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One Hundred Years of Clandestine Medicine in Mexico

What Do One Hundred Years of Cannabis Mean in Mexico?

Clearly, these have been one hundred years of illegality, one hundred years of prohibition, of black markets, of persecution, drug trafficking, and laws that have attempted to stop cannabis cultivation. But, they have also been more than one hundred years of cannabis in Mexican traditional medicine and of families who for generations have cultivated the forbidden plant, the so-called evil plant.

In late 2022, the peasants in one of Mexico's mountain ranges asked themselves what they would do to celebrate the year's end, there, with their plants, their space, their dreams, their nerve, and their life choice, because they

are families who for generations have had to cultivate marihuana to be able to put food on the table, educate their children, pay for the gas, water, and lights, and cover all their everyday expenditures. But, at the end of the day, they're just like the peasants who grow sugarcane, avocado, limes, oranges, broccoli, corn, chili peppers, cilantro, tomatoes, and onions, the daily food for a large percentage of Mexico's population. These are the peasants who for one hundred years have been growing cannabis under the hot sun, in the fields, sweating every day, just as agricultural work, working the land, requires. "I do it because my grandfather taught me, and I can say that now that I'm seventy years old, I've seen all the cycles of the cannabis flower, all the stations of the plant, perhaps all the forms, sizes, and colors. And we've also tried all the solutions that we know for the pests of this place," one peasant told me on the way to his mountain plot.

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They've spent one hundred years growing in secret, thinking that they were criminals and that they were harvesting something illegal. This way of thinking makes them live a lifestyle ruled by the simplest customs and, at the same time, the most superficial luxuries. Perhaps because of the lack of understanding of the world around them, life becomes simple, guided by the brands of the moment and the lifestyles of the famous.

On the other hand, there are the traditional doctors in Mesoamerica, who have not been around for one hundred years, but much longer, and have been using cannabis in their day-to-day lives. We could see this during the recently commemorated 500 years of the arrival of the Spaniards to the Purépecha Empire's lands, when we realized it had been they, the Europeans, who introduced the plant to this native culture. The latter used what nature provided for their food, their ceremonies, and their medicine. That culture continues to exist and to cultivate its own medicines.

Why do we speak of one hundred years of recreational use? Because this plant relaxes, it makes you feel good, it helps you sleep and fight stress. What are 100 long years of presidents in a country that has to deal with social problems every day? Presidents who haven't paid attention to a never-ending problem: that of the pursuer and the persecuted. But it wasn't always that way.

For a very long time we could find fabulous formulas at the drugstores and apothecary shops all over the country, in addition to those imported from the countries of the North, where people learned very well how to use plants and developed them industrially, giving rise to the big brands that now lead the multimillionaire pharmaceutical market the world over.

It's difficult to believe that we don't see something that has been among us for one hundred years, that touches the lives of our grandchildren who now live in the United States or Canada, and who in their time did nothing more than accompany their grandfathers to the fields, perhaps to shift the hose for watering or to clean the area or perhaps plant seeds. That thing that some child, in his/her innocence, experienced is today a way of life, a decent job, one that supports a family, although far from his/her birthplace he/she has suffered a lifetime of yearning. In Mexico, we marginalize the grower, treating him like a delinquent, a criminal, or a drug trafficker because he chose to plant marihuana instead of limes.

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Those peasants decided to prepare a trap to catch what the land wanted to give them, accompanied by the vegetables and legumes also produced in their plots because the closest town was five or six hours away in a car, because they lived hidden in the hills in extreme conditions and passed their days as peasants, but also because when they planted cannabis, they became people without rights, without a pension, without a stable future because we have decided that their crops affect society.

Their children will undoubtedly end up working in our neighboring country because that will be easier, safer, because they pay you and it's legal, because it's what there is, what's best for you, what some Mexicans have within reach and/or is their only option. But, how have Mexico's traditional healers produced their medicines? One hundred years ago surely there was more of it in Mexican homes, because the tea has never been found absent there, neither rue tea nor cinnamon tea nor arnica infusion. But if we're going to talk about medicine, we have to talk about other plants that are also sacred, that are medicinal for true Mexican culture and have not been around for centuries but millennia. How ironic that what cures us is persecuted and misunderstood.

On the other hand, we have to think about the fact that what is persecuted is what produces, what generates a profit, wealth, and this leads to privatizing it, monopolizing it, and industry completely unbalances the plants' natural cycle, their uses and customs, and distorts free, clean, natural thinking. And I ask myself, where did we get lost? Even though Mexico's countryside, cities, and all the corners of the nation have smelled like marihuana for decades, we try to ignore that, erasing traditions and customs that are more than one hundred years old, thinking that repeating a discourse enough times will make it true. This makes me think that we know the formula for getting lost along our path very well.

But not everyone. Many people live today under the starry sky, without stress, taking the risk that the army will

come to take away their work, burn their labors of months, without caring about the sweat exuded in the hours of labor in the fields, the real work that ties the peasant to the land, that is worthless if it's cannabis (that plant called marihuana or weed), which they unfortunately have been cultivating. Meanwhile, the children run among the aroma of the recently cut plants that are beginning their drying process, without seeing the evil with which we in society stigmatize them.

What are one hundred years? Customs founded on tradition, unity, community, work, and resistance. One hundred years that turn into oblivion, new laws, new paths; one hundred years that strengthen or lead a society astray; one hundred years that a government has been persecuting peasants attempting to cultivate their future. One hundred years in which the jails have been receiving traffickers of this plant that they say damages society; also, one hundred years that are now emerging with radical changes in thinking and position, that are forming a new ethics born of a globalized position in favor of cannabis, in favor of pleasure. One hundred years that are turning into digital messages where expressing an opinion is easy, since digital life takes place sitting in your living room, office, or on the toilet. One hundred years that will become an excuse to legalize something we've forgotten all about. And also, the opportunities for growing, evolving as a society, for jettisoning prejudices and fears about using a simple plant.

That's what life is like in Mexico. What an irony that the trade agreement among the United States, Mexico, and Canada (USMCA) doesn't allow us to imitate the activities in our neighboring countries. What an irony that for decades these peasants produced the plants that were taken illegally to the North, on dirt roads, bypassing "fixed" roadblocks (paid for with the money from those same crops), and now the governments try to find a solution to the prob-

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lem of cannabis cultivation, now that they want to write laws to incorporate the peasants, the people who truly know the Mexican countryside, into the world of taxes.

Where are those one hundred years of prejudices and distorted thinking in their communities, in their own lands? Let's hope that the laws include these people who for more than one hundred years have been the backbone of the clandestine crops of the plant that has given us medications, food, and many political problems. They're one hundred years of crowding people into jails, where they've wasted their lives locked up, prevented from living with their families and communities.

In these one hundred years, medicine has had to advance silently like in the time of the Inquisition, when traditional healers were thought to be witches, people associated with evil, when they were only exploring and learning from their surroundings and using plants as allies. Today, 500 years after its arrival from Spain, with all that morality charged with prejudice, we continue to hide to utilize cannabis in any of its many uses, mainly for recreational purposes.

Let's hope that another hundred years don't have to go by with society's backwardness, that we not have to see another hundred years in which we have to wait to understand that nature is our mother and father both, and that we come from her, that our transit through life is a simple sigh compared to the age of the Earth, that the plants were already here when we arrived and will continue to exist when we no longer do, that they're the medicine that cures the body, the mind, and the spirit.

Hopefully, another hundred years will not pass of prejudice and distorted information about this noble plant that has had to bear humanity's darkest bigotry.

Not to mention the countries that punish consumers or possessors of cannabis with severe sentences. Where will we go as a society? What will become of our children? Perhaps we already have the answer and we don't want to see it.

What are one hundred years of a life that passes like wind through the forest, like a ray of sunlight that glimpses through the clouds or a river that runs and doesn't stop until it reaches the sea?

One hundred years are hundreds of cannabis crops that we could use to research, learn, create community, continue, live, but that also can be the perfect trap for dying in the attempt. One hundred years are nothing. ■■■