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ASK A MEXICAN!

BY GUSTAVO ARELLANO

Dear Mexican: The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration reports that Mexican-Americans have the highest proportion of D.U.I.s and alcohol-related traffic fatalities of any ethnic group (60 percent as opposed to 40 percent for Caucasians – they're even substantially higher than any other Latino group). I apologize that this question isn't wisecracky, but that statistic is terrible. What's the deal with all the boozy driving and carnage? – Sick of Sangre



Dear Gabacho: You're right about the horridness of the above stats, wrong about the stats. The NHTSA doesn't regularly keep track of ethnicity and alcohol-related crashes — its last comprehensive report was *Ethnicity and Alcohol-Related Fatalities: 1990 to 1994* — and that survey found Native Americans were the ethnic group most likely to die in a drunk-driving accident, with Mexicans following. The proportions you cited were also wrong: the correct figures are 54.6 percent for Mexicans, and 44.2 percent for gabachos. Don't think I'm splitting hairs here — alcoholism amongst

Mexicans is a blight as terrible as Carlos Mencia — but I wanted to at least establish the facts before moving on to theories.

Why more drinking and driving amongst Mexicans? I can toss out ideas — culture, peer pressure, the sirenic taste of Herradura tequila begging for just one more shot before calling it a night — but they're all lacking. One explanation that definitely isn't valid is machismo, at least as a uniquely Mexican phenomenon. According to the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism's 2003 paper "Alcohol Use and Related Problems Among Ethnic Minorities in the United States," that theory "isn't supported by research findings ... Close examination of machismo among White, Black and Mexican American men ... has shown that machismo is related to alcohol use among men irrespective of ethnic group and that it is not a valid explanation for the high levels of drinking among Mexican Americans." Honestly, there is no answer for your pregunta, Sick of Sangre — alcohol and logic repel each other like "border" and "enforcement."

I'm wondering if güero is related to gwailo, the Cantonese slur for a white person (the world is literally "ghost man"). A Chinese language site defines a related word, waigwailo, as gringo. Another interesting similarity is the word waraji which is the Japanese word for a traditional sandal made of rope (wara is a kind of rope). It sounds like huarache. Another mystery: Is chingao Cantonese? – Secret Asian Man

Dear Chinito: Interesting similarities — really reaffirms my belief in the Jungian concept of universal archetypes. Alas, it's just wishful thinking on both of our parts. As I explained a couple of months ago in this column, güero comes from the medieval Spanish word, guerar, which referred to brooding chickens and originally had nothing to do with color (fascinating side note: guerar shares the same Indo-European root word as warm — güow!). Huarache, meanwhile, comes from the Tarasco language of Michoacán and not from Hasekura Tsunenaga, the 17th-century samurai who traveled through modern-day Mexico on the way to visit the Pope; urban legend has it that the Mexicans who greeted Tsunenaga saw his warajis and Hispanicized the word to describe their own sandals. And chingao is the past participle of the verb chingar (which can mean many aggressive things, from "to fuck" to "to fuck up" to "to fuck someone up") but put through the ol' elision máquina. The Royal Spanish Academy, the world's preeminent body for the study of Spanish, states that chingar is derived from a Romany term meaning "to fight." I appreciate the intercultural goodwill, Secret Asian Man, but unfortunately any Chinese or Japanese influences to Mexican Spanish is mostly contained to the schoolyard refrain "Chino, chino, japonés: come caca y no me des (Chinese, Chinese, Japanese: eat shit, and don't give me any)." And we Mexicans wonder why more chinitos don't march alongside us during amnesty rallies ...

Gustavo Arellano is an investigative reporter on staff at the OC Weekly in Orange County, California. His "Ask a Mexican!" column began in 2004 and today is syndicated in 32 publications nationwide. He is also the author of a book by the same name. An extensive interview with Arellano can be found in the EW archives online for Nov. 29, 2007.

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