

**The Effects of Trans-local Variables on a 19th-century  
Mexican Village**

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As small societies which have functioned relatively autonomously for centuries get drawn into larger regional or national systems, it becomes impossible to understand the inner workings of the local society without examining the impact caused by their interactions with the larger political and economic system. The Mexican village of Naranja experienced significant changes as a result of variables originating well beyond its boundaries.

The village of Naranja is located in the Tarascan area of southwestern Mexico. While Naranja interacted with other communities and dealt with traveling traders for centuries, it felt relatively little effect from the large changes occurring in other parts of Mexico, due largely to its geographic remoteness and a perceived scarceness of natural resources. Once outsiders concluded that the Zacapu region offered opportunities for exploitation, external forces (both obvious and subtle) changed the local culture forever.

Prior to 1885, Naranja was relatively self-sufficient. Subsistence farming and hunting fed the residents, and they traded with other communities in the region. Goods such as baskets, mats, beans, and fish were exported, providing them with cash to purchase items produced elsewhere. Imports included soap, salt, cloth, and tools, and they also bought sugar, tropical fruit, and brandy from the "hot country" in the South.

Nearly all of their exported goods relied on the marshes and the lake they surrounded. The rushes and other reeds which grew in the wetlands provided the raw

material for their woven items, and various types of fish and crustaceans were harvested from the swampy lake.

By the 1880s, most lands were technically owned by individuals-- the Reform Law of 1856 ultimately resulted in the disappearance of communally-owned land. The residents of Naranja troubled themselves little over land ownership, and continued raising crops as they always had. Following the discovery of highly-fertile soil beneath the Zacapu marsh, two Spanish brothers (the Noriegas) sought to acquire the marsh, drain it, and begin cash-crop cultivation. They took advantage of the land reform laws and a less-than-honest local mayor to gain legal control of the land, and began draining the marsh in 1886.

The marsh was drained by 1900, and the entire area was soon under. The direct effects on Naranja were significant. They no longer had sufficient land to raise crops, and with the wetlands gone, so were the rushes and reeds used for basket- and mat-making. The Noriega's enterprise had deprived the Naranjenos of their two means of support: subsistence crops and exports.

The villagers responded to the sudden economic changes in predictable ways. They stopped buying imported goods, experienced a drop in the quality of their nutrition, and those who retained small land holdings sold them to more wealthy locals. Those who had little became poorer, and those of means benefited.

Many sought other ways to generate income. Some Naranjenos took up share-cropping on the new farms, while most found jobs as low-wage laborers. Many even took jobs far away from home, working on the sugar plantations.

Even though their economic world had been turned upside down, the cultural and social life of Naranja remained much the same. Kinship and faith remained the bonds that held the community together. Even though they were enduring a more meager existence, their families and religious observance continued to be important. Friedrich believed that most of the workers who sought wage labor far away from Naranja did so to ensure they could continue to finance the elaborate fiestas.

Over time, the strain of the new economic realities began to take its toll. Increasingly, outside influences were changing Naranja. Development had brought improvements such as railroad travel, regular mail service and new local schools, but this also brought outsiders to the village. Naranjenos who traveled far from home to get jobs began to be influenced by the cultures in which they lived and worked.

Joaquin de la Cruz, the son of one of the village leaders, enrolled at the University. Choosing to study law so that he could help his mother and others in the village who had lost their land, he became the leader of a group of student radicals clamoring for agrarian reform. He returned to Naranja after being expelled for his reform activities. Back home, he looked after family affairs, provided free legal services to Indians fighting for their land, and continued to rally locals to the cause of agrarian

reform. Seeking a solution through legal means rather than by violence, he was not very successful in securing land rights.

Joaquin's nephew, Primo Tapia de la Cruz, was mostly seen as a lazy trouble-maker in his youth. He left for the U.S. at age 22, spending several years working there and getting involved with various labor and socialist groups. Primo brought back powerful ideas: anarchism, socialism, communism, worker revolt. He tried to unite people for the cause, but it was difficult to get them involved. The Church preached against agrarian reform, siding with the Hacendados. The Church held that true followers of the faith should accept poverty and suffering, and that anyone challenging the legal rights of the landlords were on a path to Hell. Most well-to-do families enjoyed the status quo, and saw no reason for change.

Primo worked tirelessly to organize regionally to support the agrarian movement. When he had difficulty enlisting the Naranjenos, he turned to their wives-- forming a women's league. Primo worked within the legal system in his fight to regain rights to the land, but was not above deceptive practices (he deceived over 100 Naranjanos into signing an agrarian petition, telling them they were petitioning for a priest to be assigned to Naranja), and also embraced violence when necessary.

Locals in Naranja were at odds with each other politically. People were loyal to their own families for the most part, with the lines drawn between Naranjenos on one side, and the conservative mestizos (who were mostly merchants) on the other. The

Church and the hacendados sided with the mestizos, as did the highly religious Indian families. Agrarian reformers and the national government supported the Naranjenos.

Outside economic forces destroyed much of the long-standing economy in Naranja, and the resulting need for wages brought greater interaction with more outsiders, which slowly undermined their values and world views. Imported ideas (e.g. socialism, peasant rights, land reform) also fueled local discontent. The village was caught in the middle between the national government, the haciendas, the Church, and its own varying and conflicting self-interests. The local society was not just influenced by trans-local variables-- it was overrun by them.