

# Ideas: Indigenous Historical Agency in Revolutionary Western Mexico

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## Ethnicity, Gender, and Ceremonial Traditions in the Gran Nayar

**Morris, Nathaniel. *Soldiers, Saints, and Shamans: Indigenous Communities and the Revolutionary State in Mexico's Gran Nayar, 1910–1940*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2020, 371 pages.**

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As Morris's book—and Liffman's review of it—make abundantly clear, the Gran Nayar is one of the most culturally significant regions in Mexico, and its unique and complicated history is the basis of its significance to the people who live there, as well as to others whose lives have been changed by it.

In this brief comment on both Morris's book and Liffman's detailed review of it, I would just like to re-emphasize the profound importance of the ancient but still very much alive Mesoamerican religious traditions that made life worth living for the Indigenous peoples of the region during the period covered by Morris's book, and thus the crucial role that these traditions must have played in the regional events that the book sees as part of the larger Mexican Revolution and post-Revolutionary Mexican state formation.

In this respect, *Soldiers, Saints, and Shamans* will hopefully set the stage for a reconsideration of the role played by these violent military campaigns—based on what increasingly appear to be bizarre nationalist fantasies—in the much more important and long-lasting Indigenous histories of the region, which we have every reason to believe will continue long after the collapse of the contemporary Mexican nation and with it the global system of nation-states.

What Morris and others in the Gran Nayar region call “*el costumbre*” is much more than a simple set of customs or habits. Rather, it is seen by the region’s Indigenous groups as a profound way of life that is best understood and expressed through their distinct but related Indigenous languages. Each of these languages, in turn, is seen as the manifestation of a kind of clearly expressed and focused mental effort that ultimately derives from and is connected to each group’s sacred homelands, which in turn are sustained by ceremonial traditions based on the realities of the natural world. The sacred homelands are then seen to have been formed by the sacrifices of the ancestors, whose energies continue in these ongoing natural realities as long as *el costumbre* continues. These are ways of life that are much more involved and crucially significant than other “cultural” trends, fashions or ideologies that have characterized modernizing Mexico, and they have their own historical weight beyond those that motivated outside actors during the period under consideration, or those that motivated the local or regional bosses and militia leaders who engaged with these outsiders.

Greater focus on the different ontologies produced by *el costumbre* might alter Morris’s perspective on the character of Indigenous participation in the events discussed, which are presented as more fragmented and contingent than they appear to have been.

For example, Morris says that some Indigenous communities were “genuinely attracted to the rival ideologies of Villistas and Carancistas, cristeros, and radical agrarian reformers” (7), but when such seeming attractions are discussed, it is the “markedly magical way of understanding the world” (7)—and so Indigenous autonomy in their sacred homelands—that drives participation. As Morris rightly points out, the Indigenous people who practice *costumbre* in their homelands see themselves and their ways of life “as superior to those of mestizo Mexicans” (42). They correctly understood that forcibly removing their children from this way of life would make them become “malicious, lose their customs, and quickly die” (84), and so almost none of them would have been interested in the various state-building ideologies promoted by the various fanatical and dangerous outsiders who actively sought to destroy the Indigenous peoples and traditions of the region.

Although Morris discusses the importance of the *costumbre* and recognizes the limitations of the “rationalist” historical approach that characterizes the book—which is indeed “an artifact of the same European-mestizo world whose intrusion into their time and space it itself seeks to analyze” (14)—it could go

further “reflecting and respecting” (14) the very remarkable and ancient world that continues to be recreated through the *costumbre*, specifically in terms of understandings of gender and ethnicity, and so their motivating force within this period of violence and terror.

In terms of gender, Morris repeats the idea that the Indigenous communities of the region are “patriarchal” (for example 13), although elsewhere he correctly points out that “women and children were also more highly respected and better treated by men than in many other rural areas of the country” (22). It should surprise no one that in an era of weaponized male violence and war, Indigenous women may have been subjected to horrific abuse, but this is not the fault of the *costumbre*-following Indigenous people, who all rightly understand that women are fundamental to life and well-being.

Indeed, the absence of women in the male-oriented “rationalist” documentary record of the region is itself an indication of women’s strength in very difficult circumstances, as when an anonymous eighty-year-old Wixárika woman hides a land title in her skirt (141). Surely such resistance was as commonplace then as it is now.

As Morris rightly points out, the Indigenous people of the region would have quickly lost track of their mythical history without monolingual women repeating it to their children, far out of earshot of self-interested Spanish speakers (13).

Ethnicity is another complicated problem whose local meanings are difficult to understand without a grounding in *costumbre*-oriented perspectives on the social reality of the region. Although there have certainly been conflicts between the Indigenous peoples who follow the *costumbre*, they have also seen themselves as sharing a common orientation to life, and a kind of kinship connection rooted in that common orientation, which is quite different from that of the expansionist gunmen who claimed state power in attempts to take over their lands during the period under consideration, or of the new state bureaucrats who drew up their “ethnic” maps of the region.

Indeed, it is this common orientation among the region’s different but related Indigenous groups that makes Morris’s regional approach to the Gran Nayar so valuable. The *costumbre*-following Indigenous people of the region have since the Spanish colonial period been “societies against the state” whose fundamental goal is not conquest and ideological indoctrination, but “life, for all of humanity, and for all of nature” (141). So, in no cases were conflicts “defined

more by ethnicity than ideology” (219). Rather, violent ideological outsiders created conflicts within and among costumbre-following Indigenous groups as these groups themselves focused on “a single common goal: survival” (174).

A greater focus on the ancient and ongoing ontology produced by “el costumbre” might also alter Liffman’s discussion of Morris’s book, particularly in its focus on the multiple identities mobilized by Indigenous peoples over time. While the diverse ceremonial traditions practised by the region’s Indigenous peoples are certainly characterized by “improvisational and, above all shifting postures” and thus resist any easy attempts by the “Western naturalist impulse” to “essentialize its products,” it is also true, as Liffman also suggests, that the identities produced through the practice of costumbre are very different from those of “cosmopolitical liberals free to pick and choose identities like changes of wardrobe.”

However, this difference lies not only in the “traditional distrust” of possibly traitorous outsiders, but also in the fundamentally distinct lives and livelihoods that those different kinds of identities are a part of. As Liffman points out, despite the violence of revolutionary and counter-revolutionary militias and the racist ignorance of the new state bureaucrats, “most Náayeri, Wixárika, O’dam, and Mexicanero communities managed to safeguard their cultural autonomy and win for their landholdings a modicum of security.” In other words, despite it all, they survived and were able to continue their costumbre and pass it on to the generations who continue it today.

As Náayeri consultant Antonio Candelario explained to Morris, with typical understatement, “it wasn’t an easy thing for everything to return to normal.” But they did rebuild their costumbres, and so their histories continue and have not been “transformed” (15) or turned into a regional part of the Mexican nation and its history. Rather, from the perspective of the costumbre, the proclaimed but never consolidated Mexican nation and its wars have been a small and unpleasant part of the much longer and far more profoundly epic Indigenous histories of the region, histories that have endured for hundreds of generations and that are likely to continue to offer a way forward even as the Mexican state, as Liffman astutely points out, “disintegrates once again into factional struggles and fractured sovereignties.”