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DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

THESES

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Economic Anthropology of Market Traditions in Contemporary Mexico

Totonac women working in Papantla

A Case Study

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Purpose of the dissertation, research methods

The purpose of my dissertation was to describe and analyse the wage labor of Totonac women in a market place where they work as vendors. After the analysis I have put this commercial activity in a wider social-economic and theoretical context. My research was inspired by the 20th and 21st century’s ethnographic and anthropological investigations and theories that helped me to establish all the points of view and to choose the topics of the dissertation. I studied three main topics and I intended to observe them from different perspectives. The three topics are: 1.) The network and the dynamics of Mexican market places and vendors’ situation in a concrete market place. 2.) Women’s place in the Totonac society, their work in the domestic domain and their work outside, as well as their status in the family; and related to this topic 3.) the functioning of a contemporary Totonac family. I believe that these topics can only be understood in their wider context, that is in the Latin-American version of modernization processes, which started in the 1950’s. Some of the questions considered here, had been dealt with by previous researchers, and several of them became really classic. Still I think the new drives of the modernization processes generated new changes in Latin-American social-economic life and these changes led to new phenomena. If we study them from various points of view they will give us new information and new findings. Two examples of these new phenomena in the modernization processes are the introduction and expansion of the system of public education (from the 1990s) and the introduction of female work to the labour market.

My long term fieldwork was supported by scholarships that helped me to return to Mexico and conduct my research and study for ten years. Analysing the related literature (I wrote about it in the introductory chapters) helped me to add etic perspective to my emic one. In the beginning of my research I thought that the fieldwork in the market place would be sufficient to understand the social-economic processes, but during my work I realized that it was necessary to observe the family and its environment in order to comprehend the background of female labour. That is why I started to study all the phenomena related to the family from the beginning of the fieldwork and that led me to the village called La Guásima. In addition I also studied the local schools, the governmental subvention program in the village, as well as a nationwide phenomenon: migration. All these things constitute the background of female wage labour.

As I mentioned before, various Mexican researchers studied Totonacs,1 female work and the situation of the family, but I believe I managed to contribute new information. Previous scholars drew different conclusions for several reasons: on the one hand they only treated only certain

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aspects of these topics, when they dealt with other phenomena, on the other hand they carried out their research long time before the appearance of certain social processes, so they were not able to attain the same results as I did, who after a long term fieldwork, focused on describing the Totonac women’s marketing traditions and customs in a holistic way.

I completed my long term fieldwork in three periods: in 2005–2006, in 2008 and in 2016–2017. During the participant observation I held long friendly chats with my informants who received me in their homes, in their families and in their hearts. That is why I am sincerely grateful. In the market place I had contact with 15 people, including 9 women and 6 men. In spite of my first intent to carry out a fieldwork with women only, I decided to include men in the sample. It gave new aspects and led to new questions I considered in my investigation.

In addition to the friendly chats I conducted semi-structured interviews and in-depth interviews with and collected life stories from some informants.

I conducted two surveys with questionaires among students about their relatives who live in big cities and their expectations about their future.

I did not have any difficulties in communication as I speak Spanish very well. In the communities I worked, there are less and less people who speak Totonac and more and more who speak Spanish. That is why everybody spoke Spanish to me, and if some spoke in Totonac among them, they did not have any problem to translate the content of the conversation.

The Totonacs

For understanding the contemporary situation it is very important to have in mind the Totonac history from the very beginning. I summarized this in chapter 5 of the dissertation.

The Totonac is an Indian people with a long history. They were the first whom Spaniards met when they arrived in Mexico in 1519. There are Spanish chronicles that describe the relationship between the two peoples, moreover Bernardino de Sahagún³, and Juan de Torquemada⁴ wrote long descriptions about them. The Totonac ritual centre in the 16th century was Cempoala, that was destroyed later by the Spaniards. Because of this today the biggest Totonac archeological site is El Tajín close to the region where I carried out my investigation. According to descriptions the best period of this city was in the 8th century.

The Totonacs are the native inhabitants of Totonacapan. The territory of this „country” decreased during the colonial times and now it is situated in the states of Veracruz, Puebla and Hidalgo. The same happened with the population in the colonia times which began to increase during the 18th century and numbered 267,635 people in 2015 according to official data.⁵

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² The word Indian refers to the American native people and appeared as a Spanish legal expression in the 18th century. Nowadays it is not used as a legal expression and its meaning has changed a lot according to the context in which it is used. The vulgar tongue uses the term for the descents of the native people who live in villages, speak Indian languages and/or have Indian habits or attitudes, despite of the fact that many of them live in big cities nowadays and do not speak their ancestors’ languages, that is why the expression has received another meaning: people who are treated as Indian by others or people who identify themselves as Indians.


⁴ TORQUEMADA, Juan de 1615: Monarquia Indiana.

⁵ www.cuentame.inegi.org.mx
I conducted my research in the north of Veracruz state, in the town of Papantla de Olarte. The Totonac area of Veracruz is divided into two regions: the mountains and the coast plain. Papantla and its surroundings are on the coast plain. The two regions are different not only orographically but culturally as well. One of the differentiating factors is that the mountain region was a relatively isolated area till the 20th century, meanwhile the coast plain was more open to the influence of European immigrants and mestizos.\(^6\)

The Totonac live in an agricultural and patriarchal society where men should work in the fields and women should work in the household and bring up children according to the traditional labour division.

During the colonial times agriculture was based on policultural production and cash crops appeared from the 19th century. On the coast plain vanilla, tobacco, sugar cane and chile piquín were produced in addition to maize. Their production was interrupted several times due to various plagues. In the region of my fieldwork nowadays chile piquín is produced again.

On the coast plain the ejido-system (Indian communal land property system) does not exist, unlike to other parts of independent Mexico. In Papantla county private property dominates. In the last two hundred years lands became smaller and smaller due to three basic reasons: 1) as a consequence of the legislations; 2) the latifundia were increasing by the forestalling of lands; 3) because of the Totonac partilineal inheritance traditions: every son inherit the same size of land.

These days land owners produce mainly orange, lemon, banana and chile piquín for wholesale. Monoculture became the typical producing method. In the region they stopped producing vanilla in 2012.

Those who do not have lands or who possess only a small one, look for wage labour. Usually one person takes several jobs. There are people who work as day-labourers on the land of others and in state financed constructions parallely. Others open a small shop in the village and work on their small land. Others go to Papantla (or Poza Rica) to earn some money. Another possibility is to work as a soldier, policeman or taxi driver. An increasing number of people vote for migration to big cities. In these cases family labour division shows the same pattern: man is the head of the family who earns money, and the women do the housework and bring up the children.

Besides, some people of the region go to the market places, mainly to Papantla to sell products. This is mostly true for women. Why do women go to work to the small town and how is the trade functioning? I consider these questions in chapter 7. Chapters 6-8 focus on the topics mentioned in the introduction as well as the results of my fieldwork in detail.

**The results of the research**

*The individual reasons of market selling*

I conducted my research in the Reforma lane next to Juárez Market in Papantla among tineras. Tinera, a term from Papantla, means not just a simple vendor but a Totonac street seller.

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\(^6\)The word mestizo means a mixture of Indian and European people, however according to the local understanding the Mexican nation state is mestizo. Being mestizo is a cultural concept which means that everybody is considered mestizo except the Indians.
According to the common belief they are peasant women who sell the products of their own family land. However they are not land owners, but buy the goods from small-scale producers and resell them.

But why do tineras do this work? They need to work to earn money and support their families. In fact, they are all single women who belong to diverse social strata and need to help their families in different ways. Those who are not yet married support their parents, the divorced (mostly abandoned women) and widows try to support their children and themselves, that is why they have to assume the role of the head of the family. These are examples of women labour where the patriarchal labour division is turned upside down and women are forced to play the role of a male.

In my dissertation I deal with the lives of all the tineras, how they began to work in the market place and why this work is the obvious solution for them. The results can be summerized as follows: the Totonac female trade has a long history. On the one hand, the Totonac have traded with cash crops – for example with vanilla – since the 19th century, they had to take the goods to the town to sell it to mestizo merchants or to sell them in weekly/monthly fairs. It was a work for men. And a woman often went to the town with her husband and sold the chicken or other birds breded by her. It was a female task. While the husbands were doing the main business with mestizo merchants, the women went around the town and sold their chicken and vegetables.

On the other hand, every tinera learnt the fundamental of trading from one of her older female relatives, so market trading has its antecedents and it is not an unknown activity for them, but a traditional method to complement the family incomes in case of need.

The town and the tineras

On the basis of the historical analysis I drew the conclusion that the town considers the Totonacs’ market trading as a variety of peddling. Although the weekly/monthly fairs have become permanent market places, where also peddlers were working, the people in the town continue to consider Totonac women as peddlers. The parts of the town that became open air markets, turned into dirty, untidy places without any control. Because of this during the 20th century the authorities of Papantla aimed to normalize the situation. As a result of the plans, the Hidalgo market was built in 1964 and the Juárez market in 1979 in the Centro. Officially, the purpose of the construction of the market places was to settle the peddlers and create a better environment. In spite of all these efforts, the street selling did not stop, and at the end of the 1980s several nearby streets were invaded by Totonac vendors. Despite the fact that the town considers them as peddlers, they arrived to town and went to the same assigned place every day to do a very similar work as traders inside the market building. Although the town wanted to stop the peddling, it became permanent and is increasing day by day. It is a phenomenon that should be called street selling and not peddling, as the vendors do not move from their place, but stay there every day and all day long with fixed working hours.

There were a few years of order after the 2003 „arrangement”, when vendors near Hidalgo market were moved to the surroundings of Juárez market. But during my 2016 research I detected changes: the streets were filled again by Totonac vendors dedicated to street selling, and although they were not peddlers, they generated the same traffic problems. The presence of an increasing number of Totonac women vendors points to four things. First, there are more
women who need to sell goods in the market place; secondly, this activity provides a reasonable income; thirdly, the demand to this kind of products is growing too, as the supply is bigger than it was before; fourthly, female work is more acceptable in the Totonac society.

Trading in the market place

The dynamics of market places can be described from two perspectives: synchronic and diachronic. The diachronic point of view is the historical background that I outlined in the previous chapter. The synchronic dynamics of the commercial processes can be studied by the trading process as a social-economic and cultural phenomenon that develops through communication. The context and the scene of this phenomenon is the market itself. Nevertheless, I believe that the commercial operations in the market place alone do not represent the process of trading entirely, that is why I focus on the product as the main component of trade, and on its story. Since the product link the small-scale producers with the consumers, passing through the vendors, all the activities, attitudes and details of commercial operations can be studied through the goods. Commercial operations can be investigated, for example, from the point of view of logistics, financial calculation: investments, calculation of incomes, outcomes and debts.

Trading however is not just about the goods. It connects vendors with consumers, vendors with producers and vendors with vendors. In the market place parallely with business and work relations also friendships are created, which later will be strengthened with ritual kinship. These relationships belong also to the context of the trade.

And the town itself is one of the context, as the scene of the activities. I also thought important to observe how the vendors use the urban space: in what kind of spaces do they move around? What do they use the town for? Which are the spaces they like and which are they do not like? And why?

According to my fieldwork it can be said that the most important place in the town for them is the lane, in which they work. They consider it as their work place, so they think of it as a place that belongs to them. But they prefer to stay in the village as their home. They prefer to join religious ceremonies in the village, too, and some of them said if there were a chance not to work in Papantla – for example because instead of them one of their children would do the commercial work – they should not have to go to the town.

Summerizing the mentioned facts: in spite of the previous tradition of female trading in the Totonac culture, tineras step out from the traditional labour division modell: for working for money they leave not only their house, but their village too. But they do it because they must to do something for supporting their families. And the way they leave the village is not the same as do people who vote for migration, because the tineras only leave the village temporarily and they can take part of the village life every day: they participate in every communal event, communal work and religious ceremony.

The village La Guásima as a social context

The number of inhabitants of the village increased in the last ten years. According to the census conducted in 2010 the number of people in the village that year was 1000.7 And according to

the data of the governmental subvention program, Prospera, in 2016 there were 1750 people living in the village. The number was growing thank to the immigrants possibly, because people in the village use family planning methods, therefore in the last few years only 1-2 children were born in every family comparing with 8-9 in the previous generations and with 4-5 children in the previous decades.

People support their family with the mentioned activities, and those who do not find the way how to do this, they go to big cities for earn their living.

Migration is more and more popular in the village due to various reasons. The main reason why they move to big cities is the lack of lands and the economic situation in the region. Besides, the public education has an influence on young people. Between 1960 and 1994 different schools were opened and students has the possibility to make even the high school final exam in the village (or in the region). According to the interviews with school directors, today 90-95% of young people begin to study in public school system, and 98% of them continue it and pass the final exam. Their marks are not good but the certificate they receive is valid all around the country. This also helps them to leave the village and follow one of their relatives to a big city.

To opt for migration as a possibility to earn a living is suggested also by the media (television, radio) and the desire for something better, something more. In addition, the results and the stories of relatives make the cities attractive for young people. Children hardly can picture their life far away from the village and they feel sorry for their relatives how live outside of the region. But when they grow up, only a few of them imagine their life in the village. This was the result of the surveys I conducted.

Migration has an effect on village life and on the tineras’ lives inside in it as well. There will be a family member, usually a child, who will be missing from the family but in the same time his or her financial support will appear as an income for the family. The biggest investments will be built with his or her help. In the tineras’ families, as well as in other families, the status in the hierarchy of the son who live in a city will be changed thank to his support: he will be equal with his father or he can even reach a higher position. But he can make and advantage of his authority when he is present, so temporarily during holidays.

The changes of the family in the tineras’ life

The family organizations and structure are changing in different ways. Besides the natural changes inside, various influences affect the family from outside. In Totonac culture marriage is patrilocal, and after the wedding family will be extended. After children are born they separate into two nuclear families as soon as the young ones are able to build a house. And then children grow up and they get married and so on.

This traditional system can be changed if any family member (mostly the man) „falls out” or leaves the family, it remains an one-parent family. Tineras live in one-parent families. Some of them miss their husbands, others their father. There is a tinera whose father died when she was young. So, the one-parent family was the family of her mother, so first she had to help her mother with her income, and that is why she had to begin to work when she was a young single.

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8 Interview: Isabel de la Cruz.
In the other families tineras are the head of the family: they support it financially. Nevertheless none of the tineras are really and totally alone as head of families: one of the male family members help them. In some cases the oldest brother helped the women in their need. In one case for example, the older brother helped his sister to move back home to her parents with her children and then he took part of the support of her family. Mostly he assumed the bigger payments. But later on her son grew up, got married and he stayed in the village (in contrast to his sisters, wo all went to Mexico City to work and live there). When this son’s children were born the family structure has changed: the nuclear family was not her mother’s anymore, but his own family became the nuclear family and he became the head of it. Her mother, the tinera, only became a family member who helped. Her brother does not have authority on this family anymore, her son has become the „boss“. She would not need to go to the market place to work anymore, but she wants to be independent from her son, and she needs her daily routine in the market place and her social life. That is why she keeps on working. And she is not the only one in this situation.

But there are other situations and other ways how things happen with the tineras in the market place. There are some, who live different lives as their sons have not stayed in the village, moved to a big city like their sisters. Their mothers, the tineras remained at home alone. They have to face everyday challeges alone. As well as those tineras who do not have son, but only daughter. Yet one thing is sure: there is always a male family member who helps to the tinera. If it is not the son, than will be the same brother who did it before. In another example for brother’s help is that case when the tinera’s brother live in Mexico City and he support his sisters from there. He is not present in his sisters’ family every day, but his support arrives with him when he visits his sisters during holidays. So he helps in expensive things – for example purchase television, fridge, other electric devices –, while the tinera’s income is enough to cover everyday payments. When the brother is present temporally in his family, he becomes the head of it, has an authority, but he does not interfere in the market trade, or the way they spend their money generated by trading. It means that he does not have a total authority on his sisters, and the tineras have a certain independence.

The effects on the family that come from outside
Besides of the natural inner changes in the family structure, there are social, economic processes that have an effect on the family organization. For example: divorce, falling apart and migration, as I demonstrated. And also the nation state and its institutions and institutional systems have influence on the modern family life.

One of these institution is the public school system. While 80-90% of young people have final exam from high school, their parents hardly can read or write. It means that parents and children have a totally different cultural background and they identify with the cultural values of their generations. Besides, school system, during the process of teaching, has an effect on the difference between genders, migration and even on the Totonac identity.

Migration – as I mentioned before – can make changes in the family structure. In addition the migration pattern has changed in the last 20 years too. Untill around 2000 the head of a family alone, without his family went to work to a big city and sent the money home. Today young people start to move in child’s status, many times alone, and they support their parents family.
The other change comparing the new pattern with the previous way is that now there are also girls among the migrants that was not normal before. With migration female work outside of the family home has begun to be accepted in the Totonac society. Nevertheless there is a problem that has appeared with this tolerance. It is the opposition of two different value systems. While in school there is no difference between boys and girls (they use the same spaces, many times girls study better than boys, and have better results, that is why they have more chance to promotion among their mates, etc.), there is an opposition in the family: their parents bring them up in the traditional way. They educate the girls to be housewives and mothers, and the boys to be the heads of the family and fathers. There are some cases when these value differences generate confusion inside young people, because while with final exam certificate they are prepering to their adult life that includes self-realization, entertainment, consumption on the one hand, they want to have a family as soon as it is possible on the other hand. And these two things can not become true at the same time. That is why young people become frustrated and sad and it leads to conflicts with their parents.

Turning to other topics, there is another example for the intervention of the nation state in family life. This is the governmental subvention called Prospera that is dedicated to help poor people to join the system of public education and the governmental health care system. They recieve a certain amount of money every month, and the women have the right to take it. This highlights the role of women inside the society, and lately brings about a system of gatherings that these women have to join. The gatherings last too long, and most of the time do not have any result, so nowadays men are happy that they are not compelled to be there in vain.

Summerizing the above mentioned facts, the following effects of modernization processes can be pointed out: the bigger part of the society assumes wage labour, women usually vote for trading in the market place, or go to big cities with men to earn the living there. And the majority of young people do not return from the big cities: they settle down and make a family there. And on the contrary there are some examples, when after a few years young people returns to the village and choose a traditional life.

**Some topics for a future investigation**

As I mentioned before, during my ten-year-long research I saw that conditions and circumstances of living transform very fast due to the modernization processes and, inside of it, to the technological developments. That is why I believe research can be continued in many ways. There are some questions that can be considered. For example: how will the market trade go on? Will its importance desappear? Will there be any change in the group of consumers? And in the group of vendors? Will be any change in the reasons for a preference of market trading of the tinera way? What kind of other methods will appear to increase their incomes? In addition, the labour division inside the family can be treated as well. Will the female wage labour be general in the future? What will be the life of young people in the cities? Will they be satisfied with their possibilities? How will they educate their children there? How will mass migration effect the village? How will family planning effect family life when the number of people in the village begin to decrease?
How will the nation state interfere in the transformation of local circumstances? What kind of urbanization plans will be created? And how will these have an effect on Totonac people and culture?
These are some of the questions that can be considered if there is a possibility to make a new research in ten years.

**Published articles related with the dissertation**


