

## Unique Mexican-American experience growing nationally

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Yesterday, Oct. 12, was *El Día de la Raza*. It commemorated the creation of a new people (*la raza*) in the mixture of Spanish and Indian blood and cultures. In the United States, *la raza* has reconstituted itself into a unique Mexican-American people.

Indeed, Mexican-Americans display a mixture of the characteristics of territorial minorities (such as Native Americans), racial minorities (such as African-Americans), and traditional immigrants.

To those of us who study Mexican-Americans in Texas and the Southwest, their historical territorial heritage, including Indian and Spanish occupation of the land, carries very important symbolism that influenced later waves of newcomers.

But scholars at the University of Illinois in Chicago argued at a recent conference I attended that the immigrant status and processes of Mexican-Americans are of greater importance. In Midwestern cities, these researchers say, *Mexicanos* are adapting to life in the United States just like traditional immigrants.

Indeed, the territorial character is changing even in our own state because of dramatic demographic shifts. There may be, for example, twice as many Mexican-Americans in the Dallas–Fort Worth area as in San Antonio, and maybe as many as in the Rio Grande Valley.

And in Chicago and other Midwest cities, Mexican-Americans may soon equal those of the San Antonio–El Paso–Los Angeles belt. At present, Hispanics make up 15 percent of Chicago's population and may continue to grow rapidly shortly after the new century begins.

For Mexican-Americans in the Midwest, there are no pre-European roots. Aztlán, the fabled land of origin of the Aztecs, lay by all estimates somewhere in the Southwest. And, of course, the Midwest was not part of the northern thrust of the settlement under Spain during the colonial period. By extension, then, it was never part of Mexico.

While those deep historical territorial roots are not there in the Midwest, neither is the culture of conquest created by the traditional Alamo myth.

So it is that Mexican-Americans in the Midwest are seen as just another wave of immigrants in a region very accustomed to newcomers with their own languages and distinct cultures.

Chicago, as you know, is a mosaic of ethnic groups. On any given Sunday, church services are held in more than a dozen different languages. Political posts are divided

up by ethnicity, and family and neighborhood gatherings have strong ethnic flavors. At a Greek restaurant, I witnessed as ordinary some of the ethnic patrons singing soulful melodies in their native tongue.

While the ethnic character of daily life in some way accentuates divisions, the very multiplicity of affinity groups promotes cultural pluralism, that is, the acceptance of ethnic differences much like we accept religious differences.

In fact, cultural pluralism avoids the bipolar divisions we sometimes see in San Antonio and the Southwest.

Now, of course, this isn't paradise. Problems developed, for example, as Mexican-Americans moved into an Italian parish on the Southwest Side. The response was classic: "These people are taking over and changing our community." However, it is predicted, these folks will work things out through processes similar to those used by other immigrants in the past.

The Midwestern scholars were impressed by the transnational character — that is, the maintenance of close links with the homeland — of the first and second generation of Mexican immigrants.

Some studies revealed cases of families having residences in both countries, of goods and legal documents being ferried back and forth, and of families with children born in both countries.

This happens in Texas as well, but ironically, it seems, immigrants to the areas along the border plant their roots in the United States quicker. They may well see the border as crossing them rather than they crossing the border.

In any case, the heritage of *mestizaje* (the racial and cultural mixture of Mexicans) is facilitating integration of Mexican-Americans into the Midwestern society — and possibly the whole of the American mainstream.

Clearly, the Mexican-American experience — with its territorial roots, its immigrant background and its tradition of racial and cultural blending — is varied, complex, fascinating and increasingly a more important strand in the American social fabric