

Purhépecha Hegemony and Cultural Tradition: A Case Study in the Highland Community of San Juan Nuevo Parangaricutiro

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Abstract: This paper studies collective performances to illustrate Purhépecha hegemony and cultural tradition in the highlands of Michoacán. In particular, I mention how the highland community of San Juan Nuevo Parangaricutiro has a strong connection to their cultural practices through natural resources. Contrary to zones of refuge, I argue that traditions have been handed down through generations within zones of hegemony. I observe the *Cúrpite* dance from San Juan Nuevo Parangaricutiro as an autonomous practice in connection to the highland community in Michoacán.

Keywords: Hegemonic zones, Purhépecha, highland communities, cultural traditions, *Cúrpite* dance, San Juan Nuevo Parangaricutiro.

Resumen: este ensayo estudia actos de grupo para mostrar la tradición hegemónica de la cultura Purhépecha en las partes altas de Michoacán. En lo particular se menciona como las partes altas de la comunidad de San Juan Nuevo Parangaricutiro tienen una fuerte conexión a las prácticas culturales mediante sus recursos naturales. En contrariedad a zonas de refugio, yo argumento en este estudio que las tradiciones han pasado de generación a generación mediante zonas hegemónicas. Observo la danza de los Cúrpites de San Juan Nuevo Parangaricutiro como una práctica autónoma en conexión a las partes altas de Michoacán.

Palabras clave: Zonas hegemónicas, Purhépecha, comunidad de la sierra, tradiciones culturales, danza de Cúrpites, San Juan Nuevo Parangaricutiro.

Despite the *Taracos* or Purhépecha being part of a rich cultural identity, the linguistic origins, the state expansion, and the ethnic adaptation are some of the dominant literary works of analysis. The differences in meaning between the words Purhépecha and Tarasco have long been debated and open to interpretation². Whereas the Purhépecha word means “the ‘common people’, ‘people of the town’, ‘the spoken language’, and ‘the ethnicity’” (Argueta-Villamar 42, Lopez Austin in *Tarascos y Mexicas* 19), the word Tarasco maybe a given name used by the Spaniards in Michoacán during the time of European contact. Fray Joan Baptista de Lagunas wrote about an episode of this name in the following paragraph:

¹ I was in San Jose California when my research on the indigenous *Cúrpite* dance in the highlands of San Juan Nuevo Parangaricutiro took a new direction. Dr. Tricia Gabany-Guerrero delivered the paper *Dancing Art: Visualizing Ancient Purhépecha Rituals* during the 84th Southwest Anthropological Association (SWAA). Gabany-Guerrero referred to “the tripartite spatial representation in the Purhépecha mythology to be defined in *La Alberca* compound (Gabany-Guerrero in conference). Although I had already seen the cliff painting mural she showed during her presentation, it became clear to me that dance has kept traditions alive in the highlands of Michoacán.

² See J. Pedro Márquez, *Tarascos O Purepecha?*

The *conquistadores* took Indian women as wives and concubines, and were called *tarascúe*, “son-in-law,” by the fathers of the girls. Thinking that the term was the name of the tribe, the Spaniards referred to all as *Tarascos*. (qtd. in Foster 9)

Lopez Austin sustains that “the most accurate source [to know the etymology of the term Tarasco] is that of the ancient historical manuscript called *Relación de Michoacán* (137)³. The manuscript explains how the Purhépecha descended from the fusion between the sedentary fishermen living in the outskirts of the Pátzcuaro Lake and a group of semi nomad bands coming from the north. The encounter of the two groups resulted in the exchange of food systems and religious beliefs that later became the flourishing culture of *Michhuacan* (the place of fish)⁴.

In the same way that scholars are concerned to find the origin of the Tarascan culture, linguists are eager to analyze where the language comes from. The findings are inconclusive and the results are similar to those described by Swadesh who mentioned that “el Tarasco . . . es una entidad lingüística aislada, en el sentido de que no tiene parientes cercanos” [the Tarascan language was an isolate with no close relationship to any relatives] (25). Swadesh further elaborates:

en los últimos años ha surgido al posibilidad de que tenga parentesco remoto con varias lenguas y familias lingüísticas; de ellas las más cercanas pueden ser el zuñi al norte, el quichúa al sur, y, dentro de México, las familias maya, mixe y totonaca [within the last years, there is the possibility that Tarascan language has a remote similarity with several linguistic groups, the closest being the zuñi to the north, the quechua to the south, and within Mexico the probability resides within the maya, mixe, and totonaca]. (Swadesh 25)

Mesoamerican experts established that “in West Mexico, the Tarascan or Purhépecha state ruled over a vast territory that rivaled the Aztec empire (Carmack, Gasco, Gossen 87). Gabany-Guerrero suggests that “frontier . . . battles [of the Purhépecha against the Mexica were] over territorial control of mineral resources and tribute” (*Deciphering* 77). For Helen Pollard the expansion of the Tarascan state in Tzintzuntzan was a political-religious process during the post-classic period (A.D. 1200-1520).

³ The full name of the manuscript is *Relación de Michoacán: Relación de las ceremonias y ritos y población y gobernanación de los yndios de la provincia y gobernanación de los yndios de la provincia de Mechuacan hecha al yllustrísimo señor Don Antonio Mendoça, Virrey y gobernador desta nueva España por su magestad, ecétera*. I used the on-line version courtesy of the Colegio de Michoacán last accessed August 7, 2013 at <http://etzakutarakua.colmich.edu.mx/proyectos/relaciondemichoacan/>. The manuscript was translated to English as *Chronicles of Michoacán*. The original version is housed in the Biblioteca Real del Monasterio de San Lorenzo, De El Escorial, Spain, also refer to web address for location at <http://rbme.patrimonionacional.es/> (Gabany-Guerrero personal communication May 20, 2013). Other copies are found in the Library of Congress in Washington D.C. and the University of Michoacán in Morelia. I will refer to the same as *Relación de Michoacán* hereafter.

⁴ The story also appears in Argueta Villamar, Arturo. *Los Saberes P'urhepecha: Los Animales Y El Diálogo Con La Naturaleza*. Michoacán, México: Gobierno del Estado de Michoacán y Universidad Intercultural Indígena de Michoacán, 2008. Argueta Villamar describes “La información etnohistórica señala que Ticatame y su grupo de cazadores-recolectores, denominado p'urhepecha-uacanze (*Relación de Michoacán*), procedían de Zacapu-Naranja, llegan al norte del lago, después pasan hacia el sur y traban contacto con los habitantes de Jarácuaro, que ya eran agricultores y pescadores (47). I will be using the terms Purhépecha and Tarasco interchangeably hereafter with all translations from Spanish to English to be mine.

According to Pollard “in the legendary history of the Tarascans, the great culture hero Tariacuri established himself as lord of Pátzcuaro, and his two nephews, Hiripan and Tangáxoan, as lords of Ihuatzio and Tzintzuntzan, respectively (88). The two main warfare gods were “*Curicaueri* . . . representado por las aguilas mayores (Uacusecha) y *Pungarecha* . . . representado por las aguilas menores (Cuiyusecha)” [Curicaueri who represented the upper eagles (Uacusecha) and Pungarecha who represented the lower eagles (Cuiyusecha)] (Corona Nuñez 530). Whether Purhépecha gods became humans or humans had god like powers, religion taught people virtues in life that warfare took away.

The Purhépecha from the past are different today. Studies about the children of Tzintzuntzan are limited to find a solution for poverty despite describing the problem in great detail. For instance, the Tarascan project of the 1950’s made good progress to create academic networks between American and Mexican research institutions. Many scholars under the direction of Julian Steward dedicated more than a decade to explore Michoacán. One of the key discoveries in Tzintzuntzan was referred to the concept of limited good (Foster 22). The main premise of this idea suggested that peasant communities face difficult times to create wealth within their economic systems. Land conceptualized as a limited resource that cannot increase as family sizes increase. Land can, however, be further divided into smaller segments allocating less food per new family member. With the same amount of land to be utilized to feed a larger number of people, poverty becomes inevitable so the research prescribed. Foster concluded in his report from the Tarascan project of the 1950’s that:

[Tzintzuntzan] as representative of rural Mexico – and Mexico basically is a country of rural and small – village life – the data here presented have significance far beyond the antiquarian interest of surviving Indian culture. As rural Mexico is understood, and as measures are taken to solve its economic and social problems, so will the Mexican nation progress. (22)

Nevertheless, Purhépecha performances are very important markers of cultural preservation after more than five centuries of post-colonial resistance. In the Purhépecha mythology, mountains were seen as the logical mediators between the earth and the sky, the location of rituals, individual spiritual guests, and refuge in time of chaos (Pollard 149). For instance, I define Purhépecha resurgence as an autonomous identity model where highland communities use natural resources and practice habits to create zones of cultural hegemony.

Ethnographic studies in the 20th century situate the contemporary Purhépecha within four sub regions of the state of Michoacán to include *La cienega de Zacapu*, *La cañada de los Once pueblos*, *La region del Lago*, and *La Sierra Purhépecha/Meseta Purhépecha* (highlands). “The Tarascan ‘Sierra’. . . is not a mountain chain but rather a volcanic plateau . . . whose surface has been roughened by large composite volcanoes, scores of small cinder cones, and extensive lava flows called *malpaís*”(West 2). San Juan Nuevo corresponds to the denominated Purhépecha highlands surrounded by the mountains of *La Laguna* (3,200m), *Prieto* (3,100m), *Parío* (2,910m), *San Nicolás* (2,900m), and *Cutzato* (2,810m) (Velázquez 2003:46).

The Paricutin volcano is perhaps the closest related experience to the power attributed to the mountains for the people in San Juan Nuevo. On February 20th, 1943 the Paricutin started giving signs of an upcoming eruption that would jeopardize the nearby communities including Parangaricutiro (old San Juan), Parícuti, (San Salvador Combutzio), Zirosto, and Zacán. The community members of San Juan

Parangaricutiro were reluctant to abandon their home until the lava took over the cemetery. Bishop points out that “only when the lava reached the graves of their ancestors -over a year after the appearance of the volcano- did they pick up their saints and begin the three-day march to the new town site” (407).

The people of San Juan Parangaricutiro carried the image of *El Señor de los Milagros* and began their journey to a new location on May 9, 1944. San Juan Nuevo today sits at the hacienda Los Conejos within the south center west volcanic belt region in the state of Michoacán, México. Annual pilgrimages are held to the old community of Parangaricutiro to commemorate the community’s salvation from the volcano via the intervention of *el Señor de los Milagros* (Gabany-Guerrero, *Deciphering* 182).

The image of *el Señor de los Milagros* first appears after an unknown person gives it to a native of *Parangaricutiro* named *Marichu*. The stranger offers to leave one sculpture among three he had for sale although he did not receive any payment, nor ate any foods for the time period he stayed in Parangaricutiro. The vendor spoke to an Augustinian priest from *Zacan* after leaving *Parangaricutiro* never to be seeing again. The priest order to bring flowers and praise the saint the vendor had just left saying that the saint would concede many miracles.

According to Chance “the Spanish conquest of the sixteenth century opened a new historical era and has served ever since as a benchmark of sociocultural change and continuity (p.381). Gabany-Guerrero hypothesized that “symbolic power of the Purhépecha Empire was not destroyed by Spanish hegemony, but transformed (*Deciphering* 4). Tracking their own history in the highlands, the *Pindecuario* of Parangaricutiro (PP) proved to be a vital source of information regarding community organization, the lineage system, the political economy of the pueblo-hospital and written Purhépecha language (Gabany-Guerrero, *Deciphering* 208)⁵.

Oral histories have been important in the preservation of community traditions. Gabany-Guerrero recorded that people reported “repeatedly to *Pantzingo* as one of the original highland communities before the Spanish congregations consolidated the people into *Parangaricutiro*” (*Deciphering* 184). Several pre-Hispanic communities, each corresponding to the barrios referenced in San Juan Nuevo, existed prior to the formation of new town (1943) and the original congregated community (16th century) (Moheno 39, Gabany-Guerrero, *Deciphering* 193). Fray Juan de San Miguel has been attributed for the congregation of *Andajchura*, *Tzintzicaro*, *Tzicatatacuaro*, *Tzirajpan*, *Cutzato* and *Coringuaro* as what later became Parangaricutiro around 1530-1535 (Moheno 39 and Zavala 21).

Gabany-Guerrero mentioned that “Luis Cuarao, and several members of the *cabildo*, sustained that the original communities which formed Parangaricutiro were ordered to unite under the rule of the *Cazonzi* and not the Spanish” (196)⁶. No document has been found to validate this account although community members petitioned it to the king of Spain to allow for the continuation of local dances on July 7th, 1590. According to Gabany-Guerrero:

⁵ For a full description of the *Pindecuario* of Parangaricutiro see Gabany-Guerrero, Tricia. “Deciphering the Symbolic Heritage of the Tarascan Empire: Interpreting the Political Economy of the Pueblo-Hospital of Parangaricutiro, Michoacán,” Diss. University at Albany, State University of New York, 1999.

⁶ *Cabildo* refers to a group of councilmen who advice the community on important decisions. Argueta-Villamar observes that “. . . *prioste, kenhe, kapitan, y fiscal* . . . *eran nombres del consejo de principales, hoy denominados cabildos*” [*prioste, kenhe, kapitan, and fiscal* were the same names of the councilmen in the past that today are known as *cabildos*] (my emphasis Argueta-Villamar 50). I will make reference to the *Cazonci* later in this document.

The document stated that the community was already an important center for religious celebrations, which included elaborate and extensive dancing. Complaints had been raised (it does not say by whom) about the “pagan” nature of the celebrations, but the result of a petition from the community to continue these traditions was to uphold their right to practice “ancient customs.” (Gabany-Guerrero, *Deciphering* 198)

The efforts to stretch any cultural activities near San Juan Nuevo Parangaricutiro points towards the early archaic settlement of *La Alberca*. For instance, the *Lienzo de Jucutacato* contains information about an early migration near *Panzingo*. Gabany-Guerrero also recorded an oral history about the appearance of a mythical goddess that reflects a passage in the *Relación de Michoacán*:

All the gods of the council replied, saying it would be so and began to wipe the tears from their eyes. The council broke up and that vision was seen no more. The woman found herself at the foot of an oak, and there was nothing around her when she awoke except a nearby cliff. Singing and walking through the forest, she returned to her home, arriving there about midnight. One of the sextons of the Goddess Cueravaperi heard her coming, opened the door, awoken the priests and told them to get up for the Goddess Cueravaperi was coming. (Craine and Raindrop 57-58)⁷

Ely and Bohrson formed the hypothesis that near San Juan Nuevo the complex of “*La Alberca* represented a stable and semi-permanent source of water from the Holocene to the present that could have provided an ideal habitat for wildlife including migratory birds” (qtd. in Gabany-Guerrero *Cliff Paintings in Parangaricutiro* 6). Gabany-Guerrero found cliff paintings at the *La Alberca* compound that were approximately 4000 years old with “archaic motifs (hunters/dancers and animals are distributed throughout the cliff walls” (*Cliff Paintings in Parangaricutiro* Gabany-Guerrero 5). West noticed less population decline and great language retention in the sierra region suggesting that “the pine-oak tree forest, with little palatable grass and numerous predatory animals, offered few attractions for the Spaniards” (Gabany-Guerrero, *Deciphering* 153). Scholars have argued for zones of refuge triggered upon Spanish contact as a way to preserve cultural traditions as Hernandez-Avila points out:

“Zone of refuge” . . . are immune to the reaches of imperialism and globalization. These zones of refuge are places where: knowledge has been historically guarded, exercised and sustained. These zones of refuge represent safe (physical and psychological) spaces where Mesoamerican cultures matrices continue to find expression, even as the advocates of the imaginary Mexico persist in their obstinate project of erasure and substitution. (qtd. in Taiiaki and Corntassel 605)

⁷ See also *Deciphering the Symbolic Heritage* on the oral history of the virgin of *Panzingo* (Gabany-Guerrero 184-185) and *The Curpita Dance from San Juan Nuevo* on the *Palmeras'* role to wash the clothes of the Virgin to commemorate her appearance near *Panzingo* (Valdez 40).

I proposed zones of hegemony since even before the arrival of the Spanish, these high altitude locations were heavily populated (West). The highlands have also provided an optimal environmental living condition for the people in San Juan Nuevo. Nuñez identified *agricultura de humedad* at an elevation above 2300 meters to be of a “característica del suelo de t’upuri . . . , el cual tiene una textura suelta, fina, que conserva la humedad residual producida por los bosques de pinos y encinos que circundan esta zona altitudinal” [characteristic of t’upuri soil . . . with a loose fine texture conserving residual humidity from the pine and oak forest of the highlands] (Nuñez 35). Argueta-Villamar coincides with that view since the Purhépecha have up to twenty one names for the “clasificación . . . de los suelos [basada] en las características de textura, color, uso, temperatura, y productividad” [classification . . . of the soil based on texture characteristics, color, usage, temperature, and productivity] (30).

How community members see themselves in connection to a tripartite dimension if any? I interviewed Mr. Vicente Contreras and Mr. Juan Aguilar Chavez about the *Cúrpite* dance. After we engaged in some good conversation, Mr. Contreras asked me to go on the roof of his house so that I could record a panoramic view of San Juan Nuevo. Once up on his roof, I asked him if I could take his picture and he agreed to the idea. He posed along his friend Juan while holding *Cúrpite* dancer motifs. Mr. Contreras asked me twice to take his picture since his head was covering the mountain behind him (see fig. 1).



Figure1. Life in the highland community. 2013: Photo Juan Valdez

I took a picture of the civil-religious group belonging to the Holy Child of the little old Man when posing outside of the church of the *Lord of the Miracles*. This was on the last day of the competition when the winning *Cúrpite*s escort the holy child to the house of the new civil-religious group. I was interested to ask details about this event and I thought that by returning this picture as a gift would allow me to be able to ask some questions. When I visited the family who received the Holy Child, a female member holding the civil-religious charge of the image was amazed by the almost perfectly captured image of the *Lord of the Miracles* in the background of the picture. She considered this to be the best photo she had received so far since no other picture showed the patron saint inside to the background. It came to my surprise that she did not even mentioned herself in the picture nor the rest of the group. The most important thing for her to see was the *Lord of the Miracles Christ* inside the church to the background of the picture (see fig. 2).



Figure 2. The Lord of the Miracles inside church. 2013: Photo Juan Valdez

Zavala Alfaro writes that “the *Lord of the Miracles* to measure ninety centimeters from one arm to the other and ninety three centimeters from head to toe” (50). The sacred saint has very long arms that stretch almost in proportion to the legs. The Purhépecha used the human body not only metaphorically in speech, but as a model or map for the ideal construction of social relations and institutions . . . as an essential part of their world view (Gabany-Guerrero, *Deciphering* 142).

If the Lord of the Miracles suggests reaching across land fields, where do we see this kind of representation in context. Gabany-Guerrero mentioned that “there were two types of land measured . . . calculated based on an average man’s height, plus one elbow length, plus a closed hand and finally plus the palm of one hand (*Deciphering* 106). When I saw a farmer planting seeds of corn in the field, he showed me a quick and constant movement of his feet to press the seeds into the ground. This almost instantly reminded me about the complex *Cúrpite* dancing style known as *zapateado*. Furthermore, the *Cúrpite* dancer’s arms are also held up high in the form of a cross hiding candies under a cape to give their girlfriends after dancing performances.

During the annual competition of *Cúrpites*, the dancing floor is built across the church of the *Lord of the Miracles*. The dancers are facing directly to the front of the church façade. The dancers perform to the top of the dancing floor that is raised almost to be level with the sacred saint inside the religious temple. If Purhépecha views encircle layers of hierarchical order, this once a year dancing ritual may challenge the position of the sacred saint. Gabany-Guerrero summarizes three layers of supernatural structures in connection to animate and inanimate deities in the Purhépecha cosmology:

Cuerauaperi, Curicaueiri and Xaratanga appear to have dominated the pantheon of the Purhépecha Empire as described in the *Relación* where the deities may be categorized into three distinct types: 1) deities based on constellations, astronomic observations and time; 2) deities based on the relationship with the earth and animate things (deer, eagle, snake, gopher) and the spatial areas they occupy; 3) deities based on their association with particular people, leader, place (inanimate, e.g. rocks, mountains, thermal springs) or time. (Gabany-Guerrero, *Deciphering* 118)

Just as the main dancing leader called Tarépeti controlling the flow of the dance performances, the Cazonci mediated the supernatural and all state affairs making his presence obvious in combat as the following paragraph in the *Relación de Michoacán* suggests:

The Cazonci adorns himself, putting a great plume of green feathers on his head and a very large, round silver shield on his back. A tiger-skin quiver, some golden ear-loops and golden bracelets with a red cotton doublet, and Indian suit of serrated leather on the shoulders and gold bells down the legs, a tiger skin four fingers wide on his wrists, and a bow in his hand complete his costume (Craine and Reindrop 24).

It becomes difficult to understand the full picture about Purhépecha living in the highlands “since the *Relación de Michoacán* takes a *Uacúsecha* perspective in general with that from *Tzintzuntzan* in particular (Gabany-Guerrero in conference May 20, 2013). San Juan Nuevo Parangaricutiro is not near Tzintzuntzan and the *Relación de Michoacán* lacks information on the religious cosmology since only a small fragment remains for our study. This makes it almost impossible to interpret if dance relates to cosmic views but certainly provides a strong cultural practice that have been performed in the Purhépecha highlands for a long time.

This paper gives context to the cultural tradition of Michoacán based on some background information between the names Purhépecha and Tarasco. I explored influential research that has been conducted in Michoacán to argue how it limits our understanding about cultural autonomy. The central argument of my paper emphasize that life in the mountains pertains to a zone of hegemony as opposed to a zone of refuge. I finalize the paper by providing examples drawn from my own research that support the Purhépecha tri-partition view while performing the *Cúrpite* dance. This paper commemorates part of the research and training I received as graduate student under the direction of Dr. Tricia Gabany-Guerrero.

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