

# **MEXICO - The Paths Between the Desert and the City**

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*This work is dedicated to the memory of Matías Chohhua, who died in January 2010 and was one of the last O'odham who was born in a rural community, in the south side of the desert of Altar.*

## **Introduction**

This paper deals with the migrations (mobility) dynamics and ethnic imaginary in the second half of the 20th century by the Tohono O'odham of northwestern Sonora, Mexico, particularly, the case between the desert settlement of Las Calenturas and the city of Caborca, which are located in the southwestern portion of the traditional O'odham territory. The Tohono O'odham people are an ancestral, nomadic and native group who used to live in an extensive area of the desert of Altar, between the northwestern portion of Sonora and the southwest of Arizona, reaching to the area surrounding the Gila and Salado Rivers. Beyond a very brief description of the regional and national process pushed forward by the State (of Sonora) that provoked the O'odham migration, one of the key goals of this paper is to see how this process of social and economic changes generated strong modifications in the imaginary of some O'odham about themselves. To do this, it is necessary to delineate this process of change in the O'odham conceptualization about themselves as an ethnic group in a new social environment, the city. Then, one of the goals of this paper is to identify and understand which were the symbolic referents that defined the conceptualization of what it means to be O'odham in a community of the desert as well as in a city, throughout this process of historical change. In this way, there emerges the question of how the O'odham reutilized their communitarian knowledge and tradition to survive in the city.

## **Historical context: The O'odham people, ancestral inhabitants of the desert of Altar**

The desert of Altar, that begins in the center of the state of Sonora (México) and goes to the southwest of Arizona, has been the land and home of the O'odham people for a very long time before the arrival of the Spanish to America and the Conquest process (Underhill, 1975; Basauri, 1990). The O'odham people were not a single and unified tribe. In terms of the function of the productive activities and specific geographical area where they lived, there were three groups: the Akimel O'odham, "the people of the river", who lived around the area of Gila and Salado Rivers (Swanton, 1953: 357); then came the Hia'ched O'odham, "the people of the sand", who were localized in the Pinacate area (Spicer, 1962) and finally the Tohono O'odham, "the people of the desert" who inhabited the south and central part of the Altar desert (Spicer, 1941; Swanton, 1953:357). During the Conquest (from the last part of the XVII century to the first half of XIX) and according to the Spanish, the traditional O'odham territory "belonged" to New Spain and was part of la Pimeria Alta, a huge geographical region that also included other Indians tribes.

Later, from 1821 to 1848, the O'odham land was part of the northwest portion of Independent Mexico (Ortiz Garay, 1995). But due to the treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo (1848) and Venta de la Mesilla or Gadsen Purchase (1853), the northwest part of the Mexican territory was sold to the United State and the O'odham land was divided in two parts by the international border (Neyra Solis, 2007). Many of the settlements of the ethnic group remained in northwest Sonora, México, mainly those villages belonging to

the Tohono O'odham branch (Nolasco, 1965) (Amador, 2009).

## **The life in the community of Las Calenturas, in the first half of the XXth century**

The community of Las Calenturas is located in the southwestern area of the traditional territory, quite close to the city of Caborca (Informe sobre la situación de los miembros de la Tribu Pápaga, 1973), in the beginnings of southern portion of the Altar desert, Sonora (Lumholtz, 1990). During the first half of the 20th century, this community, like many others in the Mexican side, had a mixed economy (with a strong self-subsistence component, mainly they produced for their own consumption, but also, in a small mercantile character, they sold and exchanged the remnants of the harvest for other products) (Interview to Alicia Chohiua, 22/03/2007, Caborca, Sonora). The productive activities were divided in two major areas, 1) those linked to the ancestral O'odham tradition such as the summer agriculture (Interview to Alicia Chohiua, 27/03/2007, Caborca, Sonora), the gathering of plants and fruits (like pitaya, pechita, sahuaro flower) and the hunting of wild animals (such as deer, rabbits among other) (Interview to Juanita López, 12/04/2007, Caborca, Sonora); these practices were the heritage of the hohokam ancestors (Amador, 2009). 2) And, in the other hand, those related with the Spanish Conquerors such as mining and cattle rising, besides the incorporation of new cultigens such as wheat (Ortiz, 1995; Nolasco, 1965). This way of life was the result of two historical and cultural backgrounds.

However, the agriculture, by far, was the most important activity and the main cultigens were several varieties of corn, beans, chili, among others. Nevertheless, they only could cultivate the land during certain times of the year, when there was available water (Interview to Alicia Chohiua, 15/09/2007, Caborca, Sonora). The O'odham way of life was very deeply immersed in the desert and to take advantage of the natural resources, they had periodic patterns of mobility. During the summer and fall they stayed in the settlement of Las Calenturas, where they worked in agriculture due to the rains of July and August, and, once the harvest was completed, they went to the location of Pozo Prieto, which was a few miles away and where there was a large natural tank of water for the cattle. They remained there for awhile, until the beginning of the spring. It was one community with two settlements; this way strategy to use the desert and the territory was also an ancestral heritage of their hohokam ancestors (Swanton, 1953).

It is no less important, to emphasize that from the natural environment the O'odham obtained not only their food, but also the resources needed to build the houses, materials like sahuaro, mesquite wood and adobe or clay and mud for the creation of domestic objects of the kitchen, such as utilitarian pottery. The desert was their land and home; it provided everything they may need.

Besides the productive activities, there were two other aspects that constituted the communitarian life of Las Calenturas: 1) the social organization, and 2) some specific cultural practices. The social organization of this community had tree levels: A) Like the other O'odham villages in Mexico, in Las Calenturas there was a person who had to solve the community problems as well as organize the collective work and some ceremonies (such as the deer dance). This charge was permanent and was called "traditional authority." Iziquito Tiznado, for more than three decades and until the middle of the decade of 1950, was the authority of Las Calenturas (Interview to Alicia Chohiua, 15/09/2007, Caborca, Sonora). B) Besides, due that the agriculture needed irrigation mechanism, the adult men of Las Calenturas worked together as one big family during the different stages of the agricultural cycle, but also the collective labor was to build small water basins and irrigation channels; the communal work, in the productive order as well as in the cultural practices, was one of the communitarian structures that created and extended the reproduction of the social conditions of existence (Interview to Juanita López, 12/04/2007, Caborca, Sonora). C) And last and a key element to understand the social preservation and renewal of the community, it was the nuclear and extended family, constituted according to the pattern of marriages inside the ethnic group, but with people from different Tohono O'odham villages. This mechanism of inter-ethnic unions made possible the transmission of many practices (language, social history, values, etc). With the exception of Lopez Juárez marriage, all the other families in the community had O'odham heritage by both sides (mother and father) (Interview to Juanita López, 12/04/2007, Caborca, Sonora). These three levels (family, the collective work and the traditional authority) gave a strong sense of

community and consolidated the social cohesion of the group.

On the other hand, there were some cultural practices that also provided a solid sense of belonging. One was the O'odham language that, until the decades of 1930 and 1940, was spoken by the majority of people (Interview to Alicia Chohua, 15/09/2007, Caborca, Sonora). The world was written and spoken in O'odham. The members of Las Calenturas used the Spanish language only when they went to Caborca or during the few meetings with Mexicans. The other cultural activity was the ceremony of the deer dance, with the purpose of encouraging the rain and was very linked with the beginning of the Agricultural cycle. O'odham from Las Calenturas and the Papaguería in Caborca, beside a few Mexicans, attended this event that had regional character (Interview to Juanita López, 12/04/2007, Caborca, Sonora). The ceremony was realized in the Alamo, a few miles away of Las Calenturas and began the 23rd of June with the hunting of the deer. In the night the dance began, it was begun by a group of musicians and singer, who told in O'odham the tales of the deer and the hunter. The dancers were women and men of different ages, they danced all the night until the dawn. Also, this ceremony was possible due to the communitarian work (Interview to Alicia Chohua, 15/09/2007, Caborca, Sonora).

Out of this event and of some occasional visits to Caborca, the life of Las Calenturas had a strong local sense. Besides and since the beginning of the 20th century until the last part of the decade 1940, these O'odham were almost alone in the region. Besides the neighbor rancher Canuto Garibay, there was no one else (Interview to Juanita López, 12/04/2007, Caborca, Sonora). The land had no fences yet and there were not geographical limits designated, despite the fact that these lands belonged from immemorial times to the O'odham. However, it is important to emphasize that although there was the appearance of a calm situation, the relationship between the State and the O'odham was quite unequal. In spite of the obligation to provide social services, the State did not provide elementary education and medical attention to the O'odham people of Las Calenturas ; indeed, this was not an exceptional situation, but all across the traditional territory there were no schools nor medical centers. Besides, and this is a key element to understand the next changes, the process to guarantee the legal ownership of the land was unsolved and quite ambiguous.

It is important to emphasize that the people of Las Calenturas had a very clear vision about being part of the O'odham group during this period (1930-1940). The ethnic adscription was articulated in three major ways: 1) the desert as the O'odham territory and the use of the land as the way to inhabit it, the concrete manifestation of this was to be born and live in a certain community, in addition to the periodic mobility. 2) Also, it was the fact of belonging to and being a part of certain social and extended family; some members of Las Calenturas said that it was possible to know if someone belonged to the group by the family name. 3) Finally, the fact of the social memory regarding being part of specific social group, as well as the activities that reinforced the sense of social cohesion for example ceremonies and the language. The identity process had a double side, one related to the past, the history and the ancestors, and, on the other hand, the activities (productive, social and cultural) that allowed for the reproduction of their way of life.

However, in the next decade (1950), the situation changed in a very drastic way and this was strongly related to the kind of external relationship that the O'odham had with other social groups.

## **Social changes in the community: the State policies of colonization and the invasions of traditional land**

Since the last years of the decade of 1940, but mainly during the years 1950 there was a project, promoted by the state of Sonora, to industrialize (delete) agriculture and bring and establish farmers and ranchers from across the northwest area of the State (Lizárraga, 2006). During this period the State gave more than 148,260 acres to be cultivated by irrigation systems (Almada, 2000); the new mestizos or non-Native owners received economic aid through Agrícola credits to obtain and buy agricultural machinery, besides the material infrastructure the State had already granted to these people. However, due to the social discrimination based in an unequal power relationship between the O'odham and the State, the

members of the O'odham ethnic group did not enjoy of these benefits; on the contrary, their traditional lands were invaded and sold.

At the regional level of the Las Calenturas area and in 1949, the State of Sonora and the Secretary of the Agrarian Reform (SRA) -the federal institution of Agrarian matters-, created the Colonization District of Altar and promoted the arrival of new social actors (Lizárraga, 2006). As (delete) said, before 1950 the O'odham were almost alone and the land belonged to them; the only Mexican presence was a quite owner Canuto Garibay (Interview to Alicia Chohua, 15/09/2007, Caborca, Sonora). However, during the decade of 1950 new ranchers and farmers, with a more mercantile idea of the use of the land and the desert, came to this region. During this period Valenzuela, Lemas, Venegas and Quiroz arrived in the region and established, with the permission of the State, their ranches and farms in part of Las Calenturas land (Interview to Alicia Chohua, 27/03/2007, Caborca, Sonora). In spite of the fact that the people of Las Calenturas were constituted as an Ejido (a social form of land property), the limits of their property were not respected. On the contrary, the new mestizo owners took the better lands. Besides, the land was probably not the only problem; perhaps the main issue was the water, which was an indispensable element for any productive activity in desert. According to this and from a more capitalist perspective of the land, these people took the control of the sources of the hydraulic resource (rivers, well, among other) to their own benefit and in order to maintain their cattle and supply water to their crops.

To 1957, as some of Las Calenturas members remembered, the situation for them was critical, the lack of water for the crops made an agricultural way of life each time more difficult and unstable. This was related specifically with to two ranchers: Canuto Garibay, who built a well for his cattle, and more important, Quiroz, who made a big dam, which cut off the natural supply of water to the O'odham lands (Interview to Alicia Chohua, 15/09/2007, Caborca, Sonora). The O'odham tried to negotiate with Quiroz, but he gave them water only a few times and it was not enough. After that, agriculture could no longer be the focus of the O'odham way of life. To face this scenario, for a while the men of Las Calenturas began to work in the neighbor farms as cowboys and agricultural day laborers; the people who hired them were the same who invaded the traditional land and took control of their water.

The O'odham got involved in a more mercantile form of life: instead of self-production to satisfy their necessities, they had to work for someone else to obtain the money required to buy what they needed. They got trapped in the circle of the money and the poverty. The communitarian work almost disappeared and social links of the community became weak. Little by little the community was disarticulated. This mobility process from the desert settlement to the city was slow and had its ground base in the previous relationships between Las Calenturas and Caborca; activities like commercial interchanges, familiar visits, medical attention, education.

Eventually, the people of Las Calenturas decided to go to the city of Caborca, where they had relatives and relationships of social kinship; besides that, this location was inside of O'odham territory and there were better opportunities for work. It is important to remark that this process of ethnic migration, in a huge measure, was provoked by the State policies that brought new people to O'odham lands. No only the State did not respect and recognize the O'odham people as a social group and as citizens with a different socio-cultural background, but also, they sold their lands for benefit of the mestizos farmers.

## **Final reflections: The life in a new social context, being O'odham in the city**

However, once that they arrived to Caborca, they settled down in the peripheral zone of the west of the city, the place was called la Papaguería and there were only members of the ethnic group. There an O'odham neighborhood was established, where they reproduced some socio cultural practices that characterized the community life of Las Calenturas. Almost all spoke in O'odham, especially the adults. They preserved the figure of the "traditional authority", a charge that Iziquio Tiznado still had; there were communitarian meetings and some ceremonies were performed. Both, men and women used their communitarian knowledge of Las Calenturas as survival and labor strategy: the men, to obtain a salary,

worked in agriculture and in the raising of cattle; the women made utilitarian pottery and sold their products to the mestizos of Caborca.

Nevertheless, it is also true that later in Caborca (1950-1960), due to the coexistence with the people of the city and the death of the older O'odham generations, some practices almost disappeared. The inter-ethnic marriages were each time less frequent, the O'odham began to form families with the mestizos, this was caused in part because almost all the O'odham had close family bounds between them and it was forbidden to get married with relatives. In relation with this, when younger O'odham grew up and had a common life with the mestizos, the traditional language stopped being the main communication channel and Spanish took its place; this explains why today in Caborca only a very few of the old people (those who were born between 1930 and 1940) still speak O'odham.

Also, the former and close relationship with the desert and the place of natural and socio-cultural origin was fairly deteriorated. The desert was no longer the permanent house of the O'odham, neither the land that provided food and shelter, the city became the permanent residence place. The desert became a fairly distant geographical place, where the history of the community and the O'odham tradition of the ancestors were incarnated. It was not possible any more to reproduce the traditional way of life of the ancestors. Being O'odham in Caborca took new meanings, more than a way of life or being linked directly with the desert, it was now related with the past and the origin process. Once in the city, the process of ethnic adscription was restructured and took the path of the social history of the group: being O'odham was strongly determined, not by the urban social context, but by awareness of the origin community, as well as the awareness of the omit 'blood' genealogy and family name.

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