

## **Wixárika Students and Professionals Challenge Stereotypes and Create Alternatives**

**By Diana Negrín da Silva, February 2009<sup>1</sup>**

In late June 2008 I attended a talk given by a Mexican art historian at the Hospicio Cabañas Cultural Institute in downtown Guadalajara. I had read some of the publicity for the event in the local newspapers in which the historian explained her work as an attempt to dispel the myths about the Wixárika indigenous people, myths she claims that many Wixaritari (plural form of Wixárika) have naively swallowed and believed. I agreed with some of her assertions about how many researchers had distorted this indigenous culture, yet I was uncomfortable with the claim that the Wixárika people themselves were naïve believers of academic fictions. And so I went to the talk wondering how this mestizo woman would support her belief that she was one of the chosen few to reach a "true" understanding of a people and a culture that was not her own. As it turned out, both the talk and the accompanying documentary on Wixárika crafts excluded Wixárika voices; like so many other academic works produced about indigenous people, the Wixárika were mere backdrops to a thesis: colorful faces with no voices.

But what most impacted me that evening was a comment that a Wixárika audience member made: he noticed that the term "Huichol" was used throughout the presentation and politely asked the historian and the public to begin using "Wixárika", the name that they call themselves in their native language. The art historian quickly and quite condescendingly denied his request stating that there was no difference between the two terms and that they meant the same thing (she claimed that the words Wixárika and Huichol both mean "us"\*), no matter what the Wixárika themselves thought and preferred. Her stern response reminded me and perhaps other audience members that the days of the paternalistic and often racist *indigenista* discourses had not ended.

*Indigenismo* is a current of cultural thought embraced by many Latin American countries to guide its relations and policies toward indigenous communities. In Mexico, *indigenismo* gained much ground as an ideological movement after the Revolution of 1910 when glorious depictions of *the Indigenous* were recreated in textbooks and made visible in the famous murals and paintings of Diego Rivera. Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, anthropologists were given the role of creating and administering *indigenista* policies, as it was believed that their vantage point enabled them to decide what aspects of indigenous cultures were valuable under the rubrics of the Revolutionary state and which ones were counterproductive to development. Many now argue that the policies of *indigenismo* set out to assimilate indigenous people into mestizo culture and make them consumers in a capitalist economy. It is worth noting that the discourses and practices of *indigenismo* are akin to Edward Said's conceptualization of Orientalism in which an assortment of academics, novelists, painters and public officials authorize representations of a non-Western people and geography. In turn, these literary, visual and political economic representations serve to justify relations of domination based on notions of the supremacy of Western models of culture, economics and political order.

Recently, some Mexican scholars have begun to use *neo-indigenismo* as a term that describes more appropriately the contemporary trends of indigenist policies being deployed through a neo-liberal lens with "multicultural sensibilities". At present, ethno-tourism in

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\* The etymological definition of 'nosotros' (us) and its equivalence with the words 'huichol' and 'wixárika' given by the art historian does not have any basis. In the Wixárika language us is 'tame'; similarly, various scholars, and the wixaritari themselves, have clearly defined the words 'huichol' and 'wixárika', neither of these being 'us'.

indigenous regions of the country appears to be the most conventional of *neo-indigenista* development initiatives. Under this newly invigorated push for tourism, I visited the city of Tepic which visibly prides itself on the Wixárika population on which its tourism economy rests. In the past two years, billboards and banners depicting the Wixaritari as a “magical” people have flourished throughout this small capital city. This recent trend begs the question of how the representation of the Wixárika through these advertisements is situated within Mexico’s trajectory of *indigenista* images, but more importantly how these current forms of visibility play out in the everyday experiences of indigenous peoples themselves.

Tutupika Carrillo de la Cruz, a Wixárika friend who recently graduated from the autonomous University of Tepic, related to me how representation and policy are deeply



**BILLBOARD IN TEPIC PROMOTING ZITACUA AS A TOURIST DESTINATION.**

interrelated: “the unreal image that governmental institutions and the media have created of indigenous people has had its effects on the implementation of the policies and programs of development directed at our [indigenous] areas.” He continued by saying that current development initiatives capitalize on these images to satisfy political and economic interests that are manifested in current, often contested ethno-tourist and infrastructural initiatives that have led to internal conflicts within the indigenous communities themselves. Similar to many academic works, governmental initiatives led by the National Commission for the Development of Indigenous Peoples (Comisión Nacional para el Desarrollo de Pueblos Indígenas or CDI) also use the faces of indigenous people and territories as mere backdrops to an already established thesis for development.

Yet while mestizo and foreign researchers and public officials continue to argue about *who* the Wixárika are and *what* it is that they do or do not need, a growing population of Wixárika university students and graduates are gaining their own ground to develop educational, social and economic projects that respond to community needs

independent from the gaze of academics and politicians. Guadalajara, Tepic and Zacatecas are the three Mexican cities that have most attracted Wixaritari who migrate from the traditional rural communities to these urban centers where they seek educational and employment opportunities. It is important to underline that Tepic varies from these other two cities in that it has a much denser and more established Wixárika urban population largely due to the displacement caused by the Aguamilpa hydroelectric dam that inundated two significant Wixárika communities in the lowlands of Nayarit in 1988. Tepic is also the home of Colonia Zitacua, the only officially recognized urban Wixárika community. In June and July of this year, I met with several Wixárika students and recent graduates in Guadalajara and Tepic who shared their experiences of living, studying and working in these vastly different cities located in western Mexico. These conversations often touched on the ways in which stereotypes of indigenous people are reproduced and sustained both through government policy, academic research and the media. Through their daily experiences, Wixaritari who live in Guadalajara and Tepic confront and challenge stereotypes that continue to place indigenous people in a rural time and space.

Although many of these students are vocal about practices of racism in Mexican society and are critical of academic knowledge production on the Wixárika, their principal focus does not rest on directly combating “the experts” but on creating their own projects that respond to community requests and needs. In Tepic, students and recent graduates shared with me their work developing workshops that address domestic abuse and health, the completion of Wixárika language booklets for the local university, and an initiative for revitalizing the traditional Wixárika justice system that has largely been lost amongst those who live in Nayarit. In Guadalajara, Claudio de la Rosa, a recent graduate from the ITESO, has successfully taken up the creation of the first high school in the community of Santa Catarina Cuexcomatlán; a high school whose curriculum will reflect the cultural values of the Wixárika and make higher education more accessible for those who do not chose to go to urban mestizo schools.

I embarked on my summer project wanting to learn something about the experiences of young Wixaritari who live, study and work in Guadalajara and Tepic. In the process, I deepened my understanding on the material consequences that racial representations have on policy making and the livelihoods of indigenous peoples both rural and urban. Above all, the Wixaritari with whom I spent time taught me a great deal about the problems that accompany placing ones energies in attempting to shift the perspectives of those academics that are stubbornly unwavering about the notions that guide their own theories and practices. Despite the continuation of *indigenista* or *neo-indigenista* modes of governance, these young Wixaritari are choosing their own paths and making important contributions to indigenous and mestizo Mexico.

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