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Jodi L. Biskup

Darcy L. Boellstorff

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THE EFFECTS OF A LONG-TERM DROUGHT ON THE ECONOMIC ROLES OF HACENDADO AND EJIDATARIO WOMEN IN A MEXICAN EJIDO

Jodi L. Biskup and Darcy L. Boellstorff

Data is drawn from the 1995 summer field school in applied anthropology and appropriate technology held in the Mexican state of Nuevo Leon. University of Nebraska-Lincoln students worked as a field team studying the impact of economic development and social initiatives on a rural former ejido. This paper focuses on how a severe regional drought has transformed the economic roles of ejido women of the hacendado and ejidatario classes. Data was gathered using ethnographic field techniques such as participant-observation and interviews. Preliminary analysis shows that women react to the drought by seeking alternative means of generating income. These include the production of handicrafts as well as selling their labor for housecleaning and laundry services.

The June 1995 field school in applied anthropology and appropriate technology provided University of Nebraska-Lincoln students an opportunity to experience the interrelationship between applied anthropology and development issues through the simultaneous involvement in ethnographic research and a small-scale development project. The field school was conducted in the former *ejido* Emilio Carranza, a communal land unit created during the agrarian reforms following the Mexican Revolution of 1939 (Map 1). Located in the Mexican state of Nuevo Leon, Emilio Carranza is situated in the Sierra Madre mountains. The semi-arid rocky soils support a population

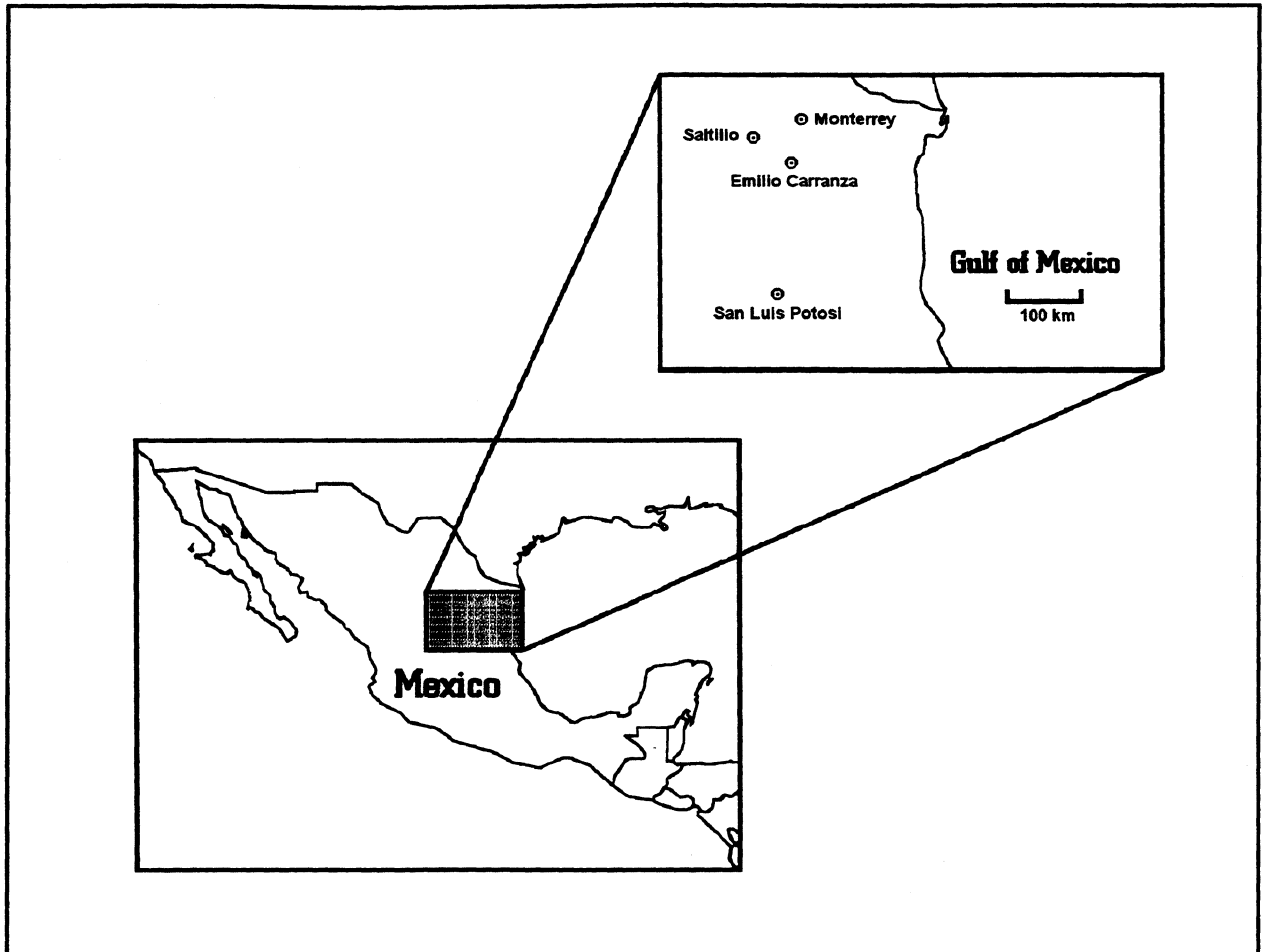
numbering less than 100 persons. The primary language is Spanish.

The original purpose of this three week study was to gather information about the different roles of the 35 or 40 women in the village. However, as we progressed in our fieldwork a prominent local issue emerged that altered our study. During the previous eight to twelve months there had been a severe drought in the region, locally referred to as "*El Seco*" [The Dry], or "*La Sequia*" [The Drought]. Crops were withering, and consequently, livestock were suffering and dying. Our interviews invariably ended with a discussion about the drought and its impact on the people.

Jodi L. Biskup, Anthropology, University of Nebraska-Lincoln 68588

Darcy L. Boellstorff, Environmental Studies in Anthropology, University of Nebraska-Lincoln 68588

The Nebraska Anthropologist
Vol. 12, No. 1, 1995-1996, pp. 7-13



Map 1. General location of ejido Emilio Carranza, Nuevo Leon, Mexico. Map by D. Boellstorff.

As the field school proceeded we modified the focus of our research to study the influence of the drought on the economic roles of women of the hacendado and ejidatario classes in Emilio Carranza. The severity of the drought caused many to go outside of their homes to generate income. This current paper describes the region, the methods and limitations in our fieldwork

research, a presentation of oral interview data, and a preliminary analysis and discussion of our findings.

The Ejido

Historically, Emilio Carranza was founded on the Spanish *hacendado* tradition, in which people of European descent, termed *hacendados*, owned the

land and people of Indigenous descent, referred to as *campesinos*, were the rural workers on the land. At the end of the Mexican Revolution in 1939, the hacendado system was put to an end. In Emilio Carranza the immense *haciendas* were broken down into 45 large landholdings, called *parcelas*. The *campesinos* were allowed to live on the *parcelas* with the condition that they would work the land. Some aspects of the revolutionary reforms were not instituted in Emilio Carranza until 30 years later. The members of the *ejido* are referred to here as the *ejidatario* class.

The inhabitants are primarily *mestizos*, peoples of mixed indigenous and European ancestry that have occupied the area for over 150 years. Cash crop (pecans and avocados) and subsistence farming (including tomatoes and peaches) are the principal occupations. The families are patriarchal; men have the responsibility to provide for their families and the women remain in the home to tend the children. The families of the area include members extended beyond the nuclear core. Fictive kin, such as godparents, are an integral part of this society. Roman Catholicism and indigenous belief systems play a role in all aspects of everyday life.

From our observations and interviews that initially focused upon women's roles, we noticed many cultural norms that prohibit women from full participation in the most visible daily activities. Women do not take part in such activities as volleyball, baseball, or meeting at the public store to converse. Women of the region do not wear shorts

in public, despite the very warm temperatures in the summer.

Research Limitations

Our research was limited due to a number of factors. First, the three week length of the field school did not provide enough time to build the personal rapport, or to pursue opportunities for community involvement as participants with the local residents. Successful anthropological field work necessitates the careful selection of key informants, a process that often requires more than a short-term visit to a community. A student handbook for anthropological fieldwork notes that "selecting a good informant is, in its own way, a delicate art that most profitably grows out of the participant observation experience" (Crane and Angrosino 1992:56). While the instructors of the field school had made prior contact with the community and established their own comfortable connections with several residents, the students were new faces to the community. Changing our research topic from "roles of women" to "effects of the drought on women" reduced further the overall time available for collecting data. A total of six women were interviewed, and ten women were observed.

Acclimatizing to the many changes in our personal surroundings necessitated a large portion of our time. We were aware that "even a trained anthropologist is apt to experience several kinds of shock (emotional as well as physical) in the first few days or weeks in the field" (Crane and Angrosino 1992:68). Being new to the fieldwork

experience meant that the culture shock may have taken a bit longer to work through. By the end of our three week visit we were still familiarizing ourselves with the new area, traditions, and customs.

The language of the region was often a barrier. We had attended formal Spanish language instruction in the United States and in other Spanish-speaking countries. However, the people of the region utilized a distinctive Spanish dialect that incorporated colloquial terms unfamiliar to us. Effective communication was sometimes difficult.

Other drawbacks included the lack of transportation which made it difficult for us to get to our informants. We were also severely limited in our sample-size and sample-variation. All of our key informants belong to the same elder generation. The younger inhabitants generally leave the ejido to attend universities and schools, or to seek employment in the larger surrounding cities.

And finally, our gender constrained us from participating in many of the (familiar to us) leisure time activities available in Emilio Carranza. Like the female residents of the ejido, we found it was socially unacceptable to play volleyball, baseball, or participate in the after-dinner conversation practiced by the males. The women's activities that we could observe, and participate in, included more utilitarian *tortilla* making and laundry washing.

Field School Methods

Data collection was pursued with a team approach and consisted of using a combination of unstructured and semi-structured interviewing techniques. We included random and participant observation of women in their daily activities. Our research was validated by triangulation, comparing the data from interviews and observations of several informants covering the same topics. Working as a multi-discipline team proved advantageous, as we were able to exchange our findings, analyses, and ideas.

Unstructured interviews were the most common type of data collection used in our research. This interview type allowed for minimum control over the informant's responses, while enabling us to see how the informant interpreted our general question. Semi-structured interviewing was used only at the end of our research when there were a few, specific questions that needed to be answered. Often, we would restructure and reword the same question, in order to get a more consistent answer, leaving less room for error in our research. Participant observation allowed us to establish and strengthen rapport with informants by taking part in their activities.

The manner in which we chose our informants was mostly circumstantial. Entering the field under the supervision of instructors already familiar with the community made it possible to establish some immediate contacts. As students of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, our research fell under the guidelines of the

University's Institutional Review Board (IRB 1993) for the protection of human subjects in research studies. Before interviewing people we described our research intentions and asked informants to sign an interview consent form. Under IRB regulations we strove to guarantee the confidentiality of the informant's identity, and thus protect them from any obligation or embarrassment in their community. As a result, the names of the informants have been fictionalized in this paper.

Description of Women's Roles

Lily is a widow born in the ejidatario class that married into the hacendado class. Her husband was murdered during a family quarrel 16 years ago. Lily is the mother of two sons, ages 27 years and 17 years. She recalled going to work in the field to extract *ixtle*, a fiber of the local *lechugilla* plant. The fiber was sold to make rope, brushes, brooms, and similar items. This is considered very grueling work and she remembers coming home with gashes all over her hands from the thorny plants. For other means of income after the death of her husband, Lily would serve as a housecleaner and laundress for community members of Emilio Carranza. When Lily's children were old enough to help out on the farm she inherited from her deceased husband, she gave more attention to her orchard of pecan, peach, and avocado trees. These trees provided vital cash crops. Her sons assisted by hauling water, collecting firewood, feeding her livestock, and irrigating the orchard. Although Lily considers her life full of

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difficult times, she said times have become even more difficult during this time of drought. Her cash crops are dying, and she has returned to outside means of generating income, such as laundering clothes for member's of her community, housecleaning, or selling her flock of 30 chickens. These are activities that Lily returns to in extreme conditions (such as drought).

Juana is a married woman of the hacendado class with three children. As a wedding gift many years before, she inherited a pregnant goat from her father. The goat subsequently gave birth to twin kids, a female and a male. Juana asserts that from this birth, her current herd of fifty goats has been produced. While ownership of goat herds is a typical condition of many of the ejido's women, Juana's herds are unusually large. Goats are a very profitable commercial product used as a source of meat, cheese and milk. Juana's husband David herds the goats, but the money generated from the selling of the goats belongs to Juana. She also has chickens and two sows, and earns money from selling the eggs and piglets. In Mexico, a woman's inheritance is solely hers, whether it is land or livestock, and the husband must ask permission before he uses resources from the inheritance. Juana was the only informant we spoke with that felt the drought had not changed her lifestyle, but she had noticed the severe consequences on other women in the ejido.

Lucy is a member of the hacendado class and has a total of seven children from two marriages. Her second husband died 11 years ago, leaving her with ownership of his land. Because of an increase in her income and material resources, Lucy states, "I am much more financially secure now that I am in control. I live better now than when my husband was alive." Her two adult sons live with her in her house. The sons are in complete agreement with her decisions about the household. Being a head of a household, she feels that the drought has affected her in the same way that it has affected other families in the region (i.e., Lucy has been affected by the drought because she is a head of household - typically a man's role, not because she is a woman). As a consequence of the drought Lucy's corn crop did not grow to maturity. The resulting crop failure meant there was no feed for the animals and Lucy has lost all but three of her thirty chickens. The milk cow has suffered because of a reduction in crop residue available as fodder. Lucy takes the cow to the pasture to browse on brush. Because of the inadequate fodder the cow is not producing as much milk as usual. Lucy explains that many times she feeds her animals before herself because they are her investments. She says it is nearly impossible for one to live without the animals. Selling chickens, cows, goats, and pigs is quite profitable but the women are careful not to sell too hastily. The animals are considered to be the "piggy banks" of the ejido women. Normally Lucy lives off of the interest she receives every month by selling her cash crops of pecans and avocados, but during the

drought there have been no harvests. Lucy reports the drought has had a serious effect on her life and she is now living solely on her vegetables that survived the harsh weather.

Analysis and Discussion

While bearing in mind the limited sampling of informants, we can offer the following observations about the economic roles of the hacendado and ejidatario classes women in the former ejido Emilio Carranza and the effect the drought has had on those roles. Some of the traditional income-generating activities for women include small livestock production and the selling of animal products such as eggs, cheese, milk, piglets, and the meat of chickens, pigs, and goats. Agricultural production, such as tomatoes, squash, chilies, onions, garlic, and corn grown in home gardens are also part of the women's economic contribution to the household. However, due to the economic crisis created by the drought women have been seeking outside sources of income. We observed or were told anecdotally about women making embroidery and crocheted handcraft items to be sold locally. One woman sold her items outside of the village. Others sold their labor through housecleaning and laundry services. When the occasion arises, assisting as midwives or tending ill people in the region has also provided income for some.

Unmarried and widowed women with children and limited resources are under the greatest economic stress during this drought. They are unable to

receive money from cash crops and must resort to seeking income outside of the home. However, they must be available to care for their children at all times. Under these severe circumstances some have resorted to selling their small livestock, ultimately reducing their investment resources and life savings. Additional data is needed before a conclusion can be drawn that incorporates all classes of ejido women. Further research should include interviewing and observing a wider sample of ejido women, including members of the campesino class and younger women.

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