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Historia social de una comunidad Tlaxcalteca: San Miguel de  
Aguayo (Bustamante, N.L.) 1686-1820 (review)

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**Historia social de una comunidad Tlaxcalteca: San Miguel de Aguayo (Bustamante, N.L.) 1686-1820.** Elisabeth Butzer. Translated by Jerónimo Valdés Garza. Saltillo: Archivo Municipal de Saltillo; Austin: University of Texas; Tlaxcala: Instituto Tlaxcalteca de la Cultura; Bustamante, N.L.: Presidencia Municipal de Bustamante, 2001. 315pp., maps, diags., photos, notes, appendices, and references. 175 pesos or approximately \$19.00 USD. (available via email <laguna@mail.utexas.edu>).

Reviewed by Linda Greenow, Department of Geography, State University of New York at New Paltz, New Paltz, NY, USA.

In the mid-1970s, just as regionally-based fieldwork began to decline in popularity among geographers, James Parsons described the riches to be gained from long-term experience as an observer and participant in a particular place. For example, “familiarity and continued exposure may lead to recognition of unexpected themes, problems and relationships within an area – especially an unfamiliar landscape and culture to which one comes with the fresh perspective of an outsider” (1977: 3).

In her recent book, Elisabeth Butzer immerses herself and her readers in the unfamiliar landscape and culture of San Miguel de Aguayo, a colonial Tlaxcalan community of northern Mexico. Butzer’s intent is to put a face on otherwise anonymous people of the past by relating their own words as they appear in hundreds of letters, reports, and commentaries housed today in municipal, parish, and other archives on both sides of the border. She minimizes her own interpretations in order to “*compartir mis propias experiencias de ingreso furtivo en esa comunidad y escuchar a sus participantes en incontrolables dramas domésticos o públicos*” (p. 19). By removing herself from the narrative, she avoids intruding on “*el ritmo de las voces nativas*” (p. 19). James Shortridge characterizes this approach, achieved through regional fieldwork, as giving voice to distinctive groups and places in order to “bring home the reality of daily life through detailed renditions of the thoughts, feelings, and experiences of the residents. The goal should be under-

standing, not explanation, with lots of words from local mouths and minimal ‘monologuing’ from the author” (1996, 11-12).

Theory, models, and analysis are therefore largely absent from this work. However, Butzer’s fascination with San Miguel de Aguayo’s origins and early development is contagious. She admits that, despite the book’s title, it is not strictly a social history, but rather a melding of historical geography and anthropology in line with her own academic background. There is much to interest the geographer in this book, especially the relationship between the *pueblo* and its surrounding region, and its unique character as a settlement reflecting Tlaxcalans’ unique position in colonial society.

San Miguel de Aguayo, whose current name is Bustamante, was founded in 1686 by settlers from the *pueblo* of San Esteban de Nueva Tlaxcala, located just outside Saltillo. San Esteban had itself been founded in 1591 by migrants sent from four communities of Tlaxcala in central Mexico. One might expect that nearly 100 years of hard life on the northern frontier would have greatly diminished the cultural integrity of the Tlaxcalans in this area by the time of San Miguel de Aguayo’s founding, but this appears not to be so. Each chapter of Butzer’s book focuses on a particular aspect of life in the *pueblo*, such as mining, agriculture, religion and education, public administration, and demographic change. In each, Tlaxcalan identity rings

clear and strong, even into the nineteenth century. The underlying question of the book is how to account for this community's success in averting incursions from mining speculators and land-grabbers, attacks from hostile indigenous groups, and legal manipulations by outsiders. Butzer attributes this success to strong leadership, solidarity, and ongoing appeals to higher authorities for verification of legal rights and privileges.

In large part, this cultural continuity can also be attributed to San Miguel de Aguayo's location, perched somewhat precariously on the northern frontier of colonial Mexico. Tlaxcalans were originally sent to this area as an attempt by colonial administrators to subdue other local indigenous groups who were less amenable to the Spanish way of life. A crucial 1591 *mandato* gave Tlaxcalans many protections, promises of supplies and material support, and considerable autonomy. The content of the *mandato* of 1591 and its reaffirmation many times in later years reveal Spain's desperation to settle and develop the northern reaches of its colony. The terms of similar agreements and laws were so essential for the *pueblo's* survival that copies were safeguarded in the municipal archive.

Butzer allows the documents themselves to describe the Tlaxcalans' success as agriculturalists, artisans, and traders. With an average of 70 footnotes per chapter, the majority referring to primary sources, the text gradually builds to a chorus of voices revealing details of life and livelihood in the *pueblo*. With careful husbandry of a nearby spring, the Tlaxcalans irrigated their fields and cultivated foods of European and native origin. They co-existed with the Alazapas, who had settled in San Miguel de Aguayo earlier but had abandoned the site and then returned to re-claim their lands. They persisted in building a permanent church, supported and funded education, and organized collective labor according to Tlaxcalan tradition. Population growth surged in the mid-eighteenth century. They participated in the defense of the region against Chichimec incursions. The residents of

San Miguel de Aguayo appear to have lacked only sufficient pasture to build livestock herds and sufficient capital to engage in mining.

Still, there was a "*proceso inexorable de invasión y expropiación*" (p. 18) by outsiders, including the Sánchez Navarro dynasty, and plenty of hard work, hunger, disease, and deprivation. Butzer asks why the Tlaxcalans persisted, why they didn't simply return to San Esteban where living was easier and where ties with family and friends were strengthened over the years. The answer, she says, is in the Tlaxcalans' identity and pride as descendants of the allies of the Spanish conquerors. They saw themselves as breaking ground in service to the Spanish king. In fact, they held a privileged place in the colonial order, a place they lost when independence arrived.

The story is told through a vast array of historical documents, including several in *náhuatl* that were translated into Spanish by Carlos E. Córdova. In one of several appendices, Córdova points out that as late as the end of the eighteenth century, documents were still written in *náhuatl*, further evidence of the lasting cultural integrity of the Tlaxcalans. Excellent maps, helpful tables and graphs, and reproductions of excerpts of manuscripts elucidate the details.

In the Prologue, Butzer explains that she first became interested in San Miguel de Aguayo because of the fascinating stories told by a student's grandmother. One wonders what those stories were and whether or not Butzer saw any trace of them in the documents she studied. Perhaps this is a topic for a future work. Leslie Offutt, who has written extensively about Saltillo, has said that northern Mexico is a "virtual *tierra incognita* to scholars" (2001, 4). Detailed study is just beginning to dispel the image of the north as a frontier wasteland of little more than violence and disorder. Butzer brings us voices of the past that breathe life into a little-known landscape and culture. Keywords: *colonial Mexico, Tlaxcalans, Saltillo*

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**Cultivated Landscapes of Native North America.** William E. Doolittle. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000. XV and 463 pp., maps, diagrams, photos, and index. \$55.00 paper (ISBN: 0-19-823429-1).

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In the first of a three work series on American agriculture on the eve of the Columbian Encounter, William Doolittle describes and discusses agricultural practices in North America prior to the arrival of Europeans. Doolittle's demarcation of North America extends from present day northern Mexico (roughly the southern edge of the border states) northward into Canada. This extensive and thorough work appeals to researchers interested in understanding both the intricacies of pre-European farming in the New World and the ways to effectively study past landscapes. In this Doolittle's book is notable on two fronts, not only is it encyclopedic in its description of former agricultural systems of North America, it is also an insightful treatise on how to conduct historic research on sometimes (quite literally) ephemeral land use patterns. Through Doolittle's careful historicism we learn how best to reconstruct past landforms.

Doolittle carefully constructs a discussion of pre-European agriculture based on a profoundly geographic principle. The book's "focus is on fields, not crops" (p. 7), and complements Doolittle's definition of academic geography as "the study of the surface of the earth, with emphasis on the shaping processes and combinations of elements such as soils and human activities that result in distinctive regions" (Doolittle 1992, 310). To enforce this notion of

academic geography, Doolittle avoids organizing the text based on traditional regional distinctions, instead focusing on how diverse landscape elements enable different agricultural strategies and thus the formation of distinctive agricultural land patterns. This organizational strategy makes this substantial book highly readable and allows the reader to compile the wealth of information contained within its pages. The text is organized into six chapters: Introduction, Horticulture, Rainfed Systems, Dryland Systems, Wetland Systems, and Conclusion.

The introduction provides an overview of the text to follow and demonstrates how geographers make a significant contribution to the study of aboriginal agricultural systems. By understanding field layout, location, and particular characteristics, geographers can demonstrate how farmers, and people in general, are intertwined with earth system processes as well as each other. This recognition has long been one of the hallmarks of academic geography, although recent efforts at creating a myth of the integrative discipline have glossed over these starting points. In this, Doolittle's book transcends a study of aboriginal cultivation in North America. He shows how trying to understand what anthropogenic features are on the land in fact strengthens our understanding of human-environment interactions in ways that other disciplines do not.

*Cultivated Landscapes of Native North*