

The Kickapoo of Coahuila/Texas Cultural Implications Of Being a Cross-border Nation

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George White Water, war chief, in front of his summer house in El Nacimiento, Coahuila.

Cross-border indigenous nations like the O’odham (Pápagos), Cucupá, and the Kickapoo of Coahuila/Texas, living on both sides of the Mexico-U.S. border and continually crossing it, are subject to severe cultural influences by the U.S. Their economic future is north of the border, and, in power terms, the intercultural relationship between Mexico and the U.S. is asymmetrical, since the United States is a world power. In addition, certain privileges enjoyed by U.S.-origin tribes facilitate cross-border migration and their intercultural contact with the two nation-states.

Originally from the Great Lakes, the Kickapoo of Coahuila/Texas have settlements on both sides of the border.

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Nevertheless, the Kickapoo Traditional Tribe of Texas (KTTT) reservation is a more powerful magnet, because they set up a casino on that federal land and the U.S. federal government awards them certain benefits as an officially recognized tribe. Therefore, the cultural influence on them from the U.S. nation is determinant. In contrast, the Kickapoo community on the Mexican side serves mainly as a ceremonial center, although in recent years, the KTTT has invested a great deal in the countryside in this area with the profits from the Kickapoo Lucky Eagle Casino.

Thus, cross-border migration from Mexico to the United States can be explained by the attraction of the latter’s economy, which simultaneously benefits the community in Coahuila, particularly when the exchange rate for the U.S. dollar is high. Tito Alegría calls this kind of migration “transmigration,”

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characterized by “a relationship between two adjacent labor markets, each with different regimes of competition, productivity, relative prices, and legislation.”¹

This cross-border migration also has a cultural impact. Cecilia Ímaz Bayona refers to this as “de-territorialized cultures,” because of the resettling “of a considerable part of the community in another country, which remains linked to and interacts with the community of origin through relatively large, organized groups of migrants.”² In the case of the Kickapoo, people of working age are the ones who emigrate, together with their families; in contrast, the elderly prefer the sacred land of the Coahuila community.

In general, cross-border peoples experience intercultural contact with two nations at a time. “Facing interculturality processes through different kinds of migration and migrants who travel through the region, the Pápagos live with different groups from southern [U.S.] states, allowing them to make their cultural references and sources of identity plural,” writes Hernán Salas.³ For their part, the Kickapoo receive more of a cultural influence from the U.S., given that, since the casino’s opening in 1996, they spend more of their time on the KTTT reservation. This cultural impact cannot be denied in the Coahuila community’s day-to-day life.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE KICKAPOO

In the Great Lakes region of what is now the United States, the Kickapoo, an Algonquin tribe of hunters and gatherers, were distinguished by their great mobility. This explains their original name, *kivikapawa* or *kivegapaw*, which means “he moves about, standing now here, now there.”⁴

Down through their history, moving to different places was not always voluntary. They were expelled from their native land between Lake Erie and Lake Michigan, first by the French (1688-1697), which resulted in their being divided into different bands, then by the English (1763-1771), and later by the Americans.⁵ The 1819 Treaties of Edwardsville

and Fort Harrison obligated them to migrate to the other side of the Mississippi, ending up on reservations in Missouri (1819) and Kansas (1832).⁶ In order for the government to reduce their territory and exercise greater cultural control over the tribe, they were forced to become farmers, which made for an ideological change and caused social tensions resulting in a high incidence of alcoholism.

When the railroad began crossing their territory (1854) and the Kansas reservation was divided up into individual lots (1863) in a fraud perpetrated against them by the railroad companies, the Kickapoo tribe members who resisted the most decided to move southward, first to Texas and later to Coahuila, to continue living according to their ancestral traditions. In 1859, Benito Juárez granted them 3 510 hectares of land in El Nacimiento, Coahuila, in exchange for defending Mexico’s northern border against the Mescalero Apaches, the Lipan Apaches, and the Comanches. In 1936, Lázaro Cárdenas gave the tribe another 3 512 hectares of *ejido* collective land to raise cattle.⁷ However, because there was a drought at the time, they had to work temporarily as agricultural workers in U.S. fields.

This was by no means an ideal solution because it made them the same as poor peasants, with all their workplace disadvantages. That was when they began taking drugs, particularly inhaling solvents.⁸

ACQUISITION OF THE KTTT AND SETTING UP THE CASINO

One solution for the economic problem was setting up a casino on U.S. federal land.⁹ To be able to do that, the Kickapoo had to take out U.S. citizenship and request federal recognition as a tribe. In 1983, after a long legal process in Congress, they obtained U.S. citizenship and were able to purchase a small, 125.43-acre piece of land in Maverick County, about 7.25 miles southeast of Eagle Pass, Texas.¹⁰ Initially, the land was used by Kickapoo day-laborers to rest on their way to U.S. fields, but, when in the mid-1990s they were largely replaced by machines, they had to seek another source of income. So, in August 1996, they set up the Kickapoo Lucky Eagle Casino on the Kickapoo Traditional Tribe of Texas (KTTT) reservation.

In the early years, the casino was equipped with between 180 and 200 video machines; but in 2004, casino earnings provided the funds to build a new facility and in winter 2006,



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The Kickapoo Traditional Tribe of Texas's Kickapoo Lucky Eagle Casino.

the number of machines increased to 1 325. The number of bingo rooms also doubled, according to Scott, the marketing director. They did have to do away with blackjack in November 2006 because the National Indian Gaming Commission (NIGC) banned it as a level-III game, and the casino is only licensed for level-II games.¹¹ The tribe is now fighting to get the permit for level-III gaming.

Thanks to the casino's monopoly in Texas, large numbers of people go there from different parts of the state and Mexican border states.¹² This provides jobs in the gaming industry for most of the Kickapoo; but this economic progress has also had its cultural consequences.

THE CASINO'S CULTURAL AND ECONOMIC IMPACT ON A CROSS-BORDER TRIBE

For Chairman Juan Garza, the Kickapoo tribe is in the midst of a transition to modernity, in which ancient customs co-exist with new ones. Andreas Huyssen addresses this phenomenon by talking about a negotiation of the impact of modernization and globalization, characterized by media penetration and the spread of consumerism.¹³

This social phenomenon is understandable if we consider that cross-border peoples adopt the culture of the dominant country, where they work to ensure their economic and social future, even though it is derived from an asymmetrical relationship between two unequal groups. Therefore, the Kickapoo tribe changed its main residence to the KITT reservation in Maverick County, Texas, where they are assured of

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a higher income from the casino, which also benefits the El Nacimiento Kickapoo community in Coahuila. This is why the tribal chairman recognizes the importance of the casino's economic success, and that it is necessary for the tribe's survival.

However, this progress is derived from a structural change in the tribe. In the middle of the last century, the gaming industry turned a tribe of agricultural day-laborers into a group of entrepreneurs. The cultural impact of this in a capitalist society predisposes tribe members to the "American way of life" in their daily activities, with its resulting addictions like alcoholism and drug abuse, particularly when young people experience the difficulty of combining two different worlds: the modern and the traditional.

In this matter, new generations' education in U.S. schools plays an important role, as does the massive influence of television, which has the ideological impact of imposing the values of an English-speaking consumer society. This is why Kickapoo children and young people prefer to speak to each other in English, leaving aside their native language, which they use only to communicate with their grandparents in El Nacimiento. Spanish is also losing ground, because it is the language of a country about which they have few expectations.

Therefore, culture cannot be understood as something static; rather, it is dynamic because it goes through significant changes over time. Nevertheless, the social process of identity takes on certain authenticity, which is possible only with ethnic consciousness that guarantees the group's survival.¹⁴ If this were not the case, the tribe would get lost in the macro-society of U.S. capitalism, even more so given its "cross-border" nature, oriented to dynamic processes of merger and cultural migration.¹⁵

IS TAKING REFUGE IN EL NACIMIENTO A CULTURAL SOLUTION?

Cross-border migration also exports cultural values from the dominant society to the subordinate country; this is why daily life in El Nacimiento, Coahuila is influenced by U.S. culture. It is not, however, a true modernization of daily life in Mexico, but what can be seen as a cultural assimilation fostered by the influx of the mass media, which often interferes in people's world view. Therefore, we can talk about cultural syncretism, in which modern life merges with traditional life.

The El Nacimiento community still represents a refuge for living life freely. This implies ritual and daily ceremonies and hunts, farming and cattle-raising, done mainly by Black Seminoles and Mexicans. So, traditional life still exists at certain times of the year. For example, some Kickapoo go every weekend from Eagle Pass to El Nacimiento; others only go in the ceremonial season, or when their children are on vacation. In addition, casino employees are given certain leeway for going to El Nacimiento. But, broadly speaking, that traditional life has been impacted by the American way of life, since the Kickapoo live most of the time in Texas.

Above all, the new generation, educated in the United States, adapts to new customs like forms of dress and eating and recreational habits; but the most noticeable thing is their way of communicating. As already mentioned, it is no longer either the Kickapoo language or Spanish, but English that predominates in these young people's conversations. Because of this, many adults are concerned about the survival of their culture among the new generations and the preservation of their language.

On the other hand, the land they have bought with the profits from the Lucky Eagle Casino mean a territorial and cultural expansion of the United States. In 2007, the Kickapoo Traditional Tribe of Texas purchased 17 000 acres of land

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for cattle and deer raising near El Nacimiento, Coahuila, in addition to approximately 12 000 acres they bought in Texas. Investment in Mexican territory, then, is derived from the tribe's economic progress, but at the same time it fosters a capitalist mentality that, in the last analysis, stems from the casino's success.

CONCLUSIONS

Cross-border tribes like the Kickapoo of Coahuila/Texas inhabit a space of a certain interculturality that emerges from their continual movement across the Mexico-U.S. international border. The ease of this cross-border migration comes from their dual-nationality status and being members of U.S. tribes, which brings with it a strong cultural influence of the dominant country. Expelled from their places of origin, the Kickapoo feel attracted by the U.S. nation, where they have found the economic key through the casinos set up on U.S. trust land. Thus, Mexico, as a dependent nation, comes in second for this people; it is only useful to them as a ceremonial center and a place for investment.

Territorial and cultural expansionism toward the country where they have fewer expectations continues. In this sense, Alicia Lindón talks of a "blurring" of the national borders and a "break-down" of boundaries that facilitate the merger of cultural values and create a space of interculturality, where the dominant country comes out the winner.¹⁶

In the case of the Kickapoo of Coahuila/Texas, employment in the casino is the key to these cultural influences, because it allows tribe members to rise on the social ladder, as opposed to the past when jobs as farm workers guaranteed certain social discrimination.

For this people to not end up a completely entrepreneurial tribe, it is extremely important that it become aware of this process and continue its cultural practices in El Nacimiento. Throughout its history, this has allowed the tribe to preserve greater ethnic specificities than many other tribes in the

United States who have lost that traditional character. This does not mean that the tribe should stagnate, but that it should transform itself over time. How? That will depend on the degree of consciousness that allows it to seek out its own path. **MM**

NOTES

- ¹ Tito Alegría, "Modelo estructural del trabajo transfronterizo," Alejandro Mercado Celis and Elizabeth Gutiérrez Romero, eds., *Fronteras en América del Norte* (Mexico City: CISAN/UNAM, 2004), p. 417.
- ² Cecilia Ímaz Bayona, *La nación mexicana, transfronterzas: Impactos socio-políticos en México de la emigración a Estados Unidos* (Mexico City: UNAM, 2006), p. 65.
- ³ Hernán Salas Quintanal, "Identidades y globalización en el espacio fronterizo del noroeste de Sonora," Cristina Oehmichen Bazán and Hernán Salas Quintanal, *Migración, diversidad y fronteras culturales* (Mexico City: IIA/UNAM, 2011), p. 134.
- ⁴ Department of the Interior, Office of Indian Affairs, "Kickapoo," Bureau of American Ethnology, *Handbook of American Indians*, Bulletin 30, 1910.
- ⁵ Elisabeth A. Mager Hois, *Casinos y poder* (Mexico City: CISAN/IIA/FES Acatlán/UNAM, 2010), p. 101.
- ⁶ In 1873, a new Kickapoo reservation was set up in the Oklahoma Indian Territory when Coronel Mackenzie's Fourth Cavalry Regiment attacked the Coahuila Kickapoo community, kidnapping elders, women, and children and forcibly resettling them there.
- ⁷ Martha Rodríguez, *Historias de resistencia y exterminio: Los indios de Coahuila durante el siglo XIX* (Mexico City: INI/CIESAS, 1995), p. 119, and Elisabeth A. Mager Hois, *Lucha y resistencia de la tribu kikapú* (Mexico City: FES Acatlán/UNAM, 2008), p. 106.
- ⁸ Eric V. Fredlund, *Volatile Substance Abuse Among the Kickapoo People in the Eagle Pass, Texas Area 1993*, Texas Commission on Alcohol and Drug Abuse Research Briefs, November 1994.

- ⁹ In Texas, legislation only permits Indian tribes to set up casinos on federal trust land.
- ¹⁰ The Traditional Kickapoo of Texas, *Land Acquisition Committee Report, 1981-1984*, McLoud, Oklahoma, 1984, p. 2.
- ¹¹ Level-II games include electronic bingo and card games; level-III games include these and other, riskier games. High-risk level-II card games require authorization under state law.
- ¹² The casino's prosperity can be explained by the fact that, since the Tiguas' Speaking Rock Casino and the Alabama-Coushatta Casino closed in 2002, it is the only one left in Texas.
- ¹³ Andreas Huyssen, *Modernismo después de la posmodernidad* (Barcelona: Gedisa, 2010), p. 33.
- ¹⁴ Allan Hanson, "When the Natives Talk Back: Thinking about Narrative in Anthropology," paper presented at the Hall Center Narrative Seminar, Lawrence, University of Kansas, 1991, p. 27.
- ¹⁵ Andreas Huyssen, op. cit., p. 41.
- ¹⁶ Alicia Lindón, "De espacialidades y transnacionalismo," Daniel Hiernaux and Margarita Zárate, eds., *Espacios y transnacionalismo* (Mexico City: UAM Iztapalapa/Casa Juan Pablos, 2008), p. 125.

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