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Fragment of Story: an Otomani Woman from Hidalgo in Mexico (1886-1974)



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ABSTRACT

We present the life dynamics of an indigenous woman. Those dynamics, which took place mainly in the post-revolutionary era, have been taken from life stories. They have been built among fragments of memories and empty documentaries. The analysis approaches the sociocultural conditions of a region where ancestral knowledge was vital for family subsistence. This approach allows us to consider the actors, Ángela Tolentino and other *Otomi-Tepehua* [geographic and cultural region from Hidalgo State, Mexico] women natives

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of the state of Hidalgo, as products of history. We highlight decisive actions to make her life a unique story as an actor in her own social space. Those actions are the formation of a family without the guardianship and protection of a father, a brother, or a husband; becoming the sole economic provider of her children; migrating to experience the gradual abandonment of previous knowledge (including her mother tongue, which gradually became extinct among her descendants); and to live in a political context that fought for the assimilation of indigenous culture because it was considered as a restraint for the development of the country. We recover memories of her life from her descendants, such as experiences and discussions made while walking and traveling from one *ranchería* [small rural settlement] to another, far from rural and urban centers. In this sense, we consider her as the producer of her own story. This is how to interweave the image of an *Otomí*-speaking indigenous woman at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th.

KEY WORDS: indigenous woman, marginalization, migrant, poverty, vulnerability

Introduction

By the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th, in the post-revolutionary era in Mexico, the indigenous communities that remained distant from envisioning a revolutionary ideology experienced a profound climate of poverty and hopelessness. Isolated from the progress of urban contexts, there prevailed a life of economic subsistence centered on working in small plots accompanied by null access to education. These conditions placed them in abandonment and vulnerability.

The culture of community and endogenous organization could not represent the unifying ideology but on the contrary, the post-revolutionary model proposed a model of acculturation and change in which the objective was the integration of the Indians through assimilation that implied *mexicanizar al indio* [Mexicanize the Indian] with symbolism of national identity. (Bartolomé 2004; Aguirre 1990). The indigenous issue represented a restraint and a problem for the country that had to be resolved. The mestizo represented the unity that was legitimized by science through cultural miscegenation. This ethnocide was represented as a civilizing crusade that looked for the indigenous people to renounce their culture and their mother tongue with the purpose of being part of the nation project. In this situation, indigenous women encountered the greatest inequality and vulnerability. The ideal of the Mexican Revolution sought an even land distribution and social justice, but this ideal was clearly directed only to a male and agrarian group.

Being a woman has a sense of signification. As a premise, it leads us to a historical reflection, in which a voice is given to bring us closer to the voices and narratives of the indigenous women of the *sierra* [chain of mountains]. They are the path because their word is walking as well as their thought. Being an indigenous woman from the social dimension implied three meanings: the origin of her poverty comes from denying her the right to have *tierras ejidales* [communal lands mainly used for agriculture]. The privileged in the distribution and direct blood inheritance to male children were delegated to men. To poverty was added illiteracy. Due to her condition as a woman (either a daughter, wife, mother, or sister), she was placed hierarchically below the men in the kinship system. This signification also places her in the triple marginalization by being on the scale of a patriarchal subordination of ancestral founding and colonizing origin.

It is important the way in which the role of the indigenous migrant woman is highlighted because this trait is fundamental in the *Otomí* culture, the exodus, and the migration in search of better life opportunities. Such is the case exemplified in this text when we talk about forced migration due to factors of labor exploitation, sexual abuse, and discrimination. That leads us to deep reflection on those aspects of social life that are still current in our country.

That is why this work deals with a study of the sociocultural conditions of the *Otomí-Tepehua* region which is in the State of Hidalgo. We emphasize the case of women and the personal events of an indigenous woman in a post-revolutionary context. We analyze how this socioeconomic and political context determined her history with facts and events that can be replicated in other contexts, communities, and by other women. The document demonstrates how Ángela Tolentino was able to influence her own history after her descendants had reconstructed her past and found the meaning of her life.

The structure of the work is organized in three sections. First, we describe the post-revolutionary Mexico sociocultural conditions of the *Otomí-Tepehua* Region in the state of Hidalgo. We emphasize the case of women to place this woman as a product of history. The second corresponds to the biography of Ángela Tolentino. We highlight her roles as head of the family, provider, and migrant; we recount how some actions and decisions were decisive in making her life a unique story. Finally, we show how her descendants, who gave meaning to her life, reconstructed the personal history of this woman.

Theoretical and methodological framework

The theoretical and methodological references motivate us to begin working on a Life Story. The aforementioned is justified on the grounds that it allows us to observe the thread and articulations that weave the tapestry of human life. Therefore, other academic methodologies impede us from achieving our goal (De Gaulejac 2006). Consequently, based on this academic perspective, we are positioned between anthropology and social history.

Life history consists of two aspects: The first one describes what "really" happened during the existence of an individual. It also identifies events and concrete elements that characterized and influenced the life, the family, and the environment of this individual, t. This is a factual reconstruction that was created using historical-sociological research. Obtaining biographical story narratives about a person's existence based on the tales that person has created for themselves or that person has been told by others is the second aspect. We aim to comprehend every aspect of those experiences related to an affective, emotional, cultural, family, and societal level based on what has been explained and from a research investigation. The conscious and unconscious levels are constantly impacted by these interactions. (De Gaulejac 2006, 30-31).

The individual is viewed as a product, an actor, and a producer of life, in accordance with De Gaulejac's (2006) theory. The person assumes, as a result, that his identity is the result of the personal experiences he has had, which give rise to his biography as a distinct and original tale. The social environment and characteristics shared by his immediate family have an impact on that identity as well. The individual believes that he can affect his own history as an actor in history. The person is also a maker of stories. Through both conscious and unconscious processes, the person reconstructs his past to give it a particular meaning.

The privileged way of accessing these stories in a biographical approach is through the narrative of life and the narrative of the story (Cornejo, 2006). For this reason, in-depth interviews were conducted with key informant descendants of Ángela Tolentino (a 95-year-old son, a niece, and other descendants). We also used other sources to associate the data obtained through the interviews. We seek to describe the phenomena of poverty and discrimination in the *Otomí-Tepehua* region that occurred during the post-revolution era and to know how they were perceived and

appreciated by their inhabitants. We analyze these phenomena based on the approach of being a woman to complying with the attributes of her time.

The *Otomí-Tepehua* region: Delimitation of this history in time and space

This region is part of the *Sierra Madre Oriental* and is in the eastern part of the state of Hidalgo. It is formed by the municipalities of Huehuetla (with a *Nahuatl* and *Otomí* speaking population), San Bartolo Tututepec, Tenango de Doria, Acaxochitlán, Agua Blanca de Iturbide, and Metepec. The region is bordered by the state of Veracruz (Tlachichilco, Huayacocotla, Ixhuatlán) to the north and by the state of Puebla (*Sierra Norte*) to the east. This is one of the three regions where the conditions of poverty, marginalization, and emigration have historically been concentrated. These conditions prevail and still show components related to the indigenous population. (Vargas 2011, 95)¹

Geographically, four bioclimatic regions stand out: semi-cold (high areas, coniferous forests, average annual temperature of 15.9 °C, annual rainfall of 1,812.9 mm); temperate cloud forest (mean annual temperatures of 18.8 °C, rainfall of 3,129.5 mm per year); temperate jungle (primary jungle vegetation, mean annual temperature 20.7 °C, rainfall 1,891.1 mm); and warm humid with primary jungle vegetation. The average annual temperature is 24.0 °C, and the precipitation is 1,478.0 mm per year (García and González 2014).

Valleys, as well as distinct canyons and ravines, are present in its mountainous topography, making it challenging to develop public infrastructure and services such as communication systems and other essential facilities. González and López (2018) emphasize that these physical features have perpetuated the isolation of its residents, who nonetheless uphold their traditions and customs. They also add that the lack of government initiatives has intensified marginalization and poverty.

In the pre-Hispanic period, the region was a multicultural conglomerate of people of different languages: Otomí, Totonaca, Tepehua and Chichimeca. At the beginning of the 16th century, they gradually decreased, leaving the Otomí population as the

¹ Such delimitation responds to a political need to differentiate it from the *Sierra Norte de Puebla* and the *Huasteca Veracruzana*, since both the geography and the population share history and common characteristics with their neighbors (Garrett 2013, 82).

dominant population in San Bartolo Tututepec, Tenango de Doria, Acaxochitlán, and the Tepehua in Huehuetla. In this scenario, these remote communities have resisted the cultural onslaught (Guerrero 1986 as cited in Vargas 2011, 97).

During the Viceroyalty era, the inhabitants of the region resisted for a time but were finally subdued by the evangelization, *los repartimientos* [distribution of land], *las encomiendas* [a grant by the crown to certain Spanish officers and others of several indigenous people] and the congregations. The *Republic of Indians* people was formed based on the towns that survived the pressure of the Spanish, and many others were formed with a high degree of cohesion. These circumstances allowed them to defend themselves against abuses and at the same time, preserve a certain autonomy in favor of their political and religious organization, incorporating the cargo system (around the patronal festival) and the cult of oratories (Dow as cited in Garret 2013, 97).

Starting in the independent period, different subjugation mechanisms were implemented to control the towns that persisted in showing opposition to the constitutional town halls in charge of mestizos and whites. (Garret 2013, 104). From the proclamation of the Reform laws until the *Porfiriato* [period when Porfirio Díaz was president of Mexico], the accumulation of land in a few hands supported the growth and consolidation of the *haciendas* [plantation land with a dwelling house]. The appearance of the *haciendas* helped to dissolve the old *Republic of Indians*. They were forced to exchange their labor for little or no economic remuneration, which caused constant conflicts and rebellions that led to the Mexican Revolution. The indigenous peoples were enmeshed in poverty, which can be defined in various ways and extends beyond a person's poor income or lack of financial wealth. In a broader sense, poverty refers to the satisfaction of other needs that cannot be entirely met by the market. For instance, a person's ability to stay healthy depends on social factors and public services like vaccination programs and clean air; a person's capacity to go to school also heavily depends on factors outside the market, like the placement of schools close to where the students live (there are some aspects of education that can be purchased as goods). And the ability to travel often depends heavily on the existence of public goods such as roads, ports, and transportation vehicles (Macewan 2010, 19).

In the post-revolutionary period, government policies on the indigenous affairs were aimed at homogenization, mainly through the *castellanizacion* [general teaching of the Spanish language in the country] and imposition of national values. These

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policies were implemented through institutions such as cultural missions, town houses, *escuelas normales rurales* [rural normal schools], and *la casa del estudiante indigena* [the house of the indigenous student]. These policies presented a double discourse, on the one hand, it was emphasized that the indigenous people were descendants of the glorious cultures of the country. On the other hand, they were despised for their "primitive and out of date" ways of life compared to the national culture. (Margarito 2012, 94)

In 1935, when Lázaro Cárdenas oversaw the government of Mexico, he created the Department of Indigenous Affairs (DAI). This division oversaw defining indigenous people to give them special consideration and reported directly to the federal government. The definition of an indigenous person was based on biological, cultural, and historical factors. It was initially intended to conduct scientific research, particularly anthropological research, which would serve as the foundation for government initiatives to address their problems; however, the DAI implemented homogenizing measures through the establishment of agricultural and industrial schools, cooperatives (of consumption and production), as well as hygienic habits, sports, and civic measures into place. These procedures were viewed as an imposition because they were generally applied in urban settings. (López, 2013)

In this period, the greatest distribution of land was carried out throughout the country in the form of *ejidos* [portion of land granted to the indigenous people]; however, it was inconvenient for many indigenous people that lived in the regions we just talked about. The geography of these regions, as well as the poverty of its inhabitants to implement modern agricultural technology, not to mention the lack of other public policies, limited the possibilities of the now called *ejidatarios* [the person that receives in charge the *ejido*] to exploit their lands in a sustainable manner.² Instead, they sought "land clearing" for edible crops which led to excessive logging.

The contempt expressed throughout the history of Mexico by the authorities (political, academic, religious, etc.), or in other words, the members of the dominant

² Coffee cultivation was introduced as a state policy in the mid-20th century, under the argument that it would provide better income for families, compared to traditional staple crops. To guarantee his safety, the peasant kept a backyard cattle farm or fruit farming (beans, peanuts, and sugar cane). In general, fruit crops were cultivated in an associated or intercropped manner (González and López 2018, 29).

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culture, towards those ways of life that maintained some cultural traits of the pre-Hispanic era, translated into discrimination against such elements. For example, the original languages; food based on corn, beans, and sauce; *el pulque* [traditional alcoholic drink]; the blanket attire; the houses made of materials taken from nature; and others. The population of indigenous origin was particularly discriminated.³

Women of the region

Sherry Ortner assures that in all cultures there has been a subordination of women at the symbolic level. In the imagination of people, regardless of where they are located, women are less than men because they are associated with nature because of their biology. It has been interpreted that the woman is not able to dedicate herself to the production of culture because she spends more time caring for her own specie. This imagination supports the idea that the tasks carried out by women have less value than those carried out by men. The above-mentioned fosters the idea that women have a psychic structure closer to nature (Copred 2017, 2).

In the Viceroyalty period, both women and Indians were considered minors. They required the guardianship of a man and the Crown itself, respectively. Such conception persisted and increased in independent Mexico, especially during the *Porfiriato*. The proliferation of scientific studies asserted its lower capacity; they had moral weaknesses that made them prone to “vices” such as prostitution and alcoholism. The incidence used to be higher among “lower class” women (including Indians) because they were less subject to the control of society.⁴ Some women had access to professional education but, because they were conceived only as wives and mothers, they were assigned professions related to educating and caring for

³ I use the concept of “discrimination” to mean excluding through selection. In other words, giving inferior treatment to individuals or groups, in this case because of their ethnic origin (CDI 2009, 5).

⁴ You can review these topics in Speckman, Elisa 2003. *Morir a manos de una mujer: homicidas e infanticidas en el porfiriato*. In F. Castro y M. Terrazas (coord. y edición), *Disidencia y disidentes en la historia de México*, pp. 295-320. México UNAM 1997. *Las flores del mal. Mujeres criminales en el Porfiriato*. Historia Mexicana, XLVII (1), 183-229; Flores, F. 1885. *El himen en México*. Study made of some observations presented in the chair of legal medicine at the School of Medicine in the year 1882. Mexico, Oficina Tipográfica de la Secretaría de Fomento; Carrillo, A. 2001-a. *Los médicos y la degeneración de la raza indígenas*. Ciencias (60):64-70 y; 2002. *La profesión médica ante el alcoholismo en el México moderno*. Cuicuilco. Revista de Ciencias Antropológicas, 9 (24): 313-332.

future citizens. The opening of primary schools throughout the national territory was favored but remote towns were still excluded from such benefits.⁵

In the first decades of the 20th century, women lived and suffered the ambiguities of a new social regime still in the process to be born, and simultaneously of an old one that did not disappear yet; there was talk of freedom, equality, citizenship, but they continued under the tutelage of males. Such subordination was recognized as "related to their sex" and therefore "natural"; a "feminine identity" built from home and by the mothers themselves in childhood and lifelong, in a process of conformity and self-acceptance of this inequitable and unequal situation (Montes de Oca 2014, 151).

During the *Cardenismo* [period when Lázaro Cárdenas was president of Mexico], due in part to international conditions, work options for women increased. Although the State promised to reduce the inequality that they were experiencing, some textbooks in public schools persisted in reproducing the model of a woman in charge of the home and family: "Mamá no sale. Mamá está en la casa. Ella cose y lava. Ella sacude las cosas. Mamá cuida de todo en la casa. ¡Tan buena mamáita!" [Mom doesn't go out. Mom is at home. She sews and washes. She dusts off. Mom takes care of everything in the house. Such a good mommy!] (SEP, as cited in Montes de Oca 2014, 159). They increased such inequality because the economy demanded their entry into the labour field, but at the same time, keeping their domestic duties. As the previous quote says, the good mother "sews, washes, dusts off" and the good mother "doesn't go out, she stays at home." So, in order to be a good mother, she had to look for employment without leaving home!

Due to this succinct review, we can emphasize the subordinate position that Mexican women have historically held in relation to men. These men represent a woman before the social group; they could be a father, brothers, or a partner. If this was the case of an indigenous woman, the disadvantage is even greater. Inequalities due to

⁵ The case of Professor Juana Ledesma shows that although, as a low-income woman, she had access to professional training, it was partly due to her physical features, as she herself stated. See Durán González, R. E. 2022. Educación y trabajo femenino bajo el modelo porfiriano, el caso de Juana Ledesma. *Revista Universidad y Sociedad*, 14(S1): 548-556.

gender are a consequence of several cultural patterns expressed constantly in behaviours of primordial importance in people's lives. Even though these inequalities are not exclusive to indigenous groups, they place women at a greater social disadvantage. These unfavourable social circumstances of material and social deprivation that prevail in most populations, especially when being indigenous, make a woman to face a double disadvantage in her decision-making capacity: access to resources and capacity for action. (CDI; CONAPO; Inmujeres; SSA; 2006, 9)

Biography of Ángela Tolentino

She was born in Huayacocotla, Veracruz, Mexico in 1886 as stated in the marriage certificate of her youngest son; however, none of her descendants ever saw a record of a birth or christening certificate. She never went to school, and at a very young age, she married a man with whom she had her first son named Felix. In the revolutionary uprising, her family was dispossessed of their land, and her husband died. Without a man to "support her" and with scarce financial resources, she began her pilgrimage through the region in search of paid work to support her son. Following that, she had relations with another man, and then her daughter María Elena was born. Later, since she only had housework skills, she started to work in a *hacienda* as a domestic worker. It was probably either the *Hacienda* of Apulco, Huehuetla (which was an iron foundry), or the *hacienda* of San Pedro Vaquerías, on the north part of Atotonilco el Grande (which raised cattle), because both *haciendas* stood out in the region.

Since the colonial period, the *haciendas* in the area were mainly livestock and agricultural production centers. They met their own requirements; however, some had specialized in the *Porfiriato* to sell their products in the market. The *hacendados* [person in charge of the *hacienda*] had such control over their workers (both men and women), that they determined the condition of their marital unions (to whom and when); this control was also extended over their offspring, (Peniche, n.d.). Ángela already had two children, so it was impossible to arrange a marriage for her; finally, she had a forced relationship with her employer Hermelindo Durán. In these circumstances, she had her third son named Juan Ricardo. Hermelindo gave him his last name, even though he was married. Juan assures that it was because he had not had sons before. Ángela and her children lived in the boss's house as part of servants until Hermelindo died. Later, they fled because Hermelindo's widow and sisters wanted to take her son away from her. Felix, the eldest, decided to stay and

work as a labourer. He was a violent young man who was constantly involved in fights, one of which he was killed in.

Head of family, provider, and migrant

Carrillo highlights that the peasant-indigenous family of the *Sierra Otom-Tepehua* is where social structure begins and develops. This is a source of socialization as well as information on political, economic, and religious issues. The social spaces where the family interacts as spaces for exchange are the kinship network - close relatives - the community, religious festivals, and *los tianguís* [street markets] (Carrillo 2014, 115). Nuclear families are generally formed by a father, a mother, and children. Families are large in indigenous communities because grandparents and uncles can also live in the home.

Unlike that model, Ángela formed her family without a man at the head, which for the community was equivalent to not having a family. This is how her descendants perceived that condition; they never felt they had a kinship network; María Elena, for example, does not know her father's name, and on her mother's side, she only remembers her uncle Rosendo Tolentino; they do not remember the names of their grandparents. Ángela did not belong to any community organization of a religious nature (such as stewardship or brotherhood), so she did not leave to her children any sense of belonging to a particular community. María Elena was born in Huayacocotla; Juan Ricardo did not know about the place of his birth: sometimes he said that he was born in Huayacocotla, and other times in Agua Blanca. She kept something from her indigenous origin, although "in secret": the *Ñhañu* language. Her son Juan commented that while they were alone, she did speak to them in that language, but avoided doing that in front of strangers. Her descendants do not know where she learned Spanish or who taught her.

Notwithstanding that she was a homeless illiterate woman, had three small children, and lived unprotected by a man, she had to provide for her children in all aspects of their lives. They, as indigenous people, lived in precarious conditions. The country was in an ongoing process of economic and political reorganization, and from the State's point of view, the indigenous people were considered a problem for this modernization. After Félix's death, Ángela and her two children travelled through the mountains of the region; to survive, they adopted these migration patterns and moved from one place to another on a regular basis. Around 1949 they moved to

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Tlahuelompa, Municipality of Zacualtipán, Hidalgo. Then their children had grown up and emigrated to Mexico City; as soon as they settled down, they took her to live with them.

“Andariega, debido a sus raíces otomíes, caminaba de una ranchería a otra ofreciendo sus servicios de cocinera, lavandera o para realizar quehaceres del hogar; muchas veces sólo por la comida, aunque nunca recurrió a la caridad. Anteponiendo siempre su orgullo de raza y su trabajo, su mano de obra para poder llevarnos el sustento”

[Wayfarer, due to her Otomi roots, walked from one *rancheria* to another offering her services as a cook, as a laundress or to do household chores; many times, just for food, although she never resorted to charity. Always prioritizing her pride of race and her work; her workforce to be able to bring us sustenance] (E.J.R. 28 June 2010)

Ancestral knowledge to survive

The indigenous communities have maintained a strong relationship with the land. The nourishment they need to live comes from small-scale production and from a direct use of natural resources, or the processing of them as well. According to the above-mentioned, during the decade of 1930 Ángela Tolentino⁶ and her children started to produce *comales*⁷ so they can sell them to have an income and avoid dependence on the *patrón* [landlord]. De Gaulejac points out that the individual is continuously an actor in his own life; and that it is essential for him to understand how he has intervened in the events that shaped his existence, even when these actions are unconscious (De Gaulejac 2006, 35). Her children point out that she chose to make these products because “nomás había que ir por la tierra fina y mucha leña para hacerlos” [you just had to go and bring fine clay and a lot of firewood to make them] (EJT.). Indeed, manufacturing did not require specialized technology but

⁶ Primary information obtained from México bautismos 1560-1950, database, Family Search (<https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:NR97-ZQ3>; 16 March 2022), María Ángela Tolentino, 1882.

⁷ The term *comal*, derives from the *náhuatl comalli* and is a basic device in Mexican kitchen. It has a round shape; originally made from clay (today we can find metallic *comales*) and that is place on the fire (firewood, coal or gas) to cook the corn *tortillas*, to toast seeds or roast chili. Larousse Cocina: <https://laroussecocina.mx/palabra/comal/>

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rather the ability to implement the skills transmitted from generation to generation. These skills were intended to be used for family subsistence and with the use of natural resources. Access to fine clay as a raw material required knowing the caves nestled in the mountains where water seeped into the interior and dripped.

As the infiltrated drops fell towards the fine clay, they generated an amalgam of mud ready to be kneaded. They just needed to remove the air and give it the shape of a *comal* using the hands as a tool. A way of attaining that is to spread the clay over a flat surface, which could be a dirt floor with overlapped leaves. With the help of their young children and enough firewood, they lit a fire to place the *comales* to cook. When she had two or three dozen *comales* ready, then she prepared a *huacal*⁸ using thin rods that they previously collected and extracted from a tree called jonote located in the mountains. To make the *huacal* she proceeded to tie together the rods using a thread; then she arranged the *comales* placing branches between them, so that they would not break. On the day of *tianguis*, or community market, they got up early because they had to walk four to five hours before sunrise through a pathway. They lit the track with wood torches while they carried the *huacal* with a *mecapal* [tumpline] at the head⁹ and “they had to get there before dawn.” They came to sell to the town of Huayacocotla. “When they arrived at the market, they already found some women selling coffee and tamales, the first food they had eaten since the day before; a coffee costed five *reales* [usual currency in this region]. There, they installed their merchandise on the floor in an improvised way for sale” (E.JRT, 4 June 2010).

Without pinpointing a specific time, there were generalized economic crises, some of which were caused by poor harvests or rising prices. In the community where they lived, it was not possible to get corn, a basic grain of the Mexican diet; it was used mainly for making *tortillas* [a flatbread made of cornmeal]. Having her children begging for food, she made use of her knowledge and managed well the little corn she could acquire; “she made the *‘nixtamal’*; to get most of the dough, she stirred it

⁸ This is a kind of basket or cage, made from wooden rods that is used to pack in, protect and carry delicate merchandise. See <https://ecorteza.com/que-son-los-huacales-en-madera-ventajas-para-transportar-y-almacenar-mercancias/>

⁹ This is a pre-Hispanic device used to carry *bultos* [loads] on the back. This is made from a strap of knit *ixtle* [natural thread] placed over the top of the head and attached at both ends to the load.

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with a previously boiled wild root called *pesma*; finally, it was added cooked '*biznaga*'¹⁰ pulp to the corn dough."

The social world is built with meanings and symbols; that implies the search for this construction and its meanings. Ángela's descendants point out that this food scarcity motivated her to migrate to a ranch called *El Cimintei*. By then, her youngest son was 12 years old, and María Elena was a young woman mature enough to get married.

What they said about Ángela

Ángela's children indicated she "got married" and had her first child. They said this with a genuine attempt to offer us an image of a mother that corresponded to the current model in her context. With the intention of making an objective reconstruction, we looked for the corresponding civil or church certificate, but without success.¹¹ María Elena did not tell her father's name because she did not know it. Juan said he was the product of a forced relationship, which is very likely because a woman with children and no husband was stigmatized as an "easy" woman. Due to her needy situation, she could consider that she has no other option but to accept being the "querida" [boss's lover]. Ángela's case was to live with her children and without a partner; she was a woman who was not interested in having a consensual or legalized marriage. Her daughter María Elena never got married; she had three daughters, and used to say "this way they wouldn't quarrel one with another; each one had her own father." We perceived an attempt to justify her actions because of having suffered submission and discrimination in the previous years; her children fought for their recognition and revaluation knowing Ángela's adverse fate; she was

¹⁰ *Pesma*, refers probably to a type of fern *Pteridium aquilinum*, que en varias culturas tiene usos alimenticios y medicinales. Ver Dennstaedtiaceae *Pteridium aquilinu*, en <http://www.conabio.gob.mx/malezasdemexico/dennstaedtiaceae/pteridium-aquilinum/fichas/ficha.htm#8.%20Enlaces%20en%20internet>; the *biznaga* is a type of globular shape cactus; the excessive use of this cactus, to produce a candy named *acitrón*, has cause to become endangered. See <https://www.cocinafacil.com.mx/tips-de-cocina/que-es-la-biznaga-y-por-que-esta-en-peligro-de-extincion/>

¹¹ Documentary research referring to the states of life of Ángela and her relatives was made in the states of Hidalgo and Veracruz, through *FamilySearch* webpage.

an indigenous language speaker, illiterate and without their own resources since women were denied the possession of the land.

Ángela and her children migrated for reasons of subsistence; they searched for domestic work or the manufacture of artisanal products such as *comales*. Migration was firstly done on an itinerant basis between *rancherías* and towns and limited to the municipality borders.

The process of social construction that her children carried out to rebuild Ángela's way of life as a migrant, allows us to recreate and create a basic structure based on experience. This process lets us perceive the meaning through language and other symbolic constructions related to their knowledge and passed on by her ancestors. Therefore, we drew upon in-depth descriptions, reducing the analysis to limited areas of experience through immersion in the contexts in which it occurs (Chárriez 2012, 51); in this case, the scarcity of corn in the town. Juan did not remember where was located the aforementioned *rancho El Cimintei*, so the documentary research made to locate it and to be able to reconstruct that lapse of time was unsuccessful. In these remote communities, where the people belong to a community culture; have an indigenous identity; and speak indigenous languages; several people live without basic resources. They did not have formal education nor vital or identity records; their priority was daily subsistence. This real scenario places them in a vulnerable situation because they become invisible from the view of the institutions.

Ángela's story can only be built with the reports of her descendants and the coexistence of some already highlighted cultural elements. For example, using typical elements of the region to feed her family and to make their *comales*; social elements, such as illegitimate marital relationships; economic features, namely: their domestic work and subsistence based on resources extracted from nature; and emotional and affective issues, that includes what they reported about avoiding charity to palliate their poverty and being proud of her race and her work (even though, there has been underlined, that she spoke her language secretly and that one of her children was the product of sexual and labor abuse).

Although this individual history has nuances of singularity, it was socially determined; poverty and discrimination experienced by Ángela were conditioned by the social environment where she was born: the *Otomí-Tepehua* region. Nowadays, this is one of the regions in the state of Hidalgo that encounters high rates of poverty. For whatever reasons, the fact that she had no father, a brother, or a husband to support

her, as well as the reality that she was a woman, indigenous, and poor, compelled that social relations were always unequal for her. Faced with such adversity, her descendants emphasize that she did not react passively. She chose the migrant life, something that they emulated. This became a reason for them to decide on a venture, and so be able to create their own business in which they could abstain from having a boss. After migrating to Mexico City, life changed for everyone. This change required them to renounce their original culture and their mother tongue, because in that big city, these two elements, were a sign of ignorance and shame. The assimilationist model argued that the indigenous population was a restraint for the country and that it is up to the new generations to make inequalities visible from Mexico's socioeconomic and political contexts.

Conclusion

Ángela Tolentino decided to undertake migration with her children to avoid discrimination and labour exploitation (mainly domestic work). This decision placed them in a position of greater vulnerability. Resources were out of reach; they have neither family (or kinship) networks nor education. Therefore, they faced a life of uncertainty. This decision created a gap between her and the community organization, which represented the protection of the kinship system and of the members of the community. Since the social structure of the community allows them to build a sense of belonging and favours the use of the language by recreating the customs and traditions of the group, this fact undoubtedly affected their children's ethnic identity.

As a result of the assimilationist policy and the Mexicanization of the Indians, the use of the language represented a symbol of shame and restraint. Therefore, Ángela and her children spoke their *Otomí* language in private spaces; they gradually renounced it to join the urban centres in search of better living conditions and with it the institutionalized ethnocide. On the other hand, the means of subsistence in a migration context from *ranchería* to *ranchería*, are equivalent to the expertise and use of their ancestral knowledge. They transform natural resources such as clay, tree branches, leaves, cacti, and other plants into supplies. Thereby, in a time of poverty and food shortages, they could produce handicrafts to obtain goods, food, and survive.

Ángela's descendants, to recover and reconstruct the fragments of her life, shared with us facts and events that were integrated into this life story. The exhaustive search for documentary evidence in civil and church archives was not successful, so we concluded that Ángela, as many other people from remote regions, faced the indifference and neglect from the institutions. The only things left as a record are the actions implemented to survive by a poor indigenous woman and mother of two children in the adverse post-revolutionary context.

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Rosa Elena DURÁN GONZÁLEZ – Luis Francisco RIVERO
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Fragment of Story: an Otomani Woman from Hidalgo in Mexico (1886-1974)

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