

Introduction

This is the story of how a Mexican *pueblo* changed. Woven together from the most diverse strands, it is at once deeply local and fundamentally international, vividly conflictual as well as coldly impersonal, seemingly predictable yet full of surprises. Remote and sparsely populated, almost forgotten by the conquering Spaniards, late-eighteenth-century Papantla was a place of indigenous family farmers. Totonac, not Spanish, was the sole language of the vast majority. Largely cut off from markets, much of what these people grew or picked or made was for their own consumption. The village lands were held collectively, and there was scant competition for them. Ecology, geography, and old customs shaped the social organization of economic life. But despite its local isolation, Papantla was connected to the wider world of commerce. That link was vanilla, the precious fruit of a native orchid coveted by wealthy Europeans who were enthralled by its delicate flavor. Light, expensive, and cultivable on a small scale by native farmers, the trade in vanilla would become Papantla's main business. As vanilla grew steadily more popular overseas, production and exports expanded hand in hand, in the process upsetting Papantla's long-established pattern of social relations. Money flowed in, land became more valuable, and those who stood to gain the most—both town merchants and Totonac entrepreneurs—eventually pushed to privatize the old village patrimony. It was not easily accomplished. By the late nineteenth century, land tenure had become the battleground of a rural society bound in violent struggle. How and why this happened is the subject of this book.

Long identified as one of the leading causes of the Mexican Revolution of 1910, the demise of communal landholding is one of the grand motifs of Mexico's nineteenth-century history. It is also, I think, among the least understood. Summarily explaining *pueblo* land disentailments as the product of liberal, pro-capitalist privatization laws and policies imposed from above by the State, historians have seldom bothered to examine these processes systematically from below, in their specific ecological, socioeconomic, cultural, and demographic contexts. As a result, a whole dimension of meaning (and explanation) has remained largely obscured. In particular, the role played by

village residents in the subdivision of communal property—the internal impetus to privatization—has not received the analytical attention it deserves.¹ Judging from the case of Papantla, it is in fact what mattered most.

In the pages that follow, the end of communal land ownership in Papantla is depicted as part of a broader process of rural social change. To this end, I have carefully mapped out the area's physical features, the roots of its agricultural ecology, and the history of its human and economic geography; viewed from these intertwined perspectives, Papantla's distinctive historic pattern of social relations becomes intelligible. I have also reconstructed in detail the birth and growth of Mexico's international vanilla economy, especially its extraordinary development in the course of the nineteenth century. In and around Papantla, the business of vanilla—production, trade, and the networks of social ties built around these activities—became the main engine of economic and social transformation. As Papantla's vanilla economy evolved, so did the character of its social relations, including those concerning property. The conflicts, alliances, ambitions, and fears generated by these changes, I argue, paved the way for the privatization of communal land. Only in this context can the radical restructuring of land-use rights in Papantla—a protracted, persistently contested, crooked, and ultimately bloody process—be properly understood. The reader will have to judge whether this integrated approach to the study of rural social history is a convincing one.

The book begins with a comprehensive introduction to vanilla, the spice that put Papantla on the map and has been so intimately connected with its history. Chapter 1 chronicles the fortuitous emergence of native Mexican vanilla as a prized international commodity and sketches the evolution of the vanilla trade. It also explains how this forest orchid fruit is grown and turned into a delicate aromatic. Chapter 2 focuses on the Tecolutla River basin in northern Veracruz, of which Papantla is the historic capital. It describes the basin's terrain, climate, and vegetation, showing how a particular set of indigenous agricultural practices developed out of this context. The chapter goes on to examine the basin's colonial economy, society, and demography. I argue that the Spaniards were unable to found working haciendas or to establish strong urban centers in the Tecolutla basin, and that the Totonacs' subsistence-oriented agriculture and dispersed settlement patterns survived colonialism unchallenged and continued to prevail well into the nineteenth century. Prior to the ascendancy of vanilla, Papantla was an isolated backwater with a weak commercial economy and scant competition for land, a world of Totonac farmers and small-time Spanish or *mesizo* merchants and bureaucrats.

In light of these long-standing conditions, the impact of a rising vanilla business on Papantla's economic and social relations stands in sharp relief.

Chapter 3 investigates the early growth of the basin's lucrative vanilla exports, the ensuing process of local capital formation, and its effects on merchants as well as farmers. As production and business competition intensified, so did social conflicts, among Totonacs as well as between them and town merchants. By 1870, land had become a more valuable and coveted good and the stage was set for a struggle over the fate of communal property. Chapter 4 links the vanilla boom of the 1870s and 1880s to the conversion of the basin's communal lands into *condueñazgos*, private associations of share-holding landowners. It describes in detail the politics and the mechanics of these initial subdivisions, showing that Totonac bosses played a leading role in the creation of the *condueñazgos*, and that the process, though peaceful, was ominously flawed.

Following the establishment of the *condueñazgos*, Papantla's vanilla production soared and competition for control over land-based resources turned fierce. Chapter 5 analyzes the internal functioning of the land-holding associations, as well as the concurrent rise in social conflicts over business, land-use rights, tax increases, and the growing involvement of merchants in land matters. In these conflicts, the dividing lines were not primarily ethnic, but political and socioeconomic. By the mid-1880s several *condueñazgos* had become hotbeds of discord and an organized opposition began to emerge among groups of Totonac farmers. For more than a decade, these dissidents would strive—and even fight—to undo all the recent changes. At the start of the 1890s, amidst a downturn in vanilla prices and with social tensions sharply on the increase, some state and local officials, the basin's rapacious merchants, and groups of powerful Totonacs all pushed for the division of the ex-communal territories into individual private properties. Their means as well as their goals elicited a spirited resistance, some of it coming from the most unexpected sources. This is the subject of Chapter 6, which traces the tortuous dissolution of the troubled *condueñazgos* and the recurrent violence—including two large uprisings, both bloodily crushed—engendered by this ruthless process. By the turn of the century, the social strife unleashed by the profits of the vanilla trade had profoundly transformed the face of Papantla. The old communal lands of the Totonac *pueblo* had been fractionalized, but only after the land-holding community had itself been fractured.

The book ends, quite deliberately, in 1900, and not—as has been the norm in the historiography of the Porfiriato—with the Revolution of 1910. By the start of the twentieth century, a new social order had been firmly established in Papantla, the wrenched product of bitter struggles played out over three decades. From an historical perspective, the 1870s, 1880s, and 1890s stand out as Papantla's great season of change, its own long revolution. It was then—and not in the wake of 1910—that this *pueblo's* socioeco-

conomic relations were decisively reshaped. The years of the Mexican Revolution—while not uneventful—would not witness any comparable social transformations. By leaving the Revolution out of the book, I have sought to avoid conventional teleologies, emphasizing instead the neglected importance of internal village rifts and power shifts in the history of Porfirian Mexico.

With regard to Mexico's agrarian history, the broader analytical significance of Papantla's path of change remains to be settled. Although the push for—and the consequences of—village land disentailment have long been salient themes in standard narratives of the late nineteenth century and the Revolution, these have in fact received remarkably little scholarly scrutiny. There are many fine regional studies of land, labor, and agriculture in the Porfiriato, but few that look closely inside the villages. This is the first detailed account of *pueblo* land privatization anywhere in Mexico. It is therefore impossible, at least for now, to compare Papantla's experience to that of other land-holding communities, and hence to assess its typicality. It is highly improbable, however, that—local peculiarities aside—Papantla's transformation will turn out to be unique. An accelerated process of social differentiation driven by new business opportunities—that is, the rise to prominence of an indigenous agrarian middle class within the villages—may well be the key to understanding the dynamics of land disentailment and expropriation in many other *pueblos*. At odds with prevailing stereotypes of village history, the case of Papantla points to the need for a reexamination of the causes, process, and consequences of rural social change in pre-Revolutionary Mexico.

The full story of Papantla's late-nineteenth-century struggles has been buried for a long time, and in more ways than one. It was buried with the many Totonacs who were killed or exiled for opposing the usurpatory designs of the powerful, other Indians among them. It was buried again with the old municipal archive, which was used as landfill when the current town hall was built. And it has been buried by the dominant historical narratives about the *pueblos* of Porfirian Mexico, which left no room for complex and contradictory social transformations like the one depicted in these pages. I have unearthed as much of it as I was able to; I hope it will now find its place in history.