

# Shades of Mexican

## **In Mexico, race is defined by culture and class as much as by DNA, and some Mexican immigrants to the US still cultivate that flexibility.**

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Los Angeles - In Kansas, federal officials are investigating an Indian tribe for allegedly selling tribal memberships to illegal immigrants, along with the promise that the documents will protect them from deportation. By their spokesman's own admission, the Kaweah Indian Nation has sold more than 10,000 memberships for prices starting at \$50 and going as high as \$1,200.

On one level, its success underscores how desperate many undocumented immigrants are to legitimize their status in the United States. On another, it is a powerful contemporary example of historical fact: Mexicans long have used and manipulated race to improve their social status.

Unlike in the US, where race is understood as purely biological, in Mexico it's defined by culture and class as much as it is by DNA. An Indian, for example, is not simply someone with Indian blood, but an individual who behaves, dresses, and speaks "like an Indian." Someone of wholly Indian heritage who speaks Spanish and lives according to Hispanic (as opposed to indigenous) customs would be considered mestizo, or mixed. Not surprisingly, when race is a question of culture, it is a fluid and even changeable category.

This isn't to say that race has had no social meaning in Mexican history. From the 16th to the 19th centuries, Spain imposed a hierarchical racial order in colonial Mexico, one that favored those with European heritage and lighter skin. Whites, blacks, mestizos, and Indians were assigned different levels of access to property, power, and prestige. But through the years, racial mixing eroded the categories and weakened that social order.

As the categories loosened, upwardly mobile Mexicans gamed the system and climbed the racial ladder by creative categorization. This was most common on Mexico's northern frontier – the contemporary American Southwest – where government control was weak and most pioneers were mestizo. In California and Texas, settlers routinely reclassified themselves to improve their social standing. The first two census surveys of the pueblo of Los Angeles are full of instances of racial reclassification.

In 1781, a certain Jose Vanegas was classified as Indian. Nine years later, however, he is listed as a mestizo. Similarly, while the first census lists Jose Navarro as mestizo, in 1790 he has become a Spaniard instead.

Sixty years later, after the US annexed Texas and conquered the Southwest, stricter boundaries went back into effect. Biology and not culture would determine caste and race. In general, the darker a person's skin color and the lower a person's status, the more vulnerable were that individual's rights. To solidify the boundaries, US authorities established antimiscegenation ordinances to discourage racial mixing.

To the extent that Mexican-Americans did enjoy legal rights under the new regime, it was because of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, which ended the Mexican-American War and extended US citizenship to Mexicans in the conquered region, well before blacks, Asians, and native Americans were eligible. They weren't socially "white," but between 1850 and 1920, the US Census counted ethnic Mexicans in the white column.

It makes sense, then, that for much of the 20th century, whenever Mexican-Americans were kept out of certain neighborhoods or schools or kept off juries, they employed the "other white race" strategy, asserting their rights by arguing that, as whites, they were being unfairly excluded.

US nativists in the late 1920s and 1930s tried to put a halt to Mexican immigration by having Mexicans (and Mexican-Americans) declared nonwhite by virtue of their Indian heritage. They based their strategy on a 1924 law that barred entry to immigrants who were ineligible for citizenship, and at that point, only blacks and whites, and not Asians or native Americans, could naturalize.

The test case came in December 1935, when a Buffalo, N.Y., judge rejected Jalisco-native Timoteo Andrade's application for citizenship on the grounds that he was a "Mexican Indian." Had it not been for the intervention of the Mexican and American governments, which forced a second hearing, this precedent could very well have made most Mexicans, the majority of whom are mestizo, ineligible for citizenship.

At the first hearing, Mr. Andrade said he was 50 percent or 75 percent Indian. At the second hearing, he swore that he had since asked his mother, who assured him that it was probably less than 2 percent. His citizenship application was approved.

In the early 1970s, Chicano activists switched from the "other white race" to "the other minority" strategy as a way to fight discrimination. Just as whiteness once offered the best prospect of protected civil rights, the emergence of race-based policies such as affirmative action created incentives for them to highlight the nonwhite side.

Which brings us back to the newest members of the Kaweah Indian Nation. The tribe, which is not federally recognized, says Mexicans can belong because of their clear indigenous ancestry. And it makes sense that the Mexicans putting up the money would be willing to switch racial labels in exchange for a better status in the US. It's tempting to say that it's a strategy that runs deep in their blood.