The Thesis Committee for Rosario De La Luz Rizzo Lara
Certifies that this is the approved version of the following thesis:

Developing Alternative Markets in Veracruz: The Case of *Totomoxtle*

APPROVED BY
SUPERVISING COMMITTEE:

Supervisor:

Rebecca M. Torres

Gregory W. Knapp

Developing Alternative Markets in Veracruz: The Case of *Totomoxtle*

by

Rosario De La Luz Rizzo Lara, B.S.

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to family: my mother Irma, my father Guillermo, my brother Memo, Edgar, my sister Cristina, my aunts, my grandmother and cousins without their support, love and encouragement this work would have never been concluded. Thanks for always being there in spite of the distance. I would also like to dedicate this work to a very special person, Jorge Eduardo Lara Fontes, who passed away in March, thanks for teaching me one of the most important lessons of my life. I would also like to include my longtime friend Alejandra Dominguez, her interest, love and companionship throughout this process are invaluable. Also, I want to include my beloved group of friends in Veracruz –LBSC- and Austin, my colleagues, professors and staff in LLILAS. Thank you for the support, for listening to me, for putting up with my craziness, for always being an inspiration and for having a smile every time I came to you. Finally, I want to dedicate this work to all the people in the Totonacapan, thank you for your time and kindness, your contributions are greatly appreciated.

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Abstract

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Rosario De La Luz Rizzo Lara, M.A.

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Supervisor: Rebecca M. Torres

A series of economic and political changes that occurred in the 1980s and the beginning of the 1990s have had major impacts on the small-scale agricultural sector in Mexico. The debt crisis of the 1980s led the government to adopt the neoliberal model. Reforms brought by the adoption of this model including trade liberalization, privatization of state-owned enterprises, reduction and cancellation of credits and social programs, along with the relative abandonment of the agricultural sector and focus on the manufacturing and services industries have caused economic, social and environmental harm to corn producers in the Totonacapan region of the state of Veracruz. In order to respond to the impacts of these large-scale policies, farmers coped by migrating to cities and U.S., and by taking advantage of the emergence of alternative markets, such as the corn husk, or *totomoxtle*, industry. The objective of this study is to explain the context in which *totomoxtle* emerged and evolved, and determine the importance and impact that this market has had on corn producers, intermediaries and exporters, men, women and children. Based on qualitative data gathered during 2011 using semi-structured

interviews, participant observation, and the examination of secondary sources, I found that the *totomoxtle* trade has expanded considerably in the last decade becoming the main source of income and employment for many marginal households in the Totonacapan. The study questions, however, its ability to be used as a tool for poverty alleviation. Findings suggest that intermediaries and exporters obtain larger profits than farmers thus elucidating the need for more access to capital and infrastructure to achieve higher benefits for growers. At the same time, research also found evidence of the different participation of women and men during the production and manufacturing of *totomoxtle.* Moreover, research show that women were paid less, work for more hours and they labor in small and crowed places. Finally, data also suggests that the growth of *totomoxtle* production can be attributed to the increased demand and consumption by Mexican/Latino immigrant populations in the U.S., a shift in the American palate, and its overall availability in new immigrant destinations.

Table of Contents

List of Tables

List of Figures

List of Illustrations

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

A series of events that occurred in the 1980s and 1990s produced widespread economic, political, social, and environmental damage to corn producers in Mexico. The cultivation of basic grains, including corn and others, was displaced, and priority was given to other crops whose export would generate greater profits (Hernández-León, 2008). The Mexican State's relative withdrawal of support from the small-scale agricultural sector and the increased focus on the manufacturing and service industries, induced migration to urban areas and the U.S. (*ibid*) The exhaustion of the Import Substitution Industrialization (ISI) model, excessive borrowing abroad, devaluation, high rates of inflation, and unemployment drove the government to restructure the economy and subsequently adopt a neoliberal development model, which included trade liberalization under the framework of NAFTA. The neoliberal model was accompanied by a set of policies propelled by the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank that consisted of fiscal reforms, privatization of state-owned enterprises, restructuring of the labor market, reduction and later elimination of credits for smallholder production, and social programs (Hernández-León, 2008; Liverman & Vilas, 2006; Nadal, 2000; Portes, 2004). The impact of these policies was particularly detrimental for vulnerable populations, such as rural people and the poor. Specifically, the reforms exacerbated the conditions of poverty for many small farmers in Veracruz – the location of this study. To cope with and adapt to changes, small farmers developed a series of tactics and strategies including domestic and international migration, expansion of land under cultivation, and a more intense use of fertilizer. In addition, they became resilient by leveraging the commercialization of maize husks, a by-product that was considered worthless until recently.

In the 1990s and 2000s, the movement of people to the United States gave rise to new markets and demand. In the midst of this growth, the question emerges, what is the political-economic context that has allowed the formation of diverse transnational communities and the acceleration of cross-border commercial exchange? Globalization has allowed the recent formation of diverse communities in the U.S. because it has promoted human mobility across the globe (Castles, 2002; Castles & Miller, 2009; Sandoval, 2007). Furthermore, globalization has created a space for global exchange on the basis of free trade and deregulation in cross-border flows of capital, services and technology (Castles & Miller, 2009). Multinational corporations (MNC's, large companies that operate in many countries) as well as small businesses are taking advantage of this economic and political context to exchange and introduce products into different societies. Along with globalization, there are other factors that have allowed ideal conditions for the introduction of ethnic (Latino) goods, such as *tamales* and corn husks, (known locally as *totomoxtle*) into the U.S. These factors include: the formation of Latino communities and a gradual shift in the American palate to a preference for exotic goods. The demand for such goods has also increased over the last decade as a result of the migrants' need to maintain links with their home country, the overall availability of such goods, and the Latino population growth. This demand in turn led to more employment opportunities for the people who participated in the crafting of these products. Hence, the increased supply and demand of *totomoxtle* in the U.S. meant the creation of jobs in Veracruz in which women and men work daily in production.

This study explains the emergence and diffusion of the corn husk industry in Veracruz in the context of neoliberal reforms, the restructuring of the Mexican economy, and global exchange. Moreover, the research seeks to identify the participants that contributed to the establishment of the nascent industry, as well as those who have been

involved in its growth and expansion. In addition, the investigation addresses the extent to which producers, intermediaries, and exporters have benefited from this business, along with drawbacks that have emerged as a result of the diffusion of the business. Also, this study reveals the relative absence of the State during the expansion of the industry. Furthermore, the present work discusses the costs of production, payment schemes, working conditions, consumers of *totomoxtle*, retail prices, and distribution channels. Finally, this thesis aims to uncover the way in which men and women participate in the production and manufacturing of corn husks and how they might benefit differently from the business.

Despite its natural richness, Veracruz is a state that has high levels of marginalization and poverty. Being born in Xalapa, the capital, and having traveled around the state, I was able to perceive the nature of exclusion, the needs and lack of basic services that permeate the different regions of the state. Aware of this reality, I became interested in the study of development frameworks that would allow communities to overcome some of these problems. One of the most important lessons learned during graduate school was that communities needed to participate actively in their own advancement. With that lesson in mind, my initial intention was to design a community-based development program that would drive communities to better their living conditions through the added value and sale of locally produced goods. However, it was the realization that communities already had a product (corn husks) that was being exported on a daily basis and that was bringing benefits to some extent, which led me in a different direction. To gain a better understanding of the historical background and current conditions of the communities in the Totonacapan region, I immersed myself in the study of the implications of economic and political reforms occurring in the 1980s and 1990s, as well as farmers' responses to these changes, specifically that of the

totomoxtle industry. The images of women, men, children, and the elderly working in the removal, selection, and distribution of the husks, as well as the traffic of trucks loaded with sacks of this good became familiar. In different forms, colors, and presentations, the husks were the focus of commercial exchange that was being carried out on a daily basis. Attracted by these scenarios, I devoted two months in the summer of 2011 to study the rationale and conditions behind the trade as well as its larger impacts on communities, men, and women.

The main inquiries that drove this study are embedded in five broad themes. The first set of questions refers to the importance of corn for Totonacapan families. Questions were posed to understand the value of corn in cultural and economic terms as well as its cost of production. Based on the participant' responses, I realized that one of the reasons for continued corn cultivation, despite low grain prices was driven by the benefits that the sale of husks was bringing to households. Hence, the second set of questions was related to the conversion of corn seeds to obtain larger husks, meaning that farmers were cultivating corn in order to generate profits from the sale of *totomoxtle* and not so much for the value of the corn grain itself. I also inquired about the point in time when people began to commercialize husks as well as some facts related to the evolution of the industry. The third group of questions addressed the process of producing and manufacturing the husks and distribution procedures. According to the people interviewed and through observations, I learned that men and women performed different activities in the Totonacapan's corn husk industry. Therefore, the fourth set of questions was designed to address the different participation of men and women in the production of domestic and export products, as well as in remuneration and working conditions. Finally, the last set of questions dealt with the overall support (or lack of it) that corn farmers received from the municipal and the federal governments. The inquiries were

aimed at gaining an understanding of the role of the state, its participation and involvement in the rise of the *totomoxtle* industry (if any), as well as the way in which the State has assisted corn farmers.

My research methods included a combination of semi-structured, in-depth interviews, informal conversations, participant observation, and collection of secondary data. Through formal interviews with farmers, I sought to identify their contribution to the emergence and diffusion of the corn husk industry. Moreover, I sought to understand how they realized that *totomoxtle* was such a strong product. Subsequently, I held interviews with intermediaries and exporters to explore their positions and roles within the business. Afterwards, I conducted interviews with women and men to address gender differences in husk added value processing. Finally, I interviewed government officials in different communities to address the State's support to corn producers. Lastly, I did an extensive literature search for information on the export of corn husks to the U.S, the volume and value of the trade, as well as the principal consumers of this product.

This thesis is divided into seven chapters. The current chapter provides a brief introductory overview of the project, a general orientation to the research site, research questions, and the overall structure of the thesis. At the end of this introductory chapter, I present my contributions to the literature and the importance of the study.

Chapter two explains in detail the background that gave rise to the *totomoxtle* industry. Specifically, some of the most important changes in the Mexican agricultural sector brought about by the application of neoliberal policies and the implementation of NAFTA are addressed. Then, farmers' responses to these changes are explained, which include migration and the emergence of an alternative market.

Chapter three addresses in detail the area of study, methodology, and approach to conducting interviews with farmers, intermediaries, exporters, and government officials.

It acknowledges my positionality as a researcher, and how this influences the way I write and portray stories. It also discusses the challenges and limitations of the present research.

Chapter four analyzes in depth the emergence of the industry while highlighting the voice of the main participants in such events. This segment focuses on explaining how farmers realized the potential of corn husks and how business owners from different parts of the country went to Veracruz looking for a product to export to the U.S. In addition, the relatively rapid participation of growers, intermediaries and exporters as the new product market emerged is detailed. Moreover, the role and contributions of the State during the rise of the industry are discussed and the way in which farmers opted for the use of a combination of locally produced seeds to increase husk production.

Chapter five addresses the consumption of ethnic and nostalgic products, specifically of *totomoxtle* in the United States as a result of high human mobility in the context of globalization. This section of the thesis is related to the formation of ethnic enclaves in North America and the way in which communities demand products that reflect their place of origin. The chapter can be understood as the end of the supply chain, i.e., the consumption of *totomoxtle* in new destinations, which has led to more employment opportunities in the regions where it is produced.

Chapter six addresses the impacts of the emergence of *totomoxtle* for men and women, as well as their participation in the industry based on social constructions of gender. This section provides a literature review of gender, place, and labor. Furthermore, the chapter explains in detail the manufacturing process of the corn husks while showing examples of different activities, payment, spheres, and conditions in which men and women operate.

Chapter seven puts forth conclusions regarding the corn–husk-industry case study, advantages of the commercialization of ethnic products, recommendations for the State regarding how to regulate, control, and increase benefits and support for trade participants. Also included in this section is a discussion of future research directions.

IMPORTANCE OF THE STUDY

This study contributes to the nascent body of literature on corn husk production in Veracruz and to the vast literature on neoliberalism by providing insights into how small corn farmers responded organically to the application of top-down policies and created alternative markets and livelihood strategies. The emergence of the market is an organized, bottom-up response to macro-structural changes. This case study exemplifies the principles of the neoliberal model that presumes reduced intervention from the Government in favor of the market.

This study questions how a new crop industry could serve as a tool for poverty alleviation. The corn husk industry is a business that has opened up diverse employment opportunities and has transformed the lives of thousands of people who work in this business; however, this business might not constitute a mechanism for poverty alleviation, especially if farmers do not better their production and distribution processes. In order to make advances and develop a competitive product that contributes to decreasing rural poverty, farmers need access to infrastructure and capital, as well as a better knowledge of the market.

In light of this, the findings of this study can contribute to the application and creation of policies and partnerships to leverage the benefits of nascent industries. Results show that if the State had been more involved during the rise of the industry farmers

might have higher benefits. The way that the industry emerged and evolved may be an example for other businesses on to how to add value to a product, take advantage of transnational markets, learn about manufacturing and distributions processes, and find creative solutions for comparative disadvantages. The challenges faced by farmers and intermediaries can also provide lessons in terms of the kind of support that they need in order to be more competitive. Also, this case study poses the possibility of strategic alliances between farmers and the private sector.

Finally, although the information is incomplete, the study provides a better understating of the Totonacapan region because it gives an overview of the area and the key similarities and differences between communities, especially in terms of corn husk participation and production. Furthermore, the study is also an attempt to contribute to feminist theory by looking at the participation of men and women in the new market and the implications of this participation.

CHAPTER TWO: CORN AND THE TOTONACAPAN: A HISTORICAL REVIEW

Among the most important changes in Mexico's agricultural sector over the last two decades are those associated with neoliberal policies. The application of these policies, reflected in trade liberalization, tax reform, floating exchange rates, privatization of state enterprises, and the elimination of agricultural subsidies and social programs (Hernández-León, 2008; Liverman & Vilas, 2006; Perreault, 2006; Portes, 2004), have important economic and social implications for the nation states in which they were implemented. Moreover, the implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994, along with the privatization and dismantling of state institutions, are perceived to have produced widespread destruction of local livelihoods and landscapes (Liverman & Vilas, 2006; Nadal, 2000). In particular, the enactment of agrarian policy reforms has had a negative impact on rural communities in Veracruz, Mexico, that were largely dependent on agriculture for their economic livelihood, and specifically on the corn producers of the Totonacapan. To cope with and adapt to price reductions, the increase of imports, and the unemployment brought by these reforms, corn farmers developed a series of tactics and strategies that consisted of an expansion of the area of cultivation, increased use of fertilizer, high levels of human mobility, and the emergence of alternative markets, such as the corn husk industry.

This chapter explains the context of the enactment of neoliberal reforms and the multiple responses of Totonacapan corn producers, including migration and the interrelated emergence of *totomoxtle* as a new cash crop in the region. The chapter is divided into four sections, commencing with the history of communities of the Totonacapan and their integration to the global economy. The second section describes the context in which Mexico was immersed during the financial crises of 1982, 1988, and

1994, as well as the immediate changes in the economy due to the enactment of the neoliberal model. The third analyzes corn production in the Totonacapan and explains the effects of the reforms on corn producers in Veracruz. The fourth addresses how farmers became resilient and the ways in which they responded to those changes through migration, a shift to more profitable crops, intensive land use, and the emergence of the corn husk industry.

TOTONACS, A HISTORY OF DISPLACEMENT AND STRUGGLE FOR SURVIVAL

The history of the Totonacs[1] is one of resistance, displacement from their land, and struggle for their rights, a history of fighting for the independence and for the survival of their culture, traditions, customs, and language. At the beginning of the Classic period (200 CE1000 CE), people living in the mountains and valleys of Veracruz and Puebla moved towards the Gulf Coast and Central Mexico. During this period, the Totonac culture flourished, with the city of El Tajín[2] as a major exponent; nevertheless, by the end of the ninth century, the Totonac culture went into decline (Garma & Masferrer, 1994; Ortiz-Espejel, 1995). Their ceremonial center survived the widespread social collapse, migrations, and destruction that forced its abandonment at the end of the period. In the Post-Classic period (1000-1697 EC), the *Triple Alianza*[3] exerted influence

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1 The totonac is an indigenous group located historically in the Totonacapan, a region that goes from the Sierra Norte of Puebla to the coasts of Veracruz. Although the area is shared by different indigenous groups, such as the Nahua, and to a lesser extent Otomí and Tepehua, the prevalent group is the Totonac (Valderrama Rouy, 2005; Velásquez Hernández, 1995).

2 The Tajin is a pre-Columbian city that flourished between 800-1100 A.C. Towards 950 A.C. the splendor displayed in previous years started to diminish; the arrival of other indigenous groups (nahuas-otomies and nonoalcas) and the strengthening of their relation with other groups on the coast caused the Tajín to be neglected, and it finally went into decline between 11750-1178 A.C. (Ortiz-Espejel, 1995).

3 The *Triple Alianza* was the last confederation of indigenous populations from the Valley of Mexico during the post-classic period. The confederation was comprised by the Nahua, Texcocco and Otomí peoples (Camargo, 2004).

over the Totonac people forcing them to pay heavy tribute and intensive labor (Ortiz-Espejel, 1995; Schmal, 2004). After their conquest in 1480, the Totonacs were incorporated into the Aztec provinces of Cempoallan, Misantla, and Xalapa. These areas were fertile and rich in water, which allowed a wide variety of vegetation and crops to be grown (Schmal, 2004). Moreover, Xalapa was located between the coast and Tenochtitlan and was a prosperous agricultural territory, with maize and chilies as major crops. In response to Aztec domination, the Totonacs supported the Spanish occupation in 1519. Their king met Cortés and assured the support of his army against the Aztec Emperor Moctezuma (*ibid*). In 1519, the Totonacs helped establish the city of Villa Rica de la Vera Cruz, the first city founded by the Spaniards in the "New World", whose name was later changed to Veracruz. Even today, Veracruz remains one of the most important commercial and industrial centers of Mexico. In return, Spaniard colonizers imposed a new religion and excessive demands for labor and high tributes (Ortiz-Espejel, 1995). Finally, several contagious diseases transmitted by the newcomers devastated 90% of the total Totonac indigenous population at that time (Garma & Masferrer, 1994).

Gradually, indigenous populations sought refuge in the highlands. Their relative isolation allowed them to reorganize their cultural systems in an autonomous way against the Spanish domination (Garma & Masferrer, 1994). Harvey and Kelly (1969) wrote in this regard:

> In the large areas where Totonac speech has survived to the present, there was little to attract the Spaniard. Transportation and communication were difficult, and Totonacapan largely lacked mineral resources. Thus, until relatively recent years, much of Totonacapan has remained intact and isolated, and many forms of native Totonac culture have survived (Schmal, 2004, para. 15 citing Harvey and Kelly, 1969).

Furthermore, the concentration of different populations has reformulated ethnic relations in the Totonacapan. The epidemic disease of the sixteenth century allowed the

Spaniards to take possession of indigenous land for agriculture and livestock, as well as for the introduction of African slaves. This mix then reformulated the pre-existing interethnic relations (Garma & Masferrer, 1994).

In the 19th century, the rise of the vanilla industry in Papantla gave rise to a series of agricultural changes. From 1830 to 1860, the commercialization of vanilla started to expand, and by 1890 Papantla was exporting two-thirds of the total production of Mexico (Kourí, 2004). Substantial economic benefits resulted as the product was exported to the United States and Europe; yet, most of the gains were for manufacturers and exporters (some of them foreigners), while Totonac growers received fewer profits. In the late 1800s, the vanilla industry experienced a decline as the market became saturated and commodity prices decreased. In the midst of this decline, "production scale was to be the key for capital accumulation" (Kourí, 2004, p. 123). As a result, merchants were eager to control vanilla exports and to expand production; local middlemen and growers also might have pursued this goal, which eventually led to the re-organization of communal land-tenure and similar arrangements (*ibid*). The desire to control production along with the State's need to increase tax-yielding property led to land-tenure reform that was later reflected in the creation of *condueñazgos*[4]. In addition, the vanilla boom served as the driving force of the Coast' commercial economy and also for the diversification of activities that involved the development of old branches of the local economy, such as cattle ranching, logging, and the production of tobacco and chile (Kourí, 2004).

During the Juarez administration, but even more so during the dictatorship of Porfirio Diaz, the Mexican State had to convert land into merchandise, an object of commoditization, in order to increase the accumulation and generation of wealth through

[4] This term refers to the land-tenure reform adopted in Veracruz. This legal term appears during the 1880s. "Condueñazgos were private landholding associations or companies in which each member or *condueño* owned a share of the land" (Kourí, E. 2004, p.38).

individualism and private property (Blanco Rosas, 1996). Veracruz was where an attempt to convert indigenous communal lands into private property was put into place. In this context, Blanco (1996) argued, "The land is a means and mechanism of production in the generation of satisfiers, therefore the form of tenure of the land is related to the type of state and its historical project"[5] (p. 106). Thus, the reconfiguration of communal land started with a conversion to *condueñazgos*, which constituted a transition to private property. Totonac communities of the late 1880's resisted the migration of businessmen and entrepreneurs who introduced new productive processes through the *hacendario* regime that gave rise to waged labor and new social relations sustained in large proportion by local and military authorities (Blanco Rosas, 1996). Lastly, more recent immigration and settlement of producers from other parts of the country affected indigenous people because the former received land grants and with this, the latter lost them, causing deeper interethnic and class-based tensions (Garma & Masferrer, 1994).

In the 1970s, with the expansion of the oil industry located in northern and coastal Veracruz (Papantla, Poza Rica and Tuxpam), many indigenous people have been dispossessed (Blanco Rosas, 1996; Garma & Masferrer, 1994; Schmal, 2004). This fact has led to significant movement as farmers were forced to migrate to the highlands, to other states in Mexico, and even to international destinations in pursuit of better living conditions. Furthermore, the lack of maintenance of oil ducts and hydrocarbon spills have caused widespread destruction of crops, water, contamination of flora and fauna, and adverse health effects to the residents. Although the Totonacapan is considered a geographic region, there are several differences and disparities among its inhabitants that are not only geographical and production-based, but also social.

[5] Original text in Spanish, translation by the author.

Totonacapan landscape

Based on topography and altitude, various authors coincide in the division of the Totonacapan region in two main areas: the Sierra Norte of Puebla and the Coastal Plain of Veracruz (Ortiz-Espejel, 1995; Valderrama Rouy, 2005; Velásquez Hernández, 1995,1996). The region is bordered on the north by the Cazones River basin, to the south by the Tecolutla River basin, to the east by the Gulf of Mexico, and to the west by the Sierra Norte of Puebla. However, previous studies suggest that the geographic delimitation has not always been the same (Kelly & Palermo, 1954). Furthermore, based on altitude and topography, production, land tenure, and population, Velázquez Hernández (1995) divided the Totonacapan into four regions: 1) Sierra Norte of Puebla, 2) Coastal Plain, 3) Sierra of Papantla, and 4) Lowlands of the North of Puebla. Similar to the patterns used for her classification, I have identified three areas based on geographic elevation, production, language, and more importantly, the production of corn husks. These three regions are the 1) highlands, 2) middle lands, and 3) lowlands. Comparable to this last regionalization is the aggregate (national) division of corn farmers by Nadal (2000), who describes three categories of producers: competitive, intermediate, and subsistence.

The highland region encompasses several municipalities, such as Filomeno Mata, Mecatlán, Coahuitlán, Chumatlán and some communities of Zozocolco and Coxquihui (see figure 2.1). Most of these communities are farther from the coast and access is limited due to high slopes, less-frequent bus routes, and higher travel costs.

The communities located in the highlands have a heterogeneous geography that does not allow the cultivation of many crops, except for coffee, *pimientas gordas* (pepper), tobacco, and corn (Valderrama Rouy, 2005; Velásquez Hernández, 1995). Farmers in this region were largely dependent on corn because it is the staple of their diet

and an important element in religion. However, the production of coffee was very significant. The money received from corn provided farmers with extra income to meet their household needs and to buy products that were not locally sourced, such as brown sugar and salt (Valderrama Rouy, 2005). Coffee cultivation went into decline after the commodity price decreased and due to a series of weather conditions that damaged the coffee farms. A similar story can be told of tobacco. The reduction in subsidies and the elimination of the state-owned Tabamex in 1990 made tobacco cultivation difficult because farmers were unable to afford the inputs. Yet, corn, or maize, experienced a different dynamic because it was (and still is) considered a subsistence product. Most of these communities are considered extremely poor, and thus, the production of corn is essential. Maize is a crop that can be grown in different temperatures, altitudes, and rainfall regimes (Nadal, 2000; Valderrama Rouy, 2005). In hot zones, three cycles can be produced per year; the middle land of the mountain slope allows the cultivation of two cycles, whereas as cold temperatures permit only one harvest per year. In the case of the highlands, corn is produced mostly for auto-consumption, because the geographic conditions do not allow the use of tractors and other technologies. Accordingly, most people living in this area are private smallholders possessing one or two hectares. Moreover, the communities located in this area are classified as highly marginalized, with Mecatlán and Filomeno Mata two of the poorest municipalities in the country (CONAFOR, 2010)[6]. These communities along with many others receive money every two months as part of a welfare program run by the Federal government called

[6] These two communities are part of the program "Estrategia 100x100" that focuses on municipalities that presented very high levels of marginalization or high levels marginalization in 2010. The classification was done by the National Population Council (CONAPO) (visit http://www.microrregiones.gob.mx/cien.php?func=0).

Oportunidades[7] (SEDESOL, 2008). Due to the low corn production, *totomoxtle* yields are also low, thus limiting communities' participation in the corn husk industry.

Figure 2.1: Highland, middle land, and lowland communities. Source: (LAVIDA, 2012)

The middle land region includes municipalities such as Espinal, Coyutla, and Coatzintla (see figure 2.1). These communities have better transportation systems and are closer to urban centers (Poza Rica and Papantla). Also, these areas have better infrastructure and more services, such as schools, universities and hospitals. In addition, these municipalities have flat extensions of land that allow farmers to grow a variety of products such as corn, pepper, beans, chilies and to a lesser extent citrus (Velásquez Hernández, 1995). Because highland communities in this region suffer from low yields, they have established a commerce flow with middle land communities; thus many of the goods produced in this area are usually exchanged and sold to the highland communities on a weekly basis. This region produces corn twice a year. The average yields are 2-3 tons per hectare of corn

[7] The mission of this program is to coordinate inter-institutional actions to contribute to the poverty alleviation of rural and urban families through the development of their basic capabilities, access to better opportunities, and economic and social development. It provides direct cash transfers in order to strengthen three areas: education, health, and nutrition. Payments are dependent on regular school attendance, health clinic visits, and nutritional support. According to official numbers, in 2012 there are 5.8 million families that benefit from this program (visit www.oportunidades.gob.mx).

that allows them to participate actively in the corn husk industry. In fact, it is in this area where the first farmers started to commercialize *totomoxtle* (see chapter four). In terms of poverty, middle land communities are still considered rural, marginalized, and poor; however, they do not have the same poverty level as highland communities. These conditions allow them to receive cash transfers from the federal government as well (SEDESOL, 2008). Most of the Totonac people are concentrated in these areas (highlands and lowlands) (Valderrama Rouy, 2005; Velásquez Hernández, 1995).

The lowland region comprises municipalities that are close to the coast: Tecolutla, Papantla (principal city of the Totonacapan region), Poza Rica, Cazones de Herrera, and Gutierrez Zamora (see figure 2.1). This proximity allows these cities to have diversified livelihood strategies in that inhabitants are not entirely dependent on agriculture or livestock, but rather, are able to work in restaurants, banks, stores, etc. In contrast to the highlands, many municipalities in the lowlands have greater access to basic services (electricity, sewage system, running water) and also to financial and health services.

Given the geographical extension of this area, the communities exhibit heterogeneous economic and physical conditions. That is, some are urban centers such as Papantla and Poza Rica, but many others are still considered rural, poor, and marginalized. However, many people in these communities are also eligible for cash transfers from the federal government, such as *Oportunidades* and *"70 y mas"* (Oportunidades, 2012).

In terms of production, the geography of the lowland region favors the use of mechanized equipment in order to produce higher yields. The region has flat extensions of land that allow the use of technology and tractors, as well as diversified crops, all of which contribute to agricultural practices that are both commercial and for auto-consumption. Moreover, inhabitants of these communities usually have capital to acquire

inputs, such as fertilizers and pesticides. Similar to the middle land, in this area farmers can carry out two production cycles. In addition, high yields of corn can translate into high yields of *totomoxtle* and subsequent sources of income. In fact, the major distribution hubs of corn husks are located in this part of the region. The production and sale of *totomoxtle* along with economic and political paradigms, globalization, and neoliberalism, have allowed the sometimes-isolated rural communities of the Totonacapan to be propelled into a new global dynamic.

From local to "glocal" communities

Globalization has accelerated the spread of western cultures (Harvey, 2008) and the integration of indigenous people into a new global order. While the vast literature on globalization cannot be summarized in this section, one approach that best serves to explain the connections and integration of communities is that of Held et al. (1999), who states that globalization is conceived as "the widening, deepening and speeding up of worldwide interconnectedness in all aspects of contemporary social life" (Castles & Miller, 2009 p. 51 citing Held et al., 1999). Globalization embodies the notion of cross-border flows of all sorts, cultural and media products, and economic and human mobility (Castles, 2002; Castles & Miller, 2009; Sandoval, 2007). With the spread of globalization, communities that had previously remained relatively isolated and excluded from commercial activity have become more integrated into global dynamics and free trade. Such is the case of the rural indigenous communities of the Totonacapan in Veracruz, where the recent emergence of the corn husk industry, among others, has incorporated these communities into the global market in new ways.

Globalization suggests a link between the "local" and the global. Many have tended to establish a dichotomy between the two; however, current worldwide dynamics

cannot be conceived without the "local", and the local cannot be understood without the "global"; they are interdependent and mutually constituted (Swyngedouw, 1997). Ortiz-Espejel (1995 p.14) asserts that the local and the global are conceived as two forces or apparent contradictory movements. On the one hand, historical unities called communities sought reaffirmation and meaning at the core of the Nation-State; on the other hand, globalization imposes a new economic order that commands a condition of an international nature. At first sight, these notions seem opposite and mutually exclusive, because one favors the particularity and the ethnic condition of each culture and the other reinforces universal integrity (Bonfil, 1991; Ortiz-Espejel, 1995;). Thus, Swyngedouw (1997) calls for a rethinking of global and local, stating that communities should be called "glocal". These communities deal with external influences that modify their structure, and they also possess capabilities to mitigate their effects (*ibid*). These capabilities take the form of human, physical and social capital, and the local knowledge acquired generation by generation. The communities of the Totonacapan can be called "glocal" because they have entered into the new global order while using their local resources to mitigate the effects of external disturbance. As shall be shown later in this chapter, the communities in Veracruz had to deal with the effects of economic-political reforms induced by the adoption of the neoliberal model. These reforms along with the debt crisis caused unemployment, deepened poverty, and induced migration. In some areas, the inhabitants were able to cope with these changes; in other areas, given the lack of economic resources and infrastructure, people had to migrate and look for different sources of income. The following is an analysis of the adoption of this economic model and the primary implications on corn farmers.

THE NEOLIBERAL MODEL IN MEXICO

Along with globalization, neoliberalism is an ideology that appeals to market efficiency in contrast to high-cost State intervention. The enactment of this new ideology combined with pre-existing conditions exacerbated extreme poverty among vulnerable populations in Mexico, particularly in Veracruz. This ideology had important implications for corn producers of the Totonacapan, who turned to migration and to the intensive use of fertilizer as a way to cope with changes in Mexico's social policy. As described below, the most important features of the neoliberal model in Mexico include a policy of trade liberalization, reductions of social programs, subsidies, credits for production, privatization of state-owned enterprises, and changes in land tenure. Subsequent consequences included unemployment, domestic and international migration, a significant increase in corn imports, and a decrease in corn prices, among others.

Defining neoliberalism

Neoliberalism is a "political philosophy or world view of free markets and less government" (Liverman & Vilas, 2006, p. 329). It relies on a set of ideas that were already in place as a result of capitalism, the prevalent economic system in Western countries. The term "neo" refers to an evolution of the economic liberalism proposed by Adam Smith in the 18th century that highlighted the role of the free market and private sector.

The ideology embodies a series of political and economic reforms that promote trade liberalization, tax reform, floating exchange rates, privatization of state enterprises, and the elimination of agricultural subsidies and social programs (Bebbington, 2002; Chase, 2002; Kohl, 2006; Kohl & Bresnahan, 2010; Liverman & Vilas, 2006; Nadal, 2000; Perreault, 2006; Portes, 2004; Torres, 2011). During the 1980s, Western countries

fostered the neoliberal model as a response to an unstable financial situation. Because the prevalent economic system was no longer working, as indicated by the ongoing financial crisis, devaluation of local currencies, and high rates of inflation and unemployment, the U.S. and the U.K. started to foster political opposition to state interventionism in favor of free-market policies. Throughout that decade, this economic-political stance spread around the world, including to Latin America, where Chile and Bolivia were the first to adopt the model (Kohl, 2006; Kohl & Bresnahan, 2010; Liverman & Vilas, 2006; Perreault, 2006). The effects of the implementation of this model were, however, different depending on the country, time of the application, and the set of policies implemented (Liverman & Vilas, 2006; Perreault, 2006).

In Mexico, neoliberal practices were fostered in an environment of crisis, unemployment, debt, high rates of inflation, currency devaluation, and foreign pressure. The purpose of the reforms was to reduce excessive borrowing from foreign entities, decrease the financial deficit, and stabilize the economy; however, the measures taken to accomplish these goals were counterproductive for some sectors of the economy, such as the small-scale agricultural sector and the shoe and clothing industries, among others (Hernández-León, 2008; Nadal, 2000; Vilas-Ghiso & Liverman, 2007). As evidenced by fieldwork findings and as observed in other studies (King, 2006, 2007), the realization of this economic-political ideology caused a new series of problems and exacerbated those already in place particularly for farmers in the Totonacapan who were largely dependent on corn.

Several events that occurred in the "lost decade" (1980s) served as motivation for the enactment of neoliberal policies. Lopez Portillo's administration (1976-1982) witnessed the controversial nationalization of the banking system in 1982, the devaluation of the Mexican peso, and excessive borrowing abroad. During Miguel de la

Madrid's government (1982-1988), the Mexican economy weakened even more, leading to massive unemployment and migration. Inflation reached unprecedented levels of more than 100%, unemployment rates soared to 25%, income declined, economic growth was erratic (CIDOB, 2010), and the privatization of state-owned enterprises went from 1,155 in 1982 to 412 in 1988 (CODHEM, N/D). During these years, the agricultural sector showed signs of deep weakness. "Mexico went from being an exporter of agricultural products to an importer of basic grains, hence signaling the end of the country's self-sufficiency in the production of food staples" (Hernández-León, 2008, p. 40). As a result, priority was given to agricultural commodities that yielded higher returns in national and world markets as opposed to the cultivation of basic grains (*ibid*).

Reforms to the Constitution were also made to allow private investment and land capitalization of the farming sector. In the early 1990s, a reform to Article 27 that would restructure land-tenure regulations, allowing for private ownership of collectively held agricultural lands, known as *ejidos*, was introduced (Vilas-Ghiso & Liverman, 2007). The reform went into effect in 1993, allowing the sale and rental of collective lands and prompting the re-concentration of land into large, privately owned farms, particularly in the northern states of the country (Domínguez, 1993; Toledo, 1994). Yet, the privatization and mapping of lands did not happen as expected and outcomes were uneven. As Perramond (2008, p. 357) stated, "The latest counter reforms have not produced wholesale, evenly distributed privatization in Mexico… However, these measures have legally formalized many of the informal practices, such as the leasing of communal farm plots, that were illegal prior to the counter reforms." The *ejido* had been a communal property unable to be sold, divided or seized, and private companies and churches could not own communal lands. After passage of the reform in 1993, the law allowed owners to sell, divide, seize, mortgage, and inherit communal lands. The reforms

might have the greatest implications for Veracruz, Chiapas, Michoacán, Oaxaca and Guanajuato, where the *ejido* lands are concentrated (INEGI, 2008).

In 1994, under Carlos Salinas' administration, the establishment of NAFTA aggravated the country's already difficult situation. The enactment of the agreement, along with poor infrastructure and technology, the lack of government support, and the focus on the manufacturing and service industries caused the small farming sector to further stagnate, thereby leading to high levels of rural-to-urban migration and unemployment. Because corn had traditionally been amongst the most important crops in Mexico and its commercialization represents the major source of income for marginal families, the effects of NAFTA-induced policies exacerbated the living conditions of vulnerable populations in Mexico, specifically those of corn producers in Veracruz.

Implications of neoliberal reforms in Veracruz

Aside from the large-scale reforms that preceded NAFTA and those that followed its implementation, there were specific reforms applied to the agricultural sector whose enactment resulted in environmental harm, increased poverty, both domestic and international migration, and the subsequent abandonment of fields. These reforms and their related consequences consisted of trade liberalization, drastic reduction of public expenditure, particularly in agricultural subsidies and social programs, and the end of an "industrial policy" and any other form of state-sponsored enterprise, and concentration on macro-economic management (Portes, 2004), which are detailed below.

One of the most important changes brought about by NAFTA was trade liberalization. Mexico had a long history of protecting the domestic market (until the mid-1980s) and was at a disadvantage at the time of the transition to an Export Oriented Industrialization model (EOI) (Hernández-León, 2008). Mexico had closed its borders for

decades and had subsidized corn prices. Due to the strategic importance of corn production in Mexico, NAFTA established a gradual transition period for the sector, allowing 15 years for the final alignment of domestic prices; however the planned 15-year transition period was compacted to 30 months (King, 2006, 2007; Nadal, 2000). Moreover, at the beginning of the transition period, the existing tariff system was transformed into a tariff-rate quota (TRQ)[8], which was initially set at 2.5 million tons per year and was to expand at a constant rate of 3% per annum over the course of 15 years, such that in 2008, corn would be commercialized freely. Nevertheless, the Mexican government did not implement the TRQ as planned, and instead it exempted all maize imports from tariff payments after 1994, resulting in massive corn imports and exposing farmers to international prices a decade earlier than planned (King 2006; Nadal, 2000)

Furthermore, commercial producers were not capable of increasing their efficiency in order to compete with maize imports from the U.S. (King, 2006). On the one hand, NAFTA created stiff competition for producers in the region due to their proximity to the city of Veracruz, a port of entry for many imports. On the other hand, significant corn subsidies by the American government put farmers at a disadvantage. Accordingly, the lack of regulation allowed substantial corn imports that resulted in a sharp fall in prices that led to fewer revenues for farmers. In fact, between January 1994 and August 1996 domestic corn prices fell by 48% (Nadal, 2000).

In terms of the workforce, peasants and *jornaleros* (landless workers*)* suffered a reduction in salaries. Many started to work in non-agricultural activities, such as animal husbandry, and several others decided to migrate. In 1996, official estimates show that

[8] "TRQ is a quota for a volume of imports at a favorable tariff" (King, 2006 p.9)

more than one million people who were considered economically active did not have a well paid or a productive job (Gobierno del Estado de Veracruz, 2005 p. 4).

One of the conditions imposed by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for granting loans to Mexico was the drastic reduction of public expenditure, particularly on agricultural subsidies and social programs. To mitigate the effect of NAFTA, the Mexican government put in place a series of instruments. Specifically, the government created PROCAMPO, a program that was envisioned providing a compensatory income transfer to producers of basic grains, such as maize, rice, beans, sorghum, and cotton, among others (King, 2006). However, this program lost most of its effectiveness due to high levels of inflation. According to Nadal (2000), PROCAMPO lost 40% of its value in real terms (King, 2006; Nadal, 2000). Additionally, credit declined to extremely low levels, as did public investment in infrastructure. The crisis, debt, and the agreements reached between the Mexican government and the IMF forced the former to cut expenditures on public works, health, and education, raise the price of utilities, and eliminate price controls and subsidies for consumer goods and basic staples (Hernández-León, 2008). Accordingly, the regulatory price agency, the National Company of Popular Subsistence (CONASUPO)[9], which played a key role in agricultural policies, shaping food production, consumption, and rural income, was completely dismantled in 1998 (Nadal, 2000; Yunez-Naude, N/D). Before the reforms of the 1990s, CONASUPO's programs involved 11 agricultural basic crops: barley, beans, copra, corn, cotton, rice,

9 CONASUPO was created in 1965 with the intention to organize all of the government's food regulatory activities into one single *paraestatal* (state-owned enterprise). It was designed to promote Mexico's economic and social development through the regularization of staple markets, the creation of more efficient distribution channels, through the provision of access to basic food for low-income producers as well as the purchase of their productions (Yunez-Naude, N/D).

sesame, sorghum, soybeans, sunflower, and wheat. By supporting prices for the producers, processing, storing, and distributing the crops, and by regulating trade through direct imports, "CONASUPO exacted control over an important component of Mexico's food chain" (Yunez-Naude, N/D, p. 3). CONASUPO's activities were reduced and finally eliminated in the context of domestic economic reforms, trade liberalization processes, and commitments under NAFTA and the World Trade Organization (WTO) (*ibid*).

Finally, the implementation of NAFTA, the drastic reduction in subsidies for production and programs, the lack of credits and appropriate technology, as well as crises in the coffee, sugar cane, mango and squash sectors severely impacted the state's economy. King (2006) asserts that the cancellation of public programs left a hole in the provision of services to small producers in Veracruz because the transfers received represented significant support and a source of income.

In addition, the implementation of NAFTA meant the end of "industrial policy" and any other form of state-sponsored enterprise and concentration on macro-economic management (Portes, 2004). In the 1990s, the withdrawal of federal investment in key sectors of the economy in Veracruz affected the regional economy and led to massive unemployment. The restructuration of Petróleos Mexicanos (PEMEX), the downsizing of the oil industry, and the clearance of Fertilizantes Mexicanos (Fertimex) caused severe unemployment in northern and southern Veracruz. Similarly, the privatization and dismantling of state-owned enterprises, such as the Instituto Mexicano del Cafe (Inmecafe) y Tabacalera Mexicana (Tabamex), affected the coffee-growing regions of Xalapa, Cordoba, Coatepec, and the Tuxtlas (Anguiano-Téllez, 2005; Del-Rey, 2004). In the Sotavento region, the economy also contracted due to the agricultural and industrial oil crises. Finally, the closure of state-owned Azucarera, S.A and the selling-off of the

sugar plantations affected several municipalities, such as Martínez de la Torre, Naulta, Misantla, Cosamaloapan, and Cardel.

One direct effect of the application of the reforms was human mobility. Between 1995 and 2005, the state of Veracruz had high levels of both rural-to-urban and also international migration (Chavez-Lomeli, N/D; Del-Rey, 2004). In monetary terms, the movement led to the abandonment of the fields and shortages in labor. In social terms, migration caused family disruption and separation and household restructuring (Córdova Plaza, 2007; Moran-Taylor, 2008). However, despite all the economic and political problems, farmers continued to produce corn. This production finds its explanation in a series of cultural, social and economic factors.

CORN PRODUCTION IN THE TOTONACAPAN

Most of the workforce of the Totonacapan is concentrated in agricultural activities, representing an important source of income for the state. Veracruz's primary sector—agriculture, forestry, and fishing—generates the most income and employs over 30% of the economically active population (EAP). Veracruz is the largest producer of coffee, sugar cane, rice, squash, orange, vanilla, lemon, pineapple, banana, and mango in Mexico (INEGI, 2010) and an important corn producer (6^{th} at the national level). Hence, the fact that a large percentage of Veracruz's economy is based on agriculture makes the state susceptible to significant losses due to changes in the market price of agricultural products.

Amid all of the economic and political reforms, what are the motivations behind corn production? I argue that there are several cultural and social elements that influence the production of corn, such as history, traditions, culture, and economic factors, because corn production represents a key historical livelihood strategy. Corn is a symbol of

national identity, and it is also the basis of the daily diet in most Mexican households. Because corn is a product that can be grown at different altitudes, terrains and temperature, its production can be carried out in rural communities of the Totonacapan. The following section addresses how these factors have stimulated the corn production over time, despite the economic crises of 1988 and 1994.

According to Nadal (2000, p. 10), "Nowhere in the world is corn so intimately related to the social and cultural fabric of a country as in Mexico". From its emergence to present days, maize has been an indispensable element in the lives of Mexicans, not only in cultural but also in economic terms. Historically, corn production emerged among indigenous populations in the Valley of Mexico. Archeological evidence places the time of domestication between 5,000 and 10,000 BCE. In Mesoamerican times, the country saw its splendor with the use of new techniques that allowed the expansion of corn crops throughout the country. This fact makes Mexico not only the epicenter of the origin of corn but also the center of its genetic variability (Nadal, 2000). This same variability has been threatened by the introduction of genetically modified and transgenic corn. Several local groups aware of the damage and the loss of variability are launching campaigns to promote preference for locally produced corn, specifically in highland communities (e.g. MAIZ group in Mecatlán). Further research needs to address how the introduction of modified seeds has affected the local communities of the Totonacapan.

The importance of corn was visible in different Mesoamerican cultures that offered sacrifices and rituals to their gods to favor the *milpa*[10]. The god of maize took a variety of forms, colors, and representations. In the Totonac culture, the Sun, *Chichini,* is the owner of maize and is associated with the different figures of Christ. In Totonac

[10] Traditional corn co-cropping system.

mythology, *Chichini* appears as a hero that finds maize and teaches humanity how to sow and harvest it. The owner of the thunder, *Aktsini,* makes rain possible and favors the *milpa* (Garma & Masferrer, 1994). It is important to note that current "Totonac religious traditions are the result of a syncretism of pre-hispanic Mesoamerican religion and the Spanish Catholicism" (Valderrama Rouy, 2005, p. 205).

Because maize is so important to the communities, even when farmers do not possess land they often rent small portions for corn cultivation. For many farmers, the production of corn is not only a livelihood strategy but also a practice, a tradition, and a custom. From childhood, they are taught the art of agriculture. Indeed, children and teenagers are usually seen as qualified labor, and they are expected to follow their parent's footsteps and help in the land preparation, sowing and harvesting. New generations, however, are looking for work outside of the agricultural sphere, given the high economic investment and low returns from corn production. Moreover, currently, there are more educational opportunities, and there is higher human mobility. Those who have more capital and resources rent large extensions of land for both auto-consumption and trade.

Another factor that was influenced corn production is Veracruz is the fact that farmers prefer locally varieties over GMO seeds. Because local communities believe that transgenic corn and GMO varieties are of poor quality, their use has been limited to animal feed. Similarly, local people assert that the imported varieties have fewer nutrients than those locally produced, as observed in other Latin American countries such as Peru (Krogel, 2010). Moreover, taste and consistency promote preference for corn that is locally produced because, according to interviews, imported corn has a different color and consistency. Additionally, women assert that the consistency makes the preparation of food more difficult.

Corn is by far the most important crop in Mexico. Veracruz ranks sixth in national maize production, where 40% of the total is for auto-consumption and 55% is sold to the flour industry, mills, and *tortillerias* (SEDESOL, 2003). Because the percentage for auto-consumption is so high, maize is considered a subsistence product. As argued above, Totonacapan corn farmers cultivate under difficult conditions of inferior soil, sloping terrain, irregular rainfall, and small landholdings, thereby leading to low yields and a lack of available production for sale. In case they have a modest surplus, the sale price, immediately after the harvest when supply is greatest, is low. Conversely, when purchasing again to fulfill a family's needs, the prices are usually higher, and thus their net income from corn sales is often negative. This practice however is necessary to cover short-term needs for cash (Nadal, 2000). In addition, in the case of rural populations, subsistence farming provides a ready supply of food, while enabling some family members to work for wages (Knapp, 1995).

Over the last decade, corn production in Veracruz has been fluctuating on a yearly basis. According to official figures at the state level, in 2008 the Papantla region ranked 2nd in corn production with 64,516 tons, behind San Andrés Tuxtla; in the following year, its production dropped and ranked 4th with 43,339 tons/year (see table 2.1).

Municipality	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
Playa Vicente	38,250	39,484	32,675	45,786	76,216
San Andrés Tuxtla	42,937	59,067.80	59,412	65,628	67,216
Isla	9,656	20,075	31,750	18,976	45,875
Papantla	18,828	32,617	23,450	64,516	43,339
Soteapan	8,335	35,870	30,682	52,070	42,787

Table 2.1. Principal municipalities in Veracruz by volume of corn production (tons)
Source: COVECA, 2011

In 2005 and 2009, the economic value of corn production positioned Papantla in third place with an estimated $3.5 million and $14.8 million pesos, respectively (see table 2.2). Before dropping to third place, Papantla ranked 1st in the 2008 year.

Municipality	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
Playa Vicente	79,875	74,440.80	95,925	125,044	223,204.80
San Andrés Tuxtla	66,737.90	86,724.24	160,406	161,694	175,021
Papantla	35,143.20	59,210.53	70,350	227,398	148,323.50
Isla	19,115.20	36,863.60	79,375	47,441.25	128,450
Soteapan	15,578.50	68,117.70	76,147	138,398	117,390.90

Table 2.2 Principal municipalities in Veracruz per value of corn production (Mexican pesos) (millions of pesos)
Source: COVECA, 2011

Finally, in terms of extension of land under cultivation, in 2005, 2008, and 2009 Papantla was the largest region with land under cultivation, accounting for 16,393.50, 25,577 and 23,422 hectares, respectively (see table 2.3) (COVECA, 2011).

Municipality	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009
Papantla	16,393.50	19,926	14,230	25,577	23,422
San Andrés Tuxtla	16,153	22,782	22,237	21,465	21,864
Playa Vicente	12,750	11,820	12,370	14,059	14,776
Soteapan	4,465	13,216	9,537	14,910	14,205
Isla	2,414	4,450	8,250	4,132	8,250

Table 2.3. Principal municipalities in Veracruz by surface area of corn harvested (hectares)
Source: COVECA, 2011

On the one hand, these data suggest that the value and volume of production have a direct relation with the land under cultivation. A pattern is visible for the year 2007, in which not only the area under cultivation dropped but also the production value and yield dropped as well. In 2009, all fields show an improvement compared to 2007 but a decline compared to 2008.

On the other hand, previous data suggest that the production of corn is critical for farmers, especially those living in the highland communities who rely strongly on this product. Similarly, research shows that changes in the production and value can dramatically affect the living conditions of people in the Totonacapan, given farmers' dependence on this crop (King, 2006). In the face of these factors, the application of neoliberal reforms in the 1990s had significant effects on the lives of corn producers under processes of rural restructuring. Thus, in order to cope with and adapt to alteration in their economic, political and social environment, Totonacapan corn farmers developed a series of resilience mechanisms that consisted of migration, a shift to more profitable crops, and carving out new niche markets.

MECHANISMS OF RESILIENCE AND FARMERS' RESPONSES TO A RESTRUCTURING ECONOMY

Due to the variety of complex problems that corn farmers faced during the end of the 1980s and beginning of the 1990s, communities developed certain abilities that allowed them to adapt to changes, that is, systems developed resilience. The concept of resilience first emerged in ecology and was used to explain the relationships between interacting populations, such as predators and prey, and their functional responses in relation to ecological stability theory (Folke, 2006). Also, this concept was a way to understand non-linear dynamics, such as the processes by which socio-ecological systems maintain themselves in the face of perturbations and change (Folke, Berkes, & Colding, 2003). According to Folke (2006, p. 259), resilience is the "capacity of a system to absorb disturbance and re-organize while undergoing change so as to still retain the same function structure, identity and feedback." Adger defined social resilience as the "ability of human communities to withstand external shocks to their social infrastructure, such as

environmental variability or social, economic and political upheaval" (Folke, 2006 p.259 citing Adger, 2000). That is to say, communities undergo a process of adaptation and restructuring in order to exercise control over their resources and respond to external changes. The concept of social resilience incorporates the idea of adaptation, learning, and self-organization in addition to the ability to persist outside disturbance (Folke, 2006). By applying this concept, I argue that communities in the Totonacapan have been able to develop certain tactics and strategies to adapt to large-scale changes in the political, economic, and social sectors by realizing their human and social capital and harnessing their own resources. For example, people from highland and lowland communities decided to migrate to other areas that, in turn, provided a source of income to keep farms afloat. Others, with access to resources and technology were able to shift to more profitable crops, but many could simply increase the amount of land under cultivation. Lastly, some people saw in corn husks a potential source of income and participated in the emergence of an alternative market, which is the focus of this work.

Migration

The way in which some members of the Totonacapan responded to social and economic large-scale policies was through circular and international migration. Given the lack of employment and reduction in production subsidies, among others, the residents of diverse communities moved to other Mexican states and to the U.S. in search for better labor opportunities and living conditions.

Veracruz and the Totonacapan had high levels of emigration in the 1995-2005 decade. With the increase in migration, the lack of employment and opportunities, and low staple prices, remittances have become an essential source of income for marginal households. The income has allowed family members in the Totonacapan to cultivate

corn and other grains and meet basic needs. Furthermore, based on findings from fieldwork in communities such as Filomeno Mata and Mecatlán, two of the poorest municipalities in the country, remittances account for one of the main sources of income along with the cash transfers from the federal government, specifically those coming from assistance programs, such as *Oportunidades* (SEDESOL, 2008).

Migration has changed the population makeup of Veracruz. During the 1980s, Veracruz possessed a migration balance between the number of emigrants and immigrants, because jobs in the oil industry, agriculture, and tourism made it an attractive place. Nevertheless, at the beginning of the 1990s Veracruz started to show an increase in the number of emigrants with destinations, first, in central states (Puebla, Mexico City, D.F., Tlaxcala) (see figure 2.2), later in border states (Tamaulipas, Chihuahua, Baja California, Sonora, Coahuila, Nuevo Leon and Durango), and finally, to the U.S. Given the number of emigrants, in 2000 Veracruz acquired the category of sending state (Anguiano-Téllez, 2005).

Similarly, several authors (Anguiano-Téllez, 2005; Benquet, 2003; Perez-Monterosas, 2003a, 2003b) have argued that Veracruz gradually lost its importance as a receiving state and became a sending state. First, there were intrastate migrations of agricultural *jornaleros*, then migration from south of the state to the border, and finally movement of urban and rural migrants to the U.S. Benquet (2003) states:

> Despite of its richness in natural resources and its relative industrialization and urbanization, Veracruz went from being a state that attracted labor into the agricultural and oil sector, to be one of the main ejectors of labor to other states and abroad (Benquet, 2003, p. 122).

In the period from 1995 to 2005, international migration increased both rapidly and exponentially. According to official numbers, the number of people who migrated to the U.S. greatly increased; in 1995 there were approximately 50,000 *Veracruzanos* living

there; and by 2004, there were approximately 300,000[11] (Gobierno de Veracruz, 2005). Furthermore, official estimates from the government of Veracruz indicate that in 1995, the state ranked 15th as a receiver of remittances; by 2002, the state ranked 6th, just behind the states with a much longer tradition of emigration –Michoacán, Zacatecas, and San Luis Potosí. In 2005, Veracruz ranked 5th. In a similar manner, remittances also increased dramatically. In absolute terms, remittances grew from $765 million in 2003 to $950.5 million in 2004 (*ibid*)

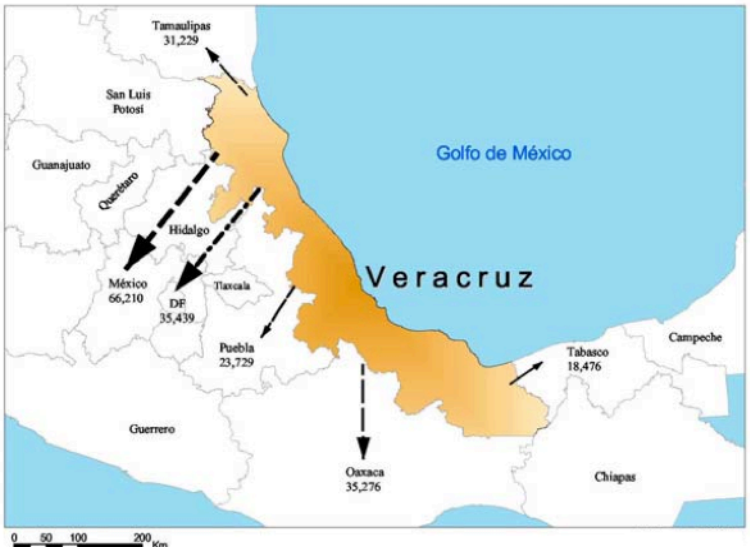


Figure 2.2: Destinations of *Veracruzanos* Migrants (1990-1995)
Source: Colegio de la Frontera Norte, (Anguiano-Téllez, 2005)

In the same vein, research has revealed that over the past two decades, 1990-2010, migration in Veracruz reached a peak due to five fundamental reasons: a) people from rural areas started to migrate to urban centers, causing an eventual saturation in the labor market that later resulted in international migration; b) problems in agricultural and industrial settings; c) the constant demand for labor in the agricultural, industrial and services sectors by the U.S.; d) the considerable difference in income between both economies; and e) the social network built during previous years that facilitated the integration of the new-comers (CONAPO, 2002).

[11] This number is an approximation given by the government because the majority of migrants are undocumented (Gobierno de Veracruz, 2005a)

Finally, after the attacks of 9/11 and the subsequent War on Terror, the U.S. has enhanced its security apparatus. In the early 2000's, law enforcement on the country's southern border increased dramatically, causing a reported decline in undocumented migration (Pew Hispanic Center, 2012). Because many Mexican and Veracruz migrants are undocumented, the costs and risks of crossing the border have also increased. In addition, the 2008s economic crisis discouraged migrants to make the trip to the U.S., because there was saturation in labor markets, high levels of unemployment, and low investment in construction projects (one of the main sources of employment for undocumented migrants to the U.S.). Accordingly, those who could not afford to emigrate have stayed in Veracruz and have sought different alternatives.

Shift to more profitable crops

The second resilience mechanism employed by corn farmers to cope with the reduction in subsidies for production and with massive corn imports was a shift to more profitable crops. After the implementation of NAFTA, the price of the staple food item dropped, and farmers needed to shift to products with higher profitability. Some large landowners in Veracruz were able to shift to vegetable and fruit production; nevertheless, the majority of farmers in the Totonacapan are small farmers who did not have the resources to change crops.

In a globalized era, small farmers have been forced to compete with large companies for survival. To do this, some have abandoned traditional farming methods and have shifted from primarily subsistence to commercial agriculture, usually involving the utilization of new and modified production strategies, such as transgenic and GMO seeds (Doolittle, 2002). This shift was more evident in northern Mexico, where big landowners had the resources and infrastructure to carry out the change.

After the adoption of neoliberal reforms, the reduction in subsidies, the closure of state-owned enterprises (i.e., Tabamex, and Inmecafe) and development banks (Banrural), and the State's promotion and support of a shift to more profitable crops, all led to an aggregate (national) increase of 57% in horticultural exports after NAFTA implementation for the commercial sector and 12% for the traditional sector (Vilas-Ghiso & Liverman, 2007). The focus on grain production by small farmers is rooted in economic constraints. The production cost of horticultural products is five to seven times that of corn because the former require more intensive use of inputs and water (Nadal, 2000). Moreover, other products, such as fruits and vegetables, are more water-intensive, thus the low production in this area. So, the high investments, the lack of cheap credit, and water scarcity have limited small farmers' capacity to switch form basic grains to more profitable crops. In this context, the only remaining option was to increase the area under corn cultivation.

Land use

The third resilience mechanism used by farmers to cope with the lack of resources for shifting to more profitable crops was to extend the land under cultivation and to increase the use of fertilizer in order to raise yields. Research shows that the increase in production was induced by an extension of land use (Vilas-Ghiso & Liverman, 2007). Based on fieldwork findings, traditional farmers decided to sow more hectares even when they were aware of the potential environmental harm that this action would cause. However, their situation was so difficult that they decided to cut down trees and extend corn crops. In this regard, research showed an aggregate (national) increase of 31% in cultivated land. Because many of these farmers are located in forested areas, this expansion of land under cultivation has likely lead to greater deforestation (*ibid*).

Because of lack of opportunities to find jobs in other sectors of the economy, abandoning corn production seemed like a high-risk strategy to small farmers. Instead, producers maintained and expanded production, hoping to at least obtain enough production to cover costs and sell a modest surplus (Nadal, 2000). In addition, due to economic pressure, farmers were forced to lower labor costs, thus reducing employment opportunities and putting pressure on subsistence farmers who were struggling to find off-farm jobs. Given the labor-intensive nature of small-scale corn production in the region (e.g., use of terracing, hedging, minimum tillage, ridge planting, and alley cropping), the reduction in labor led to lower yields. The abandonment of traditional farming methods and the increased use of fertilizer (Doolittle, 2002) damaged the soils and caused negative environmental impacts. On the one hand, climatic conditions allow for two rain-fed production cycles (spring-summer and fall-winter), in most of Veracruz, enabling year-round corn cultivation. Because of the urgency to produce corn, farmers abandoned traditional farming techniques (see Torres, 2011) and opted for a higher use of fertilizers, pesticides, and agrochemicals; their excessive use has produced widespread erosion and soil damage. In other words, low yields are a reflection of the lack of modern technology (because many small farmers cannot afford chemicals in the prescribed ways), the loss of a skilled agricultural workforce due to migration and the concentration of people in non-agricultural activities, and the use of degraded land driven by intensive use and inappropriate fertilizer application (Nadal 2000; Vilas-Ghiso & Liverman, 2007).

The emergence of the *totomoxtle* industry

The last resilience mechanism that farmers employed was to harness corn by-products. Folke (2006, p.259) emphasizes the fact that resilience is not only about being persistent to change but also taking advantage of these transformations. He states, “It is

about the opportunities that disturbance opens up in terms of recombination of evolved structures and processes, renewal of the system and emergence of new trajectories." When farmers realized that many doors were being closed, they created a window of opportunity in the conversion of "garbage" into a source of income. The rise of the corn husk industry took place at a time when the corn market was stifled, prices were falling, and imports from the U.S. were dramatically growing. Farmers were facing difficult times and needed an alternative source of income.

Traditionally, corn husks were burned, used for cattle feed, and disposed of as garbage. Farmers did not find any value in them; the product that had a value in the market was corn. Corn husks were seen as a burden because they needed to be removed to access the corn kernels. The main utility of corn husks was as raw material for making *tamales*. However, corn husk production was minimal, just enough to cover domestic needs and local demand, which resulted in low profit when sold.

However, given the need for new sources of income, producers looked for alternative solutions. At the beginning of the 1990s, farmers and carriers from Entabladero and Las Chacas were traveling to Mexico City to sell or transport products. On one of these trips, they realized that corn husks were being sold to mills and other intermediaries in the large urban markets and might become a profitable industry. Aware of the potential of the market, farmers and carriers started to take their husks to Mexico City. Within a few months, more farmers followed their example and started to trade corn husks. As with most new products, at the beginning, the sale price was very low; however, once consumers became familiar with the corn husks, the demand induced higher prices. In time, both price and demand went up. The industry finally gained momentum in 2008 when the price went up to Mex$35 per kilo, almost 10 times more than a kilo of corn. In the last couple of years, the market became saturated and prices

started to fall. More importantly, both the market and important *totomoxtle* business owners control the sale price, thus lowering the overall prices.

The emergence of this industry can be attributed to the growing demand from urban dwellers and the thousands of migrants who had traveled to border towns and the U.S. These migrants were not only the foundation of a secure demand for this product but also of a flow that would later become a fixed distribution channel. Several businessmen traveled to Veracruz looking for corn husks to satisfy the demand in Monterrey, Guadalajara, San Luis Potosí, and in the international market. They were able to establish processing facilities in critical municipalities in the Totonacapan, which later allowed them the control a significant share of the market.

Corn farmers showed resilience against large-scale political and economic changes by recognizing emerging demand due to population movements, thus developing a market for a low-value by-product and turning it into an industry that is an important source of income and employment. They created different tools to add value to corn husks and built different distribution channels in order to make them accessible to a wider population. Additionally, the emergence of this industry relies heavily on women because they have become essential in processing the export-market product, which involves removing, selecting, and packing the husks. Women "left behind" (Córdova Plaza, 2007; Hirsch, 1999) due to migration and those without formal employment found in the corn husk industry a new space for labor. The different ways in which women and men participate in this industry will be addressed in chapter six.

The remainder of this thesis will elucidate on the one hand on production and manufacturing practices, costs, benefits and challenges for producers, intermediaries and exporters. On the other hand, it will address the consumption of corn husks in northern

states and in the U.S. by migrants and non-migrants; and the participation of both men and women based on gender constructions.

CONCLUSION

As described above, the history of the Totonacs is one of displacement and struggle. Since the emergence of their culture, the Totonacs have been subject to domination and exploitation. In order to maintain and reproduce their traditions and culture, they opted for relative isolation. However, recent changes in the international economic and political environment have allowed these communities to be part of a globalized world.

Globalization and neoliberalism were fostered in a moment of international crisis and debt. Several leading economies were experiencing financial setbacks and found in these paradigms a way to deal with the crisis. Specifically in Mexico, neoliberal reforms had substantial implications on the agricultural sector. In Veracruz, as a consequence of the neoliberal policies, vulnerable populations saw declines in yields and corn prices, the privatization or dismantling of state-owned enterprises, and the reduction in subsidies and investment in social programs.

To face these changes, farmers developed several tactics and strategies. A large percentage of people migrated to border states and the U.S. in search of better living conditions, while those with greater economic resources switched from basic grain production to the cultivation of more profitable crops. Still, the majority of those who stayed in Veracruz opted for intensive use of fertilizer and the expansion of land under cultivation. Finally, a small group of farmers participated in the emergence of an alternative market, the corn husk industry, which has provided an important source of employment and income, particularly for vulnerable populations and women.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

I designed my research methods to understand the political, economic and social situation in which the corn husk industry in Mexico emerged and expanded as well as the importance and impact that this market has had on corn producers, intermediaries and exporters, men, women, and children. My goals were to a) document how farmers came to the conclusion that corn husks, *totomoxtle*, was a marketable product; b) analyze the conditions that favored the emergence and expansion of the industry –at the local and global level; c) examine the participation of men and women in the elaboration of this product as well as the impacts of their participation; and d) the role of the State during the emergence and expansion of the industry. Consequently, during site visits I addressed the economic situation of small farmers in the Totonacapan, a rural region of Veracruz state in Mexico, their labor opportunities and the impact of large-scale policy reforms. Through conversations I inquired about the cultivation of corn and its importance for small farmers. I carefully listened to the stories of how farmers changed their vision and looked for a non-traditional source of income amid the difficult economic environment. As I deepened my contact with the communities, I observed the process of production, transformation and distribution of corn husks, while discovering gender differences and gendered discourses surrounding the making of the product. Also, through formal and informal talks with exporters and intermediaries I identified the channel distribution and final consumers of this product. Finally, I interviewed government officials to find out their involvement, participation and regulation of the market. Throughout my research, I aimed to analyze and uncover the way in which an alternative market emerged in times of a restructuring economy and global changes.

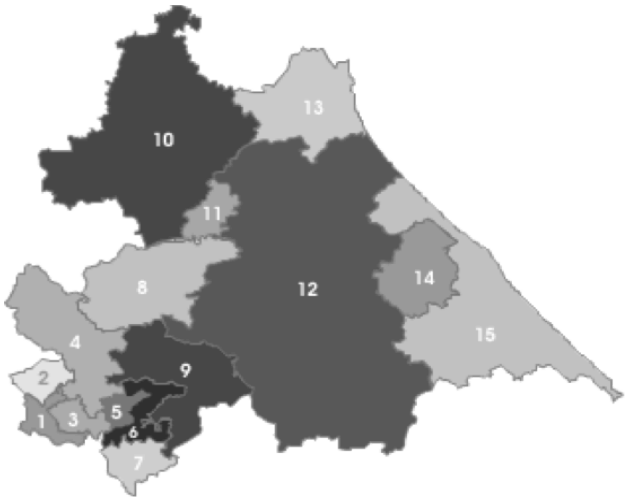
This chapter describes in further detail the methods I employed to research the making of a domestic and export product, the participants involved and the context in which it is fostered. The chapter is structured in four sections. First, I situate the research while I provide the rationale for a regional study. Second, I explain the research methods used to gather qualitative and secondary data. Third, I explain my positionality as a researcher and how this affects the overall research project. Finally, I address the limitations and challenges faced throughout the research.

SITUATING THE RESEARCH

The data collected and analyzed in this case study comes from fieldwork I undertook in the Totonacapan, a rural region located in the north part of Veracruz state (see figure 3.1) that has been historically and culturally associated with the Totonac ethnic group (Harvey & Kelly, 1969). The fieldwork took place during eight weeks in the summer of 2011. This is one of ten regions in the state, comprises 15 municipalities and about 10% of Veracruz' total population (see figure 3.2). Given the extension of the region, the area is comprised of various landscapes with a diversity of flora and fauna, including highlands, middle lands, low lands and coastal plains. Because the area is so extensive, I

Figure 3.1 Localization of the Totonacapan region
Source: Totonacapan.com.mx

did not visit all of the municipalities; however, I visited seven municipalities. In total, I conducted interviews in 16 different communities: Filomeno Mata, Mecatlán, Coyutla, Santa Ana, Las Chacas, Las Lomas, Ojite de Matamoros, Zozocolco, Coxquihui, Espinal, Entabladero, Poza Larga Miradores, Comalteco, La Concha, Agua Dulce and El Chote[12].



1. Filomeno Mata
2. Coahuitlán
3. Mecatlán
4. Coyutla
5. Chumatlán
6. Coxquihui
7. Zozocolco de Hidalgo
8. Coatzintla
9. Espinal
10. Tihuatlán
11. PozaRica de Hidalgo
12. Papantla
13. Cazones de Herrera
14. Gutiérrez Zamora
15. Tecolutla

Figue 3.2: Municipalities of the Totonacapan
Source: www.veracruz.gob.mx

During eight weeks of fieldwork in the Totonacapan, I lived in the town of Espinal, located in the center of the region. This provided ease of access to both the highland and lowland communities. Espinal is also home to one of the campuses of Universidad Veracruzana Intercultural (UVI), which provided an academic base and a local mentor, Francisco Pancardo, as part of a collaboration between UT Austin and UVI.

My initial intention was to develop a community-based development project. As I deepened my work in the field, I realized that there were several "Agencies for Rural Development", which focused mainly on the creation of these kinds of projects, so I

[12] Some of these communities do not appear in figure 3.2, because the figure only shows municipalities.

decided to shift my approach. I instead looked for products that were able to be commercialized and provide a source of income for low-income communities. As a consequence, I became interested in *totomoxtle*, the regional name for corn husks. These are usually used as raw material for *tamales* and handicrafts. I noticed that most communities were producing and exchanging corn husks. In informal conversations I was told that this was a profitable product and was expanding rapidly. Therefore, I started to pay attention to the production, transformation and distribution of the product. Finally, as I visited a wide variety of communities and interviewed several participants, I realized that communities were participating in the corn husk industry at significantly different levels, despite their geographic proximity. Thus, it became evident that a regional scale study was needed to accurately document the emergence and expansion of the new industry.

There are a number of reasons why I made the decision to conduct a multi-sited regional scale research incorporating various communities, as opposed to developing in-depth case studies of a handful of places. First, it was imperative to include those communities where the *totomoxtle* industry first surfaced, as well as emerging places, in order to document the process of adoption and diffusion. The *totomoxtle* industry has largely grown over the past 15 years, achieving high involvement from communities in the Totonacapan. Although the birth of the industry could be attributed to two or three communities, several more have contributed to its enlargement. Also, analyzing the key differences and similarities among the communities with respect to *totomoxtle* reveals how communities have responded to the emergence of this alternative market, specifically in terms of participation and contribution to the industry.

In addition, I selected communities with diverse landscapes, as I realized that the topography of the communities has a direct correlation with the level of production of

corn husks. The highlands encompass steep slopes that make cultivation, the use of tractors and other mechanized tools difficult. Thus, the production of corn leaves is very low. Conversely, lowland communities have flat extensions of land that allow the use of more advanced technology to generate higher yields. Subsequently, a high percentage of production is concentrated in the latter area.

While the whole region participates in the *totomoxtle* industry, benefits vary depending on the participation of communities. Similarly, benefits vary according to gender. Through the lens of feminist research, I aimed to unfold gender relations and gendered discourses surrounding the making of *totomoxtle*. Specifically, women and men's participation in the industry is influenced by social constructions of gender, and the economic compensation that women and men receive varies according to the activity that they carry out.

RESEARCH METHODS

The fieldwork was based mostly on qualitative research methods: participant observation and semi-structured interviews. Participant observation involves that investigators watch their research setting from the sidelines or joining the activities of those they are studying, and taking notes on what they see (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Through participant observation, I was able to spend time with families and other members of the villages while joining them in daily activities. After finishing the activities I planned for the day, I went home and wrote a daily entry in a field journal. I documented my perceptions and observations about places or certain activities in which I was participating. I also wrote comments on conversations held with different people. Field notes are accounts describing experiences and observations the researcher has made

while participating in an intense and involved manner (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995).

Because I wanted to get details and individual accounts of particular events, I conducted semi-structured interviews. Through qualitative interviews one can more fully understand experiences and reconstruct events; they are good for describing social and political processes, as well as personal issues (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). In other words, qualitative interviews are conversations in which a researcher guides a conversational partner in an extended discussion. Semi-structured interviews (also called focused questions) are more specific than unstructured interviews and are suggested by the answers to the initial questions (Rubin & Rubin, 2005).

In order to get insights about communities' perceptions of corn, corn husks, the benefits and damages of participating in corn husk processing, labor, costs of production, yields, government programs, gender roles and communities' dynamics, I conducted a total of 32 semi-structured interviews. Participants consisted of 23 men and nine women whose ages ranged from 20 to 60 years old. Out of the total, five men and one woman hold government positions in five municipalities. As I wanted to get diverse perspectives, I interviewed 15 producers, one *jornalero* (landless agricultural workers), 13 local and regional intermediaries, three exporters and three[13] *elaboradores* (people who select and pack the corn husks) (see complete chart in Appendix B). The gender imbalance, as well as the difference in the number of producers and *jornaleros* in my sample has to do with the way in which the research developed. My first intention was to interview producers and intermediaries to determine the emergence and diffusion of the industry; however, as research advanced, I realized the importance of women, their role and participation in the production of *totomoxtle*. Also, I noticed how relevant gender was in the making of the

[13] The numbers do not match up since some producers also functioned as intermediaries, albeit not all producers are intermediaries and not all intermediaries are producers.

product, since men and women take on different tasks at different stages of the process. Thus, in the time left, I tried to conduct as many interviews as possible to women. I did not do the same with *jornaleros*, since I focused on small producers, and medium and big intermediaries. The difference in the numbers of interviews to producers and *jornaleros* also obeys to the fact that producers were easier to find (word of mouth).

The duration of interviews varied between 25 to 90 minutes. Most of the interviews were tape-recorded, with the informed consent of the participants according to Institutional Review Board (IRB) protocols and approval.

The interviews took place in different settings. In the case of smallholders, who were male, I visited their fields; and many times I joined them in their fieldwork activities. In one case, I recall walking two hours to go a farmer's land; it was the perfect time to sow, so I started to plant next to him. After that, we held a conversation for about two hours. Other times, I visited them at their homes, usually during the afternoon, when they had finished their farm work. Conversely, I visited women in the mornings, because they usually stay at home doing domestic chores. While we talked, I helped them to do their daily activities, because I did not want the interviews to be a burden for them. As for regional intermediaries and exporters, I had the opportunity to see the warehouses and factories where they keep and process the husks.

The technique used to seek out participants was snowball sampling. It consists of asking initial respondents to identify other potential informants who are appropriate for the study (Gillespie & Hennessey, 2008). As I interviewed smallholders, they pointed out other communities and sometimes, even mentioned particular people with whom they felt I should speak. This was particularly important as I had access to places and people that otherwise would not be possible.

Finally, the revision of secondary data gathered during my stay in graduate school

complements this research. I draw particularly from feminist research to describe gendered spaces and labor (Córdova Plaza, 2007; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2003; McDowell, 1997; Moran-Taylor, 2008; Pessar, 2003; Ramirez & Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2009; Tyner, 2003; Zhang, 2001). I base most of my analysis of neoliberalism in literature by Hernández-León (2008), Liverman & Villas (2006), Nadal (2000), and documents from different institutions (CIDOB, 2010; CODHEM, N/D). In addition, I use Amanda King's articles as reference for *totomoxtle* research (King, 2007). Finally, I draw from migration scholars to explain the increase of Veracruz' migrant population to the U.S, the ways in which these migrants are demanding ethnic and nostalgic products while addressing the shift in the American palate and recent preference for those products (Anguiano-Téllez, 2005; Castles & Miller, 2009; CEPAL, 2003; CONAPO, 2010; Del-Rey, 2004; Hernández-León, 2008; NASFT, 2012; Packaged Facts, 2011; Perez-Monterosas, 2003a, 2003b; Ramírez, 2007).

POSITIONALITY

Positionality is understood as the way, in which the researcher establishes a position in relation to the study with the implication that this position influence different aspects of the study, specifically, the way in which stories are portrayed (McDowell, 1997). Thus, my own gender, race, nationality, and class influence the way I perceive happenings and the way I portray them. As McDowell (1997, p. 381) points out, "the social characteristics of researchers and readers affect the ways in which knowledge is constructed, transmitted and transformed..."

Because an essential part of this study focuses on women, it is important to mention that my position as a female, middle-class, educated researcher influences the

way in which I write about them. I am a mestizo Mexican woman who describes the participation of low-income indigenous women in a growing market. In many forms, these women are different from me; their culture, traditions and even language are different. Their current life situation seemed very distant from me at some points of the research. Hence, I acknowledge that my own background, my profession, my points of view, and my experiences affect the way in which I talk about these women. Mc Dowell (1997) also recognizes these differences and argues that ignoring these differences in favor of an optimistic, all-women-together approach raises problems.

A debate in feminist research has addressed the relationship between researchers and the participants in their study (McDowell, 1992). Many times, women are seen as exploited objects of research; however, it is through the establishment of an egalitarian relationship between those two that the notion can be overcome. In this context, participant observation becomes a relevant tool for women investigators, because it allows the development of this kind of relationship. Hence, the interconnections and relationships developed are seen as a valid part of the research process. As McDowell (1997, p. 381) argues "intersubjectivity rather than objectivity should be recognized as part of the research output rather than excluded from the final product."

LIMITATIONS AND CHALLENGES

The study faces some limitations and challenges, mainly in the collection of the both primary and secondary data. First, few body of literature focused on corn husks. There is narrow information on the flourishing of *totomoxtle*, partly because it is a new industry and because only a small number of scholars have documented its emergence. Amanda King (2007) is well known for her research in this area and I base part of my

analysis on her work. The cases of other countries such as El Salvador and Guatemala are used as an example to show the increase in the commercialization of ethnic products.

Second, there is little quantitative data regarding *totomoxtle*. I conducted interviews with small holders, personnel of the State Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock, Rural Development, Fishery and Food (SAGARPA for its Spanish acronym)[14] and several Offices of Agricultural Development (Fomento Agrario Municipal) to collect data in relation to hectares, number of producers, land tenure, value and volume of exports; however, the information provided by the official authorities was limited. On the one hand, they did not have any information on the value and volume of corn husks exports due to the lack of attention given to this market; also, officials affirmed that information possessed in relation to the number of farmers, yields, and land tenure was inaccurate. Moreover, a SAGARPA representative stated that his office did not have updated records and was behind in the elaboration of hard data. On the other hand, smallholders were able to provide some data on yields; but this information is only an approximation since most of them do not keep track over time.

Third, I experienced language barriers in data collection. Because some of the participants interviewed only spoke Totonac and others basic Spanish, the collection of information was difficult. On several occasions I needed translators and interpreters in order to conduct interviews.

Fourth, there were time, weather and security constraints. It was difficult to visit all of the municipalities, since the region is extensive. I visited the communities that had greater participation and those with little or no involvement in the *totomoxtle* industry. Participation in this context is based on: 1) the number of people employed in this

[14] For more information visit www.sagarpa.gob.mx

activity, and 2) the volume of production.

Likewise, weather conditions posed another challenge. July, the period of my research coincided with the rainy season, thus flooding became a major issue. The bridges built to link communities were broken down and several roads were closed. This led to limited access for several days causing a delay in the research.

Finally, security was also a concern. Given that I am a foreign woman, being alone in the communities seemed risky. Even though I am Mexican and I was born in Veracruz state, I was still considered a foreigner by the community. Indigenous people saw me as a foreigner because I did not grow up there, I did not share their same traditions, languages and culture. My color of skin, white, and my dressing was different from those of the locals, so I was always seen as an outsider. According to several villagers, it was not safe for me to be alone after dark. At the time of the interviews, there had been a couple of major violent incidents in the nearby communities, so community members strongly recommended visiting only during daylight time, around 5:00-6:00 pm. Finally, communities like Agua Dulce present high levels of violence and since my presence was always noted, people suggested traveling with a companion.

After explaining the research methods employed for this project, my positionality, and the limitations and challenges it poses, I relate my analysis of the communities with a body of literature and the support of qualitative data. The following chapter describes in depth the emergence and evolution of the *totomoxtle* industry highlighting the voices of farmers, intermediaries, exporters and local authorities. In addition, it analyzes the intervention of the State in the development of such industry.

CHAPTER FOUR: ORIGINS AND EVOLUTION OF THE CORN HUSK INDUSTRY

Despite the economic situation of the 1990's decade, farmers continued to cultivate corn and eventually found a way to meet their basic needs by taking advantage of the nascent corn husk industry. While the profits from corn were barely enough to cover costs, the sale of *totomoxtle* generated higher returns. In order to augment production, farmers turned to the use of modified seeds (hybrids) to obtain wider and larger husks. The success of the corn husk industry in Veracruz is due to entrepreneurial farmers who, working as truck drivers, realized the potential of selling ear husks in the *Central de Abastos*, the major wholesale market in Mexico City; and to businessmen from Guadalajara and San Luis Potosi who went to Veracruz looking for an inexpensive product to export at higher prices to the U.S. The emergence of the *totomoxtle* market provided various employment opportunities and a diversified source of income, especially for marginalized households. While the demand in the domestic market for corn husks had been present for years, it was the demand driven by the international market that motivated expansion and trade outside Veracruz. In this context, intermediaries and exporters are perceived to have benefited the most from the trade, given that the final retail sale price is almost eight times than what is paid to producers. Despite the emergence and growth of *totomoxtle*, the municipal and state governments have not created mechanisms to support corn farmers, nor to regularize working and trade conditions, thus failing to recognize the presence and importance of this industry.

This chapter sheds light on the origins and evolution of the corn husk industry in Veracruz while highlighting the role of producers, intermediaries and the local government. Accordingly, this chapter will: 1) explain how farmers and businessmen discovered value and potential in corn leaves; 2) discuss the many ways in which husks

are distributed and traded, and the benefits that each of the actors obtains during this process; 3) address how famers turned to modified a selection and later combination of locally produced seeds to obtain wider and larger husks; and 4) analyze the participation of the local and state governments in the development and expansion of this market.

CORN PRODUCTION: A LIVELIHOOD STRATEGY?

The decade of the 1990s was particularly difficult for corn farmers in Veracruz due to the enactment of neoliberal policies, including NAFTA, among others. However, as discussed in chapter two, Totonacapan farmers continued to produce corn and to consider agriculture their most important source of income. During fieldwork, peasants talked about the importance of agriculture as a livelihood strategy and as a source of employment. One farmer explained: "We need to work in the field, because that is the only job, there are not businesses here.[15]" Another farmer pointed out: "We are self-employed, we generate our jobs, because there is nothing else here." A third farmer, Pedro[16], explained that he grows corn for two purposes: to sell corn and to sell husks. He mentioned that farmers in the Sierra of Totonacapan plant less than a hectare for subsistence, but people in the low lands grow it for both commercial and consumption purposes. Pedro explained: "There, where I live everyone wants to grow corn because it is not as expensive and people are self-employed. It is not as expensive as other crops *(chile jalapeño y serrano*)." When asked about the reasons for corn cultivation, one totonac farmer said:

> Sometimes profits (from corn) are not enough, We only plant it because it is a tradition, so we do not abandon the fields… Corn cultivation is an activity that we

[15] Interviews were carried out in Spanish. English translations presented here were done by the author.
[16] In order to keep privacy of participants, pseudonymous are used throughout the thesis.

> are never going to stop doing because we are and are made of corn, we eat corn in all forms.

In other words, corn is intimately related to the people in the Totonacapan. Statements from farmers reflect the lack of employment opportunities in the region and their considerable dependence on agriculture. Also, these comments illustrate the perceptions of prohibitively high production costs associated with other crops, and thus famers' inability to grow different goods. They also indicate that the cultural tradition of growing corn is still present in the region, and reflects an indigenous worldview –men of corn. Nonetheless, it is important to note that the last comment is not a sentiment shared by all of the inhabitants. Indeed, elderly feel strongest about continuing to grow corn out of cultural tradition. When farmers were asked about the reasons for corn cultivation, younger men and women stated that they grow it because of the economic benefits that *totomoxtle* brings. Corn production has then different roles: it provides jobs to both landowners and the landless; it is a readily available source of income (in cash); and it accounts for a major source of household nutrition.

A closer look at household economies and the struggles faced in cultivating corn illustrate the need for a different source of income. Carlos Rodriguez is a producer who grows corn for auto-consumption and to commercialize husks. He, as well as other producers, argued that the proceeds from corn are barely enough to cover the costs of production. Table 4.1 presents the typical expenses associated with corn cultivation. The data are based on interviews with 15[17] farmers located in middle and low-land communities. Examining the cost and earning columns, one can see that the latter are minimal; a farmer needs approximately Mex$8,600 to harvest a hectare with gross revenues only slightly higher (Mex$10,500)[18]. Therefore, corn farmers have Mex$1,927

[17] To generate this table and calculate the production costs, an average of 15 responses were calculated.
[18] Prices of corn have been fluctuating; it may be possible that farmers obtain higher or lower revenues.

available to cover their basic needs. However, the cost of harvest delivery to warehouses is not considered here. If small growers do not have trucks –as is the case of most people interviewed, they are forced to spend approximately Mex$700-800, which reduces the revenue even more. This situation means that most of the time, corn farmers must look for different sources of income to cover basic needs, because money received from sales is usually used to buy inputs for the next agricultural cycle. In other words, in ideal conditions farmers would obtain Mex$1,127 after six months of work, which in turn, reflects the urgency to sell the corn husks.

The table considers expenditures for landholders, because landless farmers have to pay rent of up to Mex$2,000 per hectare per cycle. In addition, table 4.1 reports the average use of fertilizer and pesticides; however the figure might vary according to available resources. As explained in chapter two, while commercial farmers have increased the use of chemicals in the hopes of obtaining higher yields, many traditional farmers have not been able to afford expenses, thus obtaining fewer returns.

Furthermore, the estimated earnings exhibited in the table are for the sale of three tons of corn, which implies that the *milpa* generated high yields (the average is two tons per ha). It is important to note that farmers were located in the middle and low lands, because most of the time, highland communities harvest less than a ton of corn. In the same way, the revenue estimated here would suggest that farmers sell their entire harvest, which does not hold true for many farmers who keep approximately 300 kilos of corn for auto-consumption per cycle. This figure might hold true for those who sell most of their harvest at bulk, but whom will buy small quantities for consumption at a higher price. The fact that corn farmers trade corn husks might contribute to household food security, because they are able to keep corn for auto-consumption while having other products to trade.

Costs of corn production per hectare per cycle			
Activity	**Units costs (Mex pesos)**	**Quantity**	**Total**
Soil preparation			
Plough	$600.00	1	$600.00
Furrow	$400.00	1	$400.00
Harrow	$600.00	1	$600.00
Sowing			
Seeds	$4.00	12 kgs	$48.00
Insecticide	$365.00	1 sack	$365.00
Labor	$120.00	4	$480.00
Fertilization			
Packages of Urea	$320.00	5 sacks	$1,600.00
18-46-00	$350.00	3 sacks	$1,050.00
Application of fertilizer	$120.00	2 people	$240.00
Other activities			
Manual weeding	$120.00	5 people	$600.00
Chemicals	$80.00	2 l	$160.00
Harvest			
Doblada	$120.00	4 people	$480.00
Harvesting (2 days)	$150.00	6 people	$1,800.00
Thresh	$50.00	3 tons	$150.00
Total production costs w/out husks			**$8,573.00**
Removing husks (800 k) / 8-10 *pacas*	$3.50	800 kgs	$2,800.00
Total production costs w/ husks			**$11,373.00**
Earnings			
2-3 tons of corn	$3.50	3000 kgs	$10,500.00
Corn husks	$11.00	800 kgs	**$8,800.00**
Earnings: grain + husks			19,300.00

Note: prices are based on interviews conducted between June and July 2011
Note: total costs may vary according to amount of inputs and region

Table 4.1 Cost of corn production per hectare in middle and low land communities[19].

Additionally, the mentioned yields are only possible under ideal weather conditions; i.e., a production cycle without flooding, drought or fires. In the last few years, however, heat waves have caused drought and fires, resulting in severe damage to crops and huge losses for farmers. When asked about this, farmers stated that the

[19] All figures, tables and photos by author unless otherwise noted.

droughts had a significant impact on corn and that most of them lost part or all of the harvest. They said that the local government did inspections in the areas that suffered the most damage, but that farmers did not receive any compensation for their losses. Some of them speculated that the government authorized the distribution of funds for recovery, but that they never received the money because of corruption.

Finally, one of the line items in the earnings section comes from the sale of *totomoxtle*. At the time of the interviews, it became evident that corn farmers were cultivating corn because of the benefits of trading corn husks. *Totomoxtle* is what has allowed corn production to continue in the region, because there are essentially no earnings from the grain and all the profits come from the husks. The trade has become a familiar practice that has given various employment opportunities to both men and women throughout the Totonacapan. The corn husk business emerged approximately 20 years ago but only reached the international market in the last decade. In the following, there is account of how this alternative market emerged and extended throughout Veracruz.

CORN HUSK PRODUCTION: THE EMERGENCE AND EVOLUTION OF AN ALTERNATIVE MARKET

The maize husk industry has two products: "disked and manual husks." The main difference between them is the method by which they are extracted. To produce "disked husks", a male laborer uses a disk to cut off the husks; in the second a woman (usually) removes the husks by hand. The first kind is generally produced for export, while manual husks are sold in the domestic market. Accordingly, packing, distribution, price, destination, and the way the business emerges are different in each case. The differentiation is associated with consumption preferences in Mexico and the U.S. (main

destination of disked husks). In the following, there is an account of how the *totomoxtle* industry evolved. Because manual and disked husks emerged differently, they must be discussed separately. The case of manual husks will be analyzed first, because, according to interviews, this market began before the disked market; then, the origins of the disked market will be discussed, in addition to the differences in the production and distribution of these products.

Manual husks

Manual husks produced in Veracruz are mostly used as raw material for *tamales*, and in lesser quantities are used for handicrafts and matches. The name "manual husks" is given due to the process by which they are extracted from the cob; that is, typically, women and children remove the husks manually (see illustration 4.1). Also, leaves are called "*hojas de piña*" (pineapple leaves) because of the look of the final package. This kind of husk is manufactured for the domestic market, and it is distributed in central Mexican states such as Puebla, Tlaxcala, Queretaro and Mexico City. It is sold as a bundle and *paca,* that is, women assemble 17 husks to form smaller rolls, then four small rolls form a bundle, and 150 bundles form a larger package called a "*paca*". Currently, the sale price is Mex$6-10 per bundle

Illustration 4.1: A woman is removing husks manually in a warehouse.

depending on the location, the intermediary that buys them and the season; *pacas* are usually sold at Mex$1,200-1,500.

In terms of production, a hectare, under good soil and weather conditions, is able to produce between 800-1000 kilos of ear husks. This amount varies according to altitude and terrain; most of the highland farmers harvest approximately 400-600 kilos whereas those living in lowlands have yields of almost a ton. The production average is 800 kilos and about eight *pacas*.

Entabladero, (see figure 4.1) a community located 20 minutes by cay from Espinal, is the home of Hugo, the man who began to trade *totomoxtle* approximately 20 years ago. In an interview, he talked about how he developed this business, trained and opened jobs for many people in the region. Hugo was (and still is) a corn producer who was affected by the economic crisis in the country. Just like other people in the Totonacapan, he worked in transportation. While he was visiting Mexico City, he realized that he could sell maize husks (at the time almost worthless) and that, in fact, these were a potential commercial product. He recalls:

> It was the summer of 1990, my mother-in-law was sick and I had to travel to Mexico City with my wife. In one of the trips, I passed by the '*Central de Abas*tos' [whole sale market] of Ecatepec –a municipality near Mexico City- and saw that merchants were selling corn husks. I asked if they would buy the husks, and they said: 'Yes, just bring it'. I started by bringing eight *pacas* in each trip – each *paca* had 150 *rollos* and each *rollo* had 100 husks. My profits were half of the total price I sold them. The merchants in Mexico City paid me $1.20 per *rollo* and I paid $.60 to farmers. The husks were (and are) used as raw material for *tamales*. At that time, the husks were worthless, they were burned, used for cattle feed and other times left in the fields.

A similar story is that of Jorge Miranda, a 45-year-old corn farmer, who has been living in Las Chacas, Coyutla (see figure 4.1) for most of his life. He started in the business approximately 20 years ago after his return from Mexico City, where he had worked for a while without making a profit. Joel, just like Hugo, found the most

important market for corn husks in Mexico City. To consolidate the industry, they faced different challenges, such as transportation and packing, but their skills and abilities helped them to overcome adversities.

> I was living in Mexico City and I was working there, then I came back because I could not do anything over there (money). When I got here, I found out about the business, I looked at places where they (other farmers) were offering and selling the husks, and started to sell as well. But, transportation was really difficult, I did not have money, I had livestock, but I did not have a truck, and that was my biggest problem. When I came back from Mexico City the people were already selling the husks, people here transported husks on horses because there were not roads. So, I went to a car agency in Texcoco to buy a truck with money I borrowed from a friend. Then, I went back to Mexico to open new markets, to look for buyers. I was happy at the time because I was selling the husks at $5 and I was buying them at $.70, so I had big profits. I remember, the first time, I sold 1,200 rollos at $5 and *"regresé con harto dinero en la bolsa*" [I came back with a lot of money in my pockets], that was a lot of money, because people here were making $40 a day (Emphasis on the original).

Just like Jorge discovered and joined the business upon his return from Mexico City, so did other farmers. Because of the lack of employment opportunities, farmers were looking for different livelihood strategies. They recognized that Hugo was selling significant amounts of husks and decided to follow in his footsteps. However, this created competition and distrust among participants. Hugo explained:

> As time went on, other farmers noticed that the husks could be sold in other cities and persuaded my driver to give them the names and addresses of my clients. By 1995, I bought a truck and I was traveling to Mexico City three to four times a week, carrying about 45 *pacas*. Meanwhile, other competitors acknowledged the value of the husks and started to trade. The big landowners of Coyutla asked for loans from the government and also applied for funding to expand their businesses. The federal government, through SAGARPA, granted money, and with that capital they consolidated themselves as one of the major distributors in the region… I applied, but I never received anything.

Gradually the industry started to spread throughout the region. Different farmers from nearby turned to this market for survival. Soon, there were farmers from Ojite de Matamoros, Filomeno Mata, Comalteco and Las Chacas selling husks (see figure 4.1).

Farmers also expanded the market; at the beginning, husks were delivered in Puebla (given the proximity), then to different places in Mexico City and Toluca, and lastly to other states like Queretaro, San Luis Potosi and Tlaxcala. During the expansion, however, farmers did not receive attention from the local and state governments. Although SAGARPA granted loans for various projects, there were not coordinated efforts to leverage the nascent industry.

Manual corn husk production is carried out at home and is a family business. Here, household members function as labor, where women and children work many hours without any economic compensation. Farmers are able to generate profits because they do not have to invest in labor. Hugo explained the importance of women and children in the production cycle:

> When I began this business, my family helped me a lot. My wife was in charge of the money, packing and buying husks from other producers. My two daughters helped me throughout the process; they removed the husks and helped my wife to pack them. After five years of assisting me, they both started college and left. Now, my daughters are teachers and are working in Tuxpam. My wife passed away four years ago. After she died I left the business. My clients still call me and I am trying to get back, but I need a lot of money to invest.

As the industry expanded, large landholders needed labor to remove the leaves. They hired women to work in warehouses where the production of husks was taking place. As detailed in the next chapter, women became the foundation of the business because at the core of marginal households farmers were saving labor costs and also were receiving extra income. At the same time, business owners saw in women an option for efficient and cheap labor.

Jorge and Hugo started as entrepreneurs, looking for different markets to sell husks and adapting their product to the demands of customers. Jorge had several transportation issues, because he did not have a vehicle to haul the husks. Also, Hugo had

to deal the same kind of problems, including bad employees, and a personal tragedy (the death of his wife) that put him out of business. Nonetheless, he was able to initiate and consolidate a business that brought employment opportunities and economic resources to different households and communities. As he pointed out "With the business, I benefited and also helped a lot of people. I taught many women how to remove and pack the husks. I opened up a market for everybody. Many people became rich after I began this business". The way in which the disked husk market started differs from the manual husk market. The next section explores the origins of the "disked" maize husk market in Veracruz.

Disked husks

Similar to manual husks, disked husks are usually used as a raw material for *tamales*, handicrafts, matches and paper currency. The name "disked husks" is given after men cut off the leaves of the cobs at the base, using a mounting table saw blade, making them more uniform and easier to pack (see illustration 4.2). As opposed to manual husks, disked husks could be considered an export product because their main destination is the international market, especially the U.S., albeit the product is also well positioned in central and western states in Mexico, San Luis Potosí and Jalisco. and northern states such as Nuevo León and Tamaulipas. The husks are usually packed in *pacas* of 25-30 kilos (different from those of manual husks). Leaves are sorted by size and color, and packed in plastic bags or sacks to be sold to an intermediary who will later export them. The price is determined by weight and quality; it can range from Mex$7-25 per kilo. The average sale price paid to producers is Mex$11-12 per kilo.

Illustration 4.2: man cutting off husks using a disk. This process traditionally known as "*disquear*"

While manual husks have long been used domestically for *tamales* and have been marketed regionally over the last 20 years, only in the last decade has the export market seen substantial growth (King, 2007). It is, indeed, the migration of thousands of Mexicans and other people from Latin America who have popularized this product in new destinations. As previously noted in chapter two, the migration from Veracruz grew considerably over the 1995-2005 decade; this migration along with that of other states such as San Luis, Zacatecas and Michoacán have opened up a new market opportunity for Mexican products. Chapter five will expand on how this demand has been established and the business opportunities that this market represents for Mexican and Latino entrepreneurs. This section introduces the stories of how businessmen from Guadalajara and San Luis Potosí went to Veracruz looking for husks to meet the growing needs of the international market.

While the discovery of the disked husk market cannot be attributed to one person (given the many stories surrounding it), it is the story of Raquel Moreno's husband that sheds more light on the subject. She lives in Agua Dulce, the community that, according to several interviewees, started to export disked husks approximately 15 years ago. Her

husband was one of the first people working in the business after a man from Guadalajara hired him to work in the nascent industry.

> We met a man from Guadalajara and he offered us a job and that was how we started working. The man had a work plan and asked my husband if he wanted to work for him in the husk business, but my husband said that he did not know how to do it; however, he offered to help and they started working together. The guy said they needed to make a mounting table and put a disk on top of it to cut off the leaves.

Raquel argued that when the man arrived to Agua Dulce he bargained with farmers. Leaves were given for free; so, he hired employees to harvest maize, to disk husks, and then to return corn to farmers. Because husks were worthless at the time, farmers were pleased with the practice, because it saved them time and money. Eventually, the farmers realized the new value and started to sell husks, although at a very low price. At the beginning the price paid per kilo was Mex$.50, but over time the price increased.

Other intermediaries stated that businessmen from San Luis Potosí went to Veracruz looking for husks because that state does not produce corn. Specifically, Roberto, a warehouse supervisor in La Concha, confirmed that the founders of the corn husk industry live in San Luis Potosi:

> San Luis Potosi is a community like Agua Dulce, it is very flat, it is a desert, it is very dusty, and there are only *nopal* trees. The majority of the people who live there have to migrate to the U.S because there are not jobs. The people came from there to buy, but they loaded trucks… there are many *acopiadores* [people who collect *pacas*] over there.

Similar to the way the market for manual husks grew over time, so did the disked husk market. Within 10 years, most of the lowland communities were producing disked husks, primarily to be sent to other states and then to the international market. Farmers realized that there were opportunities, not only as producers, but also as intermediaries

and truck drivers. The collection of *pacas* expanded throughout Totonacapan to communities like Espinal and Comalteco. Farmers also established warehouses in some of the aforementioned communities due to high production. With the expansion of the business, Raquel's husband became an entrepreneur, provided employment and trained numerous people. Overtime, La Concha, Agua Dulce and El Chote became strategic areas and major warehouses where corporations from Guadalajara and San Luis Potosi based their businesses (see figure 4.1).

Figure 4.1 Key places for the emergence and expansion of the corn husks industry in the Totonacapan. Lines in blue denote the flow of merchandise. Numbers 4, 5 and 6 are distribution hubs while 1, 2, 3 are some of the communities with a high production of husks.

As other commodities, the husks' price depends on the behavior of the market. Usually, when products are new, the price is low; as consumer demand grows, the price rises. Moreover, as the market becomes saturated with product, prices tend to fall. Husks

are very susceptible to these rules; but there are also other factors that influence the sale price such as quality, transportation costs, and maximum amounts that intermediaries are willing to pay. In this regard, Raquel argued:

> When (my husband) started to work, he bought husks at Mex$3 per kilo, but then as things got more expensive, the price rose and now the sale price is like Mex$14-16… The price is variable, it depends, because there are people that store husks, then, in times when there are not many husks and the boss wants (them), farmers sell husks for a higher price, but if there is a lot of supply, you can buy it for less; it also depends on the quality.

When asked about the use of husks, Raquel said that her husband exported husks for *tamales* and that the remainder (after the manufacturing process was completed) was used for matches that were sold to nearby companies. Raquel also explained the process of distribution and how it has changed over the last decade. Veracruz went from being a production hub to a manufacturer and exporter, which in turn required the presence of local and regional intermediaries. Similarly, Roberto explained that it was only about eight years ago that they started to process husks in Veracruz. Before that time, they just collected them and sent them to warehouses in San Luis and Guadalajara. The process of distribution of corn husks is complex. There are different scenarios that allow for the intervention of two, three, four or five people before the product is delivered to customers or the final consumers. The amount of people involved depends on the destination, and the final sale price depends on the people involved in the manufacturing and transportation.

DISTRIBUTION: THE ROLE OF EXPORTERS AND LOCAL AND REGIONAL INTERMEDIARIES

In marketing, distribution is an element of the marketing mix, comprising four elements: product, price, distribution and promotion. The product is the good or service

available for sale; the price is the amount of money paid for particular goods or services; the distribution is the way in which the product is delivered to the final consumer; and the promotion is the approach used by companies to communicate to their customers the release of a product and its benefits with the intention to persuade them to purchase the product (Stanton, Etzel, & Walker, 2003). Applying this definition, *totomoxtle* is the product available for sale; price is determined by the market and large intermediaries; the distribution is mostly indirect; and there are few efforts by companies to promote it.

In this section, I will elaborate on how domestic and international distribution is carried out and chapter five will explain the consumption of this product specifically in the U.S. While producers have benefited from the emergence and growth of the maize husks trade, most profits go to processors and distributors, not to farmers. In marketing, the group of people that intervene in the distribution of a product is called the **distribution channel** (Stanton, Etzel, & Walker, 2003). There are two types of distribution channels: direct and indirect. In the first, the product goes from the producer to the final consumer. Specifically, a direct sale occurs when farmers sell *totomoxtle* to end-users. This type of distribution is almost non-existent in the corn husk industry. The closest example of a direct distributor is Hugo, because he carried husks from Entabladero to the wholesale vendor at *Central de Abastos.*

In the **indirect distribution channel**, the product is not delivered directly to the consumer but rather to an intermediary. The intermediary is the link between the producer and the end user, defined as, "the person or lucrative company that provides services related to the buying and selling of goods, and subsequent transportation from warehouses to end users" (Stanton, Etzel, & Walker, 2003, p. 376). The presence of intermediaries is usually associated with small businesses that do not have a large presence in the target market, or do not have the capacity to deliver the products (see

figure 4.2). When Jorge came back from Mexico City, the corn husk industry was initiating; he then sought out farmers to buy husks and subsequently became a distributor. He was the link between a farmer in Filomeno Mata and a wholesale vendor in Mexico City.

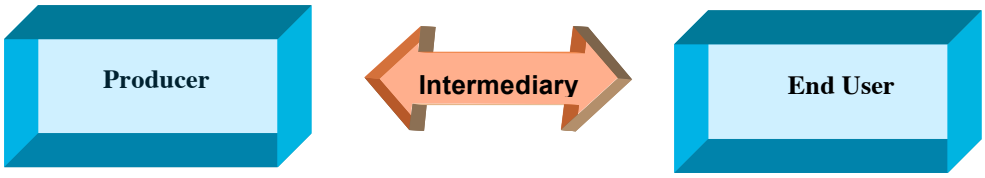


Figure: 4.2: Indirect distribution channel

Some small farmers expressed that they sell *totomoxtle* to local intermediaries in small quantities, because they do not want to or cannot sell their entire crop in bulk; if the price is low, farmers prefer to wait and save the husks in order to sell the product at a higher price. Instead, they trade a portion of their harvest in order to meet present needs (this applies for both types of husks). Other times, farmers do not have the resources (time, money, skills) to remove the leaves of the entire harvest at one time. Yet, even when smallholders are able to remove all the husks, they still lack transportation to carry their products to other communities. Many people interviewed fall in this category. They explained that they did not have the capital to move *pacas* to larger cities; so, intermediaries, or *coyotes* -as people call them, buy their products and take them to El Chote, La Concha or Agua Dulce, in the case of disked husks. As for manual husks, intermediaries are concentrated in Entabladero, Las Chacas and Coyutla.

Oscar Rivas is a farmer who grows corn for auto-consumption but works as an intermediary and manufacturer. His story is different from that of Jorge and Hugo because does not sell *pacas;* he transacts individual sales and distributes in other states such as Queretaro and Tijuana. He buys from producers, bleaches the husks and then

distributes to vendors in Mexico City and supermarkets; thus, he has higher profits, but he is exposed to more risks. Recent waves of violence in Veracruz and border towns are threatening the future of the industry as truck drivers have been assaulted and robbed on several occasions. Roberto, the warehouse manager, also commented in this regard and showed concern over the situation.

Moreover, there could be more than one intermediary in the distribution channel. Many times, a product requires the presence of regional intermediaries, because small intermediaries do not have access or the resources and capacity to deliver to final consumers. Such is the case of *totomoxtle*, where the product is transferred two, three or even four times before it ends up in the hands of the end user. That is, the producers sell to local intermediaries (or *coyotes*), and then husks are delivered to El Chote y Agua Dulce, where major hubs are established. There, *pacas* are stored upon request from the next buyer. Businesses that are in El Chote, Agua Dulce and La Concha can be considered regional intermediaries, because they buy from the local intermediaries. After they collect a considerable amount of *pacas*, they either sell them to other bigger intermediary, generally located in Monterrey, San Luis Potosi and Guadalajara, or export the product (if they have the resources and infrastructure) (see figure 4.3).

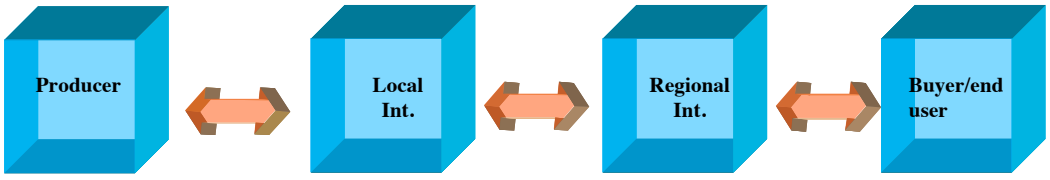


Figure 4.3: Multiple intermediaries involved in the distribution of disked corn husks

In the case of manual husks, the producer sells their *pacas* to a local intermediary in Las Chacas o Entabladero, and then the latter carries the *pacas* to Mexico City or Puebla and delivers them at wholesale markets or mills. Then, *tamaleros* go to the local

Central de Abastos to buy inputs. Here, the final consumer is the person who consumes *tamales*. So, as opposed to the disked market, the distribution channel for manual husks is smaller and prices are also lower (see figure 4.4).

Figure 4.4: Multiple intermediaries involved in the distribution of manual corn husks

In addition, every intermediary passes on the cost of its operations to the customer. That is to say that the sale price rises according to the number of intermediaries involved in the distribution process. Sometimes intermediaries add value to the product by bleaching, packing and labeling husks according to client specifications. All activities add to production costs that are passed on to the final consumer.

Juan is an intermediary who entered into the disked corn husk industry a few years ago. He would be classified as a regional intermediary because he is in charge of buying and sending husks to his boss in other states, mainly to Jalisco, Nuevo Leon and San Luis Potosi. He, like Hugo and Jorge, started as a truck driver, but as the industry expanded he was invited to become an intermediary. His familiarity with the business and closeness with participants in the industry facilitated this placement. When Juan was invited to participate in the business, he did not have capital to invest; however, the person who hired him had resources to pay his salary and investment in the industry.

> My *compadre* invited me to participate in this business. I used to be a truck driver. About 10 years ago, I carried husks to San Luis Potosi, Monterrey, Nayarit, Fresnillo, Reinosa and Zacatecas; out of those, Monterrey consumes the most. I do not know if it is a coincidence, but these cities are cold and closer to the border. As I traveled frequently, I started to meet people who receive the

husks, who invited me to participate in the business. It has been a year now since I started working for them.

Juan works with other *corredores* (buyers who go from one town to other collecting *pacas)* in the region. Because corn husks are cultivated in almost every community in the Totonacapan, Juan and others have a large area to cover. "We go everywhere collecting husks, even to remote communities; we go everywhere, but we do not buy everything. I buy what I like, if we do not like them, we do not buy them." Reflecting on these words, trade has grown in the area in recent years and with that intermediaries demand specific characteristics. If one farmer is not able to fulfill their requirements c*oyotes* simply buy from another farmer. There are regions where the husks are crumpled, so they are considered useless and worthless; the export market looks for husks that are smooth and straight.

When asked about the purchasing process, Juan said: "I wait for his (boss') call to buy. Even if farmers come here to offer the product, I cannot buy, I have to wait for my boss to tell me to buy". In other words, the exchange takes a variety of forms. Sometimes*, corredores* go to communities to buy husks, offer farmers a price –usually determined by a larger intermediary, negotiate the price, and purchase as much as producers want or are able to sell. Other times, famers go to El Chote with their trucks loaded to offer regional intermediaries their product. In the second case, the sale price is a little higher because farmers must pay for the trip.

Exporting a product usually involves the presence of a broker because most of the time small and medium-sized companies do not possess the capacity and legal advice to export products. Thus companies need the assistance of brokers, who are people or companies that arrange transactions between buyers and sellers and usually get a commission after the deal is closed (Stanton, Etzel, & Walker, 2003. Small and medium-

sized companies are usually not able to comply with the documentation and qualifications required for exports (sanitary and phytosanitary quality certificates), thus the need to find larger intermediaries who have the infrastructure to do so. The next figure (4.5) shows the place of the broker in the distribution channel.

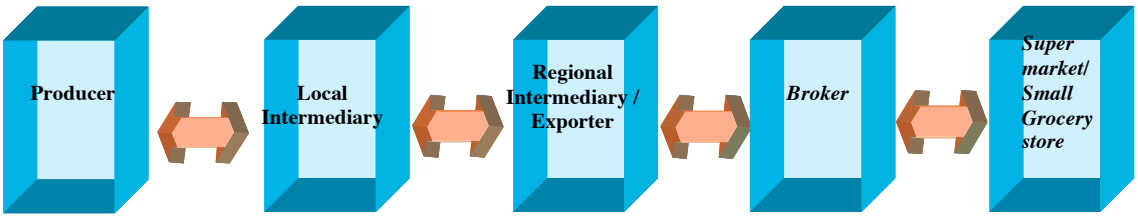


Figure 4.5: Multiple intermediaries involved in the export of disked corn husks

Farmers' biggest complaints are to the profits generated by intermediaries. First, local intermediaries are usually in charge of collecting and delivering *pacas* within the region, which is an activity that does not involve the physical and monetary investment that producers have to make. Farmers need to invest in the soil preparation, fertilizer, and pesticides, among others things. Farmers also face weather adversities as well as the probable existence of crop diseases. In other words, farmers take on more risks to produce husks, and the benefits are not as large. Specifically, the next figure (4.6) shows the actor, activities and sale price at each stage of the distribution process. Local intermediaries obtain Mex$2 per kilo; sometimes they are able to collect from 20 to 30 *pacas* a day -if each *paca* weights 25 kilos they can make up to Mex$1, 250 a day, which is almost the same that producers obtain after they sell four tons of corn (see table 2.1) and make for the sale of 120 kilos of corn husks. Second, regional intermediaries generate higher profits. As they add more value to the husks (bleach, sort, pack, deliver), they sell at higher prices. Third, exporters are the ones who benefit the most from the trade, beacuse they are able to sell one kilo of husks in approximately Mex$110, almost 10 times what is paid to producers.

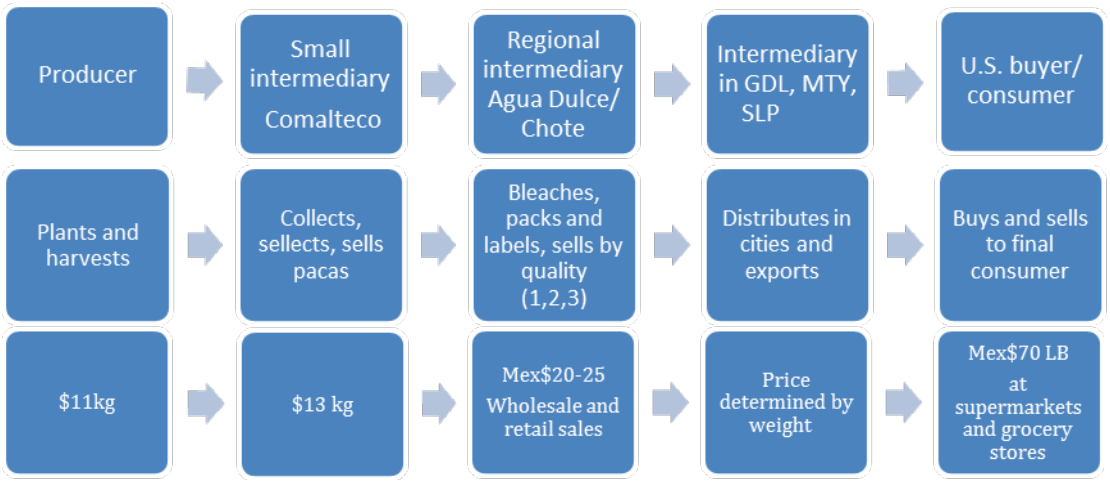


Figure 4.6 Actors, activities and sale price of disked maize husks. All prices correspond to the 2011-year.

Although benefits are far from equally distributed among all participants, thousands of people have benefited one way or another from this industry. Whether in direct jobs, such as those of women and men removing husks at warehouses, selecting and packing, or in indirect jobs as *coyotes*, *corredores,* and exporters. People in different communities stated that their lives had changed, and many have progressed economically as they now have resources to cover basic needs, build houses made of cement blocks instead of bamboo, buy cars, and appliances. When people were asked about the benefits of the industry, most of them (32 interviewees) agreed on the fact that the trade in *totomoxtle* had brought money to the communities. Jorge stated, "after the lapse of coffee, the corn husks reactivated the region." Here, he refers to the area of Coyutla. Roberto also affirmed that more than 100 households in La Concha are directly benefited from the trade and that it has become a source of income for producers. In Agua Dulce, proceeds provide for more than half of the total population.

Nonetheless, there are negative effects of the corn husk industry. Businessmen have taken advantage of cheap labor, since men and women spend long hours under

exploitative working conditions, such as restricted visitations, low salaries, and long working hours in small, crowded places with little or no ventilation. In addition, employees do not have health insurance benefits or equipment protection to carry out their job. Chapter six will explain in detail these conditions and implications for health. Despite these issues, realizing the new value, farmers started to use combine different local seeds to increase husk production.

(RE) THINKING CORN: THE USE OF IMPROVED SEEDS

As a result of the urgency to produce maize husks, farmers have naturally selected local seeds to produce more, wider and bigger husks. Seeing the economic potential of husks, growers shifted to more profitable seeds. Expectations about potential revenues were fostered in an environment in which corn was valued in less than Mex$3 per kilo. One kilo of *totomoxtle* could reach up to Mex$20 disked husks at the producer price which is six times that of the sale price of corn itself. More importantly, a pound (.45 kilo) of corn husks can currently be sold in the U.S. at USD$4 at small grocery stores and local supermarkets. So, one kilo of corn husks produced in Veracruz is sold at USD$8 (Mex$110)[20] which is almost 10 times what is originally paid to producers. Reflecting on this potential, farmers looked for seed varieties that would allow them to produce more husks even at the expense of low grain yields.

Totonacapan is a center of corn biodiversity. According to farmers, some local varieties that grow in the region include *maiz arroz, olitillo, argentino, tuxpeño, blanco, hojero,* among others. Producers had concerns about using *maiz arroz* due to low *totomoxtle* yields. Nevertheless, with the boom of *totomoxtle*, many shifted to more

[20] Currency conversion USD$1= Mex$13. This price is estimated based on 2011-year prices.

profitable seeds. *Maiz hojero* produces more husks and less grain. Commercial producers employ a combination of seeds, because they want to achieve a balance between both husks and grain. During interviews, farmers explained that they have a tendency to grow their own varieties and that they prefer *criollo*[21] maize over imported corn. The process of obtaining high-yield seeds is to plant some hectares or plots with maize *arroz* and other parts with *argentino* -(a creolized hybrid variety) that according to producers in Coyutla and Espinal have the best combination of grain yield and husks quality (King, 2007). After a few cycles, seeds get mixed, providing naturally modified seeds. Alejandra, a corn producer, said that she has been using different seeds over the last years to produce larger husks and enough grain to commercialize.

> We use *maiz hojero* also known as *maiz arroz*. (Interviewer: are they not different?) Yes, they are different, but we mix the varieties, we sow one *milpa* of *maiz hojero* along with a *milpa* of *maiz arroz*, and so on, so the milpa turns out to be mixed, the husks appear to be produced with *maiz hojero,* but the corn looks like if it is produced with *maiz arroz*. The variety that we are using is the hojero which is good, but does not produce grains, it produces very little corn; and the *maiz arroz* has a lot of grains, but fewer husks.

The shift in the use of seeds has cultural, economic and environmental implications. Many of the producers interviewed lost interest in cultivating corn because it is not profitable. The long tradition of cultivating corn as a livelihood strategy is being put aside, and the cultural value that corn had seems to be disappearing. As people move from rural areas, the social knowledge and appreciation acquired has drained. In the midst of limited options, farmers turned to corn husk, where most farmers produce maize because of the benefits that *totomoxtle* brings. In addition, maize husks in the Totonacapan are produced using *criollo* varieties of maize that, according to farmers, are of better quality in terms of their husk coverage and weight than those of GMO's (King,

[21] The term criollo is used to describe local varieties

2007). Additionally, with the success of this industry, commercial producers found a new market niche. Those who were not able to produce their own mixed seeds needed to purchase them from commercial farmers. In her analysis on corn husk production, King states that the new value from husks may be able to incentivize people to produce *criollo* varieties (2007, p. 37). However, "this incentive may be temporal as the demand for husks is satisfied by cheaper sources located closer to the border or if the saturation of the market contributes to a decline in the price" (*ibid*). Thus, farmers need to develop other strategies in the face of sudden drops in prices.

During the emergence and expansion of the corn husk industry, and in the face of environmental changes, however, neither the local nor the state government has been involved. In light of a neoliberal model, the government has not shown interest in providing subsidies or credits to support smallholder production of corn husks, nor has it provided commercial advice or support.

THE ROLE OF THE STATE

In the midst of the emergence of the industry, what has been the role of the State at the local and regional levels? What has been their contribution to this market, and what mechanisms have been established for good practices between producers and distributers? I argue that the State has had little involvement in this industry. The State's role has been limited to offering, through SAGARPA, a federal institution, some credits for small projects that have resulted in losses because of the lack of training given to producers, planning and follow up. While most of the beneficiaries have spent the money on urgent necessities, loans have not contributed to bettering the lives of the recipients as

mechanisms are not employed to effect long-term change, but rather to satisfy immediate needs.

While the emergence of an alternative market has its origins in the demand for corn husks in central states of Mexico and the U.S, and farmers' creativity in finding solutions to existing problems such as the need for different sources of income and livelihood strategies, it is not linked to any local or state-government intervention. In interviews with different local authorities from Agua Dulce, Mecatlán and Filomeno Mata it was revealed that there was not support granted to farmers who wanted to expand their participation in the industry. Specifically, the secretary of the municipal government of Agua Dulce said that there were no programs offering support to farmers to commercialize the husks; there were instead minimal transfers to producers that were not enough to have an impact on the living conditions of residents. When asked about associations or groups formed by farmers to support each other, the functionary said that there were no associations or projects created with the intention to work in this sector. Furthermore, his counterpart in Filomeno Mata asserted that there are some social programs funded by the state government, but they are directed at other sectors of the economy such as breeding and fattening pigs, handicrafts and others; however, none of this is aimed at helping corn husk producers. In fact, he argued that most federal programs do not work because they do not do anything to better people's quality of life. He explained that these programs do not have a well-conceived structure; they are not aimed at creating employment opportunities nor alternative sources of income. Programs are designed to meet present needs but not to create long-term changes in the communities. By the same token, local authorities in Mecatlán stated that most programs do not favor traditional agriculture. Lastly, the director of the department of rural development of Zozocolco explained that the municipality tried to operate some

programs to help corn husk producers, but all of them failed and were dismantled. He argued that farmers do not know how to work together, that they do not want to work, and they want the government to give them everything. In low-income municipalities in which resources are scarce, local authorities have not prioritized support to corn husk producers despite their presence and importance.

Furthermore, when asked what kind of support vulnerable populations receive, the four government officials spoke about the federal program *Oportunidades*, and their perspectives towards this program coincided. They all stated that although it is a cash transfer program, it has not really contributed to alleviating poverty among communities. Indeed, all officials said it has proven counterproductive as people have more children in order to receive more money (families receive cash based on the number of children they have and the ages of each). Further, they agreed that some recipients have become less productive and more dependent on the cash transfer. This last viewpoint reflects some sort of stereotypes on the part officials that prevail, particularly with respect to highland communities that might be rooted in hat might be rooted in the overall context in which that area is immersed. The three, Zozocolco, Mecatlán and Filomeno Mata, are municipalities that have high levels of poverty and marginalization, where production of diversified crops is difficult because of the altitude, terrain and weather conditions, and where employment opportunities are scarce. In this region, the government has not created projects that aim to make the area more productive; that is, there are small subsidies (PROCAMPO) given to landowners and small loans for breeding and fattening pigs. However, none of this really addresses the lack of jobs or the need for alternative sources of income and infrastructure in these communities. These factors, along with the uncertainty of significant harvests, the physical effort required to work in the fields, migration of young men and women, the subsequent sending of remittances, and the

readily available cash transfer received every two months, might discourage farmers to work in agriculture. Without the intention of making generalizations, the above statements should be considered a partial and not a universal view. While an exhaustive analysis on the principles under which *Oportunidades* operates and its effects are outside the scope of this research, it is important to mention it in light of the kind of support given to farmers. Further research is required to address larger implications of this government program on Totonacapan farmers.

Hence, throughout the emergence and expansion of *totomoxtle*, the participation of the government has been minimal. Intervention has been limited to funding small projects through SAGARPA. The State needs to provide better infrastructure, give follow up to approved credits, and assess the outcome of such projects. Moreover, it should offer trainings to farmers to better agricultural practices and to strength their knowledge about the behavior of the market in light of a fair trade.

Despite its substantial presence throughout the Totonacapan, neither the local nor state governments have recognized the importance of the maize-husk industry. In terms of data collection, authorities do not have information, statistics or figures that show the volume of trade or the value of exports. They are lacking records regarding labor participation in this sector of the economy. Possible explanations as to why no information has been generated include the lack of interest in the industry, limited funds, and the shortage of trained personnel to collect hard data. In fact, a director of a SAGARPA office and authorities of Agricultural Development in Espinal mentioned that some of the statistics released by that institution were fabricated and that information has not been recently updated. Finally, it is the perception of the majority of people interviewed (men, women, authorities) that agriculture is not (and will not be) a priority for the State.

CONCLUSION

Corn production in rain-fed areas such as the Totonacapan is not profitable. The costs associated with production are sometimes higher than earnings, thus contributing to the need for alternative livelihood strategies. One of these strategies has been to focus on the trade in corn husks. Farmers and truck drivers in Entabladero and Las Chacas realized that they could commercialize husks at the *Central de Abastos* and decided to start a business. Similarly, the arrival of businessmen from Guadalajara and San Luis Potosi gave rise to the development of the disked corn husk industry. While both markets have provided sources of direct and indirect employment opportunities, the benefits have not been equal for all the actors involved in the production and distribution of the husks. Given the lack of resources and infrastructure, farmers are forced to sell their products to intermediaries. This scenario also implies that the price paid to farmers in the communities where *pacas* are collected is lower than that paid in warehouses. In the absence of cohesive groups of farmers, intermediaries are able to fix prices and establish conditions of trade for their best interests.

With the increasing demand in domestic and international markets over the last 20 years, the maize husk industry has grown considerably. This growth has provided a source income and employment for marginal households, but does not mean that the industry is able to alleviate rural poverty throughout the Totonacapan. In addition, commodity markets are uncertain and earnings can simply decrease from one cycle to the next, drastically affecting expected profits –as in the case of corn leaves. During the 2007-2009 cycles, farmers sold husks up at Mex$35 per kilo to local intermediaries, but as the market became saturated the price was drastically reduced by 60% and 70%. Farmers also attributed this price drop to decisions made by large intermediaries and exporters who did not want to pay high prices. The demand for disked husks is likely to

continue due to increased migration, Latino population growth, and shifts in the American palate. Nonetheless, as King (2007 p. 37) asserted, “There are some U.S. entrepreneurs who are starting their own maize husk industries in the southwestern U.S. that have hired farmers to develop this industry”. So, the chances that the corn husk industry will be a mechanism for poverty alleviation and development are low. It seems to be a temporary solution to a larger problem, especially if farmers do not develop more long-term production and marketing strategies. In order to increase their competitiveness, farmers need access to capital and transportation as well as trainings and knowledge about the domestic and export markets. The State thus should recognize the importance of the industry and provide tools that facilitate the advancement of corn farmers. While the industry has provided sources of income to marginal households, there is a still need to employ more mechanisms to better the lives of Totonacapan residents.

CHAPTER FIVE: ETHNIC PRODUCTS IN THE U.S.: THE CASE OF *TOTOMOXTLE*

Recent migrations from Mexico, Central and South America have contributed to enlarging the consumption of ethnic products in the U.S. At the same time, being exposed to different dishes has led American consumers to be attracted to new tastes and flavors. These factors have induced the commercialization of ethnic and nostalgic products in new locations. Here, the ethnic products refer to goods associated with a country and the nostalgic goods reflect the feeling of longing of migrants (CEPAL, 2003). *Tamales* and *totomoxtle*, for example, are products that reflect those feelings and whose consumption has grown substantially over the last decade. This growth has occurred in the context of globalization because it has facilitated the formation of diverse communities in the U.S, as well as the rise of global markets. Over time, the purchasing power of immigrants, specifically the Latino population, grew along with the availability of ethnic products, thereby allowing migrant communities to meet the need for such products. The desire to consume ethnic goods by migrants and non-migrants are reflected in the significant number of ethnic restaurants and businesses that have opened in the past few years in the U.S. and in sending countries. Specifically, the rise of *totomoxtle* commercialization has resulted in more job opportunities and the emergence of a highly profitable business in Veracruz.

This chapter addresses the consumption of ethnic and nostalgic products in the U.S by migrants and non-migrants in addition to the growth in trade of *totomoxtle*. The first section explains the formation of ethnic communities in the U.S. The second section provides definitions of nostalgic and ethnic markets and products. The third section

analyses the consumption of these kinds of products, and in particular, the case of *totomoxtle*. The fourth and final section deals with the future of those products in the U.S.

MIGRATION AS A SOURCE OF ETHNIC-COMMUNITY FORMATION

Migration is a phenomenon that has given rise to the formation of new communities. In recent years, migration to the U.S. has mostly been linked to Latin American and Asian countries (Castles & Miller, 2009). The settlement process can take a long time, but as migrants begin to settle in their new country, they form new ethnic communities, which are usually composed of migrants with similar backgrounds and characteristics. Ethnicity is one of the most influential factors for community formation. Ethnicity refers to a sense of group belonging, based on ideas of common origins, history, culture, experience and values (Fishman, 1985; Smith 1986). Cohen and Bains (1988) argue that, unlike race, "ethnicity is a real process of historical individuation"; that is, the process by which linguistic and cultural practices are produced and transmitted generation by generation. In other words, ethnicity refers to the set of social practices, language, culture and traditions that are characteristic of a population.

Women play an important role in the construction of ethnic communities. They are not only the biological reproducers of an ethnic group but also the cultural carriers who have a key role in passing on language, religion and traditions to younger generations (Castles & Miller, 2009; Kurien, 1999; Tyner, 2003). As the organizers of family rituals, transmitters of homeland folklore and socializers of children, women are crucial to the maintenance of family ties and cultural traditions (Espiritu, 2003).

Furthermore, migrants use different artifacts to reflect their sense of belonging, longing and ethnicity. There are various elements that make ethnicity visible to the

dominant culture, such as attire, language, traditions and the way in which migrants behave and the food they consume. Specifically, some migrants use images and religious objects that reflect this sense of ethnicity. In contrast, many other migrants leave behind their traditional dress as a way to incorporate into the new culture and diminish the risk of discrimination.

Following this pattern of community formation is the case of Mexicans who started to migrate to the U.S. during the mid-twentieth century. The "Bracero Program" (1942-1964) stimulated the flow of many people who signed around 5 million contracts over the course of the program's duration. Many of these migrants subsequently returned to Mexico, but many also stayed in the places where they found a home. Those who remained in the U.S. started to form communities that expanded throughout the country. The decades following the end of the program were an economic crisis (see chapter two) that eventually led the new and old generations to migrate to the U.S. (see Hernández-León, 2008).

For many years, Mexican migration to the U.S. came from states such as Aguascalientes, Colima, Durango, Guanajuato, Jalisco, Michoacán, Nayarit, San Luis Potosí and Zacatecas. These states were characterized by a high migration rate, in which 13 out of 100 households participated with at least one migrant to the U.S. (Ramírez, 2007). However, recent migrants come from other states, such as Chihuahua, Morelos, Oaxaca, Guerrero, Querétaro, Puebla, Hidalgo, Estado de México, Veracruz and the Distrito Federal. The second group of states has shown a fast integration into the phenomenon, contributing to 42% of the total migration (*ibid*).

Veracruz' migration has exhibited a different dynamic than its counterparts. First, the state showed relatively high rates of female mobility, as opposed to traditional sending states from where men migrated the most (Perez-Monterosas, 2003a). According

to Ramirez (2007), from 1990 to 1995 women accounted for 25.6% of the total migration; from 1995 to 2000 their representation was 30%. Along with women's participation, in the last decade the number of children participating in the phenomenon also grew, from 17.3% to 25.5 % from the period from 1995 to 2000. Second, *Veracruzanos* displayed a tendency to settle in the U.S. More than 80% of the people who migrated decided to reside in *el Norte* and fewer than 20% opted to return home. The networks previously established in the U.S. facilitated the migrants' permanence because these networks were able to provide shelter, food and sometimes even job opportunities. Moreover, the time of residency in the U.S. also lengthened; temporary residents increased their stay to 15 months, while in the past the average was approximately six to eight months. The shift was driven by three factors: 1) major sectarian and occupational diversification, because migrants were incorporated into different labor dynamics, that is, more jobs were available to them, mainly in the manufacturing and service industries; 2) the economic cost of migration; 3) the difficult macroeconomic situation in which the country has been immersed for the past few years in terms of jobs opportunities and entrepreneurship (see chapter two).; and 4) law enforcement as well as the militarization of the border.

Social networks and social capital are key elements for the formation of ethnic communities because they sustain and contribute to diffuse migratory behavior (Hernández-León, 2008; Masey et al, 1993; Tyner, 2003; Zhang, 2001). The social capital built among migrants motivates new migrants to begin their journey by providing immigrants with benefits, such as shelter, food, and a sense of belonging in addition to being a refuge from hostile labor markets. Immigrants who do not possess job skills, education, English fluency and employment credentials, and who face racial discrimination in the formal, non-ethnic economy, might seek work in the ethnic enclave

and discover that it serves as an "employment buffer" (Light and Gold 2000; Ramirez & Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2009). However, the fact that migrants can find that kind of support might reduce their efforts to adapt to the new culture, learn the new language and find jobs outside of their immediate circle. Often, social networks are built upon familial or kin relationships, *compadrazgo,* neighbors or acquaintances.

In interviews held in Veracruz, several interlocutors affirmed that people started to migrate at the end of the 1990s. At the beginning, male migration was more prevalent, but after a few years the dynamic changed and became more inclusionary, with women and children actively participating. The interlocutors also affirmed that migrants started to settle in northern cities, mainly in Reynosa, Matamoros, Tampico, Nuevo León and Durango. Despite recent inclusion, at the time of the interviews, there were still many towns where male migration was predominant and many women were left behind, such as Agua Dulce and La Concha. Overtime, most travelers crossed the border and looked for opportunities in the U.S. Currently, there are major concentrations of *Veracruzanos* in Texas (Dallas), Illinois (Chicago) and California (Los Angeles and San Joaquin Valley). They are also present on the East Coast, New York and Washington D.C., Kansas City, Atlanta, Florida, Seattle, North Carolina and South Carolina (Pérez-Monterosas, 2003b). These people then form markets that demand certain products that remind them of their homeland.

DEFINING ETHNIC AND NOSTALGIC MARKETS AND PRODUCTS

The ethnic and nostalgic market comprises migrants who demand products from their country of origin. However, there is a nuanced difference between the markets. The nostalgic market is mostly limited to recent, or first generation migrants; in contrast, the

ethnic market is not limited to migrants but also includes other segments of the population. For the purpose of this thesis, I make the distinction between nostalgic and ethnic markets, given that *Veracruzanos* are recent migrants to the U.S. and can be considered part of the nostalgic market; and people from traditional sending states, such as Michoacán, Zacatecas and Oaxaca, would form part of the ethnic market. At the same time, migrants' preference for products might be different. Thus, both groups might demand the same product, but one group would be moved by feelings of nostalgia and the other would consider the product a part of a tradition and costume.

Nostalgic and Ethnic Markets

The nostalgic market consists of four elements: migrants who are abroad, nostalgia (or need), the difficulty to find certain products, and the ability to meet a need. Based on these elements, different scholars and institutions have provided some definitions of nostalgic markets. However, most of these only incorporate one or two elements. Thus, after reviewing authors' definitions, I present my own concept of nostalgic markets, which attempts to integrate the cited elements and contribute to the literature.

Bernardo Olmedo (2006) argues that nostalgic markets are those formed by social groups that migrate abroad, who tend to miss and recall certain products that were part of their everyday life and which are difficult to find in the destination country. Similarly, the Ministry of Economy, Planning and Development in the Dominican Republic (Secretaria de Estado de Economía, Planificación y Desarrollo de República Dominicana, 2006) states that nostalgic markets encompass a group of people who have migrated abroad and long for products that are difficult to obtain in the destination country. Moreover, the

Center for the Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises in Central America (CENPROMYPE in Spanish) argues that the immigrant population represents a natural source of demand for products from their country of origin, particularly for food, a relevant sector of production in most Latin American countries (CENPROMYPE, 2005). In addition, this Center states that the nostalgic market is conditioned to the population of most recent arrival to the U.S., because consumption patterns, tastes and preferences are still deeply rooted. Finally, I argue that the nostalgic market is composed of the group of people that have migrated abroad, who tend to long for goods and services that were part of their everyday life, by which they feel linked to their place of origin, and are generally difficult to obtain where they settle; the group in turn has the purchasing power to satisfy the need and desire for these products.

The nostalgia felt by migrants is the result of deeply rooted relationships with their home countries. As people migrate, they do not break ties with their homeland, but instead, they look for ways to maintain those ties; migrants look for products that remind them of their place of origin. In this regard, Silié (2007) argued that many times when migrants abandon their country of origin, they do not break their national affiliation. Instead, their patriotic fervor increases, stimulating transnational experiences that give rise to a new the relationship between the sending and the receiving country.

Similar to the concept of nostalgic market, ethnic market refers to people demanding products from their place origin. However, this market is not limited to migrants of recent arrival; it is much wider. According to ECLA (2003), the ethnic market is composed of groups of people who share culture, traditions and values and who demand products from their place of origin, yet this group does not necessarily consume the products because they miss their home country. Migrants who have been in the U.S. for a long time might consume ethnic products as a habit or custom. Moreover, the

second generation of migrants, those who were born and raised in the U.S. but whose parents were born outside the U.S, consume ethnic goods as part of the culture in which they were born but not necessarily because they miss their parents' homeland. As a result, the nostalgic market is seen as a sub-set of the ethnic market. In this case, the proximity between the U.S and Mexico allows transborder movements and activities that give migrants the possibility to stay in contact with their home country, while at the same time demanding new products in the destination.

Nostalgic and ethnic products

The distinction between ethnic and nostalgic products is similar to the nuanced difference between ethnic and nostalgic markets. According to the ECLA (2003), nostalgic products are "goods and services that are part of the consumer habits, culture and traditions of different peoples and countries". These products are called nostalgic because they are the result of the longing feeling of immigrants; so, they are associated with a specific segment of the population, mainly new migrants. In contrast, ethnic products are goods and services associated with a country but consumed by both nationals and other population groups. People might consume ethnic products because of their availability and because of the influence exerted by migrants. Olmedo (2006) argues that ethnic products are merchandise that has certain attributes and particularities. These products are native products that reflect a sense of national identity, ethnicity and belonging, and serve as a mechanism for social, cultural and historical reproduction. Thus, nostalgic products are also an element in the universe of ethnic products. Nostalgic and ethnic merchandise are usually associated with food; however, they refer to a wider range of goods. Examples of these might include beverages and alcoholic beverages,

canned foods, chile peppers, desserts, packaged foods, salsas, snacks, spices and herbs. Lastly, the consumption of these kinds of goods in new destinations is not only the result of nostalgia but also other factors. The next section identifies these factors and explains how they have been key to the consolidation of the *totomoxtle* industry in the U.S.

FACTORS INFLUENCING THE DEMAND OF NOSTALGIC AND ETHNIC PRODUCTS

Given the number of people migrating from Mexico and Central America, new dishes from these regions have become popular in the U.S. Such is the case with *tamales*, a Latin American dish whose demand has been increasing over the last decade. The corn husk, *totomoxtle*, is a key ingredient in the production of *tamales*, and as such, its demand has also increased. I argue that the demand for ethnic products, and specifically for *tamales* in the U.S, is driven by four factors: a) migrant population growth; b) a change in the American palate; and c) the economic power to meet the need for such products on the part of migrant communities; and 4) a globalized environment that promotes human mobility, free trade and the deregulation of goods.

Population Growth

The first element that contributed to increasing the demand for ethnic products, *tamales*, is a market expansion in turn driven by population growth. As mentioned above, migrants and non-migrants consume ethnic goods; however, migrants comprise the greater percentage of consumers. According to the 2010 US Census, there are 50.5 million Hispanics[22] in the United States, making up 16.3% of the total population. The

[22] Despite the connotation that the word Hispanic might have, for the purpose of this thesis, I will use the terms Hispanic and Latino interchangeably.

Hispanic population increased by 15.2 million between 2000 and 2010, accounting for over half of the 27.3 million-person increase in the total population of the U.S. (US Census Bureau, 2011). Out of the total, between 2000 and 2010 the population of Mexican origin increased by 54% and had the largest numeric change (11.2 million), growing from 20.6 million in 2000 to 31.8 million in 201023. Given this growth, it is plausible to infer that more people are attracted to and are consuming ethnic and nostalgic products.

The Latino population is concentrated in the Western and Southern regions of the United States. The Census Bureau (US Census Bureau, 2011) determined that in 2010, 41% of Latinos lived in the West, 36% in the South, 14% in the Northeast and 9% in the Midwest. Approximately 75% of the population is located in eight states: California, Texas, Florida, New York, Illinois, Arizona, New Jersey, and Colorado. Out of these, California and Texas account for more than 47% of the total Hispanic population in the U.S. -23.5 million. Specifically, Mexican migrants are mostly concentrated in four states: California, Texas, Illinois and Arizona (Migration Information Source, 2010). Hence, these states display a greater consumption of ethnic (Mexican) products and a higher number of new businesses (Infoplease, 2010).

One important factor that has facilitated this increased consumption is that migrants are settling in non-traditional destinations in the U.S., thus spreading the taste and flavor of "their food". The Pew Hispanic Center (2011) announced that in 2010, 76% of Latinos lived in nine states, compared with 81% in 2000 and 86% in 1990. The states with the largest percentage of growth in their Hispanic populations include nine where

23 "People of Mexican origin" refers to people who report their origin as Mexican. The term can include people born in Mexico, in the United States, or in other countries. The question of Hispanic origin is a question of ethnicity and not of place of birth.

the Latino population more than doubled, including a swath of the southeast United States: Alabama, Arkansas, Kentucky, Mississippi, North Carolina, Tennessee and South Carolina (Pew Hispanic Center, 2011). Specifically, foreign-born migrants from Mexico began to move to Georgia, North Carolina, Nebraska and Ohio (Migration Information Source, 2010). This movement reflects the diversification of new destinations for Mexican immigration, "which has gone from regional concentration in the Southwest and Chicago to a nationally dispersed geography during the last two decades" (Ramirez & Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2009, p. 73 citing Zuñiga and Hernández-Leon 2005). This presence then has motivated American consumers to try new flavors and dishes.

Shift in the American Palate

Another element that made (and is making) possible the development of the corn husk industry in Veracruz is the growing preference for ethnic products in the U.S. by non-migrants. North American consumers are increasing their consumption and predilection for ethnic products. Given the number of migrants arriving, U.S. customers have been exposed to different flavors and tastes. Previously, consumers were largely exposed to products from Europe (Italy, Germany, the Mediterranean) and Asia (China and Japan, in areas such as San Francisco and New York). However, recent waves of migration from Mexico, Central and South America have introduced a variety of dishes that are attracting many palates. In this regard, the National Association for the Specialty Food Trade (NAST) stated, "the American palate is in a state of constant evolution, driven by a growing number of immigrants from a wide array of countries bringing their new foods to an already diverse U.S. population" (NASFT, 2012, para. 3)

Furthermore, these migrants are not only bringing a wide diversity of foods, but they are also opening ethnic restaurants and businesses. In the beginning, these eateries were established to satisfy the "migrant need". However, every day more American consumers are frequenting these places, making these businesses highly profitable. The NASFT (2012, para. 5) puts it this way: "While the initial target market may be other immigrants, these restaurants become increasingly patronized by a curious American public. A growth in discretionary income and a desire to spend some of that income on eating away from home have led to a greater interest in foods from different countries." Therefore, the number of Mexican and Latino restaurants has largely increased. In 2007, the number of Hispanic-owned businesses grew by 43.6% from 2002 to a total of 2.3 million. More recent data show that in 2011 there were approximately 3 million Hispanic-owned firms, the majority of them being one-man, or increasingly, one-woman enterprises (U.S Department of State, 2012).

The significant presence of Latino populations in the U.S. has led to a refocus of marketing strategies to target this segment of the population. The concentration in the Border south, Texas and California, of Latino migrants is reflected in the large presence of businesses –restaurants and ethnic stores- that are targeting migrants and non-migrants. Accordingly, in 2007, New Mexico was the leading state for Hispanic-owned businesses with 27%, followed by Florida with 22.7 % and Texas with 20.7% (Infoplease, 2010). Given this growth, the Food Marketing Institute's Trends in the U.S. informed that seven out of ten shoppers between the ages of 25 and 39 purchase ethnic foods at least once a month. Also, the Washington Post reported that one in five Americans is eating more ethnic food now than two years ago. "Ethnic ingredients, once known solely as staples for immigrants, have become creative fodder for American shoppers and profit builders for importers, manufacturers and retailers" (NASFT, 2012, para.2).

"La Mexicana" is one case that reflects the availability of these products in new destinations and the willingness of Americans to try new goods. *"La Mexicana"* is a local store located at the heart of Lincoln, Nebraska, owned by a Mexican family. Attached to the store is a restaurant that offers a wide variety of dishes made with fresh fruits and vegetables. The store offers different products: food, candles, glass vases painted with images of Catholic saints, and *piñatas*, among others. Next to this shop, there is an Indian store and restaurant supplying goods to a vast range of consumers. Through the sale of these products, the owners of the stores and customers mimic their customs, traditions and even religion. Marcia Guzmán (2011) argues, "Although these stores cater to specific ethnic palates, people of all ethnicities buy from these stores."

Economic Power

The last element that contributes to the demand of ethnic products is migrants' capability to meet their needs. This ability is not only measured in economic terms but also in terms of the availability of locations where these products are offered. The Latino market not only has the desire to meet its needs but also has the capacity to satisfy them. Hispanic buying power jumped from $429 billion in 1996 to $870 billion in 2008, with the Hispanic share of the total U.S. disposable income reaching 8.6%. This number is expected to grow by more than 31%, reaching approximately $1.10 trillion in 2012 (Hispantelligence, 2008). Furthermore, household income has also risen from $32,335 in 1972 to $50,575 in 2006 (Hispantelligence, 2008) allowing Hispanics to spend a higher proportion of their income on nostalgic and ethnic goods.

A crucial element in migrant culture is food. Research has shown that for Hispanics, food in the home is a priority, and thus they spend a large percentage of their

income on food. Also, food is essential to gatherings and celebrations. By contrast, non-Hispanics spend less on food. Latinos spend about 9% of their household budget on buying goods to prepare at home, while other groups spend less than 7% (Packaged Facts, 2011). In fact, the first group cooks dinner at home approximately five times a week (Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, 2011), and so, they look for ingredients to cook different dishes; although migrants are also eating out, given the availability of ethnic restaurants. These ingredients are now easier to find than before because it has become more common to see Latino spices and a wide variety of products in supermarkets and local stores. In actuality, Hispanics purchase most of their groceries at supermarkets. However, they also spend over 30% of their food budget at local shops, such as butcher shops, bodegas, drug stores, bakeries and convenience stores (Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, 2011). This last preference may be explained in the accessibility to local grocery stores in migrants' neighborhoods or because of the kind of products they are able to find in specialty stores.

The introduction of ethnic products was the result of informal trade during migration. Migrants who had the ability to go back and forth between the U.S. and their homelands brought back with products that were not available in the U.S. This created a stream whose flow grew and turned into a continuous demand and thus compelled companies and formal business to meet the need. Moreover, the demand for these products grew thanks to their availability (Batres-Márquez 2001)[24]. The interest of Multinational corporations and mid-size business has contributed to increased availability of ethnic products in the U.S. The growing profits generated in this market have caught

[24]In 2001, a study of ethnic products was conducted among the Salvadorian population. This project analyzed the current and potential demand of 30 Salvadorian products in Los Angeles and Houston. Research showed that there were five predominant products that if available, migrants would most likely consume: red beans, cheese, *horchata*, *semita* and tortillas.

the attention of commercial chains such as Wal-Mart, which has become the number one store targeting migrants and supplying these goods (Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, 2011). While Wal-Mart dominates the market in most southern states, the presence of independent stores is still very important. Finally, other chain stores have realized the economic potential of the Hispanic market and have decided to convert some of their locations into strictly Hispanic-oriented stores (*ibid*).

Globalization

In the midst of this growth, what is the economic-political phenomenon that has allowed the formation of such diverse communities and the rise of commercial exchange? I argue that globalization has allowed the recent formation of diverse communities in the U.S. by promoting human mobility across the globe. In addition, the rise of the commercialization of *tamales* and *totomoxtle* and other ethnic products has been possible in the context of free trade, deregulation of goods, capital and services, and global markets (Castles & Miller, 2009). That is, thanks to cross-border activities and the massive flow of goods, people can access a wide variety of products and services. Multinational corporations (MNCs) (large companies that operate in many countries) as well as small businesses are taking advantage of this economic and political context to exchange and introduce products into different societies. The introduction of these products into the U.S. is easy for MNCs because they have the infrastructure and capital to do so. However, for small companies, product introduction requires more work. In the case of *totomoxtle*, before the product arrives in the U.S., it is handled by at least four intermediaries (see chapter four). Once it is on U.S. soil, corn husks are sold to either

large corporations or are managed by business owners who have been in retail business for quite a long time.

Advancements in technology have also allowed the growth of the *totomoxtle* industry. Specifically, there are hundreds of online stores that are selling corn husks on a daily basis. Such is the case of "Corn Husk Direct", an online store that offers such good throughout the year. The store is located in Dallas and has the infrastructure to deliver their product to the buyer's business. They sell large and small packages of husks targeting different segments of consumers (Corn Husks Direct, 2012).

CONSUMING ETHNIC PRODUCTS: THE CASE OF *TOTOMOXTLE*

The increase in the commercialization of Latino and Mexican products, specifically *tamales,* has then been driven by population growth, a shift in the American palate, the availability of Latino products, and the economic capacity to purchase these products. Every day, the number of ethnic restaurants, Mexican eateries and *taquerías* increases, offering a wide variety of dishes. Among them, *tamales* are one plate that has become very attractive to all appetites. In addition, the exchange is rising at both ends of the commercial chain, that is, both demand and supply are increasing. In this context, sending communities have also realized the economic power of their co-nationals and have focused their marketing efforts towards them. For example, according to sources from El Salvador, in one month in 2006 the export of *tamales* was valued at more than USD$500,000. The total value of non-traditional products in that year generated an income of more than USD$35 million, which meant an increase of 49.5% compared to the previous year (Barrera, 2006). Similarly, in the same year, Guatemala experienced an increase in sale of *tamales*. Montesol is a company that saw the potential of non-

traditional products in the U.S. and decided to export canned *tamales*. Given the presence of Guatemalans in the U.S., the company sent abroad approximately 40,000 cans to Miami, Los Angeles and Chicago. Overall earnings exceeded USD$500,000 (Alvarado, 2006). Mexico has experienced the same dynamic. Such is the case of "Productos Chata", a company that was established in 1962 in Sinaloa. This company started to sell local, traditional Mexican goods, such as *chorizo, chilorio, machaca, chicharrón;* then, the success of their sales abroad motivated the company to include *tamales* in the range of options. Moreover, other companies, such as Gruma[25], are making a special kind of *masa* for families to cook *tamales*. Hence, different ethnic ingredients have become available, gaining an important place in the minds of consumers.

Moreover, *totomoxtle* is now being commercialized in different local grocery stores and supermarkets, thus making the product accessible for all consumers. This availability has then facilitated consumption. In addition to being accessible in supermarkets and small grocery stores, corn husks are being marketed in online magazines and blogs that have a specific market; such is the case of TheLatinProducts.com, which has posted several articles in reference to *tamales* (Best Latin and Mexican Food Blog, 2011). Yet, there are also other online sites that are offering *totomoxtle* to a variety of consumers.

As mentioned above, California and Texas are the states where most of the Mexican population in the U.S. is located. It is not a surprise then that, according to intermediaries, these states are the primary destination for corn husks. When people were

[25] Grupo Gruma is the largest manufacturer of corn flour and tortillas in the world. Its headquarters are located in Monterrey, and it has subsidiaries in the U.S., Asia, Europe, Central America, Venezuela, and Oceania. Its two major brands are Maseca and Mission. It was established in 1949, and since then it has achieved major expansion. For more information visit http://www.gruma.com/vEsp/.

interviewed about the location of the end consumers, the majority of exporters responded that their main destination was Dallas, Houston and Los Angeles.

Furthermore, because there is little documentation about the emergence of the corn husk industry market in Veracruz (King, 2007), it is not possible to give exact data in regard to the value and volume of trade. When secondary data were sought, no information was available. When local authorities in Totonacapan were asked about this, none of them were able to offer any numbers. This lack of data is an indicator of the little attention and support given to the industry by the state. Nonetheless, the case of El Salvador and Guatemala are useful to show not only how *tamales* have become an attractive dish among U.S. consumers, but also the value of the trade.

This trade expansion has been reflected in the production of corn husks in Veracruz. At the inception of the corn husk industry, producers and intermediaries focused on fulfilling local needs, in nearby cities, such as Mexico City and Puebla, but as demand grew the industry started to export (chapter four). In interviews with producers and intermediaries, both said that production and exports have increased on a yearly basis. Given that both the labor and the product are inexpensive, different companies have been established in Agua Dulce, La Concha and El Chote in recent years. For example, when Felipe, a supervising manager of one business was asked about the increase in trade, he said that the factory opened in 2009, and since then they have been exporting. Another case is that of Juan, who worked in transportation but who was later invited to be an intermediary. Lastly, Roberto said that the company where he works started to export in 2010; the company was established 12 years ago. During the first eight years, it was limited to the purchase of raw husks, and then, they set-up their manufacturing process in La Concha (bleaching and packing) approximately four years ago. As a result of the increase in demand for *totomoxtle* in the U.S. they started to export

in October 2010. In that year, they exported 100 tons and from May-July 2011, they had been sent abroad approximately 60 tons. The decision of where to base their operations was not by chance because in 2008 the industry gained momentum, resulting in substantial sales and earnings for both producers and intermediaries. Another supervising manager in Agua Dulce stated that businesses in La Concha were sending abroad one trailer a week to the U.S, each one loaded with approximately 10 tons. Thus, in the absence of secondary data, primary information from intermediaries and producers lead to the conclusion that this industry has largely strengthened in the last decade.

As a result of the demand and the need to meet it, more men and women are participating in the production and export of the product. During interviews, several people argued that this industry has been growing significantly in recent years, providing various employment opportunities. This increase has also meant economic improvement for many families and communities of Totonacapan. As observed in previous chapters, the benefits are visible in the purchase of durable goods and cars and in home improvements.

It is in this context that *totomoxtle* emerges as both an ethnic and a nostalgic product. While some migrants long for their home country and look for certain goods and services that remind them of their homeland, non-migrants are becoming more familiar with ethnic products. Given the recent migration of *Veracruzanos*, *tamales* and corn husks can be appreciated as a nostalgic product. However, for those *Zacatecanos* and *Michoacanos* who have been abroad longer, the product can be seen as an ethnic good.

CONCLUSION: THE FUTURE OF ETHNIC AND NOSTALGIC MARKETS AND PRODUCTS

Since its founding, the U.S. has been a country of immigration, and has been the main destination for many diverse populations from Europe, Asia and more recently Mexico, Central and South America. With their arrival, immigrant populations have brought different customs, traditions and dishes that have been incorporated into U.S. culture. These individuals then have reconfigured American consumption patterns. Given the size of the Latino market -50 million people- and the economic power it displays, different companies have emerged to take advantage of demands in this market and many others enterprises have reconfigured to adjust to the growing needs of this segment of the population in both the sending and the receiving countries.

There are many factors that can influence the future of ethnic and nostalgic products in the U.S., such as population, cultural assimilation and the declining rate of migration. On the one hand, the future seems promising because every day more people are consuming ethnic products; the Latino population largely grew over the last decade, and more American consumers are consuming ethnic products. However, as time passes, consumption of these products cannot be assured. The declining fertility rate, cultural assimilation of first and second generation migrants, border enforcement, economic improvement in home countries and subsequent reduction of migrant populations, and the U.S. economic environment pose interesting challenges for the future of these products.

In the last 10 years, there was significant population growth in the U.S., especially among the Latino population. In most of the counties and states that exhibited growth, it was the Latino population that had the highest rate of growth. However, the fertility rate has dramatically dropped among the White population as well as in immigrant countries, such as Mexico. This drop and decreasing migration could imply a decrease in the consumption of nostalgic and ethnic products.

Furthermore, economic conditions in sending and receiving countries might have an effect on the consumption of ethnic and nostalgic goods. Such is the case of the Mexican migrant population to the U.S. Over the last five years, migration has dramatically decreased and might have even reversed. According to the Pew Hispanic Center (2012 para.2), "The standstill appears to be the result of a combination of factors, including the weakened U.S. job and housing construction markets, heightened border enforcement, a rise in deportations, the growing dangers associated with illegal border crossings, the long-term decline in Mexico's birth rates and broader economic conditions in Mexico". If migration is decreasing, given the size of global markets and the availability of products in the U.S., the future of nostalgic products could be in jeopardy.

One important aspect that needs to be considered for the future of ethnic products is the second-generation of migrants. Research shows that they displayed greater signs of assimilation than their parents, which most likely translates into diminished consumption of ethnic products. Second-generation migrants are usually more integrated into the dominant culture, are more likely to speak English, have a higher education and show a preference for American culture (Agriculture and Agri-Food Canada, 2011). Those who have not been able to travel to their parents' country of origin might feel estranged from that culture. However, those who have the ability to go back and forth might maintain ties, thus increasing the consumption of ethnic products. Because second generation migrants were born in the U.S., they might long their parents' homeland, but they may not necessarily feel nostalgic about a land in which they were not born. Nevertheless, the influence of their parents and the culture in which they are immersed might influence them to consume different ethnic products and services. Thus, the consumption of ethnic products among second generation migrants will depend on how deeply rooted they are in their culture, and how assimilated they are into the American culture.

Given this context, the future of these products is uncertain, although it seems clear that the success of ethnic stores and large companies investing in the sale of these products lies in their ability to go outside the migrant circle. If cultural assimilation and a declining rate of migration put the future of these products at risk, then wider consumption by non-migrants might be the key to keep afloat an industry that generates large profits. Ultimately, the broader expansion and consumption of tamales and *totomoxtle* in new locations might contribute to the reduction of conditions of poverty and to the betterment of the living conditions of growers, both men and women, and workers in Veracruz.

CHAPTER SIX: CORN HUSK PRODUCTION: A GENDERED PERSPECTIVE

The emergence and expansion of the corn husk industry provided many women and men with job opportunities. However, men and women have very different roles in this industry due to local social constructions of gender and gender relations. Activities that require more physical strength or that involve the use of heavy machinery and dangerous tools are performed by men, whereas women do work such as cleaning, cooking, sweeping, mopping and various other manual activities (Ramirez & Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2009). Also, the spaces where men and women labor differ. Private and public spaces are intertwined with gender relations: men, assume a dominant role and are associated with public spaces; women take on a subordinate position and are associated with private spaces (Córdova Plaza, 2007; Pessar, 2003; Ramirez & Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2009; Zhang, 2001). In addition, the value of work is determined by the space where it is performed (Zhang, 2001). Therefore, domestic work is usually invisible and undervalued, due to the fact that it is carried out in the privacy of the home and unpaid. In contrast, non-domestic work is public and remunerated, and therefore more valued (Pessar, 2003; Tyner, 2003; Zhang, 2001). Women who stay at home carrying out the production of husks without economic compensation reinforce traditional patterns of gender and labor, while, women who find employment outside the household in processing facilities challenge conventional gender roles. Given this context, I argue that overarching discourses of gender, which are deeply engrained in local practices, structure the participation of men and women within the making of the domestic and export corn husk market.

The focus of this chapter is to understand how men and women participate in the industry based on gender constructions. The chapter is divided into four sections. The first provides a literature review of the concept of gender, and its relation to space and labor. The second section describes the gendered production and manufacturing of corn husks. The third section analyzes the implications of a gendered division of labor. The fourth and last section presents conclusions and poses questions for future research.

INTERSECTING GENDER, PLACE AND LABOR

Feminist theory provides a framework that helps to understand taken-for-granted power dynamics that conditions people's position in society (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2003; McDowell, 1992,1997). Through this theoretical lens, we can better view how societies assign roles to men and women giving a clearer idea of how societies construct notions of masculinity and feminity. Feminist research also uncovers the intersection between gender, class, place and race. In the words of Linda McDowell (1997, p. 382):

> Doing feminist geography means looking at the actions and meanings of gendered people, at their histories, personalities and biographies, at the meaning of places to them, at the different ways in which spaces are gendered and how this affects people's understandings of themselves as women or men.

While providing a historical background on the evolution of feminist theory and its influence on different fields is beyond the scope of this chapter, its contributions to the study of gender, place and labor are essential to the development of this research. Hence, this framework explains why men and women carry out different, gendered activities in the production and manufacturing of a domestic and export product such as *totomoxtle*.

Activities in the Totonacapan are influenced by social constructions of gender. According to Tyner (2003, p. 64) "gender refers to the ways that society regulates human

interactions and allocates resources differentially, based on socially constructed norms of masculinity and femininity." Specifically, gender informs relations between men and women with respect to places and institutions, such as the family and the labor market. A definition that best suits the purpose of the study is that of Kunz (2008), who states that gender refers to the historical and cultural constructions that influence how women and men think, act and live. Moreover, femininity and masculinity are understood "as the different ways of being men and women" (Bondi & Davidson, 2005, p. 15). In her study about Filipino migrants in the U.S., Espiritu (2003, p. 264) argues that femininity is constructed in reference to other groups; in this case, Filipino women construct notions of feminity in light of American values. Espiritu defines femininity as a "relational category that is co-constructed with other racial and cultural categories." As gender is informed by historical processes and culture, race and ethnicity, it should not be seen as a fixed ideology but rather as a fluid process (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2003; McDowell, 1997). Hence, characteristics of femininity and masculinity are not fixed, but are rather multiple and diverse (Espiritu, 2003; McDowell, 1997; Secor, 2003). Migration, for example, has modified, and in some cases, accentuated roles. Veracruz experienced high levels of mobility where men migrated in search of better living conditions. This in turn led women to assume patriarchal roles traditionally associated with men. Thus in these cases, women were often made to assume the dual roles as caregiver in charge of the maintanence of the household and principal breadwinner.

Characteristics generally associated with femininity are docility, passivity, nurturing or emotional behavior, whereas masculinity is commonly described with qualifiers such as aggression, rationality and controlled emotion (McDowell, 1997). Furthermore, men are portrayed as more apt to be risk takers and achievers, whereas women are portrayed as docile, guardians of community and stability (Pessar, 2003;

Zhang, 2001). In their study with gardeners in Los Angeles, Ramirez & Hondagneu-Sotelo (2009) found that gardening is the masculine version of domestic work –usually marked as feminine. The first takes place outdoors, requires physical labor, machinery that is heavy to carry and the use of dangerous tools. Conversely, "*domésticas* work indoors, doing feminized work such as cleaning, sweeping, mopping, socially reproducing human beings and interior domesticity" (p. 72). In rural settings, such as the Totonacapan, notions of femininity and masculinity reinforce a gendered division of labor: men usually work in the fields while women stay at home cooking, feeding animals and cleaning. These assumptions are also reflected throughout the production of corn husks where men are expected to work in activities that involve riskier and involve major physical strength such as cutting off the husks by disk, loading and unloading trucks, collecting and delivering corn husks packages and the handling the sulfur; while women are assumed to work in light tasks inside the home or at warehouses.

Feminist research has questioned the unequal power relations between men and women and examined how societies have been structured in ways that favor men (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2003). Traditionally, "sexual stereotypes have been institutionalized in labor markets", that is, there has been a segregation of occupations based on sex (female and male) (Tyner, 2003, p. 66). This results from the social division of labor and segmentation of activities into productive and reproductive tasks, where men are assumed to perform the former and women the latter (Tyner, 2003 citing Sayer and Walker, 1992). According to Tyner (2003), societies reinforce and reproduce these norms—whether it be at the household level where girls and boys are taught different values and standards, or at the macro scale through government programs, television or films. Thus, particular occupations may be expected for men and others for women. These norms and attitudes give rise to patriarchy, "whereby women's subordinated position within the society is

based on ascribed characteristics of biological differences between women and men" (Tyner, 2003, p. 67). Under this assumption, women's' subservience to men and their socially constructed femininity is seen as inferior to an ideal of masculinity (McDowell, 1997). Moreover, McDowell (1997) acknowledges that these disparities are the result of women's perceived inferiority to and oppression by men in different places at different times. These relative privileges favoring men were evident in migration history, where countries like Canada and Australia limited the recruitment of temporary workers to married men (Castles & Miller, 2009). Furthermore, for long periods, in Mexico men were the recipients of social programs and credits for production; however, this tendency has been changing over the last years resulting in more benefits for women, where the State has been granting them credits for small projects (*i.e.* fattening pigs and handicrafts).

Similarly, Rosaldo (1974) explained, "women's subordinate position is built on the separation of socially constructed dual domains (the domestic and the public) in which human activities occur". Thus, since much of remunerated labor is performed in the public domain, men have been socially assigned the role of breadwinners whereas women have been constrained to unpaid labor in the household or "private" sphere (Córdova Plaza, 2007; Pessar, 2003, Ramirez & Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2009; Rommelman, 2004; Sarti, 2010; Wolkowitz, 2006). In addition, Zhang (2001) argues that because women work at home their work deemed "natural", feminine and private, and because their work is publicly invisible, it can be conceived as an extension of their domestic chores; therefore, it is assigned less social value than men's work. Similarly, socially and culturally domestic work has been seen as less productive than publicly visible work (Tyner, 2003; Zhang, 2001). In her study of Chinese migrant women, Zhang uses the concept "domestication of production" to describe the elaboration of garments inside the

household, where there is an absence of boundaries between home and work. This same concept can be applied to describe the manual production of corn husks at home in which women's labor is perceived as an extension of their domestic chores, and thus less remunerated than men's work during the same process.

In recent times, patterns of gendered labor are changing. Globalization, migration and economic restructuring have driven women to enter the labor market. The numbers of women enrolled in different occupations, whether they are low-end and domestic jobs or management positions, have largely increased over the last decades (Castles & Miller, 2009; Dyer, McDowell, & Batnitzky, 2008; Moran-Taylor, 2008). The Totonacapan region has experienced a similar dynamic. As explained in chapter two, a series of economic factors gave rise to the emergence of the maize husks industry in Veracruz. This provided various employment opportunities to women and men, and was specifically important for women heading marginalized households, or who were left behind after the male head-of-households migrated. In the next section I draw from feminist theory to show how discourses of gendered division of labor are developed among communities of the Totonacapan and how these are reflected throughout the cycle of production of maize husks.

GENDERED PLACES AND LABOR: WOMEN AND MEN'S PARTICIPATION IN THE CORN HUSK INDUSTRY

In the maize husk production process women and men have different responsibilities that reinforce a gendered division of labor and perpetuate hierarchical roles. The fact that women carry out non-domestic work without economic compensation inside the home serves to perpetuate patriarchal roles. However, the entrance of women into wage labor challenges traditional notions of gender and labor. Husk production is

carried out in four stages: extraction, bleaching, selection and packing. In the following sections, I will describe each of these stages, which elucidate different activities that men and women do, and how these are assigned based on social constructions of femininity and masculinity.

Uncovering local gender roles: women and men daily activities

As with many other jobs, agricultural work is gendered. In the study communities, most commonly, women work within the households while men work outside of the home. During one visit, a woman was asked to describe her daily activities:

> I wake up at 4 am when they go to work (my husband and children). I make coffee, cook breakfast and lunch. At 5 am they (men) leave (to go sowing) and they come back around 5 in the afternoon. (Do women also sow?) No, women do not sow; we only take them food (she and her daughter) and stay at home. Meanwhile, I sweep, do dishes, feed chickens and bunnies. I make tortillas, bring in water from the well and cook again. When they arrive we all have dinner, then we take showers and go to bed. If I watch my *novela,* I go to bed at 10, if not I go to bed earlier (*campesina*, Santa Anna, Coyutla).

Her description of a normal day includes not a gendered division of labor. That is to say that in the Totonacapan women carry out domestic work whereas men work in farm activities. Specifically, men sow, plow or crop, women are expected to clean, feed animals around the household (chickens, rabbits, roosters, pigs) and cook. In the context of these communities, one explanation of why women stay at home is because corn cultivation involves major physical effort and since notions of femininity describe women as delicate, they do not do this job, and because women need to take care of their reproductive chores, such as child bearing and caring for children and elder, health care, among others (Córdova Plaza, 2007).

It is important to keep in mind the local environment in which daily activities are carried out. That is, Totonacapan is a rural indigenous region where patriarchal structures are deeply rooted and where traditional gender roles are usually uncontested. For example, women have a longer workday than men; women work for about 15 hours without economic compensation, whereas men work seven hours for about Mex$120. Women have to wake up at 5 am and prepare breakfast and lunch, they do domestic chores throughout the day and carry out activities that also involve physical strengthen, such as hauling water from the well. In contrast, men go to the fields at 6 am and usually comeback home at 1 pm. When they return, they expect food to be prepared, women in turn have to make tortillas, cook, serve lunch and make sure that everything is in order. After, women clean up the table and wash dishes, while men sit down and rest. Men's workday finishes at 1 pm, while women's end at 8 pm, after they cook dinner and wash dishes again. Younger and older women are also expected to work in the daily maintenance of the household. During fieldwork, it was possible to see that even when girls go to school, they need to assist in the maintenance of the households and they are also more likely to stay in the communities. Depending on economic situation, boys usually go to school and if needed, they go to the field to assist in agriculture, thus reproducing patriarchal structures.

Furthermore, the participant quoted above emphasizes that women do not work outside their residence. One should note that this practice is more common in highland communities, where agriculture is the main livelihood strategy (Valderrama Rouy, 2005). In such region, the patriarchal structure tends to remain unchallenged, as most female in the household are expected to be submissive, serve and obey men's rules. During fieldwork, it was evident that sons are more likely to migrate to other communities or states in pursue of better living conditions while women are more likely to stay and help

in the daily maintenance of the household (Córdova Plaza, 2007). This tendency, however, has been recently changing.

Similarly, her description of a regular day reveals the existence of gendered spaces, the later manufacturing process of corn husks, takes place in these gendered places. Women's primary participation in the production of the domestic and export good begins after harvest. Following harvest, maize is transported to warehouses or farmers' houses. Here, both actors store corn, and landholders hire men and women to remove the husks to sell them.

"*La sacada*" (Husk removal)

As explained in chapter four, there are two ways to remove the husks, by hand and by disk. In the first procedure, women use a machete to cut the cob using a piece of wood as a base. Specifically, women cut the stem to remove more easily the layer of husks, and then they cut a little bit more to remove the remaining layers, and repeat this procedure until there are no remaining husks. This is a risky procedure, as machetes are very sharp and women can easily get hurt. After, removing the husks, women place remaining cobs in a white bag or baskets. In the second procedure, men cut off husks at the base using a mounted table saw blade. The majority of people interviewed (both men and women) asserted that the use of disk was more dangerous than that of machete. The second procedure was perceived as unsafe and riskier, so women do not do it. Because the prevalent idea is that women are fragile and sensitive, they cannot carry out the same activities than men.

Once husks are removed, men and women group them. Women create four sets of *manojos (*this practice is referred as *enconchar*, because the husks take the form of a

shell) and then, men assemble *pacas* of 150 *manojos* or bundles. The first three husks that wrap the cob are usually damaged, stained and yellowish, so they are separated from the rest and are either thrown or burned. After men cut off the leaves, they put them in *racas* (crates) to make them more uniform, lighter, and easier to pack. Then, they form *pacas* of 25-30 kilos (see illustration 6.1). Even though both are called *pacas*, they look different. Then, intermediaries transport *pacas* to ovens to whiten them.

Illustration 6.1 Different kinds of *pacas*. Photo in the right shows a *paca* assembled with manual husks. Photo in the left shows a *paca* assembled with disked husks.

Jorge, an important intermediary who trades manually cut husks, located in Las Chacas, was asked about why women do the manual removing of husks and under what conditions they carry it out. He first explained that women do this job because it is a women's work and that only women do it. Then, he expressed that "little girls" (of around 8 years old) accompany their mothers and work there. He usually buys the whole crop from farmers, and then he transports it to a warehouse where he hires women to remove husks. He pays about Mex$2.50 per *manojo*; (bundle) and women are able to produce approximately 50 *manojos* a day making Mex$120 in the course of 11 hours (6am-5 pm). Women also need to bring their own lunch, because Jorge cannot provide food for all. Many people reiterated that women, and not men, are responsible for the

manual removal of husks. Alejandra, a landowner who has been trading *totomoxtle* for over a decade and employs up to four women, also explained the reasons for this phenomenon. From her viewpoint, she preferred to employ women to cut husks because they work harder than men and "women are more apt to do this job, and I feel like this work is light." As Jorge is a big intermediary, he has warehouses where women labor. Alejandra on the other hand, was a big garage in her house that uses as warehouse for women to work. Alejandra pays women by the bundle of husks assembled, and thus there is no fixed schedule. However most women work for 10 hours (6am-4pm) in order to make a certain amount of money. They are paid Mex$2 per *manojo* and according to Alejandra, women are able to produce up to 80 *manojos* a day (making approximately Mex$160 a day, which is more than what *jornaleros* receive in a workday). Based on these salaries, one farmer stated that women earn more money than men. However, as it was shown above, women have a longer workday than men, thus receiving less payment for work done. *Jornaleros* usually earn Mex$100-120 for seven to eight hours (6am-1pm) of work in the fields. If it is sowing or harvest season, usually the employer pays for lunches of all employees. As for those who disk husks, they get paid about Mex$2.50-3.50 per kilo. Most experienced men are able to produce approximately 40-50 kilos a day earning a total of Mex$150 in the course of eight to nine hours. As a result, young men prefer to work in warehouses cutting off husks than working in the fields. Disking husks is perceived as easier than sowing, planting, hedging or alley cropping. Similarly, removing husks manually is perceived to be lighter work than disking husks.

"*La azufrada*" (Husks Bleaching)

Following the assembling procedure, the process of bleaching commences. Manually cut husks can be sold in their original form, but they fetch a lower price. Usually domestic buyers are more accepting of husks that are not completely white, however, other consumers demand higher quality. By contrast, disked husks need to be bleached for both the domestic and export market. Farmers bleach husks for two purposes: a) to make them whiter and b) to rid them of any bacteria or pests.

Because its use is highly dangerous, toxic and can cause severe health problems, women do not participate directly in the bleaching process. However, they get expose to sulfur remaining when women sort and pack the husks. Bleaching takes place in a very rudimentarily constructed oven. The first oven created was built with cement blocks and zinc; overtime, farmers located in low lands and large intermediaries built new ovens[26] that could resist the use of sulfur (see illustration 6.2). Husks are usually bleached three times: *elaboradores*[27] open the oven, let the steam out, and burn sulfur each time, until the husks are completely white; to get better results, *elaboradores* wet the husks before they burn the sulfur. Roberto, the supervisor manager, also clarified that they also add a substance that acts as preservative to comply with the requirements of the export market. Hugo (see chapter four) explained the use of sulfur and how he started to use it:

> I thought the best way to bleach the husks was using sulfur, because the husks sold in Mexico (D.F.) are whiter than the ones we produce, because they (other farmers) are from Puebla and live near the volcano. The volcano spreads sulfur that whitens husks. So, I put *pacas* in a room, on top of wood pallets, then, in a small container, I put sulfur and then lit some matches and burned it. The smoke spreads out in the room and bleaches the husks. I also put water underneath the pallets to prevent any fire.

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[26] Local people use the term oven to describe any room without doors or windows that is sealed with different materials (glue, *plastilina*, and *engrudo*).

[27] *Elaboradores* are people who are in charge of bleaching the husks, put into the over and take off the husks. *Elaboradoras* are women who sort and pack the husks.

Hugo's statement indicates the need to be competitive. First, merchants were asking him to bring whiter husks, as those of its counterparts in Puebla. Then, as husks started to be exported, farmers and intermediaries were forced to find ways to add value to their goods. Hence, they developed new tools that would allow them to offer the same quality as their counterparts. The invention of the oven is thus a creative solution to deal with a comparative disadvantage.

Illustration 6.2 Oven used to beach husks. Photo in the right is an oven where husks are bleached Photo in the left shows the interior of the oven, *pacas* and wood pallets are visible

People's responses varied concerning the health risks associated with the use of sulfur. While some were sure that it was safe to use, many others stated that it was very harmful. The difference in responses was driven by experience with the substance; those who had not been in contact with it affirmed its use was safe; by contrast, *elaboradores*, intermediaries, and exporters who handle it on regular basis stated it was dangerous. Overall, exposure to the substance caused interlocutors damage to their lungs, eyes, ears, hands and knees, the latter due to the bone decalcification. However, sulfur effects go beyond these and according to research carried out by Lenntech Company, sulfur compounds have an unpleasant smell and are often highly toxic. In general, its use can

alter the blood stream, cause neurological effects and behavioral changes, organ failure, stomach and gastrointestinal disorder, defects in hearing, suffocation and pulmonary embolism, dermatological and visual effects, alterations of the hormonal metabolism, and damage to the functions to the liver and kidneys (Lenntech, 2011). Despite sulfur effects, the whitening has become a requirement for the domestic, and more so for the export market, and its use has increased over the last decade. Even though women are not in direct contact with sulfur during husk selection, drifting fumes irritate their noses and throats; the same can be said for children and elders that help during the selection and packing. Hugo gave details regarding health problems faced as he managed sulfur for over eight years. He developed a serious condition in his legs, lost his motor skills and was very injured.

> We need to handle the oven very carefully, if the steam is still hot, it can damage your bones; your legs start to hurt because the sulfur decalcifies the bones. We need to be very careful. My legs got hurt and I had to take a lot vitamins. My knees hurt, so I went to the *temazcal*[28] to try to reduce the pain. There were days when I could not even walk, I felt like if someone pricked me with needles several times.

In spite of the high risks associated with using sulfur, people will continue to use the substance in order to earn a living. *Elaboradore*s are aware of the dangers of handling sulfur, but limited job opportunities in the area have forced people to work in this industry. While indeed it has provided employment and revenue, it has also put people at risk. When one supervisor was questioned about this situation, he responded, "it is the job and you have to survive to bring money to the family."

[28] *Temazcal* or sweat bath is a Mexican therapeutic instrument, a medical practice developed by indigenous people in Mesoamerica (Mexico, Belize and Guatemala). *Temazcal* is a Nahualt word formed by two words: *temas* that means bath and *calli* that means home (Rojas-Alba,1996).

Selection and packing

The next stage in the production cycle is the selection of husks based on quality of the husks. After manually cut husks are bleached, husks can be either repack in smaller packages or delivered in the same figure. In the first option, women working in warehouses, repackage the bundles of husks into individual sacks for retail sale in supermarkets and stores (see illustration 6.3), while men transport whole *pacas* to the wholesale destination. This scenario, the repackaging of husks into smaller packs for

Illustration 6.3 Different packages of manual husks. Image on the left shows the package in which husks are delivered in Mexico City and Tijuana. Photo in the center shows the labeling. Photo in the right shows the individual presentation for sale

retail sale, was actually only observed in Las Lomas, where Oscar Rivas lives (see chapter four) because rest of the intermediaries that were interviewed transport whole *pacas* to Mexico City and Puebla for wholesale.

Once the bleaching process is finalized, selection begins[29]. There are two stages in the selection processes. The first takes place at women's houses, and the second in warehouses. In the first, husks are selected in two broad categories: *limpias* and *sucias* (clean and dirty). In the latter, the selection is based on the destination and buyer's

[29] This selection process only applies to disked husks.

specifications. It should be noted that out of 16 communities visited, only two carry out the first selection process: La Concha and Agua Dulce. For the first type of distribution, business owners hire men to distribute *pacas* to household participants. According to supervisor managers in both towns, families go to warehouses and request to be part of the "selection program". Employees[30] carry *pacas* from warehouses to women's houses where household members (mostly women and children) select husks based on defined standards. Every owner has a set of policies that define the quality of the husks according to height, width and color. Leaves for export usually measure 20 centimeters (cm) long and 8-10 cm wide. Payment varies according to the activities and actor who carryout these activities. That is, men are compensated on weekly basis for collecting, bleaching and distributing the husks, whereas women are paid per the amount of selected husks in first and second quality. The majority of women who participate in the first part of the process are single parents and housewives.

In Agua Dulce, one of the communities with the most participation in the corn husk industry, women select leaves in first and second quality or presentation. Men deliver to household participants four *pacas* of 25-30 kilos twice a week. Then, women select corn husks meeting criteria for height, width and color and put them into big yellow bags (see illustration 6.4) for pick up. Leaves that are broken or yellowish are usually put aside for the domestic market. At the end of the week, employees collect the sacks, weigh them and pay women accordingly –business owners, who are usually large intermediaries or exporters pay Mex$4.50 per kilo of clean and Mex$3.50 per kilo of dirty husks. Every time men deliver husks, women receive a receipt as a way to measure

[30] These employees also function as *corredores*, that is, people hired by businessmen who go from town to town collecting *pacas*.

the production and waste (see illustration 6.4); out of every *paca* processed about 80% is used and 20% is discarded.

This system has more benefits compared to other distribution methods. Because the selection of husks is carried out at home, women can take care of the household, feed animals and care for children while earning outside income. In addition, since selection largely takes place in the home, it allows for the participation of different members of the household, such as the elderly and children, to contribute with their labor. Similar to the removal of husks at home, there are no boundaries between the home and the work place; yet, there is economic compensation for the work done. In the presence of the both men and women in the household, the work of women can be seen as an extension of their domestic activities and their income may be perceived as a contribution to the family economy. Some disadvantages of this type of distribution are, however, the overall exposure to the sulfur and the lack of benefits that a formalized job would offer such as fixed wages and workday, protection equipment, pension plans, among others. In addition, because *totomoxtle* is a seasonal commodity, employers can expand and contract according to their needs. Also, employers pay for overall production, but they do not consider the individual effort, that is, they do not compensate for the participation of children or elderly.

Illustration 6.4: Receipt and bag used for pick up. Photo in the right shows the receipt given to women every time carriers deliver *pacas*. Photo in the left shows yellow containers in which *pacas* are deposited after the selection at women's houses.

Husks are a seasonal product, and families' incomes are impacted accordingly. Demand for both labor and husks increase in the period of August to January, and decrease in the months of March to July; albeit the production takes place throughout the year. The increase and decrease obeys on the one hand the weather, as it gets colder people consume more *tamales*; on the other hand, during the second part of the year, diverse holidays take place that induce the consumption in the U.S. by migrants. At the time of research, (July) women said that they were receiving about two or three *pacas* a week. However, during peak season employees deliver *pacas* up to three times a week. That is, in the months of September to December the need for this product substantially grows. However, revenue from the selection of husks may not be enough to cover basic needs during the off-season and women may be forced to look for alternative livelihood strategies.

The second stage of the selection process takes place at warehouses. Most of these warehouses are located in Agua Dulce, el Chote y La Concha. Specifically, in Agua Dulce (see figure 4.1) alone there are about seven different warehouses that export corn husks to the U.S. Agua Dulce is a community located about 15 minutes away from El Chote (see figure 4.1). According to interviews, this might be the first community to export husks. It may not surprising then that migration flows started in early 1990s have had an influence on the developing of the industry. On the one hand, this locality has served as a major distribution hub over the last decade given its closeness to Papantla and El Chote. On the other hand, the economic crisis of the 1990s forced people to migrate, while many men went to northern states looking for employment opportunities, many women were left behind. In the midst of this situation, women needed to find sources of

income, so, the establishment of warehouses for selection and packing was very opportune. In fact, it is plausible that businessmen realized the conditions of necessity and took advantage of women's labor.

Local people supervise the majority of businesses, although business owners usually come from Guadalajara and San Luis Potosi. In this part of the process women are employed to work in warehouses, they are usually young single women who want to have a source of income. In the second stage, women select husks based on inquiries by customers. There are clients that require large bags of 17 kilos (see illustration 6.5) to be transported to Guadalajara, Monterrey and San Luis Potosi where they are packed and labeled in individual packages (464g, 250g, 150g) for the international market and there are others that sell husks locally. Women also select husks for the domestic market. Monterrey demands smaller and narrower husks because *tamales* are smaller, in contrast with buyers from Guadalajara that demand bigger and wider husks.

Illustration 6.5 Packages of 17 kilos of disked husks. Photo in the right show husks that are ready to be transported to other distribution centers. Photo in the left shows the label for export. Photo in the right shows libeling, with specifications of the use of sulfur as preservative.

Moreover, according to supervising managers in La Concha and Agua Dulce, it was revealed that women are expected to work during six days a week and for about 10 hours a day (8am-6pm). These women, as opposed to those who work at home, have a fixed salary of approximately Mex$130 a day. Employment conditions vary by warehouse. For example, one warehouse in Agua Dulce, employed women to work six days a week, eight hours a day (8 am-4pm) paying them Mex$600 a week; other businesses have different working arraignments. In terms of working conditions, all seem to be the same: small rooms with limited or no ventilation and with little or no time for breaks. Women must bring their own food, visitations are restricted, and information about the work they do and how they do it is confidential. Certain information was not disclosed because of security reasons and competition, that is, personnel did not speak about working conditions, recipients of the final products, nor retail price of the goods, because there is rivalry and distrust among exporters, and because of the recent waves of violence and robberies occurred during transit.

The profile of women who work in warehouses is different than those working at home. Women who work at home are mostly single mothers or housewives who have to take care of the elderly and children, and attend to domestic chores, therefore they cannot work for eight or ten hours a day in warehouses. By contrast, most of the women who work in the warehouses are still teenagers, who do not have children and live with their parents. After husks are sorted into the different categories, women pack husks in individual packets. In order to make them uniform and easier to pack, women cut the tip of the husk, and if they are too wide they also remove part of the husk. Then, women place them into plastic or cellophane bags (illustration 6.6).


Illustration 6.6 Final presentation of corn husks for export. Photo in the right shows husks in cellophane bag with where the point previously cut. Photo in the left shows husks packed in a sack using a circular base to make them uniform and easier to pack.

In this last stage of production, just as in the previous stages, women and men work separately, in different places. During fieldwork, this was observed first hand in a storehouse in Agua Dulce owned by an entrepreneur from Guadalajara. During the visit, gendered spaces became evident. Women were segregated and confined to two rooms where all the *pacas* were located. Men, in turn, were outside, in the patio, loading and unloading trucks, taking out husks from the ovens and supervising the production. When the manager was asked about why women were apart from men while doing activities, he said, "so, they are not mixed with men". To "mix" with men might indicate that women and men will flirt, form friendships or other types of relationships and therefore work less. His statement reaffirms attitudes, notions and assumptions already observed about gendered spaces and roles.

DISCUSSION: THE IMPLICATION OF THE CORN HUSK INDUSTRY FOR WOMEN AND MEN

Social constructions of femininity and masculinity influence the participation of men and women within the production and manufacturing of corn husks. As observed in

all of the stages of the process, extraction or removal of husks, bleaching, selection and packing, men and women take on different activities, perform in different spheres, and receive dissimilar treatment and compensation. The following discussion focuses on how overarching discourses of gender permeate this industry while highlighting the voice of farmers, workers, men, women, intermediaries, and exporters.

The first situation that exemplifies this gendered division of labor is the process of extraction and the subsequent use of disks and machetes by men and women respectively. Similar to what Ramirez & Hondagneu-Sotelo (2009) found in their study about gardeners in Los Angeles, where men perform outdoors and take on dangerous activities and women execute chores indoors and do light work, this is the case corn husk production. Men usually handle heavy machinery and tools whose use is riskier than what women are normally accustomed. Women do not do handle these implements because they are perceived as fragile and delicate. Evidence of these perceptions was found during visits to homes and warehouses. When participants were asked about why only men use the disks, a *campesino* in Poza Larga Miradores said, "My wife does not do it (cut off the leaves by disk) and I already cut a finger. I do not do it anymore, because I do not want to get hurt again. I ask somebody else to do it." Likewise, Raquel, an *elaboradora* in Agua Dulce, in an interview explained:

> Interviewer: Did you use the disk to cut off the leaves?
> Raquel: No, my husband did it
> Interviewer: Is it hard to do it?
> Raquel: No, it is not that hard, the issue is that one can get hurt, and you can lose too much blood, because the disk is very sharp, it is dangerous.

Lastly an engineer in Coyutla mentioned, "Women are the ones who participate the most in the industry because they have the ability to remove husks. In Entabladero, they cut off the husks by disk, but only men do it because it is more dangerous." These

quotes then elucidate differences between men and women as well as the perceived need to protect the latter. Because men assume the dominant role, they are assigned activities that are unsafe, as the *elaboradora* expressed, people can get easily hurt with the blade. It is my perception, however, that the use of machetes to remove the husks is equally as risky as the use of the disk: both are sharp tools and both are capable of providing serious injuries.

Moreover, when Alejandra, a producer who hires women to help her remove the husks, was asked about why only women do this job and not men, she said "women are more apt to do this job, and I feel like this work is light, even their children come to work with them". And Jorge, an intermediary in Las Chacas, argued:

> Interviewer: Who does remove the husks?
> Jorge: Women, women that I hire, a lot of women from nearby places, few men work, mostly women work on this.
> Interviewer: Why?
> Jorge: Who knows, it is the work of women.
> Interviewer: When did women start to work on this?
> Jorge: Since the beginning of this business.

Different ideas are reflected in these words. On the one hand, one could infer the conditions of poverty facing many communities in the Totonacapan, because many women go from nearby communities exclusively to work on this industry. On the other hand, the preference for women's labor over men's is embedded in the notion that women are more docile and thus more easily controlled in the work place (Tyner, 2003). More importantly, the preference indicate gendered biases in the performing of this job, the phrase "it's women's work" and "women are more apt" clearly reflect them. Lastly, in the realization of this job women and men reproduce patriarchal roles that reinforce notions of femininity and masculinity and a gendered division of labor.

Another situation that reflects that men and women are perceived to have different roles in society is their participation the labor market and subsequent economic compensation or wages. There are three scenarios in which it is possible to distinguish notions of patriarchy resulting in low or no salaries for women neither for children. In the first scenario, women pull off manually the husks and do not receive any salary as their work is seen as an extension of their domestic chores. Small farmers usually do not have the capacity to hire workers to remove husks, so members of the household take on this task. Households have been able to develop small enterprises where women and children are the foundation. Because they are not economically compensated, they enable a reduction in costs. As one farmer expressed: "women's participation helps us save money, that way we do not have to hire two workers… we have created our own enterprise." Furthermore, with their participation in the husk industry, women contribute to the household subsistence. A farmer explained: "we do not pay them (women), the money we save and we use it for household consumption." This is a similar scheme to the one observed by Zhang (2001) in China, she might also refer to elaboration of husks at home as "domestication of production" due to the absence of boundaries between the home and the workplace. The fact that women's work is not economically compensated could be seen as an expression of low appreciation and underestimation. However, if one takes into account the local context, it may be that women's work is appreciated in terms of the savings and contributions to the family business.

The second scenario is that of women who work for pay at home during the first stage of the selection process. Even though they work for several hours, their job and the way in which they are compensated (lower wages than men) are seen only as supplementary to that of the patriarchal figure. For women-headed households, this compensation may not be enough and they may need to search for another source of

income as well. For example Raquel (see chapter four), she works as an *elaboradora*, but also started to work in confectionery. Furthermore, although women are able to enter the labor market, they are still limited because they need to attend reproductive tasks in the home. It is important to note that it is normal in these communities to have extended family in the same household. However, in the absence of more employment opportunities and the lack of a husband or partner to maintain the household, such as the case of many women in the Totonacapan, specifically in Agua Dulce, the fact that women can do waged labor at home may be seen as an advantage. Working at home is an advantage in light of the conditions in which women work in warehouses. Raquel manifested that women who work in warehouses are not allowed to go out to lunch, and have long workdays of about 12 hours, so, she prefers to work at home, at her own pace and be able to cook and check on her children. She said that she would rather obtain a lower salary working at home than working under exploitative labor conditions.

In addition, whether work is performed at home with or without compensation, women receive assistance of children, so the work is done faster and business owners do not pay children any salary. Also, elders are able to help in the selection of the husks without receiving a wage. Thus, the household is an enterprise where economic compensation is absent and where children and elderly's work is also undervalued and seen as an extension of household tasks.

The third and last scenario is that of women who work in warehouses. This framework differs from previous in terms of the sphere where labor is carried out, but still reflects social constructions of femininity and patriarchy; that is, women have lower wages, work in the public sphere, but still do work that is considered light, and under poor conditions. Women who work manually removing husks are paid by production of *manojos* (piece meal), whereas men have a set wage. In the second stage of selection,

men and women have a fixed salary (payment schemes may vary according to the business owner, daily or weekly basis), yet women have to work more hours, receive lower payment, and perform under poor conditions such as crowed rooms with limited or no ventilation.

Thus, the corn husk industry is embedded in a capitalist economy that benefits from gender based discriminatory norms. As Tyner (2003, p. 67) observed, "In the labor market, employers may benefit from the reduction in labor costs through the employment of women by capitalizing on patriarchal attitudes, social relations and stereotypes." Employers may assume that women's salary is merely complementary to the sustenance of the household, and thereby justify lower wages. In this regard, Pessar also suggested that different industries employ women, specifically in the manufacturing and service sector due to the "patriarchal and racist assumptions that women can afford to work for less" (Pessar, 2003 p. 23 citing Espiritu, 1997).

The last situation also reflects gender biases that are present during the production of corn husks. When the supervisor was asked about why only women worked packing husks he said "to keep them busy, so they do not have bad thoughts." His statement reinforces the sexist idea that unoccupied women, left to their own devices, and not under the control of their families' will somehow get into trouble. On the other hand, Sara made the generalization that women work harder than men and that is why she only employs women.

After reviewing these scenarios and the way in which women and men participate in making the product, one can conclude that women and men have been affected in different ways. For some women, the elaboration at home of husks has meant an extra burden. In addition to their daily chores, now women need to find time to work in this industry. The lack of economic compensation for their labor and their contribution to the

household is substantial and as such should be valued and estimated. For other women, the industry has meant an opportunity to go outside the household, become more economically independent and have a source of income. However, what is the price that these women have to pay? It is arguably quite high. They work under exploitative and poor conditions, they are subject of several restrictions and wages are very low, jobs are seasonal, there are not health benefits, equipment protection, pension plans neither paid vacations. In other words, this is an informal economy, and business owners are not willing to pay higher prices neither offer benefits to workers. Yet, in the context of limited employment opportunities, the option of working in the husk industry seems very opportune.

The fact that there is a gendered division of labor could also reflect the overall social structure of communities. On the one side, it is an indicator of how patriarchal norms are deeply rooted and how they remain, in several ways, uncontested and unchallenged. At the same time, communities as well as gender constructions are changing and in constant evolution (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2003; McDowell, 1992). The fact that many men, and in less proportion women, migrated set the groundwork for a different relation and roles inside the household and community. As a result, women have assumed roles that were historically assigned to men, such as the breadwinner, participating in community meetings, and overseeing cultivation. Moreover, male head of household migration led women to participate in waged labor, both inside and outside the household, as they were in need for sources of income when remittances diminished or were not forthcoming. The rise of the corn husk industry is partially the result of migrants' needs in the U.S. (see chapter three and five), where the growing demand for this product has driven the increased participation of both men and women in its

production. Thus, this business is intimately related with migration processes and gender relations.

Also, sulfur practices are embedded in gender constructions. That is to say that the perceived notion that women are more fragile and delicate does not allow them to handle sulfur, as it is a dangerous activity. Also, the bleaching process requires considerable physical strength, as men have to move *pacas* from one place to another. Also, as women are depicted as delicate and weak (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2003; McDowell, 1997; Pessar, 2003; Zhang, 2001) their physical and social differences influence their participation throughout the making of the product. Although, men are much more exposed to the effects of its use, drifting fumes irritate women's noses and throats and may cause other severe alterations. Some men have already seen the damages of sulfur as they have suffered from injuries to their lungs, eyes, ears, hands and knees. However, many people are not aware of the harms that the substance can cause. Despite the health implications, *elaboradores* are forced to utilize sulfur to whiten the husks. In addition, business owners do not provide men with any protective equipment, so they are completely exposed. For example, one intermediary in Comalteco spoke about the dangers of sulfur and expressed his desire to be better equipped in order to bleach husks, "I have not bleached the husks because the sulfur damages the lungs. In order to use it, we need to have adequate equipment that protects the face because the steam is poisonous to you". Similarly, Roberto mentioned that the liquid used to bleach the husks damages the eyes: "The liquid is harmful, because the lungs absorb all the steam. Additionally, our eyes get damaged, because they are exposed to sulfur steams, it burns your eyes". As a result, companies as well as the government should enforce some protection policies in favor of employees. Moreover, larger implications of the use of sulfur are yet to come. So far, some interlocutors have suffered injuries; however it has not been enough for people

to stop using it. Despite the sporadic reported cases of injuries and given the condition of poverty that is present throughout these communities, the need for a source of income and employment is a strong incentive for people to work in this industry. Further research should analyze implications for health related to long exposure to the substance for men and women, children and elder.

An analysis of gender and the division of labor is then useful to influence the way that policies, tools and mechanisms are designed and implemented. Based on previous analysis, a more inclusive framework needs to be created in order to benefit men and women equally. In terms of policy, for long periods, men were recipients of social programs, but currently, programs are now focused on women. However, the inclusion and gender equality should go beyond the scope of being recipients of cash transfers. On the other hand, there is still a long way to go in order for women to be incorporated to the labor market at the same proportion than men as many of them are limited by their "reproductive character".

Finally, this analysis of gender contributes to feminist literature, as there are no studies on the production of corn husks from a gender perspective. This case study serves to illustrate how overarching discourses of gendered division of labor engrained in social practices are generated and manifested within the production of a domestic and export product. Furthermore, this case reveals how gender relations in indigenous communities have been modified by larger economic and political changes. That is, gender relations are influenced by a series of factors such as migration, so this case shows how migration in Veracruz has led to the emergence of an alternative market that in turn provided labor opportunities in different ways to men and women, resulting also in a reconfiguration of gender roles.

CONCLUSIONS

As it has been shown throughout this chapter, social constructions of gender, labor and space influence the participation of men and women in the cycle of production of corn husks. While the way in which men and women participate in the industry serves to perpetuate traditional patriarchal norms, the participation of women in waged labor challenge traditional notions and assumptions of gendered labor, as shown in the case of women who work in the selection and packing of husks. As Hondogneu-Sotelo (2003) states, gendered norms are not fixed, but rather flexible and in constant evolution. By working within the corn husk industry -whether inside or outside of the home, women are becoming the breadwinners and sustenance of their households. In doing so they are assuming roles historically assigned to men, thus reconfiguring traditional norms in the Totonacapan.

Different bodies of literature support the idea that women's employment can contribute to changing the gendered nature of economic exclusion and participation in the decision-making process (Grasmuck & Espinal, 2000). However, in the case of Totonacapan households, more research needs to be carried out to actually provide insights as to how gendered roles are negotiated and contested inside the households after women enter into the labor market. Work in migration studies has shown that as men and women find jobs outside the domestic sphere, both participate more equally in budgetary processes and distribution of household chores (Hirsch, 1999). However, this might not be the case in rural settings like the Totonacapan, since patriarchal stereotypes and *machismo* are still deeply rooted.

Along these lines, further research should be conducted to analyze the impact of returnee migrants to the communities like Agua Dulce and La Concha given the high rates of emigration. Specifically, with male migration, women have assumed typically

male roles; the return of the "patriarch" may alter or have a great impact in the life and experiences of these women. Thus, a study should focus on the how gender roles and power relations are negotiated and challenged at the core receiving households, as well as the implications of their return.

Other studies highlight the fact that education and literacy are elements that favor a more equal participation inside the household and help to diminish gender differences between men and women (Hirsch, 1999). Yet, the majority of women interviewed for this study showed low rates of literacy and schooling. In light of this, the odds that women will emerge from deeply rooted patterns of marginalization seem small. Nonetheless, as women begin to work outside the household, to receive cash transfer from state, to be the focus of different social programs and to present higher levels of migration (although not in the same level than men), the chances to have a more equal participation at home could be higher.

By the same token, in the last decade, economic funds have been given to women to produce handicrafts, fatten pigs and other products, under the assumption that such projects generate higher incomes and empower women to gain autonomy and improve the health of their families, helping to alleviate poverty in society at large (Grasmuck & Espinal, 2000). However, as shown in chapter three only little government support has been given to the corn husk industry in Veracruz. Since the participation of women in this industry has, to a certain extent, proven beneficial for many households, the business should receive more support and funds to increase regulations in order to improve labor conditions for women who are employed in exploitative conditions. Although, further research should be conducted to analyze if in fact women feel more empowered and have gained autonomy in households where the patriarchal figure is not absent.

Finally, although women have entered waged labor, they are still limited by domestic responsibilities, cultural and gender norms (Grasmuck & Espinal, 2000). So, there are still many changes that need to be made in order to achieve more fair and equal working conditions. In order to create mechanisms, policies and structures that favor women, the local context in which gender constructions are framed must be considered, without ignoring overarching discourses of power and gender inequities.

CHAPTER SEVEN: CONCLUSIONS

Given the novelty of the corn husk industry and the limited existing literature on this topic, this thesis should not be taken as a conclusive work but rather a contribution to understanding the emergence, diffusion, and primary implications of such a business. This last chapter is structured into four sections. The first contains some preliminary conclusions regarding the *totomoxtle* case study. The second section explores the business potential and advantages of *totomoxtle* due to its nature –an ethnic product. The third provides a series of recommendations for the State because its further intervention in this business could lead to better living conditions for Totonacapan residents. Finally, the fourth section offers some directions for future research.

TOTOMOXTLE CONCLUSIONS

The corn husk industry case study in Veracruz leads to various conclusions regarding the participation of farmers, intermediaries, and the State, as well as the larger implications for communities, men, and women. As previously indicated, the beginning of the business involved the active participation of local farmers, people working in transportation, and business owners from central and northern cities of Mexico, such as Guadalajara, Monterrey, and San Luis Potosí. However, throughout the rise of the market, the State had little involvement, and its contributions were limited to small loans to corn farmers. Therefore, I conclude that the development of the *totomoxtle* industry was more an organic response to the economic and political reforms faced by farmers rather than an intervention from the state to mitigate the effects of the drastic financial crisis.

In different countries and regions, the application of the neoliberal framework produced the destruction of livelihoods and environments (Liverman & Vilas, 2006). The model was seen as a top-down policy for which many communities did not have a prompt response. However, the case of the *totomoxtle* industry can be seen as a bottom-up answer to larger policy and global processes. In top-down schemes, farmers seem less capable of reacting to macro changes and are often portrayed as disempowered; nonetheless, this case is an example of how indigenous communities are resilient and give rise to new livelihoods, strategies, and trajectories.

As previously discussed, the effects of the industry are both positive and negative, including direct and indirect employment opportunities, a diversified source of income, labor exploitation, and health damages. In terms of benefits, the *totomoxtle* seemed to offer jobs opportunities for intermediaries, *jornaleros*, *elaboradores*, and other people working indirectly in the industry. Also, it constituted an alternative source of income for farmers who were largely dependent on corn. Overall, the rise of the industry led to higher commercial activity in the region and integrated communities in new ways. On the other hand, the industry proved counterproductive in terms of labor conditions. Most men and women spend long hours at warehouses either removing, cutting off, assembling, sorting, selecting, or packing husks in small rooms with little or no ventilation. Moreover, they work under an exploitative scheme: they do not have protective equipment, health insurance and benefits, fair salaries, or pension plans. Finally, this business has affected *elaboradores*, who are in direct contact with sulfur and also women who handle husks after they are bleached. The exposure to that substance has caused negative health effects on the eyes, lungs, and knees of workers in addition to nose and throat irritation, among other injuries; these effects are likely to continue and increase if proper handling and

training in the use of sulfur and protective equipment are not given to people who are in contact with sulfur, either directly or indirectly.

In the context of low prices and massive imports, the historical and economic value of corn seems to be disappearing. As analyzed in previous chapters, maize has been present in the lives of the Totonacs for centuries. It was seen as an important part of their culture, religion and tradition, and it meant a livelihood strategy. Yet, the restructuring of the economy had larger implications that caused, among other things, a sharp fall in corn prices and increased domestic and international migration. As people started to move, the local knowledge, traditional farming methods, and appreciation of corn also declined. In light of these changes and due to the realization of the potential of corn husks, farmers opted for modified seeds that would provide wider and larger husks. Instead of looking for ways to increase grain production, their intention was to create a natural hybrid seed that would produce higher *totomoxtle* yields. This shift might imply a loss in the cultural value of corn. Higher returns can motivate farmers to produce corn; however, as the market becomes saturated the price would decrease, thus discouraging production. In the face of this risk, farmers might need to find strategies to mitigate sudden drops in prices.

Furthermore, the increasing demand in domestic and international markets over the last two decades has driven the growth of the maize husk industry as well as more employment opportunities in the Totonacapan. Given the strengthening of the business, rural poverty can diminish but cannot be completely alleviated. The demand for such goods is likely to continue in light of continued migration, the availability of ethnic products in new destinations, Latino population growth, and a shift in the American palate and preference for these kinds of products. Nevertheless, the fact that more U.S. entrepreneurs are realizing the potential value of the industry and are taking advantage of it south of the border might reduce employment opportunities in Veracruz. Given that

commodity markets are uncertain, expected profits can simply decrease, thereby affecting families' income –as in the case of *totomoxtle*. Therefore, the odds that the corn husk industry will be an instrument for poverty alleviation and development seem low, particularly if farmers are not able to increase their competitiveness. In this context, the state could provide guidance and support that facilitate the advancement of corn farmers, such as capital, transportation, and training.

Finally, looking at the development of the industry from a gender perspective, there are also multiple effects. There is evidence to support the existence of gendered places and a gendered division of labor in which men and women operate in different spheres, receive differential treatment, work under different conditions, and carry out typical activities based on social constructions of gender. On the one hand, many women found in this business a source of income, whether working at home or in warehouses. Although, those who work in the public sphere challenge a gendered division of labor, their economic compensation still reflects notions of patriarchy, where a woman's wage is seen as complementary, thereby justifying lower salaries than men. For women who work at home but who are paid, the industry represents the opportunity to have a salary while at the same time allowing them to carry out reproductive tasks. It could be argued that women are limited by the responsibility of sustaining the household, yet for many women the opportunity to work at home has some advantages over working in factories. Because it was not the initial purpose of this work to examine the way in which income has modified existing relationships between men and women after the latter entered the wage market, research should be carried out to understand the larger impact of this industry on household participants. Ultimately, because the corn husk is a product that can bring more employment opportunities, its nature as an ethnic product can be leveraged.

NOSTALGIC AND ETHNIC PRODUCTS, A BUSINESS OPPORTUNITY

Veracruz possesses a comparative advantage over other states in the production and commercialization of *totomoxtle*. Totonacapan farmers can decide to specialize in the making and exporting of corn husks because its production is cheaper than other goods and they have the experience and expertise to do so.

Although the introduction of ethnic products to the U.S. can be difficult and expensive for small business owners, these products possess a set of advantages over others that make them attractive for sale. For example, there is an established preference on the basis of ethnicity, culture, and nostalgia that makes them highly differentiated. Subsequently, the consumption of these products is permanent; that is, it does not obey fashion but rather caters to the culture and traditions of migrant populations, and the craving of the American palate. Given the permanent consumption, the fact that consumers are willing to pay higher prices than in the country of origin and the fact that companies and local stores do not have to make large investment in the promotion of ethnic and nostalgic products represent an attractive business opportunity for small and large companies (CEPAL, 2003). Businesses might decide to target migrants in the U.S. because they are familiar with those products, so even if small business owners do not have the resources to promote them, there is a real and potential demand. Hence, migrants' consumption is related more to nostalgic feelings or the need to satisfy a desire as opposed to being a response to market strategies. In addition, the retail price of the product can be considerably higher in the U.S. than in the place of origin. This means that buyers are able to compensate for high transportation costs. Migrants and non-migrants, in turn, are willing to pay this price to meet their needs and desires for such goods. *Totomoxtle*, for example, is one product that passes the cost of imports onto consumers and whose price is higher than in Mexico and other countries of Central America.

Lastly, the demand for these products could grow due to their availability and the increasing preference of non-migrants. Restaurants and shops that offer ethnic products, such as *totomoxtle*, are opening more than ever before. This greater accessibility of products, along with substantial purchasing power and the greater preference of this good over others by non-migrants has led to greater consumption. This consumption in turn can provide major labor opportunities for farmers, intermediaries, and exporters.

However, there is a lot of potential in the organic market as it has greatly increased over the last years. The U.S is one country consuming large quantities of organic goods, and so, farmers might be able to take advantage of this preference and produce organic *totomoxtle*, which would fetch a higher price. Thus, there are various benefits of exporting *totomoxtle* that nevertheless, could be greater if farmers had some kind of support from the State.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE STATE AND BUSINESSES

Had the State shown greater participation in the emergence of the *totomoxtle* industry, the current scenario might look different for producers. Instead of a monopolization of the business and few benefits for growers, the trade could have brought higher profits to smallholders and better labor conditions. The intervention of the local government, businesses, and multilateral agencies can still, however, influence the current and future conditions in which commercial exchange occurs.

In economic terms, the State and Multilateral Aid Agencies could contribute with infrastructure, tractors, trucks, warehouses, and offices around which farmers could organize and make decisions about the production and manufacturing processes. The

access to vehicles and collaboration would allow farmers to obtain higher returns on the basis of direct delivery and price consensus.

Because the role of the State is not limited to granting credits or cash transfers, but constitutes a more holistic support of its citizens, the intervention of the State can be understood, first, as training directed to farmers in order to better production practices. Because the region experienced high levels of migration over the last years, local farming expertise has been drained. Given the abandonment of old techniques and the adoption of new methods for producing corn, soils have been damaged. In addition, everyday new products and chemicals are available to farmers, and so an orientation regarding the advantages and disadvantages of using certain products as well as their proper use could further improved harvests. Also, with the increased use of fertilizers and deforestation, good practices can improve soil fertility and help regenerate the soils, which would benefit not only farmers but also the larger community.

Second, the State can exert control over manufacturing procedures, more specifically in terms of the use of sulfur, which, as previously outlined, has severe health implications. The availability of sulfur should be better regulated, and awareness about its effects should be promoted. The government could favor laws that improve the labor conditions of workers through the Secretary of Labor.

Third, the State via BANCOMEXT[31] can provide guidance in marketing and in the export process. Many small farmers and even intermediaries do not possess knowledge of market behaviors. Moreover, they are not aware of the domestic and international requirements regarding the use of preservatives, labeling, packing, quality

[31] Banco Nacional de Comercio Exterior (in Spanish) is an entity of the Mexican Government whose mission is to promote the development of small and medium-sized export businesses as well as the financing of foreign trade and the generation of foreign currencies in the country (visit http://www.bancomext.com).

standards, sanitary and phytosanitary norms, and other documentation required to commercialize their products. Therefore, workshops and other educational material and outreach that address these issues would be highly beneficial and would provide farmers and intermediaries with the tools to improve product quality and negotiate better prices. By the same token, with BANCOMEXT's assistance, farmers could have access to financing, consulting, and project coordination.

Fifth, the State can look for ways to collect data on the value and volume of trade. In the first place, the government through SAGARPA could measure the production of corn husks. Second, the government could trace exports and estimate the size and proceeds from the sale. That way, information regarding production, value, and volume of *totomoxtle* could contribute to developing business projects, marketing plans, and ways to leverage the industry.

Finally, the State can act as a link between producers and the private sector. Despite the lack of interest and support to the corn husk industry in Veracruz, the state can serve as a vehicle to bring actors together with the intention of bettering the conditions in which farmers commercialize. That is, the government can be a bridge to initiate conversations between private companies interested in trading and exporting the corn by-product, and the farmers who want to increase profits. In an era in which "social corporate responsibility" is becoming more important, companies might look for a way to partner with individuals because of the economic benefits that trade can bring but also because the potential social advantages that the partnership can bring to individuals. In particular, Mexican or American companies could collaborate with Totonacapan farmers in the export of *totomoxtle.* The former would contribute with capital, skills and marketing expertise, information regarding norms, quality standards, and production practices regarding compliance with the requirements of the international market; farmers

in turn would contribute their local knowledge and the production of corn husks. This partnership would not only provide higher economic benefits, such as better payments schemes, labor conditions (hours, places, equipment) and health insurance and pension plans, but would also formalize the industry. Other joint venture and partnership schemes should be evaluated with goal of greater equity between private companies and producers.

BEYOND *TOTOMOXTLE:* DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Because this work is a first approach to the corn husk industry in Veracruz, there are many areas that still need to be studied. In particular, there are four topics that merit further investigation. The first topic is the future of the industry and its sustainability in Veracruz. On the one hand, there are concerns related to recent and increasing waves of violence and insecurity. As previously discussed, intermediaries have expressed concern over trips to the U.S. because robberies and assaults have been more frequent. This fear can translate into an increase in the price of *totomoxtle* because intermediaries must assume more risks during delivery. At the same time security concerns can be detrimental and discourage production. On the other hand, as King (2007) pointed out, U.S. businessmen are looking to participate in the corn husk industry by producing their own husks and hiring people to work in the industry and to avoid risks. This initiative can be unfavorable for Totonacapan communities because their sources of income and employment could be highly reduced. Conversely, on the basis of receiving more support and security from the State, the future of the industry might be more promising. Then, further research could look at the impact of violence and security risks on the production and distribution of *totomoxtle* as well as the impact of State involvement.

Second, information should be collected to evaluate the broader effects of sulfur use. As previously outlined, the sulfur can be highly toxic, but thus far none of the people with whom I have spoken use protective equipment when working with sulfur. Law enforcement and company regulations could be a partial solution to the problem; however, research could address the substitution of sulfur with other less toxic products that provide similar results (bleaching and cleaning the husks). Also, further studies can analyze the extent of the damage and injuries suffered by those handling the substance.

Third, a case study on the consumption of ethnic products across gender and generations could be carried out. The study might look at the consumption patterns not only of *totomoxtle* but perhaps also other corn products. Research could reveal preferences in the U.S. by migrants for imported over locally produced goods and brands, and the percentage of income spent on the purchasing of those goods, among others. Also, it could look at how men and women purchase different products while also examining how migration has changed a gendered role regarding tasks, such as cooking, which has been considered a primarily feminine chore.

Fourth, from a gender perspective, research needs to address the impact of the return of male migrants to Veracruz. Specifically, a study could examine how men and women in the Totonacapan negotiate and challenge gender roles and power relations as well as the implications of their return, given that many women assumed control of the household in the absence of men and given their active participation in the corn husk industry. The arrival of the patriarchal figure might alter household dynamics and the experiences of these women and their children. By the same token, scholars doing feminist research could provide insights into how gendered roles are arranged in households after women in the Totonacapan enter the labor market.

APPENDIX A: QUESTIONNAIRE FOR SMALL FARMERS AND INTERMEDIARIES

Guía de entrevista para pequeños productores e intermediarios

Localidad: _____ Municipio:_____
Familia: _____ Fecha: _____

- ✓ Objetivo de la entrevista
- ✓ Anónimo y confidencial / Grabación

Quienes viven aquí y que actividades realizan?

Nombre	Edad	Sexo	Lengua Indígena	Actividad

1. Proceso de significacion del maiz

a) ¿Para usted, qué es el maíz?
b) ¿Qué representa?
c) ¿Qué beneficios le deja el maiz?
d) ¿Por qué lo siembra?
e) ¿Desde cuándo lo siembra?
f) ¿Conoce alguna historia relacionada con el maíz?

2. Cambio en el aprovechamiento del grano por hoja

a) ¿De lo que cosecha, qué tanto es para autoconsumo y que tanto es para venta?
b) ¿De lo que produce que le deja más dinero?
c) ¿Cómo era antes la venta del maíz?
d) ¿Ahora cómo es?
e) ¿Por qué cambio? A qué se debe?
f) ¿Desde cuándo empezó a vender la hoja?
g) ¿Quién inicio la venta de hoja?
h) ¿Cuáles son los principales problemas a los que se enfrenta como productor de hoja de maíz?

3. Proceso de distribución y comercialización de la hoja

a) ¿Cómo es el proceso de discado de hoja?
b) ¿Cuál es el proceso de venta?
c) ¿Usted los promociona o alguien llega a su casa y se los compra?
d) ¿A quién le vende los productos (intermediarios, mercados, empresas)?
e) ¿En qué presentación la vende? Por rollo, por paca, por kilo?
f) ¿Hay algún proceso de transformación de la hoja? Usted lo realiza?
a) ¿A cómo vende la hoja?
b) ¿Quién fija los precios de compra y venta de la hoja?
c) ¿Cuáles son los obstáculos para la comercialización y distribución de la hoja?
g) ¿Cuál cree que sería una solución para estos problemas?
h) Mapa de distribución

4. Apoyos y Programas

a) ¿Qué apoyos ha recibido del gobierno?
b) ¿Cuáles recibe actualmente?
c) ¿Se han implementado programas de ayuda en su comunidad? ¿De qué? ¿Han funcionado?

5. Proyectos en la comunidad

a) ¿Hay en la región grupos que hayan tratado de crear alguna estructura organizacional, cooperativas, agencias o asociaciones?
b) ¿Usted participa en alguna?
c) ¿Qué beneficios le brinda ser parte de esta?
d) ¿Si no es participante, le gustaría formar parte de alguna?
e) ¿Cómo cree que sería su participación en esta organización?
f) ¿De qué manera cooperaria usted en la organización?
g) ¿Qué cree que le hace falta a su casa o a su comunidad? La imagina usted diferente? Cómo?
h) ¿De los recursos que usted tiene, qué podría aportar para que se hicieran los cambios?
i) ¿Cómo se podría lograr el cambio? Que cree usted que podría hacerse? Que se necesita para que haya un cambio?
j) ¿Puede usted dibujar un mapa de su comunidad

Migración

a) ¿Ha migrado alguien de su familia O conocidos? ¿Solos o acompañados?
b) ¿Desde cuándo se fueron?
c) ¿A dónde?

d) ¿Han regresado o ya se quedaron allá?
e) ¿Sabe en qué trabajan?
f) ¿Le mandan dinero? Cada cuánto?
g) ¿Por qué ha migrado la gente?
h) ¿Y que pasa cuando se van? ¿Qué hacen las esposas y los hijos cuando se van solos?
i) ¿Usted que piensa de la migración?
j) ¿Ve que su comunidad haya cambiado debido a la migración?

8. Datos estadísticos
Datos del terreno:

a) ¿Es usted propietario de la tierra?
b) ¿Cuál es la totalidad del terreno?
c) ¿Cuántas ha ocupa para producción?
d) ¿Cuántas ha. son para ganado?
e) ¿Cuántas ha. renta a otras personas?
f) ¿Cuántas ha. tiene en desuso?

¿Cuántos trabajan en su parcela?

¿Es trabajo familiar?

Datos de Producción

Semilla: criollo Hibrido

Cultivo (último ciclo completo)	Ha.Sembradas (HA)	Produc.Total (TM)	Rend.Prom. (TM/HA)
Maiz (milpa)			
Maiz (no milpa)			

¿Qué otros productos siembra?
¿Tiene animales, ganado?

Agrícola (siembra)	Pecuario (vacas, marranos)	Pesquero	Forestal (leña, madera)	Mano de obra

¿Cuáles son sus principales fuentes de ingreso?

Trabajo	Negocio familiar Artesanías, antojitos	Venta de productos	Programas de subsidio	Remesas

¿En qué gasta sus ingresos?
¿Ahorra?
¿Reinvierte?

APPENDIX B: LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

Secuencia de entrevistas realizadas en el Totonacapan				
Nombre	Comunidad	Municipio	Grabacion	Ocupacion
Jose Matias Ambrosio	Las Chacas	Coyutla	si	Acopiador
Teofilo Vargas Gomez	Coyutla	Coyutla	si	Productor
Aurelia Lopez Perez	Coyutla	Coyutla	si	Productor
Don Silvestre	Las Chacas	Coyutla		Productor
Sagarpa	Espinal	Espinal		SAGARPA
Fomento Agropecuario	Espinal	Espinal		Fomento
Ignacio Trinidad Castillo	Poza Larga	Poza Larga	si	Productor
Jose Luna Juarez	Poza Larga	Poza Larga	si	Productor
Josefa Castaneda Francisco	Santa Ana	Coyutla	si	Productor
Miguel Antonio Jimenez	Mecatlan	Mecatlan	si	Organizacion Maiz
Juan Pablo Salinas Garcia	Mecatlan	Mecatlan	si	Productor
Elias Santiago Cruz	Filomeno	Filomeno	no	Secretario del Ayuntamiento
Eloina Huerta Mtz	Comalteco	Espinal	si	Esposa de acopiador
Matilde Ramon Cruz	Ojite	Coxquihui	si	Esposa de acopiador
Carmelo Hernandez Palma	Ojite	Coxquihui	si	Productor
Gaudencio de Luna de Luna	Zozocolco	Zozocolco	si	Dir. Del Depto de Desarrollo Rural
Joel Campo Garcia	Zozocolco	Zozocolco	si	Productor
Guadalupe Jimenez	Las Lomas	Coyutla	si	Viuda de productor
Jorge Uribe guzman	Las Lomas	Coyutla	si	Trabajador y acopiador de hoja
Simon Cano	Las Lomas	Coyutla	no	Productor, acopiador y distribuidor de hoja
"Lupita, casa azul"	Entabladero	Espinal	si	Productora, acopiadora y distribuidora de hoja
Casa Roja, el Chote	Chote	Papantla	si	Acopiador hoja
Primera Distribuidora Agua Dulce	Agua Dulce	Papantla	no	Distribuidor de hoja
Agustin Hdez "La Suprema"	Agua Dulce	Papantla	no	Acopiador y distribuidor
Amitaid Martinez	Agua Dulce	Papantla	si	Secretario del Ayuntamiento
Teodora Romero	Agua Dulce	Papantla	si	Elaboradora de hoja
Maria del Carmen Navarro Guerra	Agua Dulce	Papantla	si	Elaboradora de hoja

Adolfo Bastian Parra (Piquito de oro)	Entabladero	Espinal	si	Productor, acopiador y distribuidor de hoja
Cirilo (encargado de la bodega)	La Concha	Papantla	si	Encargado y prodcutor
Eduardo Morales Vivian	La Concha	Papantla	si	Hijo de acopiador
Elaborador de hoja	La Concha	Papantla	si	Elaboradora de hoja, junto con hijo (video)
Joel (Julianes)	Las Chacas	Coyutla	si	Productor, acopiador y distribuidor de hoja

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