

Chapter 3 – Luis Miguel López Alanís – Tour operator Morelia, Michoacán

Luis Miguel is a thoughtful, introspective middle-aged man. He is very proud of his heritage and of his country. In the interview with him, he pronounced Mexico correctly, in the Spanish way, with the accent of the first “e” followed by the “he” sound instead of an “x.” sound. To emphasize this, I have spelled the country Méjico.

You say Méjico instead of Mexico, which is, of course the correct pronunciation. Most Mexicans, when speaking English say ‘Mexico’ with an “X” or the Anglicized pronunciation. Can you explain the importance of pronouncing it the way you do?

When I say Mexico I feel I am not a Méjicano. What is the way Russians pronounce Washington? Vashington? Try to pronounce your own Washington as Vashington and you’ll feel it is wrong.

It’s like the way you pronounce ‘o’. The way you say Doming-‘Oh’. To most of the US it is Domin-‘GO’. It just comes natural. O. That’s the way we feel about Méjico. Besides I have to tell you, it is an important step for us Méjicanos to not lose our identity. I keep telling my friends and companions at work and us as tour guides that they must not pronounce ‘Mexico’. They must teach the foreigners that the name of this nation is ‘Méjico’.

As a foreigner, I feel presumptuous pronouncing it Méjico. What do you think about foreigners using the correct pronunciation?

I think they should. It shows respect.

Can you explain how life in Méjico today is different than it was when you were growing up. How did you become a tour guide?

I became a tour guide, maybe because I have it in my blood. I was working in newspapers, local newspapers, here in Morelia as an editor. I saw an invitation from the government to subscribe to a course to become a tour guide. First at home I was always the “official” tour guide. Secondly, it was a source of more income. It was a one-year course. Little by little, I became more involved in tourism. Then I decided to cut the newspaper’s life. Tour guiding was much better. It was more income. It was something I liked to do.

Is it correct to say that you love your area of the country, Morelia?

Yes. I have a saying, “*I am a horse from the rancho. I know my rancho better than any other areas of Méjico.*” We are specialized by area, although as a federal tour guide, we are supposed to know the entire country. Supposedly I could give you a tour of Chichén

Itza, as could any federal tour guide. So I know my area, where I have more knowledge and the one that I enjoy more. I was born here, in Zitacuaro, near the Monarch butterfly preserve.

Why did your family move to the big city of Morelia?

We moved to Morelia in 1976. There were two reasons. Part was that there was more opportunity here. The other part was that my mother had twelve children and most of them were already grown up when I was 15 years old. There were only two children left at home and we needed to go to school. Here in Morelia that should be more opportunities for us.

Is it still the case that people who grow up in more rural areas want to move to the cities for education?

Zitacuaro is not very small and has modern schools and an extension from the university. But in 1976 it was not like that. Let me give you some numbers. In 1930, Méjico was 70% rural and 30% urban. Today it is the opposite – 70% urban and 30% rural. And the countryside is losing more and more people.

That is interesting and the same thing is happening in the United States. Do you feel that in this move to urbanization, that something important is being lost in the character of the country? That the country is losing its identity, that it is becoming more international?

Yes, yes. I will give you an example. The siesta. The siesta, you know Hollywood depicts the siesta as typical of the Mejjicanos. That is not exactly like that today. Today, in the modern life of the big city, you don't have time for the siesta. Besides your schedule of work is different. You don't wake up at four AM to go to work in the fields and after six hours of work, you are not tired from working out in the sun. You don't sleep under the hot sun. That's a big difference. In the cities, you have the regular schedule that most of the modern cities have. If you think of this example, you will find many other examples of how modern life has changed. I am speaking of family relations, everything.

Enormous changes have been happening in our country. Obviously that has a bad side and a good side. You could lose the innocence of the farmers. On the other hand the urban life puts the people closer than the agricultural life. What affects one person good or bad affects many others. Obviously this is good; this creates more links between people.

In the past the main links were between family members. People were more insulated. Is it correct to say that now, with urbanization, there are more links between strangers, non-family members, which makes the society more integrated?

That is correct. Take for example our university, here in Morelia, the Universidad Michoacána de San Nicolas. In our university you have 45,000 students, along with administration. You would think with that many students that they are separated from

their families. They learn to work together, more cooperatively. And even if individualism grows, it puts people together and that is good.

Do you feel that Méjico is a more communal society than an individualistic society? In the United States we are a more “me, me, me” society. Is it correct to say that Méjico is more of an “us, us, us” society?

In many ways, yes. Some of the people who come from the countryside to the city bring traditional communal ideas with them. They don't lose these ideas. They are only transformed. Life in the city creates other links. On the other hand, you have to understand that Méjico has suffered many aggressions- many, many aggressions. It's a dramatic life of aggression – war after war after war. That apparently runs in our blood. That feeling of being different from the aggressors. This has pulled us together much more than in the United States. We feel that we have a common enemy. Those traditions are inherited, not perhaps genetically, but socially as a psychological way of being. And in many ways it works. But I have to tell you that the individualistic way of life is growing in our country. Perhaps that is one of the bad sides of the modern life.

Let me tell you something about this communal way of life. Méjico has approximately 12% indigenous population. And there among the indigenous population you still find a lot of communal living. What I think about US citizens is that they usually come with the idea that all of Méjico is indigenous. They want to come to the most indigenous areas. And that is good. That is not bad. But maybe they are losing the other 88% of the population, the mestizo people. Over 70% of the people are mestizos, we have a bit of blood of the indigenous and a bit of the blood of the Spanish. And that is precisely the other Méjico. It seems not to be the exotic ones, but that is the majority of Méjico. These common people have a belief, ways of being, loyalties, friendships that are expressed in many different ways.

What I would say to your readers is, “Don't forget that other part of Méjico.” I am sure that if they share time with these other Mejjicanos, they will find out many things to enrich their spirit.

I did not realize that so many American tourists came solely to see the indigenous people.

That is my experience. When we have a little town that is not visually attractive, that means nothing. They want a countryside that is very rural. My best friends are loyal people who are mestizos. And I find there a lot of things that enrich my own soul living with them or sharing time with them.

EDITOR'S NOTE: Jose Luis touched on what, to me, is crucial to understanding Méjico and to understanding why some Americans are so attracted to the country. This has nothing to do with “modern” Méjico. This is a sentiment that I have felt and most people I know who like Méjico have felt as long as I have been around. Some gringos express it as the “warmth” of the people and others express it as the soul of Méjico. And some people just don't get it. There are people who merely see Méjico as a cheap beach

destination. There are businessmen who see it as just one more place to sell or produce widgets. They wouldn't know a soul if it bit them. Trust me, if you pick up nothing else from this book, pick up what follows.

Do you think Mejicanos are closer to their souls than Americans? Some say we are more commercially oriented.

Sí. Definitely yes. Mejicanos of all social classes are. Although we are aware of the dangers of commercialism, you can see, for example the way that Halloween is growing. Halloween is strictly commercial. It has no social roots in Méjico. If there were no commercials to sell plastic pumpkins, masks, et cetera, then we wouldn't buy them. Since it is a good business for big companies, it is promoted.

Many people in the middle classes and up don't buy things in little stores but in the big ones like Auerera, Comercial Mejicana, et cetera. It is logical and natural because you will find more attractive prices there. But on the other hand, you will find rivers of people who still buy natural things in the *mercado*. My own family, we go to the market to buy fresh things. We eat almost nothing coming from cans. We buy almost everything from the market. When we have time to go to the market, we share time with our wives, in the case of my brothers, or husbands in the case of my sisters, so we almost religiously go to the market to buy fresh things, even the coffee.

I think you touched on something that there is a different concept of time.

That is an enormous question. I'll give you the example of my family. My wife and I have gone thousands of times to the market. If I am not on a tour and I have the time, I stay with her. When we are home, we turn off the TV and we talk at the table. I have two children and the oldest is sixteen years old. He spends a lot of time with his friends, but it is time with his friends, not time on the computer. They go for walks a lot and climb mountains near Morelia, outdoor activities.

We live on a street where there is not much traffic, so it is safe for them to be outside with their friends. We know they are within a couple of blocks around the house. They have a lot of friends. They are not in their rooms, their time is spent in sharing with others.

I am not a believer. I am an atheist. I know a lot of people in my own family who have a lot of time for religious ceremonies. Whenever there is a birthday, we come together. Since we are twelve, you can imagine that there are a lot of birthdays, because we celebrate the birthdays of the children of the brothers and sisters (the nieces and nephews) as well. We make at least fifteen fiestas a month. Then we all come together for Mother's Day and the festivities of our nation, as well as the two weeks around Christmas and Easter. So time without the family is inconceivable. Our children have grown always going to family events. They go to the fiestas of the towns.

*** The important thing is that time shared together is the most important.**

As a travel guide, you are no doubt aware of the advertising and packaging of 'eco-tourism' destinations. Yet, there are many who say that is a lot of hype, that tour operators and hotels do nothing different, but slap the eco-tourism label on the old way of doing things.

I agree with you about eco-tourism, there is no such a thing in Méjico. I understand that ecotourism is another thing, but not one that we practice in Méjico. Maybe because we still have a lot of nature and we find it as something that is there. It is part of us and maybe with the work of the government and lack of nature Méjico will become more and more worried. There is a lot of growing of that consciousness among the people but ecotourism as such, there is not.

Do you see Méjico at a crossroads in its development now because we talked about the change from the rural to the city life, the urban life and the impact of like TV and Halloween and advertising in general? Some people have told me that there is a fear that Méjico will lose its identity and become more internationalized. Do you feel this is a realistic fear or that people are scared of nothing?

No it is true. It's happening. It is happening

Let me focus that a little bit- what is the solution? If you were king and you could make Méjico grow the way you want it to grow, what would be a better way for it to go than it's growing now? Does that make sense?

Yes, maybe that is the problem of all the countries in the world. First .One of the terrible things that happened in our country is the concentration of richness in very few areas and the existence of poorness in a big amount of people. That is one of the big dangers because poverty, of course, brings not only the material poverty but the spiritual poverty.

Second. There is a lot of danger; I can say so, in the politics that is right now ruling the state, ruling the country. A lot of people including myself consider that Méjico is in the hands of rightist politicians and they are taking certain measurements that are lowering more and more things, like for example, education. Education in the schools is becoming more and more superficial. Technics, engineers if they are good, if they prepare them, but very little of humanities, very little of philosophy, almost nothing of history. The history that we study is very superficial in the school.

Yes I read that the currently accepted Mexican history book, that it was the complaint that it was very superficial.

Highly superficial. Well, maybe it is very hard to say that it is done on purpose but the fact is the teachers in the schools, according to the programs, the official programs of the ministry of education, they are giving less and less and less lessons of history. For example, there was a counter-reform maybe 3 or 4 years ago when the ministry of education said because of the lack of time in the schools we can't teach pre-Hispanic

history. Imagine. I am a tour guide. I take people to archeological sites. I find out how important it is – the prehistoric history of the area, of my country. You can imagine how much I suffer when I find out officially that the authorities don't want to teach the children pre-Hispanic history. Obviously when you don't know your past you don't have roots, you lose your identity, and yes, that is a big danger. If you combine this with the growing individualism for example with the growing commercialism, with the talk shows and TV's and the TV theater. Novellas. There are a lot of attacks to the identity of ours. Yes, that is a big danger it is happening.

Is this like an attack on La Raza because isn't this, the concept of La Raza, include the indigenous people? The mestizos, everyone came together to form the Méjicanos. It's taking away part of the race and I don't know why they would want to do that.

Here you must include ideological and political reasons. Obviously I don't know if I have to say it but if you have a people that are easily manipulated because of the lack of identity because of the lack of knowledge of history, then it's much easier to manipulate.

That was a Communist concept. Their idea was that if they took away the history, then the history was only what they said it was, so then they could manipulate the people.

Something similar to that is happening right now in Méjico. Let me tell you, for example, in the schools. The primary schools, you have 50-55 students per teacher. The state could waste more money paying teachers, but they don't, they won't, they don't do that. Supposedly the path of logic is they can teach 20- 25 students per teacher, that would be an optimum, even less, but they don't do that so the teachers in the schools don't have the time to dedicate to the children. And obviously the education is expressed in the low knowledge, qualifications and quality of education, but obviously you have to combine it as I told you with the unfair distribution of riches. We have in Méjico the richest man in the world right now, but on the other hand you have an enormous amount of people in the terrible poorness, when you visit in the southern Michoacán places like??Coalcoman ?? La Huacana. You see terrible things there, or in Oaxaca or in Chiapas.

And this is the difficult question, I think. Is there a solution and if there is, what is it? Some people say more education and that certainly may be part of it. More jobs, but if people have no training even if you put a factory there for them to have a job they couldn't take advantage of it. So to me as an outsider it seems like there is no solution. Maybe you have a much more positive view or observation that could help me.

Well, obviously one solution to our country like many countries including the United States. It's a more fair distribution of riches. Definitely you have to affect interests in everyone in reforms in your country. There is no other solution because only in that way the states and the governments can have sources or money and possibilities to do many other things. Like, for example, it is known today that in Méjico most of the very, very rich companies evade taxes.

Same in the US.

And the government, on the contrary, returns incredible amounts of money. Some middle classes, they receive some of this like the remains of the cake, and they are happy at the moment. If you receive a check of 10,000 pesos that's very good and then you don't complain, but on the other hand there are incredible amounts of money that is not taken from the very rich. Definitely a more fair distribution of riches. From there you can do a lot of things.

But wasn't that tried in the 70s with Echeverria and even before him with Cardenas? Weren't there attempts at a more fair distribution of riches?

No the real moment of a more fair distribution of riches was right after the revolution 1910- 1917. Between 1917 and 1940 at that moment there were a lot of reforms like the agricultural sharing the exportations of oil, the railroads electricity companies the mines, etc.

And teachers were elevated?

Oh yes. That was a moment of growth in Méjico. You don't believe it when you read novels and writings of those times. It was like a fever of growing, of creation of schools and universities all over the country. Technological institutions, hospitals, clinics, roads, railroads- it was like an explosion at that moment, and then little by little from 1940's the 50's and 60's were like an impasse, like the transition moment and then in 1970 approx on little by little again. We have come back to the same point. A very, very unfair distribution.

It's not being done the same way now?

No, it is not.

The money from the rich does not trickle down to the poor?

No. There are programs obviously there are some programs but one of our most important opposite leaders, he says that the government is administrating the poorness. They just administrate it- not let it go up or down just keep it like that, and that's it. They are specialists in administration of poorness. That includes, for example, from time to time several certain valves of escape like programs, subsidies, opening the social security for this, et cetera, but these are not solutions, and they are temporary fixes.

Maybe road building would be one, like we do that in the US, too. I believe that we administer the poorness. There are government employees whose job is to minister to the poor and they don't have any solutions. I see the parallels between our countries in the teaching in the schools. Exactly what you just said, many people in my country say the same thing about the schools. Except our schools are violent. Children have guns and they kill each other. They beat up teachers. In Méjico is it still true that the children pretty much respect the teachers?

Sí. There are certain cases, but usually yes, they respect the teachers, they respect the principal and, how do you say, they submit.

So in conclusion, if you were talking right now to my audience if you wanted to express what they misunderstand completely about your country and what you'd like them to understand. If you could correct what my people have completely wrong and what would you like them to learn by listening to you?

First I need a lot of time. It is not easy to compress an invitation from Méjico I think if the US citizens come to share some time with us they will find out that Méjico is not only one Méjico, there are a lot of Méjicos. There are indigenous, there are high class which are very intellectual, there are high class that are very, very bad people. But even from them they can learn. There is a lot of middle class that is shrinking.

The middle class is shrinking?

Oh yes. Yes, it is shrinking. I am wrong. In amount it is the same, but in proportion to the rest of the population it is all the time less and less. They will find out in a lot of traditions of people. In food, customs in certain communities. Habits of people. They will find, for example, a country that is struggling to develop itself with the idea of becoming better. They will find sometime that we have the freedom of the fly inside of the bottle. Trying to go out but there is no way out, but there is a feeling with that fly, he keeps trying. They will find that in many people. They will find out as well in Méjico it's difficult to express that...they will find out in Méjico, not Méjicanos in the US.

For most of the US citizens it is clear that most of the Méjicanos, just most, are good workers in the US. There is like a common feeling I can perceive that through my visitors. That wish of doing the things right, of giving extra of doing many things in little time; manual things in little time. It transports back to its real root and they will find when they visit Méjico that this capability of Méjicanos in the US is expressed in our country more freely, because up there it is like, encapsulated. I know it because I lived in your country for 2 years- legally- in Chicago- you feel encapsulated.

When one Méjicano lives in the US we feel that the birds sing in English. Everything is strange and even when people live in the US for years and years it is yet a strange land. You transport that to and it is expressed more freely. If, for many people in the US some Méjicanos are admirable because of their capability to work, then we are more admirable when we are in our own land. With a feeling that we are free. But finally it is our own land and I would invite your readers to prove that the Méjicanos you see in the US are only 10% the rest are here with their families. I mean in the spirit of their families. The rest is here and they shouldn't judge the country only because of the illegal workers. There is much more to Méjico than you know if you have not been here.

There is a sun in Méjico. There is not only beaches. There are people who are working who have the same feeling of becoming more fair to have a better life. The social conditions don't allow us, but there is a feeling and sometimes that feeling is more important than the touristical attractions.

Absolutely. That's my sentiment that I also try to get across- it is not just the beaches and attractions. The reason I keep coming back and wanting to know more is the people. Understanding the people and the feeling that the people give me. That's the greatest gift I get from Méjico I feel more free and I'm not a Mexican.

You are on the road to getting the soul of a Mejicano.

Gracias, Luis Miguel.

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