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Rituals, Feasts, and Ceremonies Sustaining and Regenerating Commons Socio-cultural Institutions and Livelihoods in Santa Fe de la Laguna, Mexico

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Abstract

Traditional and indigenous communities around the world maintain their livelihoods based on complex social structures and systems. In this article I show the role that symbolic and cultural practices play in the structure and social organization of an indigenous community in Mexico and their relation to its livelihoods. Drawing on ethnographic research, I found that access to natural resources in Santa Fe de la Laguna is controlled by a collective management structure and is granted only to those who fulfil social responsibilities in the community. I show how social responsibilities and the corresponding socio-cultural institutions function in everyday life through an understanding of the roles of the community's people in symbolic and cultural practices, and how these provide the scaffolding that defines how lives and livelihoods are conducted in this community, reproducing an existing common. Finally, I discuss the relationships and interdependencies sustaining and regenerating social institutions and livelihoods in Santa Fe de la Laguna.

Keywords: symbolic practices, social institutions, livelihoods, regeneration, community, Purepecha

Rituels, fêtes et cérémonies soutenant et régénérant les institutions socioculturelles et les moyens de subsistance des biens communs à Santa Fe de la Laguna, au Mexique

Resumé

Les communautés traditionnelles et autochtones du monde entier maintiennent leurs moyens de subsistance sur la base de structures et de systèmes sociaux complexes. Dans cet article, je montre le rôle que jouent les pratiques symboliques et culturelles dans la structure et l'organisation sociale d'une communauté indigène au Mexique et leur relation avec ses moyens de subsistance. En m'appuyant sur des recherches ethnographiques, j'ai découvert que l'accès aux ressources naturelles à Santa Fe de la Laguna est contrôlé par une structure de gestion collective et n'est accordé qu'à ceux qui assument des responsabilités sociales dans la communauté. Je montre

comment les responsabilités sociales et les institutions socioculturelles correspondantes fonctionnent dans la vie quotidienne à travers une compréhension des rôles des personnes de la communauté dans les pratiques symboliques et culturelles, et comment celles-ci fournissent l'échafaudage qui définit la façon dont les vies et les moyens de subsistance sont menés dans cette communauté, reproduisant un commun existant. Enfin, je discute des relations et des interdépendances qui soutiennent et régénèrent les institutions sociales et les moyens de subsistance à Santa Fe de la Laguna.

Mots clés : pratiques symboliques, institutions sociales, moyens de subsistance, régénération, communauté, Purepecha

1.0 Introduction

Traditional and indigenous communities around the world cultivate and sustain knowledge and economic practices that have been developed from complex historical socio-ecological systems (Berkes, 2009; Brown & Kothari, 2011; Senanayake, 2006). Such communities typically determine their social organization by drawing on the structures underlying these systems in order to generate and regenerate the resources and means necessary to develop and sustain their livelihoods from their immediate environment (Chambers & Conway, 1992; Department for International Development, 1999; Scoones, 2009). Livelihoods are sustained by a mesh of economic and symbolic or cultural practices, informed and supported both by material and non-material resources, such as knowledge generated by socio-ecological relationships and the historical context in which they function, as well as sociocultural values and institutions (Kofinas & Chapin, 2009).

The most common contemporary studies of livelihoods maintain a fragmentation in the understanding of various influences, interactions, and interdependencies with social institutions and practices (Baumgartner et al., 2011; Binder et al., 2013; Miller, 2014). They focus mainly on a set of assets or capitals—social, human, economic, natural, and physical—that people can access and use to meet their material needs. As indicated by Binder et al. (2013), the social system is conceptualized as situated in a context of external factors, and social dynamics are not incorporated within an understanding of the ways social institutions, cultural practices, and livelihoods relate.

The purpose of this article is to provide insights into the role that symbolic and cultural practices play in the structure and social organization of an indigenous community in Mexico and their relation to the sustaining of its livelihoods and regenerating of its identity. The aims are threefold: (a) to identify the key components and relationships that comprise or help shape the community's symbolic practices, (b) to understand how local sociocultural institutions function in everyday life, and (c) to generate insights into how these factors inform community identity. In turn, these will provide the basis for understanding the ways in which the social structures—which are informed by symbolic practices—are the scaffolding that defines how livelihoods are conducted in this community as well as its social reproduction. For the purpose of analysis, I have focused on symbolic and cultural practices involving an array of feasts and ceremonies, because they incorporate the cultural elements—social and spiritual—which are the bedrock

on which families develop their lives (Högger, 2011), and where the community regenerates its identity.

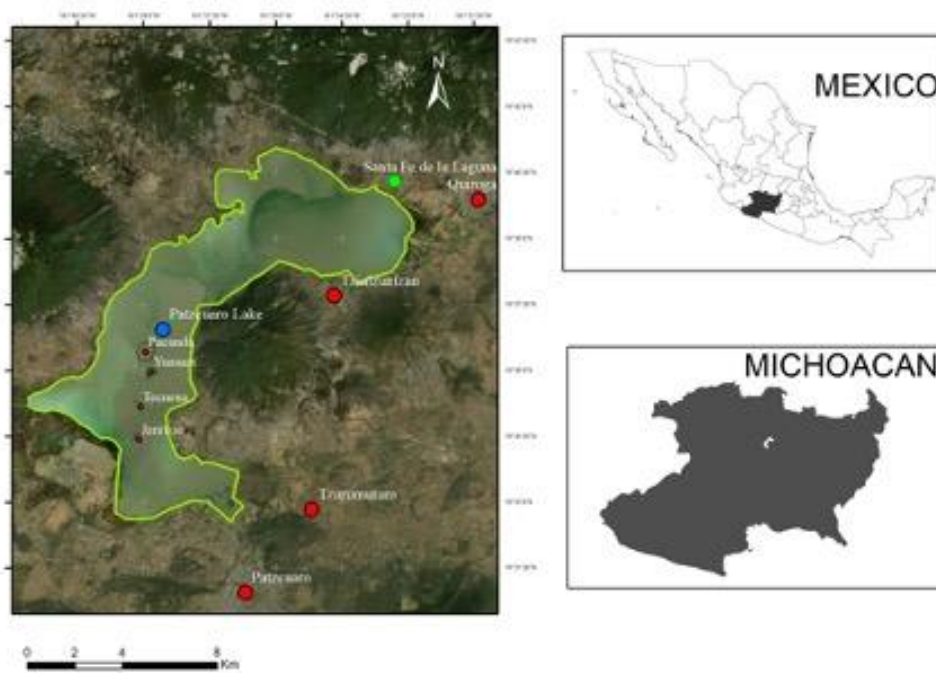
Analysing symbolic and cultural practices, more commonly known as traditions or customs, allows us to discern recurrent activities that have a sociocultural character, and to which people dedicate not only their time, but a variety of resources. Knowledge, beliefs, habits, values, principles, norms, and social roles are manifested through these activities, and inform many of the sociocultural systems that are reproduced in the community, and which are a relevant—or even a determining—part of the structure of lives and livelihoods. Within these practices, multiple elements, relationships, and interdependencies are also manifested, and these, in turn, shape the mechanisms that reproduce and regenerate them.

2.0 Santa Fe de la Laguna

The indigenous community of Santa Fe de la Laguna is one of the Purepecha communities in the state of Michoacan, Mexico. Like other such communities, livelihoods are, in many ways, traditionally based on communality and a close relationship between social and natural life. The main activities on which livelihoods are based are closely linked to the land, including (a) pottery, (b) fishing, (c) small scale cattle farming, (d) agriculture, and (e) commerce—the latter mainly associated with crafts derived from pottery. Even though agriculture has declined in Santa Fe de la Laguna, it continues to be important for the maintenance of different strains of maize, which are still used for various gastronomic purposes, many of them related to the community's festivities and traditional customs. According to Alcalá et al. (2012), in Santa Fe de la Laguna people view the practices that sustain their lives as being linked to the community–nature relationship, their communal self-governance practices, their ancestral values and sacred practices, as well as the organization of festive–religious calendars that shape their way of life.

Santa Fe de la Laguna is located in the municipality of Quiroga, Northwest of the Patzcuaro Basin, on the Northern shore of Lake Patzcuaro, in an area of approximately 211 km² (see Figure 1). The community has historically claimed its origins, traditions, and communal territory; it is governed by local customs and practices (*usos y costumbres*)—indigenous customary law for self-government that is recognized by the Mexican State. *Usos y costumbres* is a system of self-government practiced by various municipalities with indigenous populations to regulate the life of the community. Santa Fe de la Laguna has a strong structure of rights and societal obligations, and access to its common natural resources is controlled by a collective management structure. Only those who fulfil their religious and/or civic duties (*cargos*) and social obligations in the community have access to the communally owned natural resources, critical for their livelihoods. In recent decades, local livelihoods have transitioned from mainly agricultural, forestry and fisheries related activities, to an economy based on handicraft production and trade—of local handicrafts, mainly pottery, as well as of exogenously produced goods. Each household combines various productive activities for its livelihood, developing activities for the generation of monetary income as well as for self-consumption.

Figure 1. Location of the indigenous community of Santa Fe de la Laguna.



Source: Miguel Perez from Landstat 7 Google Earth geospatial datasets, retrieved in 2020.

The community's physical landscape has, in many ways, shaped its social organization. There is a complex set of institutions for self-governance as well as for the organizing collective action for developing local works, feasts, and other activities related to the care and security of the territory and the community (Klooster, 2005). The community is divided into neighbourhoods (*barrios*), each of which has particular functions and responsibilities (Hernández Cendejas, 2003). All the households in a *barrio* collectively appoint a leader to represent them in the community council, and all community decisions are made collectively through the *barrios'* representatives and the community's authorities. Each *barrio* head is also responsible for securing the participation of households in the community's collective activities.

3.0 Research Methods

This article is based on part of the findings of an ethnographic, constructivist research conducted during several fieldwork visits over a two-year period (2015–2017). Each visit ranged from 1 to 3 weeks. This type of research was considered appropriate, as it was necessary to understand the nature, form and meaning of the practices that shape community traditions or symbolic practices and its related institutions, within a specific historical, social, cultural, and natural context (Lietz & Zayas, 2010); and to do so from the point of view of the participants.

The first approach to the community was made to its authorities, to share research general objectives and request authorization. They informed the community in a general assembly, and approval was granted. Throughout the fieldwork visits, constant communication was maintained with the authorities, who also participated

in the research. In addition, several families were contacted at different stages and informed of what their participation would consist of, and research activities were carried out with those who agreed to participate. A relationship of greater closeness and trust was developed with two families, with whom I had the opportunity to share experiences of their daily life, customs, and rituals.

For gathering information, I implemented different instruments in two different phases. In the first phase, I conducted documentary and archival review. Subsequently, I conducted direct and participant observation in daily customs, in the development of a feast and a ceremony, and in several general assemblies of the community. The participant observation of the feast and ceremony was carried out in two different years. Finally, I carried out eight individual in-depth interviews. For the second phase, with the support of a colleague, I carried out two group interviews and two workshops to deepen the knowledge of their symbolic practices, the related history and their relationship with the environment, culture, economy, social and political organization.

The multiple sources of information were complementary to each other and provided an empirical basis that allowed both triangulation and reaching the saturation point, according to the needs of the research. For each technique used, collection, recording, reflection, and systematization instruments were designed according to a categorization appropriate to the units of analysis—symbolic practices' structure and organization, functions, and dynamics. Once the information was integrated, it was systematized according to a categorical framework and an interpretative process based on content analysis was developed.

4.0 Symbolic and Cultural Practices: Social Structure and Organization in Santa Fe de la Laguna

In the community of Santa Fe de la Laguna, as is the case with many other communities in rural areas, and with indigenous identity in Mexico more specifically, ethnic and community or local identity is manifested during feasts and other ceremonial activities or practices (Ojeda Dávila, 2006). Traditional feasts and ceremonies in Santa Fe de la Laguna are numerous, diverse, and meaningful everyday practices. I follow the distinction proposed by Ojeda Dávila (2006) between a feast and a traditional ceremony, the former being a joyous event and the latter having a rather solemn character. By studying these symbolic and cultural practices, it is possible to identify the sociocultural institutions that underpin them, as well as the social relations that sustain and reproduce them. The roles of individuals or groups are of significant importance, as are the changing relationships and interdependencies between them.

During my research I focused on a key traditional ceremony and a key feast: All Saints' Day and Night of the Dead, and the Corpus Christi. My analysis centres first on the system of *cargos*—the duties required from different roles within the community structure and organization—and second on their interrelationships, which become evident through an exploration of the activities that make up the feasts and ceremonies. From this analysis, it is possible to identify the elements that structure and give meaning and continuity to these practices, as well as the ways in which they relate to their livelihoods.

4.1 Among the Dead and Other Feasts

4.1.1 All Saints' Day and Night of the Dead. The cult of the dead is one of the most representative and well-known cultural expressions of the indigenous communities of Mexico (UNESCO, n.d.), and the people of Michoacan are no exception. It has been documented (Carrillo Muñoz, 2016; Vega Deloya, 2016) that the socio-cultural practices currently developed in this ceremony express aspects of cultural syncretism resulting from the evangelization process of the Spanish during colonization, and practices of Mesoamerican indigenous peoples linked to the meteorological–agricultural cycle of maize, particularly referring to the cycle of death, resurgence, and reciprocity between the living and the dead. Although there are rituals and elements common to this celebration among the indigenous communities, each one has its own particularities.

My fieldwork observations in Santa Fe de la Laguna focused on the processes that developed around the rituals performed for a person who had died within the year. During this ceremony, family members, relatives, and community come together, and it is possible to observe the diversity of relationships and roles that people play in the enactment of this tradition, as well as the specific cultural elements—social and spiritual—common to all Santa Fe de la Laguna ceremonies.

There were three main stages to the ceremony: (a) the preparations—30 October to 2 November; (b) the rituals and customs of All Saints' Day and the Night of the Dead—1st and 2nd November; and (c) the conclusion and closure in the pantheon, the Day of the Faithful Departed—2nd November. The preparations included creating elaborate flower arrangements and decorations for the altar, for placing in the house of the person who has died, and for the tomb in the pantheon: making food, both for the people who are involved in the preparations from 30th October to 2nd November, and for the people of the community who are received in the house of the person to whom the ceremony is dedicated, during the rituals of 1st and 2nd November. During the second stage of the ceremony, people visit the deceased's household, bringing an offering and receiving care and food from the family of the deceased. In the third and final stage, family members and people close to them go to the pantheon and sit around the grave together. Men and women take on different tasks; men focus on building the altar and decorations for the pantheon, and in the transportation of supplies for food preparation, and women prepare all the food throughout the preparations and to give to the people who visit the altar.

Each person has a specific role to play in the ceremony. This includes members of the immediate family, which in the ceremony I observed included three generations (the spouse of the deceased, the son and daughter, and their spouses and children); members of the extended family; and ritual relatives: godfathers, godmothers, and godchildren. Another role is fulfilled by the neighbours of the deceased, who help with organizing the ceremony. Each set of roles fulfil specific functions in relation to the others.

There is a hierarchy of involvement and responsibilities in the ceremony, which begins with the close relatives—who are the hosts—and extended family members, who bear the brunt of the associated expenses and are the key players in the ceremony. Next are the godchildren, who have an obligation to always aid their godparents and in whatever ways necessary. This ritual kinship is created from the bond of godmother or godfather (*compadrazgo*), formed during rites of passage, baptism and marriage being the most important ones, and are an important element of the family's aid network—family, ritual kinship, and neighbours. The other ritual

relatives present are the godfathers and godmothers of the host family; in this case their role is that of special guests.

The resources that are mobilized around this traditional ceremony are varied and are constituted in '*ir a ofrendar*'—the act of making an offering to the dead. An altar is prepared in the household, and what resources the family can afford, as well as contributions from their aid network, are placed upon it. The better the family's economic situation and the bigger its aid network, the bigger the altar and the more elaborate the decorations in the household. This relative wealth is also reflected in the type and quantity of food that is prepared to offer to all the people of the community who come to pay their respects and make an offering. These offerings usually consist of fruit and bread that, at the end of the ceremony, are distributed among all the people involved in the preparations.

In this way, a cycle is formed in which different types of resources flow and are distributed and redistributed throughout the community. Everyone contributes something in one part of the cycle or another, and the relatives of the deceased assume the greatest weight of the expenses and contributions involved. In the particular case of the All Saints' Day and Night of the Dead ceremony, this cycle is repeated year after year, and the roles, aid networks and contributions thus revolve through all the families in the community.

4.1.2 The feast of Corpus Christi. Corpus Christi, also a feast resulting from cultural syncretism, is one of the most important feasts in the region and is celebrated in most Purepecha communities (Ojeda Dávila, 2006). This celebration is related to the subsistence activities of each community and the act of sharing the produce that has been harvested during the year. It also celebrates the beginning of the agricultural cycle and the rainy season, and it takes place in dates that vary from community to community, between the months of May and June. It is believed that this responds to a practice that dates back to pre-Hispanic times, when rituals related to the start of the rainy season were carried out on different dates among communities (Carrillo Muñoz, 2016).

In Santa Fe de la Laguna, the entire community participates in the feast and in its organization. The local authorities and the households, who are organized by *barrio* to take responsibility for different activities, contribute financially to cover the costs of the feast. The youth, both men and women, are the main protagonists, and the different guilds or groups of people—fishermen, farmers, potters, traders, transporters, professionals, and so on—are the special guests.

The first stage is the preparations, which take at least two months. All the youth in each *barrio* get together to organize sourcing or purchasing the materials they need to decorate the Church's atrium and prepare offerings required to host the community's authorities. The Commission of the Commons (*Comisariado de Bienes Comunales*), which has the responsibility of protecting and stewarding the commons—land and territory of the community, are responsible for finding and cutting down a very tall tree and, with the aid of all the men of the community, they trim the branches and make it into a pole. On the day of the feast young men try to climb the pole—one of a series of rituals that involve the entire community, as well as a good number of merchants and outside visitors.

This celebration, based on the act of sharing and distributing, has as a particular symbolism, what some call *hacer el Corpus*—an act of gifting (Padilla Pineda, 2000, p. 114). The sharing is carried out by representatives of groups of producers or

merchants, as well as by individuals who are engaged in trade or professionals. They share what they have produced and give part of their annual earnings to the community in a way that symbolizes gratitude and sharing, in the hope of a good year to come.

The cost of the feast is shared by the community, mainly through each household making a financial contribution, although this does not necessarily mean that the contribution is the same for all households. As the number of households per *barrio* is different, the contribution requested from each one is greater in some *barrios* than in others. The most important aspect, however, is the sense of cooperation and solidarity generated by sharing the costs amongst everyone.

Another aspect to highlight about this feast—and indeed about all the community’s feasts, are the opportunities they present for different types of commerce and services, local and external. Food and drink, flowers and decorations, light and sound equipment, infrastructure for stages, musicians, dancers, different elements of traditional dress, park rides, crafts, hostels—these are just some of the many products and services that can be found at the feasts, and which require a constant mobilization of resources both from within and outside the community. Indeed, the demand for and mobilization of resources is shared with other communities in the region, as they all celebrate different feasts at different times. In the case of the feast of Corpus Christi, for example, several communities coordinate to ensure that the main day of each feast falls on different dates, so that they can all attend each other’s. This is a prime example of the mechanisms of reciprocity that flourish between communities.

5.0 The Cargos System and its Relationship to the Feasts and Ceremonies

The *cargos*, which are a set of responsibilities and duties in the community, are important roles within the community’s structure and organization. *Cargos* rotate amongst the *barrios* and are divided into two types: civic and community *cargos*, presided over by men who serve as traditional judges, the Commission of the Commons, *barrio* chiefs, and *Tenencia* heads¹, which together make up the community’s authorities; and religious *cargos*, that are fundamental and indispensable to the organization of most feasts and ceremonies. Those in charge of the latter are responsible for safeguarding the community’s religious images (of saints, Christ, or the Virgin Mary, for example), and for conducting the rituals and festivities associated with each image.

The religious *cargueros*—those who preside over the *cargos*—have several responsibilities and obligations for the duration of their term, which is usually one year. They are responsible for conducting a series of ceremonies, ritual events, and feasts prior to taking up the *cargo*. They are also required to participate in community ceremonies and feasts held throughout their term. The *cargos* carry a significant financial burden, which means that the *cargueros* need to have a good support (aid) network of family and ritual kinship. Religious *cargos* are assumed on an individual basis by men, although it is understood that this is a commitment that must be made as a (married) couple.

Previously, access to civic and community *cargos* was linked to religious *cargos* and it was only possible to take civic or community *cargos* if you had already gone

¹ A *Tenencia* is the smallest political division in the state of Michoacan in Mexico. Santa Fe de la Laguna constitutes a *Tenencia* of its own.

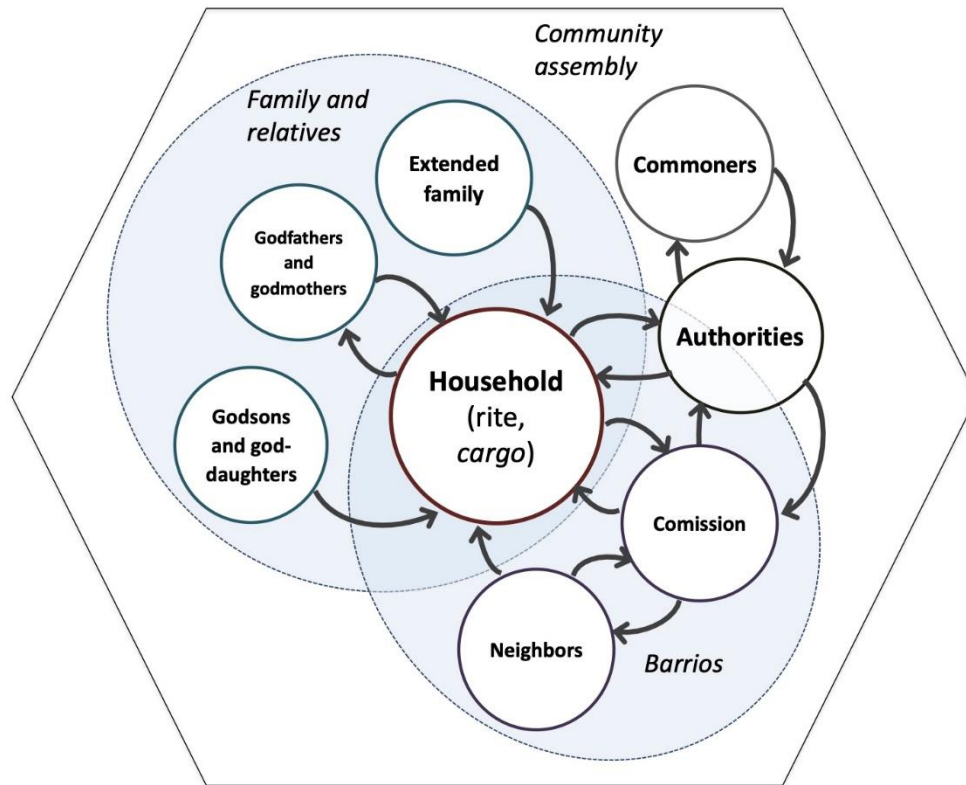
through a succession of religious *cargos*, alternating these with a succession of civic ones. According to several investigations (Ojeda Dávila, 2006; Sepúlveda y Herrera, 2003; Zárate Hernández, 2001), the need to have had experience with religious *cargos* before ascending through the hierarchy required to occupy a significant civic or community *cargo* greatly limited the access of many community members, due to the high costs associated with them. Those who wanted to take up such positions needed to be able to afford the significant associated costs, dedicate a lot of time, and have strong and broad support (aid) networks. It is also mentioned that some people who did not have the necessary resources got into debt and even ended up bankrupt. Borrowing to pay for a feast or ceremony is still a very common occurrence. In return, a *carguero* acquires much prestige and political capital. Today, the requirement to have had religious *cargos* in order to hold civic or community *cargos* has been dropped. However, it continues to be important—especially for community *cargos* which are considered to be of great significance—that the men who take them on have a history of service and commitment to the community, and that their behaviour is consistent with the values and interests of the community. An important part of this continues to be their participation in feasts, ceremonies, and ritual life.

Another aspect that should be pointed out is the role played by the communal assembly—the highest decision-making body—in the feasts. In the general assembly, all commoners can participate in decisions to appoint authorities and in deciding important territorial and public issues, as well as issues related to the feasts and daily life. This ensures peaceful coexistence and conviviality in the community. In general, matters are brought to the assembly by one of the authorities, and the *barrio* chiefs play an important role in conveying matters related to the *barrios* they represent; matters that have been previously discussed in *barrio* meetings. The organization and costs of many of the feasts are distributed between the *barrios* by the commissions established for each feast and *barrio* chiefs. It is common for there to be intense competition between the *barrios*, as each wants to look the best in the eyes of the community as a whole. The assembly often plays a regulatory role and generates consensus among the *barrios*, especially regarding the costs, and the most appropriate meaning and content for the feasts.

6.0 Feasts and Ceremonies Defining Community Interaction and Interdependence

Feasts and ceremonies are shaped by the interaction and mutual dependence of the different roles played by members of the community. Each person follows longstanding guidelines regarding how to fulfil their role in order to best serve the common interest. In this way, each role constitutes a functional unit with its specific associated activities. While the people who fill each role might change, the role remains the same. This establishes a pattern of behaviour that is recurrent, and which dictates the behaviour of each person in each role. Figure 2 shows the roles and the relationships between the different roles.

Figure 2. Roles and relationships between the different actors in the Santa Fe de la Laguna feasts and ceremonies.



Source: Author.

There are two main subsets of functional units in the feasts and ceremonies, but they are not exclusive subsets because the type and degree of involvement depends on the context. One of these subsets relates to the network of family relations, including ritual kinship ties, and the other to the network of relations derived from how the *barrios* are organized. In both subsets, the household is the node or functional unit in which the greatest number of interactions converge; it is the unit from which a network of mutual aid is established, and this network also participates in the broader network of community cooperation. Figure 2 shows how the *barrio* is organized and the functions the authorities perform, particularly the *barrio* chiefs. The authorities also have functions to play at the community interface, that is, in interactions at the level of the entire community. The assembly is, in itself, constituted with the participation of all the commoners and the authorities.

These different levels of community organization dictate interactions between the functional units which underlie the community structure. This structure, in turn, is reflected in the different contexts in which symbolic practices are played out, and have endured, more or less unchanged, over time; that is, since the colonial founding of the community in the 16th century (Zárate Hernández, 2001; Zendejas Romero, 1992). The horizontal distribution of different roles and activities throughout the community is governed by this organizational structure. Each member of the community must, at some point, fulfil several of the roles in the subset of family and ritual kinship relationships, whether as a household, or as a family member, godfather, godmother, or godchild, or whether hosting a rite of passage ceremony,

or becoming a *carguero*. All members of the community must also participate through contributing financially to the feasts.

The commissions set for the feasts revolve among the households in each *barrio* over time, and civic and community *cargos* also rotate between and within the *barrios*. In principle, anyone can become a *carguero*. However, in the case of the most important *cargos*, there are important restrictions regarding a man's history of service to the community, whether he has been involved enough in maintaining symbolic practices or in territorial defence and community work activities.

The relationships inherent in this community organization structure are mutually interdependent, as are the functional units, and this has resulted in a complex intertwining of links between recurrent activities over time (Hawley et al., 1991). People commit to their different roles, or are forced to fulfil them, because of the cooperation necessary to carry out the feasts and ceremonies—and reciprocity is another essential characteristic of this. The interactions between roles played by different members of the community occur in response to the tasks required by each of the feasts and ceremonies in which they are (recurrently) involved. This same system also operates in all areas in which the community has a common interest (work, defence, and so on), and is founded on unshakeable principles of commitment and mutual obligation.

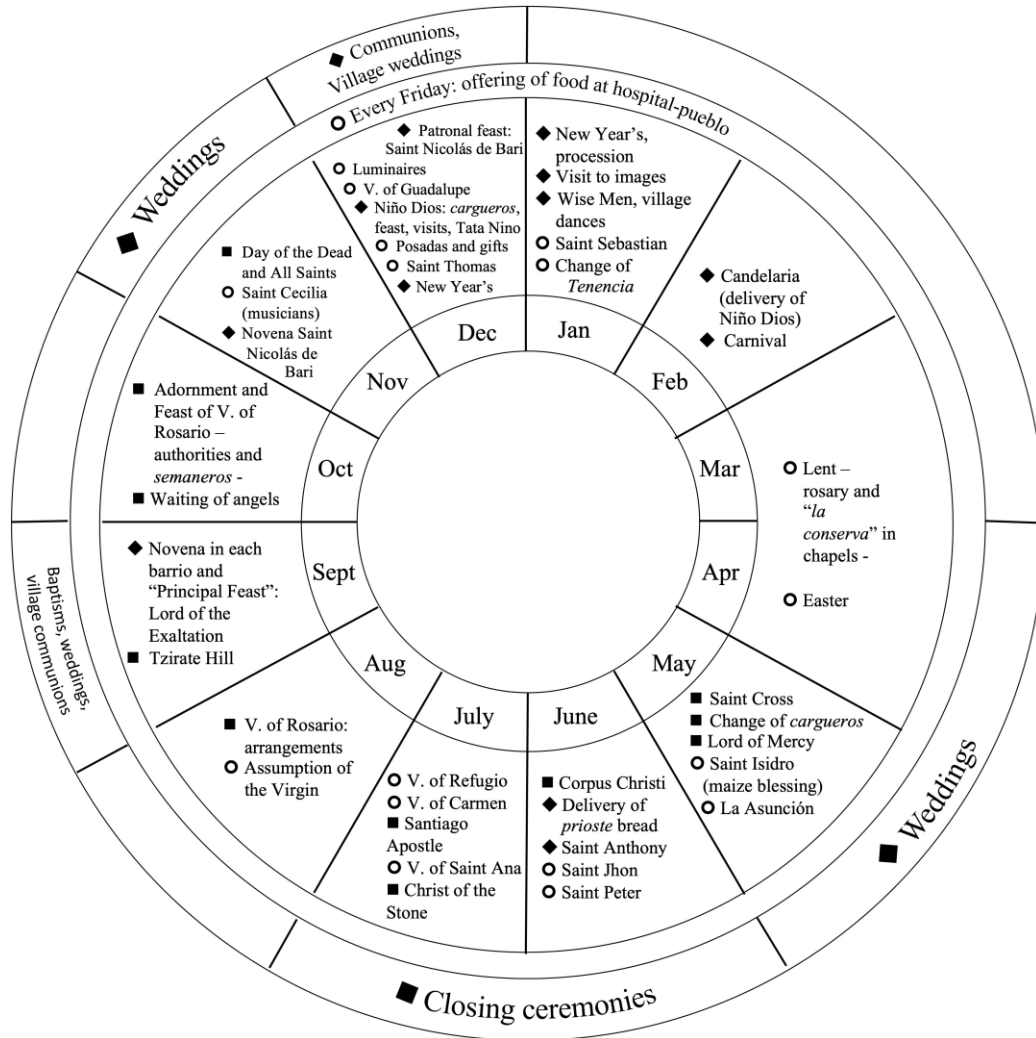
6.1 ‘They are Always in a Fiesta’: Time and Resources

The most important sociocultural practices for Santa Fe de la Laguna and the rest of the communities in the region continue to be those related to feasts and ceremonies, which is why they are perceived to be communities that ‘are always in a *fiesta*’. The extent to which the community of Santa Fe de la Laguna observes their festive calendar is testament to the validity of this perception (see Figure 3).

As Figure 3 shows, Santa Fe de la Laguna has rituals, feasts, and ceremonies throughout the year, which repeat cyclically. Therefore, there is an established annual schedule or routine, around which people in the community organize their time and resources, according to the commitments and other obligations they must fulfil—or whether they have decided to participate more deeply by taking on a religious *cargo*. Everyone must fulfil various responsibilities throughout the year, so they need to have the necessary flexibility for the time that these commitments require. This relates to the flexibility in the dedication to different activities in households’ livelihoods, which is the structural characteristic of pluri-occupation in family organization.

Not all feasts and ceremonies require the same kind or level of dedication or resources, and people categorize them according to their size. Thus, for large feasts and ceremonies there are often many responsibilities and many people involved in preparations and associated activities throughout the year, and more resources are required as well. Medium sized feasts and ceremonies may also require a large number of resources, but fewer people are involved or responsible and there are fewer linked activities throughout the year. This holds true for small feasts and ceremonies, too, in that not so many people participate, and possibly only a few families are responsible for organizing them and carrying the costs. Examples are celebrations held in the *barrios* for patron saints.

Figure 3. Festive calendar in Santa Fe de la Laguna.



- ◆ Large feasts and ceremonies (FC) (or related events)
- Medium FC
- Small FC

Source: Author and community members.

Weddings are also very important community events in which the most important ritual kinship ties are established. They are classified as large celebrations and it is understood that the associated expenses will be very large too. They are held during specific periods of the year—after the most important trading seasons when they can earn more income—and many people are involved in all the preparation activities as well as the days of celebration. On these occasions it is considered very important that everyone fulfils their role—as hosts, family members, godparents, or godchildren, for example—to the very best of their ability.

Despite these categories, most people said that all feasts and ceremonies are important, that each one has a particular meaning. Usually, people mentioned an historical aspect that was particularly important, or an aspect that was of sentimental value to them, some moment of their life cycle, a belief, a responsibility, spiritual elements, something characteristic of the community, an aspect of their shared cultural identity, a particular rite, or a significant environmental reference. The festive cycle is, therefore, very important in how people organize their lives: people are always aware which feasts and ceremonies they intend to dedicate more time and resources to during the year, and of the roles and corresponding responsibilities they have.

7.0 Relationships and Interdependencies Sustaining and Regenerating Social Institutions and Livelihoods

I have so far explained the system of relationships and interdependencies that shapes and sustains feasts and ceremonies, as well as the mechanisms of their reproduction. I now focus on the reasons for the existence of that system of social relations, to understand what gives meaning to the interactions and what influences how it is organized, controlled, and reproduced. The symbolic and material exchanges that are central to the rituals within each feast and ceremony are the product of historical processes that incorporate religious, ceremonial, institutional, and material aspects of the pre-Hispanic Purepecha and their co-evolution both with a westernized culture and the Catholic religion. In the following section I highlight the elements relevant to the structure and maintenance of the system of relationships and interdependencies.

7.1 Belonging and Service to the Community: Rights and Obligations

People commit to fulfilling their roles in the social organization behind feasts and ceremonies, as well as behind communal work and in taking on civic and community *cargos*. This response is linked to the character of the individual-in-community, that is, to each person's sense of belonging to the community, which gives them a series of rights, as well as obligations.

I identified two primary and interrelated concerns that are key to the preservation of the community. First, it is fundamental for them to maintain the system of values and customs, since they inform the guidelines that largely govern community life and social organization. Second, it is of vital importance that their territory remains communal property, so that all community members can be assured access to the resources that are necessary for the maintenance of their livelihoods—mainly craft pottery that depends on the land and biomass resources of their territory. Both concerns are interrelated in that effective defence of the communal territory is achieved through effective social organization, which is maintained mainly through the reproduction of community customs and traditions. By safeguarding these interests, the community ensures the basis of its culture is maintained, and that the material resources needed for sustaining their livelihoods are conserved. Territory, traditions, resource use and customs are inseparable components of their communal identity.

However, elements of control and monitoring are also required to ensure participation and cooperation, such as households' financial contributions, for which detailed records are kept by each *barrio*. There are also mechanisms for sanctioning those who do not collaborate in organizing feasts, or participate in the collective tasks, or who do not accept a civic *cargo*. Some sanctions are of a social nature in

the sense that those who have not participated in the community's activities are socially singled out. As one interviewee commented: "here we all know each other; we all know who fits in." Sanctions can range from the ways in which people are treated in social spaces to reciprocity, as mutual aid networks become diluted. Other sanctions are established through communal rights becoming restricted, such as cutting off of some service or even taking away the right to use land or the allocation of land for a house. Obviously, sanctions do not come without controversy among the people involved. The increase in income inequality in the community, the increase in tourism during these feasts and ceremonies, as well as the fact that many family members work during the week in other cities, such as Morelia, makes it increasingly difficult to keep community sanctions free of conflict.

Another example is that a man who has a history of non-participation in the community might be chosen to assume the *cargo* of head of *Tenencia*. For some people this constitutes a sanction as it forces them to take on significant expenses and to dedicate a year to the work, which necessarily impacts on their own productive activities and livelihoods; but it is also a mechanism for more equitably distributing services in the community, as those who constantly participate dedicate much time and resources. These are ways of ensuring compliance with mutual obligations in which the interests of family groups, ritual kinship and the community take precedence.

7.2 Recognition, Prestige, and Power

My respondents all stressed that fulfilling roles in social organization and in organizing and participating in feasts and ceremonies brings recognition, even more so if you hold a religious *cargo*. As previously mentioned, there is also a certain hierarchy in religious roles and *cargos*, so that the level of recognition that goes with each is different. It is through this hierarchy of recognition that reputations and prestige are built in the community. Performing well as a godfather during a wedding, for example, is very well recognized and people try to do their best. Taking on certain *cargos*, such as that of the *Niño Dios*, is considered very prestigious because, as mentioned by a couple of respondents who had previously assumed that *cargo*, "you kind of earn people's admiration...Ah, they are the *cargueros* of the *Niño Dios*!"

The prestige that some people accumulate because of their continuous and sustained participation in both the ritual life and work of the community is translated into their recognition as honourable and trustworthy community members who have more than fulfilled their community obligations. The time and resources that must be invested to achieve such recognition are great, but it is a process through which power is legitimized and conferred in the community, as it is those members who can then take on the most important and prestigious community *cargos* and be responsible for representing and defending the interests of the community.

A noteworthy aspect of this system is that those with the most economic resources are likely to be the ones who gain access to the most important community *cargos*, that is, the key positions to exercise power in the community. However, although this is a necessary condition, it is not the only one, as it is necessary also to prove commitment to the community through involvement in feasts and ceremonies or community work, as well as through growing and strengthening ritual kinship relationships. Conditions of access to power are thus regulated through a complex process of legitimation.

7.3 Distribution and Redistribution

The system of relationships and interdependencies establishes a structure that horizontally distributes communal tasks and roles, as well as the costs related to the maintenance of ritual and community life. The same person fulfils different roles at different times throughout a year and at different times in his or her life, so work and costs are rotated among all members of the community. In this way, sometimes the role and associated costs of being a godfather, for example, become central, at other times it is the godchild's turn, or a commissioner, or family member. Everyone must contribute financially when requested.

As well as the distribution of communal work and associated costs (i.e., labour; payments for musicians, beverages, food, other inputs as well as in-kind contributions of food and firewood, for associated traditions), there is also, in principle, a horizontal distribution of power insofar as any person can take on a civic and community *cargo*, bypassing the controls and the process of legitimization that I mentioned above. There is an inherent redistributive aspect to this process, as those who invest in it spend a lot of time and money in the service of the community, redistributing economic surpluses that they may have accumulated.

An important feature of the system's distributive and redistributive aspects is that it enables the levelling out of socioeconomic differences between community members. Everyone participates in the networks of relationships based on complex social obligations that are ultimately in the interest of the community. Even though there are economic differences between households, everyone must fulfil their different roles and collaborate on an equal basis. The fact that everyone is involved also helps to reduce potential conflicts, as spaces of interaction—set by feasts and ceremonies—are established in which people recognize themselves as members of the community.

7.4 Cooperation and Reciprocity

The relationships within this social organization are sustained by cooperation in the various feasts and ceremonies, in communal work, and in other spaces. As I have said, cooperation takes the form of both time spent on various activities and the disbursement of a variety of resources, including money. Everyone offers their cooperation as part of their commitment, tacit or explicit, to being family members, because they have formalized a particular ritual kinship relationship or simply to being members of the community. Reciprocity is part of that commitment and is expected within the networks of relationships—the network formed by the family and ritual kinship being paramount.

These are reciprocal links in which all those who cooperate know that by doing so they ensure receiving the help of others when required. They are interactions of mutual benefit, driven mainly by the maintenance of the feasts and ceremonies, and are reproduced in that continuous exchange. Those who grow their ritual kinship networks and fulfil their roles well, consolidate good bonds of reciprocity, that will benefit them throughout their lives.

8.0 Conclusion

One of the most representative social and cultural aspects of traditional societies is wrapped up in the notion of community. Hann and Hart (2011) as well as Narotzky (2004) highlight the historical recognition of the intricate world of social relations that engender a sense of community and its relevance in the broad reproduction of life. Authors such as Mauss (2002) and his studies on ‘the gift’, Malinowski (1921) and his immersion in the life of the Trobrianders, and Polanyi (2003) in “The Great Transformation,” have demonstrated how in traditional societies deeply rooted behaviours of reciprocity maintain the sense of the common, and also maintain the processes whereby social relations are reproduced. Inherent in the reciprocity and reproduction of these relationships is the sense of obligation between people within a context of commonly accepted values and norms. Therefore, for these communities it is fundamental to preserve the customs through which reciprocity occurs, as they give rise to the principles that largely regulate community life and social organization (Bourdieu, 2011; Narotzky, 2004; Reygadas, 2008).

My research found that for Santa Fe de la Laguna these aspects continue to be indispensable for community life to function, but also for regulating the relationships between people and between people and their environment. Regarding this last aspect, I also found that the maintenance of customs cannot be separated from the communal system of land ownership. For the community of Santa Fe de la Laguna, maintaining communal ownership of their territory is vital for ensuring individuals’ access to the land and resources that are necessary for the maintenance of their livelihoods. As my research shows, social relations and land use are inextricably interrelated, both in terms of equity and right of access to resources and the potential for collective action to effectively defend communal territory—and this could not be achieved without effective social organization, which, in turn, is upheld mainly through the reproduction of traditions, rituals, feasts, ceremonies, and customs. The maintenance of symbolic and cultural practices and related social relationships safeguards the social position, social rights, social capital, and place of each person in the community (Polanyi, 2003). At the same time, the organization of their livelihoods is subject to the times, dictated by symbolic and cultural practices and the resources they secure thanks to their participation in them. It can thus be understood as a common substantive economy, since it refers to the continuous and necessary exchange between people and their natural and social environment vital to sustain their lives (Coraggio et al., 2009). However, Santa Fe de la Laguna’s situation is not idyllic. As is the case in many other indigenous communities, keeping their local institutions functioning solidly is difficult in the face of the current socioeconomic and political system.

In this sense, it is important to distinguish three key but inseparable aspects of community: The first is the condition of living with others in a context where there is a confluence of values and norms. The second is being able to establish the social interactions necessary to carry out communal activities. The third is having common resources, which are also necessary to make a community and sustain livelihoods (Miller, 2014, 2015). Together, these three features govern the creation of control mechanisms and self-organization through which an integrated system of community social institutions and livelihoods can be sustained, adapted, reproduced, and regenerated through time. The regeneration and renewal of this actually existing commons is, above all, “a continuous act of social reproduction” (Ogundiran, 2019, p. 155) through symbolic and cultural practices.

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