

## CHAPTER 3

### Socio-cultural characteristics of Tlaxcala

Tlaxcala is the smallest state in Mexico. Its population barely accounts for 1% of the country's total according to the 2000 census carried on by INEGI (Instituto Nacional de Estadística, Geografía e Informática) which revealed a figure of 962,946 inhabitants, occupying the 26<sup>th</sup> place among the rest of the states. Its birth rate is around 2%.

The social characteristics of such a small place are rather peculiar. This chapter reviews how history has given shape to the modern traits that define its people in order to understand how their way of thinking and behaving affect their interaction with the social and economical entities that surround them.



Fig. 3.1 Tlaxcala's Geographical Location in Mexico (Encarta Atlas 2000)

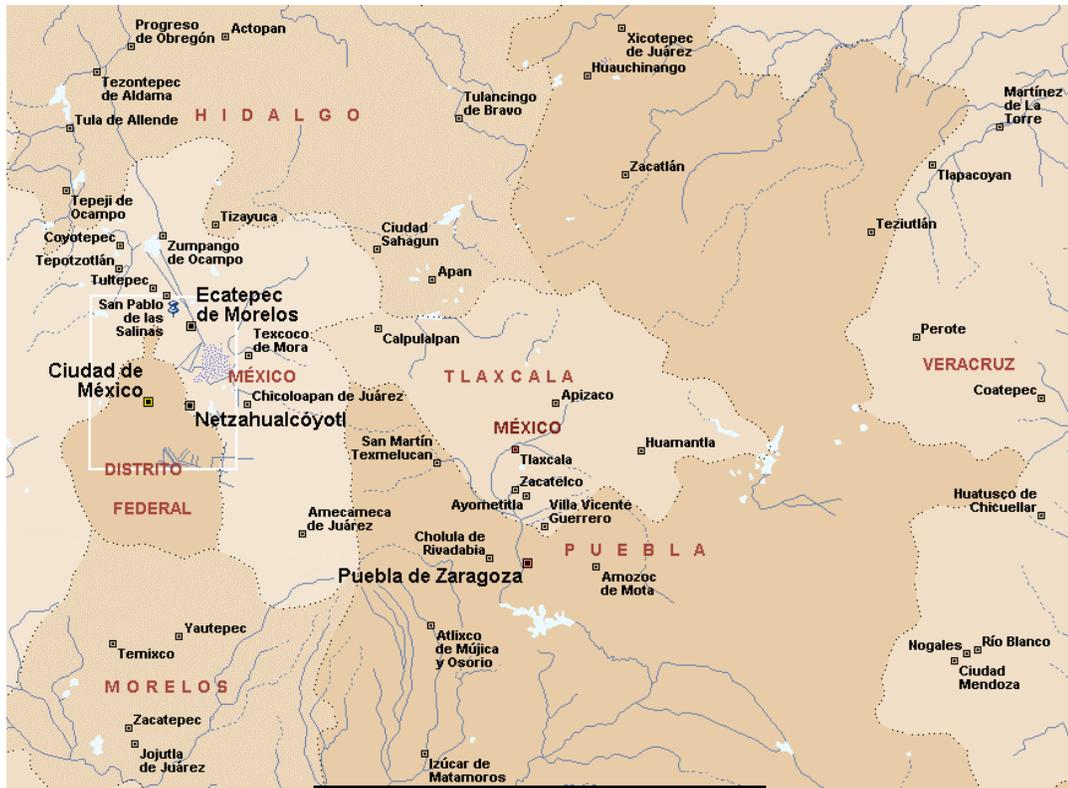


Fig. 3.2 Map of Tlaxcala and the Surrounding States (Encarta Atlas 2000)

### 3.1 The Historical Background of Tlaxcala

Trying to understand a culture is by no means an easy task. One has to go look deeply into its origins in order to understand the evolution process that took place; one has to thoroughly analyze the turning points and their consequences in every aspect of this culture: socially, economically, artistically and politically. Not being this the purpose of this research project, it will be limited to a brief but sufficient overview of Tlaxcala's history, basically focusing on the main event that is believed to have had the most contribution to the regional identity that defines the state nowadays: the Spanish conquest and the special privileges that were granted to Tlaxcala as a result of the alliance to defeat the Aztec Empire.

Back in 1504, the Aztecs perpetrated the one and only major attack to Tlaxcala's territory. Enormous personal and property losses were caused. However, the Aztecs were forced to retreat given the fierceness of the Tlaxcalans. There was absolutely no doubt that the power of the Atoyac River valley was held by Tlaxcala, which was actually one of the very few kingdoms in the region that the Aztec Empire never got to conquer.

When the Spaniards arrived to Tlaxcala from Veracruz in 1519, several battles were fought, and again, many lives were lost. Seeing that his army was almost defeated by this fierce people, Hernán Cortés opted to make a truce with Tlaxcala, offering to fight together against the Aztecs in exchange for peace. For Tlaxcala, this was a one-time only chance to crush its most hated enemy, however, it wanted to set very clear that this was not, by any means, an act of surrender, therefore, it agreed to fight side by side with the Spaniards only if their freedom and autonomy as a nation, for which they felt so proud, were respected. On their side, the Spaniards asked for the recognition of the King of Spain (Charles V at the time) as the supreme authority and the Christian God as the one and only (Rendón, 1996).

Once this agreement was made between the Kings of Spain and Tlaxcala, an aggressive and bicultural army was prepared and a precise military offensive was developed. The Spaniards now knew that they had 100 000 brave warriors to help them defeat the Aztec Empire and ultimately rule over the New Spain. Together, Spaniards and Tlaxcalans first defeated Cholula and then moved on to Tenochtitlan, which finally surrendered in 1521. Tlaxcala finally saw its long time enemies humiliated before them and the Spaniards had no more major obstacles to rule the new territories. A whole new way of life was about to be established in the nation, and even for Tlaxcalans, their untouchable autonomy and culture were just about to be altered by new principles, a new

faith and a new political structure where the natives would not really have that much of a participation (Saldaña, 1950).

By the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, the promises made by the Spaniards to the Tlaxcalans were all long forgotten, as the native monopoly over the land and political positions was gradually lost. Treason was the word, the Spaniards had lied and the way Tlaxcala saw foreigners again was forever changed. Spain actually decided in 1786 that Tlaxcala should fall under Puebla's scope of influence, a fact that Tlaxcala would never accept, just as it never accepted to have ever been conquered by the Spaniards, claiming instead to have been its one and only ally. After civil uprisings and several trips to the Spanish Court, Tlaxcala was granted again its sovereignty in 1794, fact that was later reinforced in 1857 when its own political Constitution was signed (Saldaña, 1950).

For many years, there were lots of give and takes between the Spanish and Tlaxcalan governments. Then came the Independence struggle which eventually left the fate of a new nation, Mexico, in the hands of an emperor of its own. It was mostly during these years that Puebla kept seeking to make Tlaxcala a part of its territory again, an effort that almost succeeded a number of times if it wasn't for the tough resistance of Tlaxcala's people.

The role that Tlaxcala played thereafter was reduced to being a cross-road between the Gulf coast and Mexico City, being barely even noticed by the rest of the nation. Its geographical position put it in the midst of important social and political issues, of peace and war, of progress and crisis, but it was hardly ever a main player.

Nevertheless, it had had a couple of high development periods in which the Industrial Revolution kicked in with major improvements such as the railroad, giving birth to a prosperous industry, the textiles (Rendón, 1996). In addition to this, the development

of a new urban marketplace, the wide availability of cheap labor force and the big demographical explosion led to drastic socio-cultural changes that gave birth to modern Tlaxcala. Nevertheless, at all times, have its people defended to death their strong convictions about their beliefs and traditions. Tlaxcalans are defying by nature even stubborn sometimes and very proud of their ancient heritage.

By mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, Tlaxcala found itself in a rather weak position. The country's government sought ways to promote the state as a profitable place to invest. A new industrialization period took place and has not stopped ever since, in spite of ups and downs that eventually arise. Today we find a diverse and prosperous industrial environment as well as a rather steady agriculture. There are plenty of jobs available, sometimes even more than those that can be fulfilled by locals, this is why now more than ever, people from all around the country is moving to Tlaxcala, giving birth to a whole new social structure that will eventually define a brand new state, although perhaps, given the nature of the Tlaxcalans, that will still take a very long time to happen. According to the latest figures provided by COPARMEX (Confederación Patronal de la República Mexicana), unemployment in Tlaxcala is currently at the rate of 4.2%, measured among people 15 and up. This unemployment rate is obtained considering all of those in this age range who haven't earned at least one minimum wage in the 15 days prior to the poll.

Tlaxcala is one of the rare places in Mexico in which finding maids is extremely difficult because the textile industries offer them better wages and benefits than those a family would. Young men are leaving the farmlands attracted by industrial jobs with a paycheck that does not rely upon the rain. As more and more industries establish themselves in the region, the employment opportunities increase exponentially, creating both direct and indirect jobs all around the state.

### 3.2 Tlaxcala Today and Towards the Future

As it has been seen, all through its history Tlaxcala's society has been characterized by a notorious cohesion and homogeneity due to, in part, having its origins in a very well defined indigenous group, a fact that played a major role in its progress. Tlaxcala owns today the same territory, with very minor add-ons, that it did before the Spanish conquest. Its people constantly strived to keep their independence and autonomy from the Aztecs, then from the Spaniards, which led to a strong cultural and historical identity that is the common denominator in the state.

The industrialization process came to modify several popular traditions, some of which have already disappeared. One example of a tradition that is in the verge of disappearing among industry workers is that of belonging to a "camada de Huehues". This is a group of dancers, mainly young men and women that dance during the town's carnival dressed up with highly elaborated masks and garments that represent a Spaniard. The reason why this is quickly fading among young men and women that work in factories is that according to the tradition, the costume has to be made by them. Considering that most of them work in a changing shift basis, there is never enough time to prepare the costume and rehearse for the carnival itself, thus, less and less people belong to a "camada" (brood) nowadays. Imagine a little town in which 75% of its population works under these conditions, how can it keep alive its Huehues tradition?



Fig. 3.3 Huehue (Encarta Encyclopedia 2001)

The challenges that this little state faces today are all but minor. Its social stability depends a great deal on its economic prosperity. The most recent socio-economical figures show that Tlaxcala has a relatively small degree of poverty as measured by the COPLADET (Comité de Planeación para el Desarrollo del Estado de Tlaxcala) back in 2000. We can see this in the following chart:

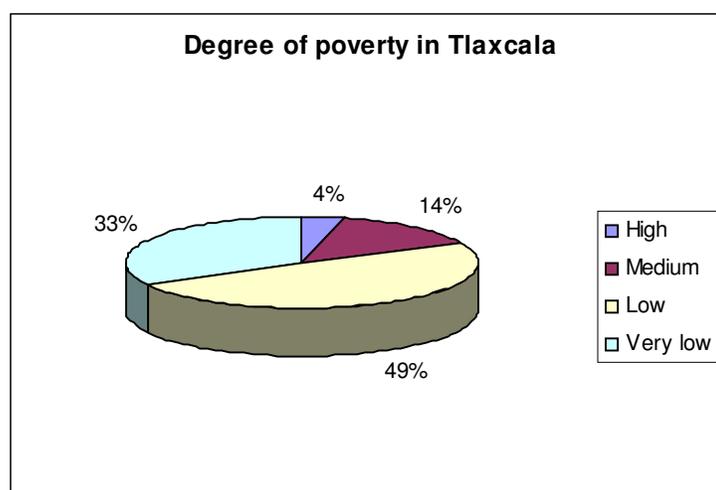


Fig 3.4 Poverty Level in Tlaxcala According to COPLADET  
([www.tlaxcala.gob.mx/portal/indicadores.html](http://www.tlaxcala.gob.mx/portal/indicadores.html))

As far as education goes, Tlaxcala has one of the highest literacy rates in the country thanks to a great effort that the state's government has carried on over the last few administrations. According to the COPLADET at elementary school level Tlaxcala has a 98.2% terminal efficiency nowadays, which means that out of every 100 kids that enter 1<sup>st</sup> grade only 2 won't finish through 6<sup>th</sup> grade. The state has 31 higher education institutions that provide service to a little over 20 000 students and 26 technical education institutions that host 15 000 students, thus providing an excellent labor market for the industries that have come to settle in the region.

The distribution of labor in the state, again according to COPLADET is as follows:

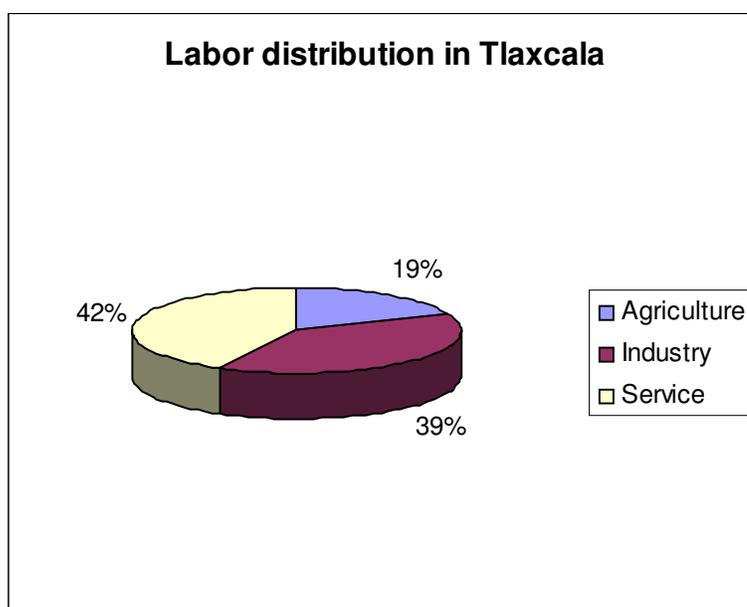


Fig 3.5 Labor Distribution in Tlaxcala According to COPLADET  
([www.tlaxcala.gob.mx/portal/indicadores.html](http://www.tlaxcala.gob.mx/portal/indicadores.html))

Competition is not only restricted to the local marketplace but to a fully globalized one already. All along the state may we find both local and foreign industries striving for survival. The success of this effort depends on both the company and its employees. If

they are both willing to stay afloat, they both must work together; each one must make certain concessions that seek to develop a trustworthy and win-win environment.

### **3.3 Tlaxcalans**

Even though in the next chapter a detailed description will be given regarding the general stereotype of the Mexican worker, the nature of this research project calls for a more specific one regarding the people of Tlaxcala. The following description seeks to be as objective as possible. It will mainly deal with the people belonging to the socio-economical level that constitutes most of the shop floor workers in the company where this research takes place in order to keep the study on track.

In general, it can be seen that this group of Tlaxcalans is characterized by an enormous sense of pride regarding their origins. One can still find many native last names among them and usually they don't live in the city but in little towns surrounding it where local customs and traditions are even stronger. In spite of a rather difficult economical situation, they belong to large families and they have followed the example with their own descendants, 3 in average. They don't like the idea of their wives working, so most of them stay at home and take care of the children and household chores. As difficult times as they face, they'd rather work double shifts than letting their manly pride to be hindered by a working wife. They are expected to have the meals ready whenever the husband gets home, either after a first, second or third shift.

At the workplace the main topic of discussion of men is their family, which supports the fact that nothing is more important to them than that. Most of them got married before they were 20. They know what to do and how to do it, regardless if there's

an easier way to do so, hence, they are not very welcoming when it comes to receiving feedback in this sense or any other. They like routine, they tend to keep on doing the same things in the same order and they are really annoyed by anything that disturbs this process. They hardly ever accept to go have their lunch break later than they usually do and with whom they usually go.

Since routine is what they like, whatever extra activities that need to be carried on must be fit in by their supervisor in order to avoid further discussion. Obviously, their first reaction to extra work is a demand for extra pay. Many of the systems that the company seeks to implement will actually reduce their workloads in the medium term, but they can not even conceive the concept of time-investment to profit later from less work, if at the moment it looks like an extra 15 minutes of their time will be needed during their normal work schedule, they will protest but will ultimately do it. They particularly like written instructions rather than verbal ones and prefer to be told they have to do something instead of doing it by themselves even though they had most of the times already thought about it. They don't own a highly developed initiative, while their inventive really flies high, it is just a matter of decision-making, and they'd rather have this done by someone else to avoid responsibility.

Other than their families, their favorite topic is how poorly paid they are and how their supervisors and managers do nothing but yet get an awful lot of money. As soon as one fellow gets them started, it is nearly impossible to end it. Therefore, whenever new tasks or systems must be carried on or implemented they are so negative about doing it, because they just see more work and the same pay. The only way of motivation they care to see is more money in their paychecks, something that is really hard to get any company do.

In global vision companies they are required to work under a multi-skills philosophy that expects them to be able to operate, maintain and administrate, all at the same time. When they realize this they immediately tend to think they are doing a three-men job and therefore they would expect a three-men paycheck, but this obviously not the way it works in this company. They do know that they are expected to do all these three things and do them in the best possible way because every year they are going to be ranked accordingly and the rank they end up falling in decides the annual salary increase they will get. Most of them conform themselves to being excellent operators or mechanics, but they tend to forget about the other two roles they must carry on, which usually severely affects their yearly ranking. This gets them mad at the organization and they automatically refuse to do any more new things that the company comes up with. It is a vicious circle with a terrible inertia that is very hard to control, let alone stop.

Getting them to come to work during their town's fair or carnival is impossible, it is a tradition that goes way back to pre-Hispanic times. The problem comes when you have a work team in which two or more members live in the same place. Flexible is not an adjective that would be used to define them. Getting to gather all four team leaders (there are four different work crews) for a meeting is a titanic job because the three of them that are not on shift completely refuse to make concessions, so it is not unusual to end up with two of them at most, and this is done by choosing the overlap meetings time, when they really have no other choice.

In general terms they are deeply obstinate people, not willing to do anything they are not necessarily required to, the only commitment they have is to cover their 8 or 9 hour shifts and that's it. They cannot conceive a way to make their jobs easier, for instance, they'd rather routinely clean up a machine's mess instead of looking for ways to stop it

from its root causes, why bother? They will for example, routinely wet the floors when “cleaning” even though there is nothing really to clean up; they don’t know otherwise.

Another main characteristic of 60% of this plant’s workers is that they had to go through the acquisition process. They used to work for a very traditional Mexican company in which party and alcohol were allowed in the facilities (they claim nobody got ever hurt), where the ones that got a better paycheck were those who invited over their supervisor for some drinks, where they were publicly humiliated when making a mistake, being sent to do the worst chores of the area. Somehow though, that turns out to be a way of working that most of that 60% really miss. On the opposite, after the acquisition, they became the most valuable asset of the company, because it recognizes that not even with the latest and most expensive technology can it accomplish its business goals without the support of those who make the technology work. Their labor weeks were reduced to 5 days instead of 6 and a whole series of training sessions were developed to improve their skills. They got a cafeteria on the site in which they get a complete meal for one dollar, but many of them still prefers to go risk their health to the little stand right outside the front door and where they usually end up paying much more.

The hopes are set mainly in the newly hired, the company has owned these facilities for over 5 years now, and all those hired after the acquisition are expected to help change the mentality of those who have been here before them. They know from day one that they will be evaluated in their operation, maintenance and administrative performance; they are told when they sign their collective working contract that the company will require them to work on holidays, obviously receiving the legal bonuses they are entitled to. All this new men and women know that the traditional way of working is not this company’s philosophy of success.

Somehow, Tlaxcalans have a hard time trying to understand and interiorize this. Constant, yet light, struggles with their supervisors and managers are common. Nothing that cannot be fixed by saying that it is the Plant Manager that orders one thing or another, they will still protest but they will do it faster and better. The situation is particularly difficult when one realizes that all these systems are trying to be implemented by a foreign firm, let's just remember that the Spaniards broke all the promises that they originally made to Tlaxcalans. Even though that happened almost half a millennium ago, it still rings in their spirits and daily responses.