Gender and natural resources: Maya women and the Agrarian Land Reform in Mexico

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Introduction

Anthropology, like other disciplines, has contributed to reflect on social groups, cultures, products, ideas and transformations in the context of the globalization (Good, 2000). In general terms, globalization shows a world interconnected in multiple dimensions, ambivalent, discontinuous and heterogeneous, that not only encompasses the interests of capitalism, but also extends to the political, demographic, ideological and cultural realms, which generate multiple meanings and give rise to new social forms, to transformation, reinvention and reconstruction of already existing processes. The present work analyzes the change of Mexican agrarian legislation from the perspective of gender in the context of collective rights of the land-use in a Mayan community in Campeche, pointing out that the work of the Mayan farmer is based on collaboration, with well-defined roles based on respect, reciprocity and the work group.

Gender studies

The relationship between gender and natural resource rights is a topic of much current interest. Rocheleau and collaborators (1996) in Africa have included a gender perspective on natural resource management. While the family remains the primary social system in many parts of the world, (Sachs, 1996), public and private places, home and workplace are often divided into male and female domains of access and control. In many parts of the world, for example, kinship-based institutions regulate labor and embody power relations structured around gender and age (Fortmann 1990; Agarwal 1994 and Rochelau et al., 1996). Often these differences lead to conflict. This is of particular importance for populations that depend on communal resources to supplement income, particularly in places were women can not own and control land (Fortmann, 1985, 1990; Arizpe and Botey, 1987; Agarwal, 1994, Deere and León, 1998).

The studies on the impact of agrarian reforms on the women of the Third World are especially excellent. On this subject, the pioneering work of Bina Agarwal on the relations of gender and the agrarian rights of the women in South Asia is definitive. Few researchers have analysis of such scope, though there are some important exceptions, such as the works of Deere and Leon (1987, 1995, 1998); Arizpe and Botey (1987); Zapata (1995) and Scatters (1999). These works analyze the role of gender relations in the context of neoliberal reforms carried out in Latin America during the reformist period of 1960s and 70s. These works indicate that most women have not benefited. Many women do not have formal or informal legal access to the land nor are they able to make decision in questions related to the use of the land (Deere and Leon, 1998; Zapata, 1995; Scatter, 1999). Although there are not legal barriers to acquire land, few women were or are owners of their parcels. Furthermore, most women live under practices based on customs that guarantees use-rights to the women, but the control of the resources falls to men (Stephen, 1994, 1996; Goldring, 1996; Green, 1996; Perez, 1998 and Scatter, 1999). Zapata (1995) analyzes the experience of the Women’s Agricultural Units (UAIM) established in 1971. Based on the experience of the women studied, some of the greatest obstacles are public opinion, their own spouses, other non-participating women and local authorities. In addition, the
women indicated that there is a lack of technical support and lack of access to credit necessary to carry out their projects. Studies of the impact of land reform in the Third World on women appear particularly relevant. Bina Agarwal's ground-breaking work on gender and agrarian relations in South Asia has demonstrated the importance of the topic. But as of now, few social scientists have investigated it in Latin America; of these the most significant are studies by Deere and León (1985; 1987; 1998), Arizpe and Botey (1987), Zapata (1995), and Esparza (1999). Deere and León (1998) and Arizpe and Botey (1987) have produced the most influential work regarding rural women. They analyze the role of gender relations under the neoliberal reforms of land tenure implemented in many Latin American countries and find that women's participation and needs have been ignored. Rural women did not fare well in the land reforms of Latin America’s "reformist period" in the 1960s and 1970s and were under-represented among the beneficiaries. Rural women may live and work on their husband's farms, but lack legal rights to the land or the power to make decisions regarding land use (Deere and León, 1998; Zapata 1995; Esparza, 1999). There are usually no explicit legal barriers to women's ownership of land, and some women do own their own plots. However, the majority of women live with the double legacy of customary patrilineal practices that grant use rights to women and control over resources to men (Stephen, 1994; 1996; Goldring, 1996; Green, 1996, Pérez, 1998; Esparza, 1999).

In her research on the topic in Mexico, Marroni (1995) found different arguments given to justify the lack of access to land: women are considered as “helpers” not as active workers, land is scarce, and residence and inheritance patterns are patrilocal and patrilineal respectively. González and Salles (1995) argue that these patterns legitimized the patriarchal systems of land rights. Zapata (1995) analyzes the experience of women in the Unidades Agrícolas de la Mujer (UAIM). She finds several forces restricting women's participation: public opinion, husbands, other women and members of the community and the local authorities. Lack of access to loans and improved technology were particularly striking.

Focusing on the institutions of resource management rather than the community itself is likely to be more fruitful for understanding community-based natural resource management (Agrawal and Gibson, 1999). This project will use institutional analysis to evaluate the ability of a Mayan community to create and enforce rules. Institutional analysis requires identifying resource management rules, the groups and individuals affected by such rules, and the processes by which rules change in a given situation. Institutional economic perspective combines the actor-oriented approach of economics with the anthropological approach of institutions (Ensminger, 1991; 1996; Acheson, 1994 and Guillet, 1997, 1998, 2000). Whether, and how, property rights change depends on economic incentives (market), political structure (the Mexican Agrarian and Conservation Policy) and ideology (Maya; gender). Ideology, including notions of fairness and justice, influence the relative assessment of property rights. Which property rights are actually chosen depends on how rights are accessed, as well as which rights are actually desired (Ensminger, 1996, Guillet, 2000). Knight (1992), Acheson (1994) and Ensminger (1996) have examined the role of power in institutional change.

Today, ecosystems are considered as systems characterized by high variability in time and space. Similarly, local communities may be shown to be dynamic and internally differentiated. One example of this kind of interaction and dynamic can be found through the wide zone known as Mesoamerica. Here, the environment has provided a setting for social action for more than 3,000 years. Mayan farmers have a long history of regulated collective property. This offers the opportunity to study how a Mayan community responds, debates and accepts the neoliberal policies imposed by the Mexican government.

The Mexican Agrarian Reform
The tenancy of collective land, well-known today as ejidos, have a pre-Hispanic origin, that is to say, that the origin of regulated collective property existed before the Spanish presence in Mexico and has subsisted during the Colonial era and Independence to the present time. In 1915, the first Agrarian Law recognized the right of communities to recover the land that they had lost. The ejido was born indeed as a result of an armed revolutionary movement that demanded it and was granted the right to recover the land. The sale and rents of ejido land was generally prohibited although the ejido was subject to a complex of relations imposed by the institutions of the state, such as credit to rural areas, the organization of the farmers in the National Confederation Farmer (CNC), affiliated with Institutional the Revolutionary Party (PRI). In 1971 legal rights for men and women of 16 years and older were established as well as the fact that women ejidatarias did not lose their rights upon marriage. In 1992 the reform of article 27 of the Agrarian law was promulgated. This article considers the social institution of the ejido to be like the legal proprietor of its land. This new legislation provides mechanisms by means of which the ejidatarios can legally rent, sell and buy previously inalienable land. This means that what previously was birthright now can become private property of one or a few ejidatarios.

In this context of gender studies, many researchers have focused on indicating the inequality of gender, but equally important is the dimension of class and/or ethnicity. These studies are a departure point for the analysis depending on the influential cultural, social, economic or political institutions.

**Maya farmers**

A study is taking place in the community of Xmaben in the Municipality of Hopelchén, the well-known zone called La Montaña o Los Chenes, 210 km to the southeast of the city of Campeche. The population speaks Mayan Yucatecan, with 2/3 of adult population bilingual. The most important commercial activity is the beekeeping although also there is timber extraction with aims of consumption (firewood, palm of guano, wood for construction, forage) and of commercialization (siricote and sweet gum) and cattle and sheep ranching.

In accordance with Mayan tradition, different kinds of land are cultivated during an agricultural cycle, and the products that result from the efforts of a nuclear or extended family’s are considered their property. After looking over the land and choosing a plot, a farmer as representative of his family communicates with the ejido commissioner as to where he will establish a new field. Once it is measured and until the last harvest, the products of the field are theirs. This gives them exclusive rights to harvest fruits and vegetables, gather firewood, forage, to hunt, etc.. However, once the agricultural cycle is finished and the land begins the process of regeneration, the cultivated space reverts to collective property, with any member of the community having permission to enter, to put traps animals, to hunt, to collect, etc.

This form of appropriation of natural resources is common to Mesoamerican land-holdings, considered as geographic spaces under historical-cultural influence and public control, allowing its members to make decisions on the whole about the natural resources on which they depend for subsistence. Land is thus associated with ritual life, beliefs, sacred places; the social organization is also related to the occupation and suitable distribution of natural resources. The land is not merely symbolic or spiritual, but also material (Gómez, 2002: 254).

**The Mayan women**

Maya women have been active participants in their economy since Pre-hispanic periods. During the Pre-classic, Classic and Post-classic periods, and in the beginning of the Colonial period, ethno-historic
documents indicate that the primary economic activity of women was production of wax and cloth. Women were in charge of beehives, which were inherited through matrilineal descent (Pohl and Feldman, 1982). Mary Elmendorf (1976) produced one of the first studies of the role of women in Yucatecan rural society. She finds women actively involved as mothers, wives, producers, and advocates for change and development. Her work showed a peasant society characterized by strong interdependence and equality of responsibilities between husband and wife. The husband produces the staples of corn and beans, while the wife prepares the food to nourish the family, weaves hammocks, embroiders hipiles, takes care of the garden, and raises the children. Further, Kintz (1990, 1998) and Daltabuit (1992) document the complex range of economic activities that Yucatecan women carry out in order to reproduce the domestic unit. In addition to being skilled gardeners, seamstresses, weavers, and artisans producing other small crafts, women also collect wood and manage fowl and the pigs as part of the family economy. Rather than strictly material reproducers of the domestic economy, the role of Mayan women in biological reproduction empowers and dignifies them. Only women can provide families with new sources of labor, opportunities for inter-family alliances, and possibilities for emotional fulfillment through reproduction (Restall, 1995, 1997). The work of Daltabuit (1992), Kintz (1990; 1998) and (Restall, 1995, 1997) confirms the importance of gender in Maya Yucatecan society and the mutual dependency and respect commanded by gender roles. Men and women are partners in work, rituals of domestic organization, and linked to more embracing forms of social organization and the community. Role boundaries limit action but also provide an arena in which women, as well as men, can pursue social, economic and informal political goals with some degree of independence. For example, in many non-western societies, women's ritual roles are central and indispensable to community cohesion and well being (Brettell and Sargent, 1997: 351). Rather than conceptualizing male and female ritual roles as opposed within a rigid domestic-public domain, they can be considered simultaneously parallel and interdependent.

The productive spaces in Xmaben

The predominant use of the forest, in agriculture terms, is slash-and-burn agriculture, which results in several productive spaces, for the fields, the beehives, parcels and grasslands for cattle. The main crops are corn, beans, squash and chili, along with other vegetables like tomato, watermelon, sweet potato, to mention a few. The home gardens or solares are very productive and highly diverse spaces, with ornamental and medicinal plants, fruit trees and wood-producing trees like cedar, the oak and/or siricote. In addition, women raise hens, turkeys and pigs. In accordance with Mayan customs, the only activities from which women are completely excluded are beekeeping and commercial forest extraction. In all the others activities, they might participate in smaller degree, as in the case of cultivation of field crops, but they are not totally excluded. According with their age, composition of the family, the distance from fields to the house and the personal desire, women work in the fields to a greater or smaller degree. They gather seeds, weed and harvest, leaving the slashing and burning in the hands of the men.

The harvest is the activity with most intense participation, when women abandon all other activities, to bring in the harvest before they lose it to rain. Women’s participation in the cultivation of gardens is intense, with absolute control over the animal husbandry and the harvesting of fruit trees, vegetables, medicinal and ornamental plants. Cedars are sold in case of the family’s economic need, or they are cut to make tables or benches, that is to say, objects of consumption; less frequently, wood is sold to carpenters in the region. But women’s access to and control of the resources are not limited the gardens and the fields.

One form of women’s of access to land is through parcels, productive spaces relatively near the town. These spaces are within the village and are worked primarily by women with their children. These parcels may become the property of their children in the future, but at the present it is the place of work
for women around 45 years of age, whose children are already in secondary or high school. These are women who decide to cultivate the land, who like to work outside, and because the fields are distant, they work their parcels near the village, the distance to their homes being no more than 3km. These parcels are of one hectare less or, with an intensive use and a great diversity of plants, up to 45 species different species, from plants and shrubs to medium-sized trees. Their products include corn, beans, chili, squash, and vegetables like cucumber, coriander, radish, tomato, fruits like pomegranate, bananas, pineapple, watermelon, etc.

Other economic activities of women are embroidering and temporary migration to the cities, whether for domestic work or in the urban and/or rural assembly plants.

**The impact of the change of Article 27**

In the context of globalization, Mayan concepts of property go beyond the legal considerations of the western society. For Mayan farmers the owners of the forest are divine beings and spirits, which include their ancestors. The God of the Forest is the owner of the productive spaces of the forest or k'ax. Productive spaces – fields for cultivation, for example - are called col, and have a temporary aspect. The productive space will be used by a family group while it is farming it, that is to say, two or three years. Later this space is left for its recuperation into the forest again. During the first years of recuperation, the family group continues obtaining its products, but soon this space returns to the forest, which is property of the community, the cah. The right to work the land is obtained by being a member of the community. The farmer is owner of his product, but not of the land itself. As the farmers of Xmaben say, "we are single passengers of this world". The right to the forest also entails obligations, such as respect for the Gods of the forest, meaning the responsibility to take care of it.

This concept of property is opposed to the Agrarian Legislation that it treats land like a market object. Twelve years after the change in legislation, farmers of Xmaben sold a portion of their forest, nearly 5000 hectares, to a group of Mennonites originating from Durango and Zacatecas. This "sale" was very controversial in the ejido community, but according to informants, a group in power at that time, after multiple meetings and community assemblies, obtained a majority of votes and the transaction was ratified with the Agrarian National Registry. Each farmer received his corresponding part of money. Nowadays, many farmers are displeased, because they say that the value was very low and the ejidal authorities took the best part.

One of the most remarkable results of this sale has been one group that rejected the transaction on principle. This group is an extended family group, whose main activity aside from beekeeping is cattle ranching. In response to the sale, they have dedicated themselves to establishing grasslands for cattle with the idea of establishing their territory. In their words: "Before they come for more land, we are investing so much work in our ranches that nobody will take away our lands". Another response by this same group is the purchase of federal lands around the ejido. In this case it is very important to indicate two issues. First, it is necessary to have the money to buy federal land, that is to say, only a group with the ability to make cash will be able to do so. In this case, the cattle ranchers have sold animals to be able to pay the expenses. Secondly, it is very important to have the knowledge of how proceed with the paperwork in the different offices related to agrarian issues, in Hopelchén as well as in the city of Campeche. In this case the leader of the community has been very important. He is part of a nongovernmental organization defending the rights of indigenous people of the zone. This Mayan farmer has had training in agrarian legal subjects and human rights, and was the one who most actively tried to prevent the land sale to the Mennonites, based on the fact that this group did not live within the ejido, and were therefore breaking the law. Complaints were made to the Agrarian Office of Law Advocacy, but they finally reached an agreement, to not reduce the percentage of land of these farmers.
The 12 new lands that are in the process of being purchased are each 100 hectares, and in several cases the titles will be in the name of the wife. When asked, some women say that it is their husbands’ business, others openly assert their rights, because according to them, "the males [in my family] are going to marry and work the lands of my husband, so what am I going to be left with?"

In the community, 5 associations are legally constituted with the Registro Agrario Nacional. Two of these associations are of beekeepers and two of women embroiderers and one is the House of the Woman. In this last case, the women, advised by an NGO, received training in packaging wax, making preserves, jams and some medicinal products.

In general market relations are limited as much for men as for women. The products of the fields and the forest are for self consumption and have a very low price in the market. The commercial products are the honey and the hipiles. Honey is exported to a European country through the Fair Trade market. At the moment they are in process of certifying the honey as organic in order to improve the price. Other products of the harvest are sold among the members of the community and in nearby communities, especially in Ukum. The women barter products from their gardens, which favors relations among other members of the family and the community in general. The children sell the products in the town.

In addition, in the cases in which women prefer other activities, such as the embroidering of hipiles, the possibilities broaden substantially. Given the increasing demand of hipiles, many women are employed in this activity and take their products to resale sites including Hopelchén, Mérida and Ciudad del Carmen. Others travel to nearby communities, where the hipiles are resold in sites of greater distribution. This activity gives women a certain independence, as a father, proud of the work of his daughters, explained me, "I I do not maintain them, they pay all to their clothes and their needs".

This paper has tried to contribute to the ethnology of the Mayas of Campeche, emphasizing the role of Mayan women as active participants in different cultural, social, economic contexts and, to a lesser extent in the political atmosphere, as members of the social institution called family and by extension in its community or cah.