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Ángela, a First-People's Struggle

When we talk about first peoples, normally we think of the indigenous in our country. Even though the 1917 Mexican Constitution protects the rights of indigenous communities and peoples and their territories, and those rights were broadened with the 1992 reform, our history is littered with illegal, unjust land-grabs and expropriations of first peoples since the era of the conquistadors. Everyone knows how deeply rooted peasants and indigenous peoples are in their land, the profound identity it gives them, those people who have venerated it and made it their own, preserving the many traditions that have developed over time.

In this article, I present the human vision of a Mexican social activist, María de los Ángeles Vences Gutiérrez, who belonged to the Florencio “El Güero” (Blondy) Medrano guerrilla group and lived among the indigenous and peasant communities deprived of their lands in the states

of Morelos, Guerrero, Veracruz, and Oaxaca during our country's dirty war under the presidency of Luis Echeverría Álvarez (1970-1976). The aim here is to bring up today a social issue that has always been present in the history of the first peoples and that continues without being fully resolved. It is also to give voice to a woman who lives among us and who just published a book about her activities in defense of these groups' rights.

I interviewed María de los Ángeles Vences Gutiérrez in her home in Morelos on February 14, 2019, thanks to the help of my friends Elsa Torres Garza and Luz Adriana Robledo. Luz Adriana gave me “Ángela's” —that's what they call her— recently published autobiographical novel to read: *El Caliche*,¹ which is the name the author gives to her fictionalized character's hometown. This put me on the track of a forgotten, ignored historical period, a voyage to the origin of human conflicts that have determined our social relations in many ways.

“Ángela” has won her freedom from bottom up, just like the trees grow, bearing the corresponding fruit. Born in a town in Morelos, she tells us about how, as a little girl,

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she absorbed much of the wisdom of its traditions with great sensitivity, assimilating the beliefs and customs of its people. She worked in the fields, at home, and in her family's shop from the time she was very small in addition to going to school. An active worker, she helped in all the ways required of her; however, she soon noted the social differences between those who had much and those who had very little, and the imbalance in the exercise of power. This awakened in her a sense of justice, equality, and social harmony: why do some live well and others do not? Questions like these plagued her from a very early age and her social activism responded to that kind, intelligent heart that wanted the common good, that wanted everyone to be treated equally, justly, and kindly.

She was 14 when she became interested in politics when her town's city hall was taken over in 1973 by people opposed to the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), which had stolen the election, proclaiming itself the winner and illegally imposing its candidate. El Caliche was ruled by a local strongman: the PRI and politicians in general shared the land out among themselves, imposed unfair prohibitions on local inhabitants, and discriminated against them. "Ángela," however, saw that they could defend their political rights if they united. That was when she met the people from the Rubén Jaramillo Neighborhood in the Temixco municipality, who had been supporting them. She became the girlfriend of one of the young men from that group, and she would follow him two years later to carry out clandestine activities in solidarity with the local residents, peasants, and indigenous people who had had their land and territories stolen from them. Her links to the deeply-rooted agricultural traditions of her town naturally gave that struggle enormous meaning.

It turned out that her boyfriend—"Arturo" in the novel—was one of the most important activists led by Florencio "El Güero" Medrano, the head of the United Proletarian Party of America (PPUA), which fought against imperialism, the landowners, and the bourgeoisie.² She says that her town, El Caliche, was conservative and too small for the aspirations for a better life for all, since she wanted to create awareness about the possibility of a broader horizon of common good that could benefit them more fully. But her town had stagnated in individualism, forgetting the values of solidarity of their grandparents who had fought with Zapata and the loyalty due to the popular traditions, replaced now by monetary interests.

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Her role was political, not military. "Ángela" recognizes that her poor, rural origins helped her interact with poor peasants and indigenous. She was a messenger, she arranged for meetings with "El Güero" Medrano, and she carried out organizational tasks. She worked with mestizo peasants from Guerrero's Tierra Caliente (low-lying "hot land") and with Mixe, Chinantec, Popoluc, Mixtec, and Zapotec indigenous communities of Oaxaca. She notes that the peasants from Guerrero were more impulsive and determined in their protests; they made more autonomous decisions and were more open to organizing. They had to deal with local authorities—also landowners—who took their lands away from them by sending in gangs of armed thugs. The indigenous communities, by contrast, although they were calmer and more mistrustful, suffered from the local and federal authorities' harassment to the benefit of influential politicians' families interested in their lands.

The indigenous people did not leave their communities, but, if forced to, they took refuge in other indigenous territories. By contrast, the peasants from the Tierra Caliente went more often to the cities, to the sugar harvest in Morelos or at the Tuxtepec sugar mill, or worked as agricultural day laborers elsewhere. Those who could went back to their hometowns, but if there was violence there, they stayed where they were or tried to live elsewhere. The author tells us that even the Tlapanec indigenous from Guerrero, who worked the sugar harvest, had to take over land in Ayala, Morelos, because they could not return home.

The indigenous and peasants fought their legal defense in the Agrarian Reform Ministry, advised by "El Güero" Medrano, who was supported by Humberto Serrano Pérez, the president of the Mexican Agrarian Council.³ And it was precisely due to the recovery of those lands in Oaxaca, stolen by the local strongmen, that "El Güero" was killed. "Ángela" mentions that today the issue is not land-grabbing by the landowners, but rather their use by drug traffickers, mining companies, and multinationals (to build housing and tourist complexes), etc.:

The enemy of the First Peoples has gotten bigger, because, while before, they were landowners who wanted to grab the First Peoples' land to create their ranches, now they include foreign companies—right?— who use the same methods as the other people, scaring them. They force them to sell and even kidnap them to take away the money they have just been paid. The only thing that has changed is the enemy, who is bigger. . . . Here, there are real estate companies that launder money. And then in Tetlama and Coatepec, there are indigenous communities, and since the Canadian mining company came on the scene to grab their lands, violence has also increased more. . . . Once you've got violence, remember that it's no longer so easy to celebrate traditions and customs because of the fear of violence; you don't have the same kind of confidence you used to have. . . . The fabric of society breaks down. . . . Indigenous migration always existed, but only half-way, because they'd come and work and then go back, but now there's more and more migration because of the violence. . . . The important thing is to occupy the space so they can't plant. . . . It's easier to subject a people that way, a less sovereign people.⁴

When I ask her about the Zapatista insurrection in Mexico's southeast by the National Zapatista Liberation Army (EZLN) in January 1994, "Ángela" says that she was very hopeful because it made the First Peoples visible in many ways. She even says that she worked in Morelos on the issue of indigenous laws. However, they turned out to be a dead letter because the people are not really taken into account; everything goes on as before.

She also says that she went through many painful moments full of sacrifices during her struggle, and that reading the legacy of leaders like Ernesto "Che" Guevara helped her escape from situations that depressed her, since she had suffered hunger, cold, and she missed her people. Nevertheless, she defines herself as an idealist, a dreamer who, since she was a young girl, was protected by her grandparents, who, in her dreams, offered her sticks of ocote or torch pine: that is, light to guide her. She says that her town is magical, that around it are pre-Hispanic constructions that were houses for healing, which is why there are many traditional healers. She tells me that her Aunt Diega said to her,

You've got the struggle in your blood, "Ángela." . . . First she scolded me, and my aunt is very wise. . . . She knows about

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those women I dreamed of; when my Uncle Lito was orphaned, those are the women who took care of him, two sisters or two cousins, because his father, who was "silvered," my great-grandfather Benito. . . . The "Silvered Ones" were the gang of bandits from the time of the Reform . . . , but they also participated in the War of the Reform, the Three-Year War, but they also could see that there was much inequality between hacienda-owners and peons. . . . And so, he died in 1908 and years later, my grandfather's mother died and he was brought up by those ladies. And so, I think that that's where the connection comes from, because my grandfather also did cleansings. My grandfather would take an egg and spit on it and clean my sister. He didn't do it . . . he didn't do it with other people; just with the family. And I think that has been the protection that they've had to be able to get ahead, my family on my mother's side.

My interviewee thinks that she inherited part of this family legacy (being protected and her spirit of solidarity). In addition, she had family chats around the *tlacuitl* or hearth with her paternal grandmother Aurelia, which helped create better communication. She thinks homes are no longer lasting and "married people divorce for any little difference." She's in favor of reconciliation before suing for divorce. She explains that in the past, parents congregated in a circle and sought to create dialogue to overcome a couple's squabbles and disagreements to rebuild what had been damaged. She observes that women defend their rights today, but forget their obligations; they have become more individualistic and less collective: they no longer educate their children because the psychologists say they should not be punished, so they do not correct them. Today, more young people are in the drug trade because this kind of education is missing. Before, women resolved many difficulties in the family; they were intermediaries in the fights among the children, but they no longer are.

"Ángela" confesses to us that she has always struggled and that she cannot identify with this society, and that

after her clandestine activity, she became disillusioned with political parties and social movements. She laments the lack of principles, of ethics, and of an authentic ideology.

And so, with this book, I wanted to reflect on that integrity of feelings that existed before. . . . That giving oneself over to an ideal. That sincere, uninterested devotion, but also to disseminate the PPUA's work. This isn't just my personal concern. . . . That's how the breach was opened up for the democracy that still exists. They left us no alternative because there were no political parties like now to participate in, somewhere to participate [expressing] your concerns; that didn't exist. There was only one party and the rest were clandestine. And wanting to participate was penalized. Being different was penalized.

The PPUA's action was more organizational and political than armed, says "Ángela," unlike the September 23 Communist League guerrilla group, which was more military. An arduous task because the idea was to create consciousness, but in a way that was so disinterested that the party militants had to work for a living in other fields since they received no financing, and if any of their members died in the forest, for example, no one would ever know.

"Ángela" stopped collaborating with the party in 1978, and although she does not cover this in her story, she was arrested, tortured, and later released. One of her fellow militants was very sick and suffered from depression due to the violence he had been subjected to, but she encouraged him, told him that they had to go on, that her book recovers the memory and gives voice to all the comrades, including the ones who had already died, who were in the PPUA's social struggle. She said that this was not her book, but the book of all of them, and that therefore, their lives had not been in vain: "That's why I consider myself a *nemontemi*.⁵ I feel like the *nemontemi*. . . . And being *nemontemi* is a commitment. . . . I am living extra days to complete what others have lived and what I lived. That is the mission. And here is the mission [pointing to the book]. That's it. And I feel I am *nemontemi*."

In "Ángela's" opinion, memory serves to prevent us from making the same mistakes, and writing *El Caliche* has allowed her to put what she has inside herself out there and to rediscover her tradition and culture more consciously. She even realizes that the knowledge passed on to her

by her grandparents is very valuable and that she is fulfilling the mission she inherited from her family and that it will be necessary to continue resisting until people have the wool taken from their eyes and wake up. That is why she wrote her narrative in a simple style, so it could be understood by most people.

There is no doubt that we are all sensitive to the history of the First Peoples with regard to the illegal expropriation of their lands and territories. But "Ángela" acted and gave everything she possessed over valiantly to change the situation, risking her own life, rooted in the community values of her Morelos town and identified with the injustice suffered by Mexico's indigenous and peasants.

In contemporary history, the defense of the land and territory continues to be fundamental. "Ángela," for example, actively opposed the construction of a landfill in Temixco, Morelos. However, despite the success of that protest, she confesses that she has not wanted to join any social movement or political group because she sees them as divided. And even though the land grabbing continues, she proposes to start working with families, with the values of solidarity among brothers and sisters and with honest work and respect for others, "without racism or discrimination." She thinks that teaching the true value of human beings is also a way to resist with an eye toward transforming society in the quest for the common good. ■■■

Notes

- 1 María de los Ángeles Vences Gutiérrez, *El Caliche* (Mexico City: Senado de la República-LXIII Legislatura, 2018).
- 2 Uriel Velázquez Vidal, "El movimiento social impulsado por Florencio Medrano Mederos 'el Güero', la lucha armada y el PPUA en el estado de Morelos. 1973-1979," *Pacarina del Sur* year 8 no. 29, (October-December 2016), <http://www.pacarinadelsur.com/home/brisas/59-dossiers/dossier-19/1376-el-movimiento-social-impulsado-por-florencio-medrano-mederos-el-gueero-la-lucha-armada-y-el-ppua-en-el-estado-de-morelos-1973-1979>.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 This and the following paragraphs quoted are from the aforementioned interview with the author, on February 14, 2019.
- 5 "The last five days of the Aztec or Mexica calendar were known as the *nemontemi*, which translates as 'completing what has been lived.' According to the sources of the time, those days were considered 'unfortunate,' 'in vain,' 'insufficient,' 'empty.' That was the thinking because those days were not associated with any divinity, in contrast with the other days of the calendar. The sources mention that people spent those days in repose, in their homes. They didn't go out." <https://tuul.tv/cultura/los-nemontemi-los-dias-del-ano-en-que-se-reconciliaban-los-mexica>.



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