

Cultural and Artistic Expressions of Haitians on Mexicali, Baja California

Written by Kenia María Ramírez Meda and Adriana Teresa Moreno-Gutiérrez

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<https://www.e-ir.info/2022/04/25/cultural-and-artistic-expressions-of-haitians-on-mexicali-baja-california/>

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This is a pre-print excerpt from *Decolonizing Politics and Theories from the Abya Yala*. You can download the book free of charge from E-International Relations.

There are social dynamics where culture and the phenomenon of human mobility intertwine as non-passive interacting processes. This happens between individuals and groups that are native to the recipient societies and those who have decided to stay indefinitely – or for a set amount of time. Actions that arise from everyday situations that get enriched with the expressions and interactions that happen in the vivid space are slowly captured in the exchange processes that occur in the complex space between different subjects. In this process, the significations, constructions, exchanges, and dynamics between, toward and with the subjects of the recipient society become relevant.

In the city of Mexicali, Baja California, bordering to the north with the United States, migratory processes happen every day as part of its social dynamic and everyday nature, in which 'Mexicans, Americans, Chinese, Indian, and even Russian people cohabitate since the beginning of the 21st century' (Vizcarra y Peimbert 2021, 48). For this reason, the interactions between cultures produce an effect that goes beyond biculturalism, and multiculturalism manifests and expresses itself in migrant integration. It is worth mentioning that the border crossing between Mexicali and Calexico is one of the most active in California (Vizcarra y Peimbert 2021), so the human mobility dynamic is non-stop and interactive with an effect that creates and recreates the configuration of spaces and processes that materialize in cultural manifestations and expressions.

Artistic creation and its dissemination represent a tool for social integration, therefore, in this work the contributions and cultural and artistic expressions that these Haitian migrants make in the locality are evidenced in order to account for how these expressions contribute to an integration from an intercultural approach, and how these occur from a bidirectional scope when local public, private and social actors participate.

Interculturality in Migrant Cultural Integration

In postmodernity (Beck 1998), social processes linked to globalization occur which enables the circulation, exchange and flow of messages, goods, people and, among these; culture. This interconnection is not limited to unique spaces or territorialities, but has an extended scope where different social groups, actors, groups, and individuals converge. The relationships that are gestated in the 'complex and multifaceted' space (Shmite and Nin 2006, 171) do not seem to be limited or rigid but rather appear to be quite the opposite, they are 'recreated amid the growing interaction between different cultures [...]' (Ávila 2004, 1) the foregoing, blurring the borders or territorialities that emerge from a conception of a physical or imaginary type, with culture appearing in this framework as an element of integration of migrants.

Cultural diversity occurs in contexts where people migrate and move in temporary or permanent way, those individuals who settle in cities or places and in the processes of social interaction, make their traditions, customs, thoughts, and their worldview known, inserting culture as a 'transversal axis' (Shmite and Nin 2006, 172), which will

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have multiple manifestations. People in a migration context who arrive at different entities, whether bordering or not, where they can remain temporarily or indefinitely, are dynamic-interacting providers (Hernández 2008). More than a mere spatial displacement, human mobility contributes to production and reproduction of social life in the economic, social and cultural spheres.

Ferrer et al. (2014) point out that since there is a 'strong identification with both societies or their cultures, it indicates an integration or biculturalism, in which the immigrant preserves the characteristics of their culture and participates or shares the culture of the majority group at the same time' (561). Beyond biculturalism, it is desirable to transcend multiculturalism to move towards interculturalism, due to the diverse and varied cultures that are shared between members of the community of origin and with those who are foreigners.

Multiculturalism is promoted by neoliberal and Eurocentric ideologies, where cultural contact generates rejection and intolerance, giving rise to racism and xenophobia (Zárate 2014). The term also refers to the dismemberment that participates in the pluralist community and produces subgroups that are themselves homogeneous and closed communities, whereas pluralism allows us to appreciate an open society enriched by multiple belongings (Sartori 2001). Thus, pluralism is distinguished and based on tolerance, consensus and the value of diversity, the latter being one of the main distinctions between the concepts of multiculturalism and pluralism.

Intercultural perspectives provide an explanatory framework in those societies in which there is a confluence of cultural groups without one exerting deculturation processes on the other, thus avoiding the loss or blurring of ethnocultural values. Interculturalism and decoloniality are approaches that complement each other and argue for the need to overcome the hegemonic and cultural dominance of dominant colonial societies.

For the historical case in Latin America, domination implied the dispossession and repression of the original identities of the diversity of social groups (Quijano 1998). Therefore, interculturality and a true intercultural dialogue make it possible to account for the situation of power and asymmetry in which they develop to avoid being co-opted and instrumentalized by the hegemonic power and the discourse of the dominant culture (Espinoza, Valencia, and Opazo 2019). It is important to note that interculturality is linked to the colonial domination that occurred between the mestizo and white Indigenous peoples. The concept was born in Latin America linked to Indigenous education (Ferrão Candau 2010) and is introduced as part of the demands towards the state to demand a change in society where relations are more egalitarian.

Interculturality is closely linked with bilingual education seeking to preserve customs, traditions, language and put an end to colonial domination (Quijano 1998), although interculturality itself is to accept the diversity of being as it is (Walsh 2003). The decolonial approach with emphasis on interculturality according to León (2015) leads to deconstructing the knowledge made from the modern world to reconstruct them from the symmetrical and recognizing dialogue of cultural diversity, for the author interculturality 'refers to cultural exchanges of multiple routes, in an equitable relationship of different peoples, people, knowledge and cultural practices' (20).

Similarly, cultural relations are necessary because they contribute to cultural development as long as they do not become relations of domination (Zárate 2014), although Tubino (2005) also points out that it is a strategy acquired by states as part of social cohesion. On the other hand, within cultural expressions, 'art fulfills several functions, it serves as a method of communication and transmission of knowledge, it is a tool to disseminate the culture of the place of origin of migrants as well as a communication channel through which it passes the exchange of thoughts, feelings, ideas, character, personal characteristics of the artist and people's aspirations' (Apreval, Cuza, and Fernández 2011, 2).

Migrant groups find in the artistic and cultural diffusion a channel to sensitize the population of the place that receives them about their history, customs, traditions, flavors, colors and beliefs. It has even been considered that artistic creation and its dissemination represents a tool for social integration. Thus, through art, according to Carrascosa (2010), the ability to assert immigrants in the host country can be developed, where artistic expression functions as a vehicle for training in life. However, the cultural expression of immigrants in host or receiving communities implies 'subversion' (Quijano 1998, 233). This generates new meanings which are reflected and expressed in the culture

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from their own subjectivity and worldview.

The integration of migrants is a multidimensional process (Giménez 2006) that includes legal and cultural aspects. Culture and its dissemination is a tool little considered, generally the importance of regularization, employment, housing and other more tangible elements is pointed out, but little is said about cultural capital, which governments could take advantage of 'as a factor of integration cultural, values of coexistence and interaction can be promoted to exchange cultural aspects that would help to build a more inclusive society, more tolerant and more respectful of civil rights' (Rivas 2017, 110).

Migrant groups have the right to show and enjoy their culture, to maintain their cultural roots of origin and to use their native language in the host country both in personal activities and in the public sphere. This enjoyment of rights will be manifested in the dissemination of art and culture as stated by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights of the Organization of American States in resolution 04/19, principle 39 called: Right to culture, which states that 'states should encourage and support the efforts made by migrants to preserve their cultural and ethnic identity through educational and cultural activities, including the preservation of their languages and knowledge related to their cultures' (Comisión Interamericana de Derechos Humanos 2019, 15).

Co-responsibility: the Actors of the Cultural Integration of the Migrants

Integration not only happens through individual efforts but is a collective and two-way process that involves the migrants themselves but also the host society in general and, in particular, civil society groups, government institutions as well as businessmen. In different integration plans and / or documents of the countries it is indicated that integration involves the group of immigrants, the host society and institutions and organizations (Ministerio de Trabajo y Asuntos Sociales 2017). In this sense, it highlights the role of civil society that organizes social and cultural activities that include immigrants to promote cultural exchange and dialogue.

The role of civil society is remarkable, organizing social and cultural activities that include immigrants to promote cultural exchange and dialogue. At the international level, the Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions is established as a legally binding agreement. It guarantees artists, professionals and other cultural actors, as well as citizens of the entire world, who can create, produce, disseminate and enjoy a wide range of cultural goods, services and activities, in addition to their own (Organización de las Naciones Unidas para la Educación, la Ciencia y la Cultura 2005).

Culture is a factor of sustainable development. There is a need to create an international regulatory framework that protects the rights of all peoples, individuals, groups and societies. It is necessary to establish relationships and integration of migrants from an approach that urges respect, tolerance and protection. No less important is the promotion of international cooperation where the different actors participate in the protection and promotion of the diversity of cultural expressions.

Conceptualizing Cultural Expressions

Culture can be understood as a network of complex factors that include the modes of production, food, health, knowledge, beliefs, art, morals, law, customs and any other habits and capacities acquired by the man as a member of society (C. González 2012). On the other hand, culture comprises structures or schemes of meanings that have been socially established and based on these, people do a series of things, where mechanisms that control and guide such behaviors are involved (Geertz 1987).

In turn, cultural expressions have a broad conceptualization in the sense that they represent a set of activities that manifest traditions of a specific time and place that can be both tangible and intangible. Therefore, culture refers to a set of practices and experiences linked to nationality, ethnicity, religion, ways of life, thought and the particular praxis of a human group (Zárate 2014).

Regarding decolonial studies, León refers to the need to rethink the conceptions of culture from dominated societies

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with the aim of not reproducing colonial forms of knowledge and interpreting it (León 2015). Culture can also be seen as cultural capital and that can exist under the forms a) incorporated state, under the provisions and duration of the organism; b) objectified state, which includes from pictures, books, cultural assets, instruments, theories and their criticisms, among others and; c) the institutionalized state, which takes a particular form of objectification (Bourdieu 1987).

In this regard, there are different types of cultural expressions, from those that can be considered as traditional, to modern and contemporary – and even those that adapt to new modernities. All of them are part of cultural expressions since they attend defined times, spaces and circumstances and express different situations that represent the contexts under which they were created. In this regard, the following forms of cultural expression are then indicated considering to (Román 2009):

- a. Oral or verbal expressions.
- b. Music.
- c. Physical or bodily expressions.
- d. Tangible expressions (works of art, paintings, mosaics, sculptures, pottery, basketry, architectural works, mosaics, etc).

Cultural Expressions: Haitian Artists

In the case of Haitian artists that have settled permanently in the city of Mexicali, the existence of a nurtured group of plastic artists, musicians, and cultural promoters has started to gain recognition. They have taken on disseminating part of the cultural expressions of their country through painting, music, dance, language, and literature. It has even been documented that those artistic activities are means of survival for Haitians that live in this city, from artists that offer their paintings at bazaars, streets, and parks, to music groups that offer their services for different social events. Such is the case of Roger Romain and Nixon Tervine, a pair of artists who sell their paintings and pictures in public spaces or K-Fel, a music group that provides entertainment at a social club at night.

In Mexicali, Baja California the cultural expressions of Haitian immigrants happen on different platforms and are supported by a variety of public, private and academic actors. They have contributed to the dissemination and positioning of these artists in the city. The promotion that the local media give to the cultural products generated by Haitian artists is important because it shows that the community is welcoming of the new artistic offering.

Methodology and Field Work

This research is based on a qualitative methodological strategy (Erickson 1985) which is made up of two elements; documentary analysis and field work that allowed to collect the experiences of Haitian artists in Mexicali, Baja California. According to the theoretical approach of interculturalism derived from the documentary review, its elements serve as a basis for determining the necessary indicators to consider that there is a cultural integration of migrants and a contribution to the generation of interculturality. To measure this, the documentary method is used through the review of printed media such as newspapers, magazines and gazettes. It is complemented by the review of audiovisual media such as broadcasts of television programs, radio and internet platforms.

For the field work the semi-structured interview was chosen, which is characterized by collecting various topics in a broad way during its development (E. González 2008; López-Roldán, y Fachelli 2015), the case selection method was a combination of intentional selection and snowball (Baltar y Gorjup 2012), where they were interviewed a total of 4 Haitian artists residing in the city of Mexicali and who have actively participated in the dissemination of art and culture in different disciplines.

Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, and the general recommendations for social distancing (Banerjee y Nayak 2020), the interviews were conducted remotely, online, in July 2021. They were transcribed and processed in the *Atlas.ti* software (Varguillas 2006) to obtain codes and relationships and to measure the indicators obtained from the literature review.

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To determine if the cultural expressions of Haitian artists are a manifestation of interculturalism and cultural integration, the interviewees were questioned regarding four topics:

1. When you have presented your art in Mexicali (music, painting, writing) have you felt free to express yourself? Or has someone told you that you should do it in a certain way or have they limited you in some way?
2. Do you consider that you have had enough opportunities and spaces to present your art in Mexicali?
3. Who has supported you to present your art in Mexicali?
4. How have the people of Mexicali received your artistic presentations?

One example of this artistic offering is the different local events that have been organized to promote Haitian culture, for example, the painting exhibition 'Mixturado' as part of the 'Algo Por El Centro' festival carried out in September 2017. The exhibition was presented by painters – Romain and Nixon – who expressed that they sought to show their experiences in the different countries before reaching Mexicali. In the same way, the Institute for Cultural Research-Museum of the Autonomous University of Baja California, Mexicali campus, organized the 'Culture Festival' in October 2017 and included Haitian art and painting exhibitions, as well as Haitian music and food. Nixon stated that although he received opportunities to present his paintings in diverse spaces, they have not been enough given that these opportunities have come mostly from non-formal actors and to a lesser extent from government institutions. Only once did he get the attention of a government institution to get a chance to mount an exhibition in a gallery, but this did not materialize.

In November 2017, the first Haitian culture festival was organized in Mexicali by the Civil Society Organization Movimiento Haitiano en México, founded by Haitian immigrants to represent their interests in the city. The festival had the goal of showing Haitian cuisine, culture, and folklore to the Mexicali community. Around 200 people attended, which was considered a great success.

A considerable number of Haitian artists reside in Mexicali, among them 'Woldo' who is currently promoting his most recent album in the city. This album was recorded partially in Brazil, before he came to Mexico, and finished in Mexicali with support from some local sponsors. As an artist, Woldo affirms that he has total freedom to express himself through his music and songs that he composes in Portuguese, English, French, Creole and Spanish, as well as using his own traditions. However, he comments that he has not had enough opportunities to present his music, but he attributes it to the fact that he himself has not sought them out enough. He affirms that he has received a lot of support from the Mexicali community and the media, not financially but by supporting him to promote his videos and songs on social networks. He has not received government or business support in this regard.

In May 2017, a group of Haitian entrepreneurs established the first Haitian food restaurant in the history of Mexicali to showcase the culture and gastronomy of their country. They wanted the restaurant to serve also as a meeting point for the immigrant community, where they could have the chance to meet and connect, express their needs, help their compatriots, or even watch a soccer game. There are currently two Haitian restaurants in the city, and the people have well received both from Mexicali, and other immigrant groups in the city, such as Africans and Central Americans. This restaurant also provides 'a new element to the city of Mexicali and fulfills the need of Haitians to buy and prepare their own food' (Roa et al. 2017, 50). The restaurant managers confirm in the interview that normally Mexicans like Haitian food a lot, because the Mexican people always want to travel in novelty, they always appreciate cultural diversity. Many Mexicans come to the restaurant to savor and taste Haitian food and they really love it.

Even though the taste of the food is different from Mexican, Haitians do not modify their cooking methods to adapt to Mexican taste, because Mexicans themselves congratulate Haitians for their food when they come to eat at the restaurant, then they feel comfortable. He states that despite being a popular dish, there is no support for promoting Haitian food in Mexicali, neither from the government nor from the private sector.

During the International Book Fair 2018 of the Autonomous University of Baja California, Haitian writer Gama Luidor presented and sold his first book 'Francés', which intends to support French language learning by presenting every day, practical situations. The author comments in an interview that; when presenting his work of music, he has seen

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on people's faces an expression of curiosity for the fact that he plays different rhythms, people are attentive to listen, and he thinks that he has all the freedom to express himself. Also add that as a foreigner presenting works of art and culture, the community is always very enthusiastic, interested in listening to reading, etc. For me, the community is very open to new things in culture. Gama has received support to spread music and poetry from government authorities, yet he considers that the spaces to perform are still limited.

The book 'Sobrevivientes: Ciudadanos del Mundo' which narrates the journey of Haitian immigrants from Brazil to Tijuana and Mexicali in 2016, as well as their arrival and settlement in the city, was presented as part of the activities of the 'Group of Actors in Favor of the Integration of Haitian Immigrants in Baja California' in 2018 organized by the School of Political and Social Science of Autonomous University of Baja California.

Lastly, in 2019, the Art and Culture Institute of Mexicali organized a cultural soiree called 'Live Haitian Culture' with presentations by the Haitian music group 'K-fel', poetry by Gama Luidor, and a free cuisine exhibition open to the general public.

Aside from the different cultural expressions that have been addressed, it is worth mentioning that culture goes beyond expressions; it has allowed strengthening or establishing aspects that reflect the new ways and customs accepted by the Haitian community and have been identified as traditional. This is how many places that offer job opportunities have been framed as traditional places to find and develop certain productive activities – meaning that these spaces have been reconfigured and acquired particular significance for Haitians. Some examples are the wholesale food market in Mexicali and selling different products on the main roads and avenues of the city (Ramírez 2020).

The new spaces identified as traditional by Haitians provide additional benefits for certain job activities. In this sense, the link generated by work allows them to learn a language in an environment that links them to the traditions and customs of recipient societies but does not limit them. Language is one of the relevant aspects of the integration of immigrants since it is involved in different processes and in daily interactions.

One experience that confirms the previously stated is the case of Woodley Augustin. He arrived in the city of Mexicali and started working at a polyurethane factory. His employer provided a Spanish language course, and he says that he learned it in eight months, although it cost him eight hours of work every day. Currently, Woodley is a Sociology student at the Autonomous University of Baja California in Mexicali (El Migrante 2020).

Final Reflections

In the different spaces occupied by migrants to carry out their activities, their customs and traditions are printed, endowed and expressed, which provide meaning and symbolism in and towards a space, where exchange processes occur that take place in different directions towards and with the original individuals of the host society, with those who are not, but who have decided to remain and including those who have just arrived. Therefore, cultural expressions and representations can serve as a binding bridge that leads to the integration of migrants.

This chapter shows how the contributions and cultural and artistic expressions that Haitian migrants make in the locality of Mexicali, Baja California contribute to an integration from an intercultural approach, and how these occur from a bidirectional scope when local public, private and social actors participate. However, for integration to really happen, it is necessary that there are no relations of domination to consolidate social cohesion. In the case studied in this work, the artists reflect a reality where they can express themselves freely, without impositions and even in their own language, where they can manifest their culture through the expression of music, poetry, writing and writing, painting and culinary art. Where, using elements of their culture, they have been received and accepted by the different actors involved in the appreciation, dissemination, and consumption of their products.

The cultural and artistic expressions of Haitian immigrants happen as a reflection of the road toward an integration process, which has a pending agenda that the main actors have still to address, for example, it is necessary to create more formal spaces where Haitian artists can present their cultural offerings, for government institutions to help

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promote their art, culture, and products so that this diffusion is made from formal platforms. Also, the actors involved; media, academia, government and private groups formulate joint strategies so that this diffusion has an even greater impact on the host society and reaches a wider public.

The way cultural integration has happened has been optimal by promoting Haitian art, culture, and food at different cultural events in the city promoted by the government, academia, civil society, and the media. We believe that these expressions help the socio-cultural integration of immigrants and that they are a tool to promote and help them become a part of the receiving society. In this sense, we emphasize the importance of supporting and promoting Haitian art and culture dissemination initiatives by the government, business, academic, and media sectors, because the more the Haitian culture is known by the community, the integration process will be more fluid and dynamic.

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