

Mortars and Metates

Alice Fay Lozano

as told to Ian Hancock

Alice Fay Lozano is one of the Mexican Afro-Seminole. The Seminoles originally came west from Florida, first to Indian Territory in what is now Oklahoma in the 1830s, and then to Nacimiento in northern Mexico some 12 years later. In both instances, they were distancing themselves from slave raids into their settlements. In 1870, some of the Nacimiento people came north again into Texas to serve as Scouts for the U.S. Army, settling in Brackettville after they were discharged in 1914. The word seminole is a Creek Indian reinterpretation of the Spanish cimarrón, meaning, among other things, "fugitive." When the British were using Africans and Native Americans as slaves in the Crown Colonies during the 17th and early 18th centuries, a number of those people threw off their yoke of bondage and escaped south into Spanish Florida. Indian Cimarrones, or Seminoles, were not subject to the same harassment as the African Seminoles, and not all of them left Florida, though almost all of the African Seminoles did. In Oklahoma, nearly all of the Indian Seminoles remained, while the African Seminoles continued on to Mexico, and subsequently to Texas.

Today, the Seminoles in Mexico (known locally as Muscogos) are fewer than 200, and a similar number live in and around Brackettville 30 miles north of the Texas border. Although there are Afro-Seminole communities elsewhere — in Oklahoma, Florida, and the Bahamas — the Border Seminoles are different. While retaining their language and many of their traditions,

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both groups have adopted newer elements of culture: those of the frontera norteña. Ms. Lozano lives most of the time in Nacimiento, sometimes spending time with relatives in Del Rio, but preferring the peace and spirituality of her home at the foot of the Mexican mountains. During an afternoon, talking in her yard about an African-looking mortar, which sat on the ground not far from a Mexican grindstone, she commented that the two really represented the Indian and African heritage of her people. I asked her to elaborate.

From the yard around my hacienda in El Nacimiento de los Negros I can look down across the valley to some other homesteads and see men tending their goats and cows, and women hanging their washing out to dry. Here at the foot of the Sierra Madre range, an hour's drive from Melchor Musquíz, Coahuila State's capital city, everything is hushed and peaceful. Only the wind, and the noise of the animals pushing through the brush, break the silence.

In my yard you'll find a mortar and pestle, which we call *maata en maatastick* in our own speech, and you'll find a grinding stone, in Spanish called a *metate y tejolote*. More than anything else, these two tools for preparing food symbolize the dual heritage of our Black Seminole people, for one is African, and the other Indian.

The mortar is far too heavy for me to lift; it consists of an upright oak log about a foot across and two or three feet high, with a depression cut into the top several inches deep. The pestle is about five feet long, and is also cut from oak. It is about three inches in diameter except for the last foot on each end, which is wider, and rounded so that it can crush the dried corn kernels and other things we use it for. The metate is about a foot square with four small feet, and is carved out of one piece of stone. It has a flat top which curves inward slightly, and the tejolote, or grinder, looks like a fat stone cigar and is used



Alice "Nina" Fay Lozano enjoys the tranquility of the Sierra Madre mountains that surround the Muscogo community of Nacimiento de los Negros in northern Coahuila, México. Photo by David Bosserman

with both hands to mash peppers and other things on the surface. Sometimes we also use a *molcajete*, which is like a small stone mortar and pestle, and is used with just one hand.

Things are different now, because some of the homes in Nacimiento have electricity and electric blenders, but food processed that way doesn't come out the same, and it sure doesn't taste as good. Another sign of the changing times can be seen inside the pantry; provisions from Musquíz, or even from Del Rio across the border, are our staples now, but it wasn't always like that. In the early days, everything we ate we grew and prepared ourselves. In leaner times we would go up into the Sierra Madre to cut down the royal palms growing there, from which we could make a flour called *kunteh*. We'd mash and soak the fibers, strain them through a fine sieve, and use their starchy sediment to make tortillas. We don't need to do that any more, but people in Nacimiento still use the natural medicines that grow all around. Plants in the area are brewed into teas to remedy all kinds of ailments. Even the *yerba loca* is boiled with water as a pain reliever, especially during childbirth.

Much of our daily fare is Indian in origin. Some dishes, like *suffki* (a kind of cornmeal porridge) we brought with us from Florida; its name is from the Creek language. Others, like *toli* (sweetened and spiced cornmeal pudding) or fry bread probably come from Mexican Indians. We

also make and eat chorizo, tamales, and all kinds of other regional foods, which are not exclusive to the Seminoles. One popular African dish is sweet potato pudding, which we call *tettuh-poon*. Some of these we make at any time, while others are for special occasions, such as birthdays or funerals or the New Year.

The Border Seminoles differ in some ways from Seminole communities elsewhere, because of our special connection with Mexico. Seminoles in Oklahoma or Florida or the Bahamas for example, don't share that history, and would find some of the things we eat unusual.

Some people think we already spoke Spanish before we reached Mexico, having learned it first in Florida. But one thing is certain, wherever we learned it: Spanish has taken over as our main language in Nacimiento. Only a handful of older folk still speak Seminole. The settlement even has more outsiders living there today than Seminoles themselves, who have moved out to other towns, or up to Texas, especially to Brackettville. With the new interest in our people, and the establishment of the Seminole Center and Museum in Del Rio, and the attention the Folklife Festival has brought us, our own grandchildren are beginning to take a renewed interest in their special history. Our language and culture, our own unique blend of African and Native American and Mexican, may yet survive to be enjoyed by the generations to come.