

Tinker Grant Field Research Report

Food Sovereignty and Gender: Agrifood Systems in La Mixteca, Oaxaca

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Exploratory research is like a bath of cold water; it wakes you up immediately, pulls you out of any theoretical silos you might be submerged in, and forces you to ground yourself to a reality that you had perhaps only imagined. I go back and forth between using the idea of fieldwork to describe a researcher's activities outside of university grounds. More so, the word exploratory doesn't do it justice –as if going somewhere with one's questions meant anything close to exploring. Nevertheless, and however, we decided to call this preliminary work that changes, informs, and transforms our research questions– it is a bath of cold water.

In this research report, I choose to write more about the struggles, tensions, and nature of being in the field rather than describe my objectives, hypothesis, and methods –these all changed dramatically after spending six weeks in the High Mixtec Region, in Oaxaca. I write so not

as a way to discourage field work, exploratory fieldwork, or any of its derivations, but rather to incentive more pre and post-field work reflections on positionality, on our methods, and put very broadly, on the use of our time and the time of the communities we work with.

On positionality

One-third of my time in the Mixtec Region –or *La Mixteca*, as it is commonly known– was spent moving back and forth between different communities and introducing myself to the Mixtec Indigenous Authorities or the communities surrounding Yanhuitlan, the main municipality in the region. Governed by what is known in Mexico as '*Usos y Costumbres*', Mixtec communities in

Oaxaca implicitly ask and require that all non-community members personally introduce themselves to the authorities in turn before spending time conducting any activity on their land. Introductions are formal and require a lot of time. Yet, they are not necessarily formal in a serious and intimidating way, but rather in that full transparency and honesty are expected in all encounters. In La Mixteca, members of the Indigenous Authority serve as the gatekeepers, coordinators, and safeguards of all activities involving the community; everything from the famous Oaxacan *calendas* –annual dancing parties in honor of each communities’ Saint– to government-led water programs. When introducing myself, I tried to be as clear as possible about the nature of my work, the scope and possibilities, and the timeframes I was aiming for. I tried to do this even as I knew how much it was bound to change after this initial time spent with them. After the weeks-long presentations and once my presence and research ideas were known and accepted, I quickly realized that my initial position and relationship with community members was complex and deserved some reflection –a Mexican woman coming from The City (as many refer to Mexico City), a Ph.D. student living and working ‘on the other side (a.k.a the U.S) sometimes to be confused with an NGO worker, or an ‘expert’ in agronomy (even though I have no training in agronomy but simply has a lot of questions related to agricultural practices). These intertwined ideas of who I was and what I was there for changed drastically during the 6 weeks, and I slowly became known and familiar to community members. I found that building the latter –familiarity and trust– was much more important than describing who I was and what I was there for. My positionality –a fancy way of saying who I was and where I can form– became not only something I was acutely aware of but also something that I realized was in constant transformation and therefore was going to influence my engagement and collaboration with the communities I was introducing myself to.

On methods

Directly tied to where we come from and who we are –in the eyes of others and to ourselves– is the way we do things. During this field experience, I realized how intimately tied our method’s choice is to how we foresee our research evolving and eventually impacting –for good and for bad- the communities and places we work in. I have long discarded the idea of science as rational and ultimately objective, or the notion of legitimate or nonvalid knowledge. To do this, while also aiming to conduct critical social science research, I have chosen methods and ‘ways of doing’ whose main principle is collaboration and participation. Such methods’ panacea, in my opinion, is to create spaces for new ways of seeing, thinking, and doing to take hold and support environmentally and culturally viable livelihoods. But this is the ideal. In reality, these methods are messy and complex, require a lot of trust and patience, and participation is often essentialized. For instance, when conducting the first focus groups with farmer women, I struggled with finding the right justification to encourage them to participate. What’s in it for them? How will they benefit from discussing topics and issues they experience daily? How can the outcomes of my research be translated into benefits for them and their communities? Will it ever be?

To add to the complications of knowledge creation and the methods we chose, we must take into account the power entanglements that come when thinking about participatory research methods. How can such methods understand and categorize sensory experiences and meaning-making practices? How can we ensure that community members participating are representative of the

majority's needs and wants? Do participatory methods help researchers better understand what knowing in practice means within specific groups?

As I wrapped up focus groups on my last week, I realized that I wasn't going to find a straightforward answer and that reflecting on these questions and constantly coming back to them –as well as incorporating them in my writing– was going to be as important to my research as trying to find a definite answer.

On time

Time changes depending on the context in which we are immersed. On campus, Berkeley time allows us that delightful 10-minute pause between classes and meetings. In the field, time takes different shapes and forms. During the month and a half I spent in La Mixteca, time slowed down and it became less important than I ever thought it could. After spending the initial weeks trying to conduct focus groups and interviews during the day, I gave up on planning and scheduling and allowed myself to be immersed in the times of the communities. This meant meeting with women during dinner time, walking around their plots helping them to sow seeds, and adjusting to farming and care work schedules to build the trust and types of relationships needed for participation – and participatory methods, in that case– to take hold.

Experiencing time in the communities of the High Mixtec Region also allowed me to question if and how the time I was asking community members to invest in my research was worth it. More often than not, I found that farmers –particularly women– were overburdened with farming, household, and community activities. Asking them to spend the little rest time they had answering questions or participating in a focus group felt intrusive. Yet, as much tension I found in asking for their time, there were still several occasions when the time and energy investment felt generative for both parties. In other words, the conversations –or unstructured interviews, for the sake of methods– that I was having, were enjoyable for myself and the other person(s) involved. When closeness provided insights into my research, all of a sudden the messy bag of questions and ideas that I had been ruminating and writing about made sense.

Each of these topics –positionality, methods, and time– was central to my experience while conducting fieldwork in the summer of 2023 in the High Mixtec Region of Oaxaca. I purposely chose not to write about my advancements, next steps, and conclusions for my research in this research report because it would be hypocritical of me to have fully articulated ideas after such an intense field experience. A lot about fieldwork is romanticized when we are far from the sites that have awakened so much curiosity in us to dedicate ourselves to their understanding, and little is written about how confusing it can be to tear apart our objectives, hypotheses, and methods over and over again at the sight of a reality we hadn't imagined. I am convinced that more reflection and writing on these struggles is crucial to continue being critical about the research we do and how we conduct it.