

Environment and cargo system in Otomí communities of the State of Mexico: case study of San Mateo El Viejo

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Abstract

The factors that influence the development process of rural territories and that explain the success or failure of political strategies promoted from the local level to understand the complexity of these processes. In the case of natural spaces inhabited by indigenous populations that maintain close relationships with the resources associated with such areas, the ‘sustainable development’ approach is also insufficient to explain the social dynamics that take place in those spaces.

Keywords: identity, indigenous population, natural resources, position system.

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Although more than a century has passed since the American journalist John Kenneth Turner (1908) described the level of slavery that existed in the twentieth century in Mexico and although it is true that the situation of the indigenous population has improved, it is also true that, compared to the rest of Mexican society, its backwardness is still considerable, being a reality that the conditions in which indigenous communities live are very far from those that should correspond to them.

All this still persistent situation of backwardness of the indigenous population and the loss of many of its traditional cultural roots, has been accompanied by the need to reconstruct its own history based on new identities. In this process of rebuilding indigenous cultural identity in an increasingly interrelated and open world, the struggle for equal conditions gives rise to a dynamic of permanent mobilization of indigenous communities.

The Otomi culture has its origins from time immemorial, before Christ (BC). It is difficult to find its true roots because of the little information that exists, since when the Spaniards arrived they finished with any vestige that could give an idea of the true origins of the culture, however, it can be said that during the time that elapses before the Colony the Otomí culture was a civilization that respected the environment, which had its own customs and traditions that identified them from other cultures. Over time, the cultures that predominated in the past tried unsuccessfully to subdue the Otomí people. For sure there is nothing proven about the origins of the Otomí culture and therefore many ideas can be speculated, however, the existence of the ‘Ottomangues’ can be dated to around 4 500 BC.

Community context and overview

Mexico is a mega-diverse country, both in natural resources and in cultures, customs and festivals. In the 32 states of the country, a myriad of festivals is organized throughout the year that make the country a unique representation in the world. These festivals are a mosaic of lights, rockets, traditional foods and multicolored clothing. The state of Mexico belongs to one of those 32 states and is made up of 125 municipalities, of which the municipality of Temascalcingo is part.

San Mateo El Viejo is one of the 85 communities that belong to the municipality. In the community there are 1387 inhabitants. San Mateo el Viejo is at 2 576 meters of altitude, which makes the predominant climate temperate humid with rains in summer. 63.01% of the population is indigenous and 24.87% of the inhabitants speak it. The town of San Mateo el Viejo is located in the Municipality of Temascalcingo, State of Mexico. There are 1 387 inhabitants. San Mateo el Viejo is at 2 576 meters of altitude.

According to statistical data from INEGI (2010) in the town there are 649 men and 738 women. 7.64% of the inhabitants are illiterate (3.39% of men and 11.38% of women). The average school enrollment ratio is 7.84 (8.30 within the men and 7.47 within the women). The town of San Mateo El Viejo has an initial education school ‘José Vasconcelos’, three preschools: one in the Pedregal neighborhood (Neighborhood *n’chepi*), another in the Barrio de la Loma de San Mateo and another in the neighborhood del Durazno (*Ñishi*) ‘Benito Juárez’, two elementary schools: one in the center of the community called ‘Cuauhtémoc’ and another in the Neighborhood de la Loma de San Mateo, a Maria Montessori tele-high school and a tele-baccalaureate from recent creation.

Most of the children finish their basic education up to high school. To attend high school, you have to go to the municipality of Acambay and Atacomulco, which are the most populated and urban municipalities that are close to the community. 63.01% of the population is indigenous and 24.87% of the inhabitants speak an indigenous language. 0.001% of the population speaks an indigenous language and does not speak Spanish.

Language is of utmost importance to the population because it has endured; through the centuries and is a very important identity element for the culture in San Mateo EL Viejo. Until 50 years ago most of the community's inhabitants spoke Otomí; however, with the arrival of basic education schools in the community such as primary schools, the fact that children who are now adults instilled in them that they could be bilingual was lost, because children were forbidden to speak the language of their grandparents and parents.

Regarding unemployment and the economy in San Mateo el Viejo, it can be said that 30.35% of the population over 12 years of age is employed (47.61% of men and 15.18% of women), the majority of people are employed, in third sector (informal) jobs found in Mexico City, these are: masonry, commerce, house maids, diablos in the central supply and plumbing. Another part of the population is also working in the United States of America and many others are in the community working their land for family consumption.

Traditions and culture

Although the temascal, is still today a ritual that consists of a steam bath lasting approximately one or two hours and is practiced for medicinal purposes. It was a traditional practice in the communities of the municipality, today only some isolated spaces can be identified where traditional baths are still practiced and for tourist purposes. In some cases, baths with various herbs are used and for their practice aluminum or iron tubs are adapted and which are carried out, mainly, to cure 'scare' of people and prevent subsequent diseases or with the intention of purifying the body, these practices are the reflection of what the local themes were at one time when they were in their splendor.

It is around the land that the indigenous population has built its own identity, cultivating it to produce food and basing its traditions, culture and customs, as well as its forms of organization, on it. The land means more than a material good, it is the space where communities carry out their rituals, produce their food and therefore it becomes part of people's daily lives, with a symbiosis beyond the material and even you may consider that spiritually there is a close relationship between the earth and people.

With regard to clothing, it can be said that 'the man wore white pants and a blanket shirt, hat and some wore huarache. In women, petticoats, blouses, rebozo and in the Mazahua and Otomi communities, *quesquémel*' (Garduño, 1999). Nowadays it is not very common to see people dress traditionally, however, in school performances or festivals they can dress girls and boys for traditional dances. Also in the celebrations of the patron saint of the community you can see traditional dresses, especially in the dances.

With regard to the gastronomy of the Temascalcingo families, since ancient times and to date it has not changed in its rich variety ‘the diet in the municipality is based on corn, beans and chili, little are consumed: milk, eggs, meat, wheat bread and fish’ (Garduño, 1999). The richness of foods is due to the fact that they are species and foods that are produced locally. Garduño (1999) tells us that ‘only in events such as the town festival, compadrazgo, weddings or others, the food is specially prepared with turkey meat in spicy sauce, rice and tamales’.

Similarly, ‘among traditional foods we can point out a great variety of quelites, mushrooms, prickly pear and squash’ (Garduño, 1999). Although nowadays there has been an excessive consumption of beer, and different drinks that contain high levels of alcohol, in the communities ‘traditional drinks are: pulque made with maguey honey, *Sende Choo*, made with corn and la Sambumbia’ (Garduño, 1999). At present, pulque is collected by the ‘tlachiquero’ who, with his acocote and jug, travels through the lots where he has broken his magueys to continue preserving the precious liquid in one of his pots or barrels found in the home.

The wind band music was a custom in the festivals held throughout the year, for a long time there was a band in San Mateo El Viejo that entertained various festive events and that occasionally went out to the nearby towns there are two bands of music from wind, that of San Pedro el Alto and that of San Mateo EL Viejo, who participate in various festivities interposing religious music and music from the revolutionary era, as well as marches (Garduño, 1999). At present, said band, at least, in the aforementioned community and object of the present investigation no longer exists and there are only a few people who dedicate themselves to entertain the dances of the festivities, accompanied by a drum, a violin and a guitar.

Natural resources

World society owes a historical debt to the indigenous peoples who have lived in natural spaces and who have known how to take care of it over time. They have valued the many benefits that a forest, a river, a mountain or a valley brings with it where there is a diversity of flora and fauna. Leonardo Boff (1996) refers somewhat to this issue by saying that the indigenous people of the Amazon ‘feel and perceive nature as part of their society and culture, as an extension of their personal and social body. For them nature is a living subject, it is loaded with intentions. It is not, like the modern ones, something objectified, mute, neutral. Nature speaks and the indigenous understand its voice and its message’. This fact is not exclusive to the Amazon or Brazil, it is a custom or a historical fact that goes beyond borders and thus, thanks to the care of indigenous cultures, there is a great wealth of natural diversity in the world.

Mexico has been the cradle of great artists who have transcended internationally, one of them was José María Velazco, the painter who reflected in each of his works the greatness of the valleys, mountains and prairies of rural Mexico of his time ‘it is said that when he returned to Temascalcingo to paint the town and the landscape... he blessed God for having arranged for him to be born in that place, where the root of his deep love for nature lay’ (Garduño, 1999). He was an emblematic character who deepened his talent in the art of painting, leaving a halo of pride for the people of Temascalcingo. Thus ‘the history of Temascalcingo is the product of the activity of man in front of nature; internal and external factors have influenced its development’ (Garduño, 1999). When Velazco’s paintings are appreciated, a kind of reflection

towards the care and preservation of the natural environment can be observed. Subjectively, the paintings cite the natural wealth of the hills and valleys that shelter the municipality where it was born.

Charge system

The organization system that communities have goes beyond the conventional logic dictated by constitutional norms or laws. To understand these organizational processes, a host of theoretical-practical arguments must first be analyzed on the use of natural resources, forms of community organization, social cohesion, collective action or social capital. In the present work, it refers to how the mayordomias or system of charges, which are practiced in the communities, as conceptualized by Korsbaek (1996) and comprises two separate hierarchies, one political and one religious, but the two hierarchies are closely related and after having assumed the most important positions of the system a member of the community is considered as 'past' or 'main'.

The mayordomias as part of the uses and customs in the communities are important and is conceptualized by Recondo (Vázquez, 2007) as 'hybrid institutions and practices, like any type of cultural and institutional manifestation that have been signed, formulated and changed in the course of history, in the interaction between the local and the national' both conceptions are adapted to refer to the traditional practices of the communities.

Korsbaek (2002) makes a comparative analysis between two communities in the State of Mexico where uses and customs are identified as a way of life and responsibility, focusing on the system of positions/mayordomias. The referred communities are: San Juan Atzingo in the municipality of Ocuilan and San Francisco Oxtotilpan in the municipality of Temascaltepec.

The system of positions in San Francisco Oxtotilpan tends to weaken as soon as sanctions are applied to those who do not want to participate in it. In San Juan Atzingo, voluntary participation in the charging system is maintained and it is not remembered that sanctions have been applied to someone for not participating. Thus, in the community that does not practice the mother tongue, there is a greater attachment to traditional forms of organization. Undoubtedly, the presence of an alternative identity project is the cause of this situation (Korsbaek, 2002).

Being that in the first community the population that speaks the original language predominates with respect to the second. One of the most helpful practices in the social organization of a community are 'mayordomias', especially with regard to the community's system of positions, power relations, social status and the prestige that is achieved when a person/family/group are responsible for the festivities, jobs and various activities that benefit the community traditions and customs. A separate issue that is not mentioned in the revised work is the commitment through 'promises' that people make to fulfill the commitments of mayordomias in the community, promises made to the patron saint of the community for having fulfilled a goal personal or family and that it has been concluded successfully and that they are immersed in the topic addressed at work. These faith practices are very frequent in the community where the research was carried out.

System of charges in the community of San Mateo El Viejo

At dawn on the first day of January, the party that responds to the celebration of the baptism of the child God begins: coffee and bread are provided to the attendees, in the afternoon food is distributed, consisting of chicken meat, rice, beans, traditional mole, fresh waters, soda, beer and pulque. On the 6th of January the change of godparents is made, those who were in charge of the feast of the first day are changed this day; outgoing godparents give gifts to the children (bread, sweets) who attend church and they give bread to older people as well. On this occasion, people are formed inside the church to give a kiss to the representation of the child God, previously it was said that it is because some disease is left, for example, if you have a cough, it will be left at the moment of giving the kiss is also done out of devotion and adoration of the child. The child god is visited to remember when the shepherds went to Bethlehem to visit the child god 2 000 years ago, according to the bible.

The candelaria festival on February 2 is celebrated with mass, traditional dance, food for the attendees, and fireworks on the eve. In the month of May, all the crosses of the masons, of those who are building, are blessed. In the feast of the Patron Saint San Mateo, which is on September 21, the celebration begins with the eve of September 19 when the flower is woven, the church is adorned, the arch is made for the main door of the Church which is built with flowers, teaspoon (*Dasyllirion acrotrichum*) and coshal (*Pinus ayacahuite*) is fed beans to the dancers, the violinists and the musicians of the wind band. The dancers and the prosecutors are the ones who make the adornment (men and women help each other to make the adornments to make the church look colorful).

On the 20th it continues with the eve where pyrotechnic fires are burned and these are carried out by the freighters, that day the visitors arrive (neighboring towns that bring the image of the Patron Saint of their town). The freighters go to collect the rockets in the houses of the rockets man, who dance and arrive with their rockets at the church, mass is celebrated at eight in the evening.

On the 21st. they dance all day, at one in the afternoon the dancers eat, finish eating and perform a rosary, when the rosary is finished, they go home. On the 22nd. the chickens get together, the ecclesiastical authorities commission a group of people per neighborhood to collect the chickens house by house, the townspeople give a chicken, which they get together and move into wooden crates to bless them, later in the church they are taken out in a procession and taken to the traditional horse race, a chicken is given to each of the riders who have run on the back of their horses, such an event is called 'chicken cutter', the runners they must be foreigners, people from the community are not allowed to run, the dancers accompany the event, later they return to the church, eat again, make rosaries and go home. On the 23rd. they join the freighters, the new freighters sign up, many chickens are killed at the freighters houses (the neighbors support themselves with whatever they can: a chicken, rice, sugar, vegetables, salt, oil, etc.).

On the 24th. at two in the morning atole is prepared to distribute in the Church in the morning, at approximately nine or ten in the morning. The dancers gather flowers in the houses of the freighters, dance in the house of the freighters, then they go to church, exchange the flower basket, the new freighters enter with their basket of flowers and the projections also, at eight o'clock at night, they put the flowers in the vases, they eat chicken for dinner in the church, they deliver a dozen rockets

to the incoming freighters to be burned at the time of the change (when the outgoing freighter delivers the basket as a symbol of responsibility to the freighter incoming). In the basket she carries a candle and flowers... it is the symbol of change.

On the 25th the dancers go out to distribute wooden crosses to seven sacred places in the community, where crosses from previous years are settled. They are traditions that are repeated year after year and many times because of tradition and customs, they have endured and changed over time.

Conclusions

It is extremely important to know and determine the implications of the intervention of indigenous communities and common in their different micro and macro dimensions to understand how they can contribute to greater interaction at the political, institutional and production level with them. This is how decisions can be made to value the history, tradition and culture that characterizes and is representative of our country. This work is of great relevance for the community because the indigenous issue has been related to poverty and inequality of opportunities; however, it is also necessary to understand that in indigenous communities there are countless festivities that are part of their tradition and culture, which help to strengthen ties of solidarity and contribute to the improvement of social organization.

In this research, the different ways of organizing in the community were analyzed, emphasizing the system of positions of a religious nature, in addition the work gave an account of the reality to which the inhabitants are subjected and the new life strategies that are going building based on the uses and customs of the community of San Mateo El Viejo.

It should be noted that in rural communities there are hills, mountains, the diversity of fauna and flora that the territories preserve and that they are a landscape asset rich in diversity, which also provides environmental services to the community and the context that surrounds it. In San Mateo El Viejo the Otomi population has tried to respect the ecological balance of the natural resources associated with them. In this sense, it should be considered that the communities are the ones that have safeguarded natural resources, thanks to the practices that help to conserve soils and to recover forest spaces in a natural way.

The uses and customs of the indigenous communities (culinary, musical, artistic, work, etc.) have been examples of ways of life, social cohesion and local technological innovation; however, they have been victims of public policies, for example: the reforms to article 27 of the Constitution, the Free Trade Agreement (FTA) implemented *de facto*, have meant greater social inequality, greater marginalization of small producers, increase poverty and massively nourish migration, all at the risk of the survival of the Mexican indigenous peoples, who survive, not a few, thanks to the remittances sent by migrants who work in the United States of America.

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