

The pilgrimage of the Virgen Corazón de María as a territorial practice in the ejido Francisco Sarabia, Comitán de Domínguez, Chiapas

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— Abstract—

This article addresses the symbolic burden that rural populations maintain in the XV Meseta Comiteca Tojolabal region of the state of Chiapas based on the ethnographic study among residents of the ejido Francisco Sarabia around the pilgrimage they carry out in honor of the Virgen Corazón de María, same that culminates in the archaeological zone of Tenam Puente. This study plays an important role in the current configuration of the appropriation of indigenous and peasant territories in the 21st century since it is one of the few experiences in Chiapas where rural populations make use of these institutionalized spaces (archaeological zones) for the realization of rituals with agricultural sense. The methodological route that guided this research is based on qualitative research, particularly from ethnography, when developing a descriptive-interpretive record of the pilgrimage carried out by the residents of the ejido.

Keywords:

Rituality; territory, indigenous peoples; Archeology; Ethnography.

THE ALTOS ORIENTALES OF CHIAPAS AND THE HISTORICAL LEGACY
OF TENAM PUENTE BETWEEN THE VILLAGES OF THE MESETA
COMITECA TOJOLABAL

In the archaeological field, the study region is made up of "different locations that share common cultural and temporal traits, including Hun Chabin and Tenam Puente, in the municipality of Comitán; Pueblo Viejo in Tzimol, Chinkultik, Tenam Rosario, Sachana and Lagartero -next to the Lagos de Colón- in La Trinitaria and Cerro Nahlem in Las Margaritas" (Navarrete, 2001:31, in Ruíz, 2007: 42). A region with a diversity of archaeological spaces or housing complexes with important particularities that have left a historical legacy to the populations of the Meseta Comiteca Tojolabal to this day.

In this way, Tenam Puente has been cataloged as "a civic-military center, located 13 km southwest of the city of Comitán, on a series of hills that rise moderately to an altitude ranging from 1600 to 1700 meters above sea level and that serves as a southern limit to the Comitán valley, this chain also functions as a natural barrier that divides the hot land (Central Depression) from the cold land (the Altos Orientales)" (Laló & Alor, 1998:827), in addition, this location allowed the civilizations that inhabited them "to participate in the commercial routes established in these areas" (Laló, 2001:553). The toponymy of the archaeological zone is particularly composed of Tenam a Nahuatl voice, Tenamitl that could well be translated as "fortification" or "city wall or fence" (Thouvenot, 2014) and the name Puente (bridge) that comes from the name of the old El Puente estate.

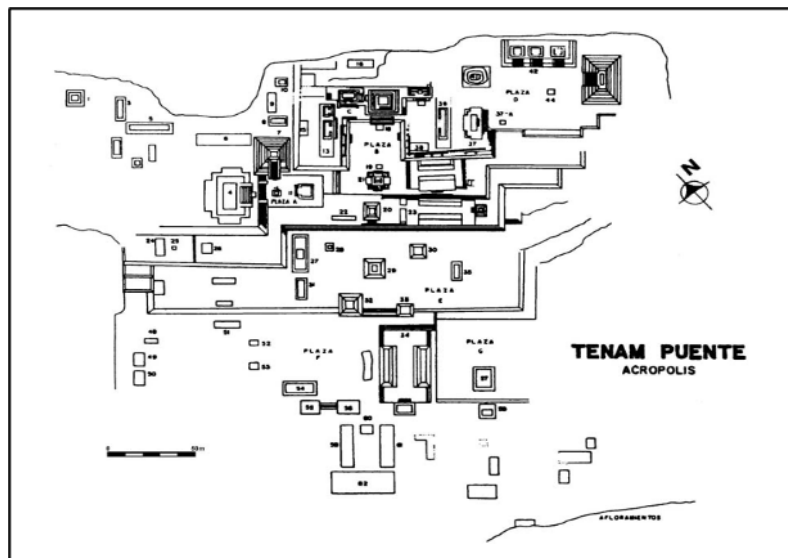


Figure 1. Sketch of the Acropolis of Tenam Puente Source: Retrieved from Laló, 2001:559

Tenam Puente acquired great importance as a guiding center in the comitecos valleys, this importance is based on the multiple archaeological finds that have been identified, since, as Laló and Alor state:

"The nuclear zone of the site is composed of just over 80 structures, most of these buildings and the most important are located in what we have called the Acropolis... three ball courts were built in this large architectural complex, two of them contiguous and within the Acropolis, one more located in an open square in front of the large platform of the first level... although the first human occupations at the location are not yet clearly defined, it is possible to trace its first occupants back to the Early Classic period. This seems to demonstrate the burial whose ceramic offerings coincide in form, in the Teotihuacan style of Central Mexico, referring to around 500 AD... most of the buildings so far intervened (10 in total) show an evident occupation of the Late Classic and Early Postclassic... it is during the Late Classic when the greatest occupation occurs within the region and even in the neighboring Central Depression, in the case of Tenam it also coincides with great architectural development and sculpted monuments" (1998:828).

That is, the territorial impact that Tenam had on the valleys of Comitán de Domínguez shows the degree of participation of this settlement in the political, social, cultural, and religious life in this region.

One of the most important cultural practices that were continued among the inhabitants of this place that is now known as the Francisco Sarabia ejido, was the elaboration of pottery, a practice that until a couple of decades ago was included as part of the family income of those who continued to develop the ancient techniques. In Tojolabales localities of the municipality of Las Margaritas, the importance of the clay vessels that came from the Francisco Sarabia ejido are remembered, which are characterized as utensils of good quality and resistance. However, at present, few people maintain this practice, whose products are sold in the municipal market of Comitán de Domínguez or those knowledgeable about the type of pottery made in the ejido Francisco Sarabia look precisely for the makers to order the pieces they need, such as pots to cook beans, larger pots to prepare atole, skillets, and diversity of multi-dimensional vessels.

FROM HACIENDA EL PUENTE TO EJIDO FRANCISCO SARABIA

The inhabitants of the current ejido Francisco Sarabia consider that the first inhabitants were part of groups of tojolabales that populated this space, so the origins of the current ejido go back to the Hacienda El Puente that according to Pulido was "owned by Germans who for unknown reasons left

the city, leaving it to their agent and administrator Enoch Ortiz, who made produce and enjoyed it until for agrarian reasons sold it to the government, turning it into the Francisco Sarabia colony" (2000: 220). On the other hand, Laló states that "although the procedures for the endowment of the land had begun in 1937, it was not until August 14, 1945 when the expropriation decree in favor of the new ejido was finally published" (2005: 28) and in addition, we point out a fact that is interesting for the development of the analysis in the text, by mentioning that "according to oral tradition it was in that year [1945] and on August 22, when the owner gifted a Virgin Mary to the inhabitants when it became an ejido" (Laló, 2005: 30).

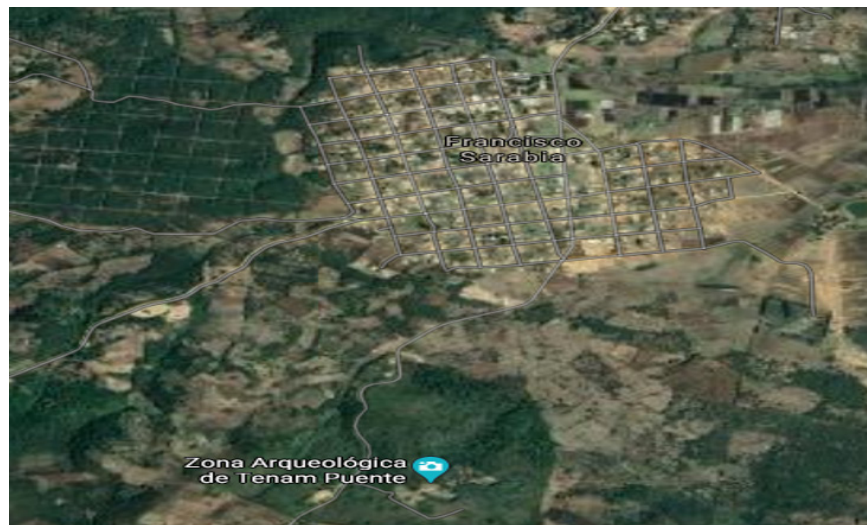


Figure 2. Locality of Francisco Sarabia. Source: Google Maps, 2020

Although the first generations of inhabitants of the current ejido are considered of Tojolabal filiation, it should be brought to the discussion that the generations of grandparents worked as peons for the farmers of the region and, consequently, their employers did not allow the practice of visiting sacred places such as caves, ojos de agua, hills, and other spaces considered sacred. "The estate's role was decisive in the socio-economic conformation of the current Chiapas territory... the estate was not only what was contained in its territorial framework, not only was a productive space but also ideological, it transcended its geographical limits by forming in several areas the cultural world that today in Chiapas is known as "ladino" and by helping even in others, sometimes, to recreate a good part of the traditions of colonial indigenous roots, when the members of the communities took refuge – by a degree or by force – within their borders" (Ruz, 1988 in Gómez & Ruz, 1992:17).

Although the origins of the Tojolabales are still uncertain, the multiple studies both in the ethnological field (Ruz, 1990), and linguistic (Lenkersdorf, 1986), highlight the importance that pilgrimages to places considered sacred have in this ethnolinguistic group, although Ruz argues that with the end of the estate period (that is, with the agrarian distribution and the constitution of the ejidos), visits to sacred places or pilgrimages were made with greater emphasis among the Tojolabal population due to the nascent "freedom" in which the inhabitants were found, however, in this way the sacred dimension among the Tojolabales is concretized particularly from the rituality from natural and sacred spaces that somehow seek to maintain in balance the forces that make up the daily life of the subjects (Nájera, 2006).

These peoples following the Mesoamerican ritual tradition have achieved the permanence of linking spaces as sacred territories, where everything is in a relationship, it is about coexistence. The territory and particularly the sacred spaces "are always relationships, they are links and, consequently, the vital slogan is in the search for balance, for the new balance as a renewal of the intensities and senses in the vital ties" (Limón, 2012: 43).

TERRITORY AS A SYMBOLIC SPACE FROM THE PILGRIMAGE OF THE VIRGEN CORAZÓN DE MARÍA

In the game of belonging, the traits and practices of identification between the subjects become axes that allow us to address territoriality and understand it as "the action of signifying a place and with it, protecting, ratifying, defending, marking, creating customs, practices, and uses by an individual or collective subject" (Avendaño, 2010: 15). The spaces from which the identity of the inhabitants of the Francisco Sarabia ejido is constructed lead us to address the conception of territory as the "natural space culturally appropriated by human society: the territory would be the appropriate and valued space – symbolically and/or instrumentally – by human groups" (Giménez, 2000: 90), and in addition, it is necessary to add that the territory is "also the object of symbolic operations and a kind of screen on which the social actors (individual or collective) project their conceptions of the world" (Berruecos, 2012: 54). The territorial space that the locals have assumed as their own is linked precisely to the heritage of the space, the product of the struggle of grandfathers and grandmothers of the current ejido owners.

The identity of the inhabitants of the Ejido Francisco Sarabia with their own territory implies a strong feeling of attachment and belonging to their socio-cultural space, which implies links with the material context, such as the land, water, and the mountain (natural resources), but also symbolic aspects that have to do with how they appropriate the land, nature, family and social relations thus Porto Goncalvez maintains that "man is a symbolic

animal and, in that sense, his relations with each other and with nature are mediated by the meanings he creates and directs his practices" (2008:65) which is particularly observed in the resignification of pilgrimage.

Mother Earth or the *nantik lu 'um k 'inal*, continues to be an extremely important element in the life of each of the families, it is the giver of life, the fruit that feeds and maintains them, the corn. However, the incorporation of elements of Catholic religious worship such as the Virgen Corazón de María, has allowed generating processes of social cohesion and, consequently, reappropriation of territorial spaces that have been considered sacred and of collective importance.

The pilgrimage in honor of the Virgen Corazón de María, by agreement of the inhabitants, takes place on a Sunday before August 22, since this last date coincides with the date on which the owner of the farm gave the virgin to the newly consolidated ejido owners (Laló, 2005). The fieldwork was carried out throughout August 18, 2019, however, the preparations began a day before so that, from very early, the image of the virgin was enlisted making a movable kiosk, adorning it with wildflowers in which the jutuz¹ or Mayflower (*plumeria rubra*) and flowers such as roses, sunflowers, and chrysanthemums stand out. In a way, the rituality of this practice is inscribed in what Ruz proposes when mentioning that "the tojolabal universe claims as primarily its own the geographical spaces that it recovered from the old estates ... [in this way] the abandonment of the traditional centers of settlement did not mean, in any way, the resignation of the cultural patterns forged with the American and European heritage" (Gómez & Ruz, 1992:18-19).



Figure3. Contingent starting from the ejido church. Source: Personal Archive, 2019

1 The local name assigned to *plumeria rubra* L

The pilgrimage is composed particularly of Catholics of the ejido, men, women, young people, boys, and girls participate, they make the journey from a characteristic, special organization, especially because they manifest the symbolic form for the petitions linked to agriculture. In this way, the first subjects that appear in the contingent are the *coheteros* who are responsible for the fireworks whose figurative sense symbolizes thunder, lightning, the preparation of rain; followed by the crew of drummers who are playing the drums and the reed-flute offering the melodies along the walk of the contingent, the sounds generated by the drums is considered the rain that falls on the crops; the third important party is composed of the image of the Virgen Corazón de María, the flags that represent the homes where the rain is expected to fall and the women, boys and girls in the central part of the contingent as a fertility space.

Around nine o'clock in the morning, the contingent prepares its departure towards the route that will take the pilgrimage to Tenam Puente. The walk begins in the Catholic religious temple of the ejido, loading the image of the virgin in a wooden structure adorned with flowers and accompanied by the traditional music of drum and reed-flute, including the flags of pilgrimage, that is, those flags that within the ritual tojolabal life are considered "major flags" and "minor flags".

The contingent walks to the archaeological zone on the paved road that connects the ejido with Tenam Puente. The crews of *coheteros* and drummers are the ones who lead the pilgrimage, followed by the flag bearers, those who pray, and the image of the virgin. When they have arrived at the archaeological zone, the contingent borders the structures on the south side, until they reach Building 14 located in one of the highest areas of the Acropolis.



Figure 4. Contingent arriving at the archaeological zone. Source: Personal Archive, 2019

In Square D, the contingent makes a stop to accommodate the shrine in which they transport the virgin and prepare to approach the B square of the Acropolis. Once they have crossed Square D, the contingent approaches Building 14, which is the main point where the pilgrims and the Virgen Corazón de María must arrive. In front of Building 14, there is a *shinil* tree (*Quercus polymorpha* Benth) which is given three turns counterclockwise to immediately let rest the shrine containing the virgin in front of the building, a rosary is prayed by all the participants while the drummers and *coheteros* wait for the end of the prayer.



Figure 5. Principals blessing the offerings for the spots. Source: Personal Archive, 2019

Once the rosary is finished, the principals go up to the platform of Building 14 with the "major" flags where there is a wooden cross itself that is adorned with flowers such as the laurel (*Litsea glaucescens* Kunh). Next to the cross sits the shrine with the Virgin; at the foot of the building, the principals and the entourage that make up the committee in charge of the pilgrimage, light candles on sedges (*Pinus oaxacana* Mirov) that have been previously scattered, in addition to this, a special prayer is made linked mainly to the request to have a beneficial agricultural season for the ejido (rains and abundant harvests). A special fact during this prayer is the blessing of *tzenam* (a kind of bromeliad for ceremonial, medicinal use, and symbolic protection) and candles that must be offered, with an important symbolic charge, in the spots that are considered of utmost importance, until a few years ago 26 spots were identified and currently a couple of candles and a couple of *tzenam* are lit to only nine main spots distributed around Building 14.

However, the ritual process does not end with the arrival of the Virgin to Building 14, but music also plays an important role, as the crews of drummers and warblers continue to play at the foot of the *shinil* tree and, in addition,

next to it, a marimba is installed that plays multiple sounds to cheer up the visit and accompany all the attendees who have brought food and drinks to share and party and *share*, as proposed by Jaime Martínez Luna (2010).



Figure 6. Space of coexistence among the participants. Source: Personal Archive, 2019

Family and community coexistence play an important role in the celebration of the ritual journey carried out by the inhabitants since processes are revealed with which institutionalized spaces (archaeological zone) are assumed as symbolic, identity, and epistemic elements, which allow us to understand that the social fabric is built from the recognition of spaces that are considered collective and with a sacred intention, thus giving meaning to daily work.

CONCLUSIONS

The society-environment binomial highlights the importance of the symbolic interpretation that subjects make around the space and time in which they build their daily lives. Although, the rituals of indigenous peoples represent in some way the continuity of ancestral practices linked to the recognition and reaffirmation of the space-time duality since the ancestral territory is then interpreted "as the axis of the material, social, and cultural reproduction of the group" (Lerma, 2017: 2). Therefore, resignifying the territory as a process of territorialization makes it a hierophanizing experience² that allows to symbolically appropriate the territories that have been part of the collective

2 Hierophany can be understood as "how the sacred is manifested from some element that without that attribute would be common" (Lerma, 2017: 2).

identity. Although Laló found when mentioning that "in the photographic records of the 30s of the building 14, in these shots, the existence of any wooden cross is not observed. Nor do the reports of the different researchers who were on the site mention anything related to the holiday. The reports of the inspectors of pre-Hispanic monuments in the 30s mention "the existence of some caves with crosses" (2005: 30), but none speak about any procession at the site, that is, although the visit to the archaeological zone would seem to begin from the second half of the 40s, somehow the pilgrimage in honor of the Virgen Corazón de María becomes an opportunity for appropriation and sacralization of space in the archaeological zone from the subjects themselves, which leads them to build new symbolic and material territorialities.

In this way, symbolic territoriality acquires meaning among the inhabitants of Francisco Sarabia, since this territoriality is articulated as "the cultural representations elaborated by the peoples about their space. Highlights the distinction between sacred and profane places that allows regulating the reproduction of heterogeneous practices according to the significance and usefulness that is granted to them" (Lerma, 2017: 3), since the cross and the building 14 make sense depending on the dialectical relationship that is established between the space and the subjects through the cyclical renewal concretized in the annual rituals, one of them, the pilgrimage of the virgin.

The territory constitutes a space with an important symbolic charge, but even more so they become ethnic land that reactivates memory and become instruments to claim territorial rights within the national states in which they are located (Barabas, 2004), that is, in the case of the inhabitants of Francisco Sarabia, through the pilgrimage in honor of the Virgen Corazón de María a re-territorialization of the physical space is built, in this case, the cross, building 14 and in itself, the archaeological zone becomes what Barabas (2003) has called as *ethics of the gift* referenced by a "set of conceptions, values, and stipulations that regulate the relations of balanced reciprocity between people, families, neighbors, authorities, and communities in all fields of social life: the work, the life cycle, the party, the political, and the sacred" (Barabas, 2004: 146). That is, the fulfillment of the gift implies obtaining well-being and balance in the life of the participating subjects and the community as a whole, therefore, the offerings and petitions establish an alliance between the deities and the subjects with the territory and with special attention in the request for a good agricultural production as sustenance of life.

The territorialization that the pilgrims of the ejido make with the archaeological zone of Tenam Puente and especially to building 14, highlights its importance at the spatial and social level that space has and, in addition, makes visible the network of relationships that are established before, during, and after the pilgrimage, since this practice is understood as the lived side of

the territory with an important historical load. Therefore, talking territoriality refers to the daily life of the inhabitants of the territory, their multiple relationships at work and outside work, their family relationships, their relations with social or religious groups, their relations with the authorities themselves, and with their *habitus* individuals (Restrepo, 2005).

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