

9. Spectacle and discourse of decommodification in the construction of subaltern public spheres: the P'urhépecha New Year and P'urhécherio¹

Andrew Roth-Seneff

There is nothing intrinsic to the Habermasian model that would prevent it from linking questions about publicity and language with questions about gender, class and ethnicity and about the power of markets and institutions to shape identities. The articulation of private interest in public was, after all, part of the historical development of the public sphere, as was the circulation of cultural products.

(Piccato, 2010, p. 177)

The annual cultural celebration of P'urhépecha revitalisation, symbolised by the lighting of a new fire, began in 1983 when leaders and promoters of P'urhépecha culture met at the ruins of a pre-Hispanic site in the town of Ihuatzio and marched to the *yacatas* (pyramids) above Tzintzuntzan, the ancient centre of the Tarascan Empire.² Over the past 30 years, the preparation and staging of the P'urhépecha New Year has evolved through the appropriation of traditional spheres of ritual exchange associated with town ceremonies honouring patron saints. A selective tradition has evolved: the eve of 2 February (Candlemas) marks the start of each New Year with a celebration that consecrates the symbols of P'urhépecha ethnicity and which, more importantly, employs a postcolonial civil-religious system to organise the rotation of each year's host site, by which an ethnic space called P'urhécherio (the P'urhépecha homeland) is defined. The celebration has become a forum in which P'urhépecha cosmology and Mesoamerican traditions legitimate a system of reciprocity that recasts the commercial (specifically touristic) commodification of traditions and customs in the State of Michoacán's P'urhépecha heartland situated in the central west of Mexico.

1 This chapter has benefited greatly from the insightful and critical observations of Helen Gilbert and Charlotte Gleghorn.

2 Tarascan refers to the indigenous population in colonial times, while P'urhépecha is the contemporarily accepted term.

The New Year's structure and protocol permit the representation and possible construction of what Charles Taylor (2004) describes as a public sphere derived from a modern but complexly postcolonial social imaginary. This incipient subaltern public sphere is situated in a common space, which – in its ceremonial evocation as part of the Ireta P'urhépecha (P'urhépecha Nation) – serves to resignify a repertoire of the Nation's performance, music and dance commercialised during the 20th century (Helliier-Tinoco, 2011). This chapter examines how complex interactions between the state and the ethnic mobilisation of the P'urhépecha gave rise to the present-day New Year festivity, demonstrating how the organisers have adapted a religious system of reciprocity established in the colonial era to the Nation's cosmological symbolism.

This adaptation points to the need for scholars, as Pablo Piccato suggests, 'to revalue the connections between meaning and social structure', especially in terms of ethnic identification as a process intimately related to modern state formation (2010, p. 166). This recommendation is particularly pertinent when conceiving ethnicity as a mode of subalternity in Mexico, where there is a long tradition of scholarly debate over whether the indigenous population can be characterised by forms of identification somehow resistant to class-based social structures in society. Indeed, this connection between meaning and social structure challenges what Fredrik Barth described as the 'self-fulfilling character' of ethnicity as a 'constellation of categorization and value orientation' (1969, p. 30). Barth's view of ethnicity as a 'superordinant status', similar to gender and rank but with no fixed cultural content, was an important advance for the study of ethnicity at the time (*ibid.*, p. 17). Nevertheless, by situating categories of self-ascription and affiliation somehow outside of processes of social structuring and symbolic violence, Barth's stated constructivist position retains a troubling essentialist aspect, ignoring the transformative power of state formation (Roth-Seneff, 2008, pp. 55–8).

P'urhépecha ethnicity has developed over the past three decades and as such is inseparable from the state reforms associated with Mexico's insertion into a global economy. These reforms entailed a process of deregulating the project of national consolidation. As Gavin Smith argues, a shift away from a model of state formation described as a Keynesian National Welfare State to a neoliberal model powered by finance capital has occurred (2011, p. 4). Curiously, in Mexico this shift involved legislating stronger guarantees for human rights while at the same time removing many of the national regulations of the economy as well as the guarantees for indigenous and agrarian communities. A series of constitutional reforms, beginning in 1983 and continuing until 2011, has significantly changed the ethnic landscape in Mexico. As I will argue here, the P'urhépecha New Year celebration, which I associate with an evolving

ethnic subalternity, is an exemplary case, demonstrating the strong connections of neoliberal state formation to an emerging ethnic identity.

Towards an ethnic subalternity

Between 1970 and 1982 the presidential administrations of Luis Echeverría (1970–6) and José López Portillo (1976–82) struggled to sustain the form of corporate political control that had characterised the Partido Revolucionario Institucional (Institutional Revolutionary Party – PRI) after it took control of Mexico's government in 1929. Politically, the PRI organised different sectors of the society into powerful voting blocks among which peasants or rural labourers and the indigenous population were included as an organised sector. During the 1960s and 1970s, this sector of the PRI was challenged by a growing, often revolutionary, opposition on the left.

Financed by international loans supposedly guaranteed by Mexico's petroleum reserves, both Echeverría and López Portillo introduced a series of initiatives to reorganise the rural indigenous sector. Echeverría created *Consejos Supremos Indígenas* (Indigenous Supreme Councils) for 56 indigenous groups and tried to integrate them within the PRI's major rural labourer organisations. At the same time, the Ministry of Public Education was restructured in the area of indigenous education and came to have the largest teachers' union in the world. The creation of a new office for indigenous education was part of an initiative to change the ideology from assimilation (dominant since the 1930s) to an approach that promoted bilingualism and biculturalism by training and employing indigenous teachers. These changes at the state level were accompanied by important efforts led by indigenous teachers to organise and promote bilingual education: an indigenous Congress was held in Chiapas in 1974 and a National Congress of Indigenous Peoples in 1975; the National Alliance of Bilingual Indigenous Professionals was formed in 1977; and the First National Seminar on Bilingual Bicultural Education was held in 1979.

Parallel to this national shift in educational policy, a *Consejo Supremo P'urhépecha* (Supreme P'urhépecha Council) was created in the state of Michoacán which began to engage in the region's factional politics. A Centre for the Study of P'urhépecha Culture was also established at the state's university and staffed with P'urhépecha teachers and intellectuals. At the same time, an inter-institutional initiative under the leadership of dependency theory anthropologists, Guillermo Bonfil and Salomón Nahmad, and the Náhuatl ethnolinguist, Luis Reyes, convened a short-lived Programme for the Professional Training of Ethnolinguists (1979–82). The programme was first established in the city of Pátzcuaro, Michoacán when 53 indigenous students were admitted to study a university degree, 12 of whom were P'urhépecha speakers.

While this programme in Pátzcuaro was, as one of the linguistics professors notes, 'producing agents of linguistic revalorization' (Rojas, 2005), other important events were mobilising members of P'urhépecha towns and villages around Lake Pátzcuaro. In one town, Santa Fe de la Laguna, a bilingual teacher, Elpidio Domínquez, had returned to his hometown to become a commoner and put into practice a revolutionary socialism aimed at transforming peasants into organised workers. Shortly after his return, he was elected leader of the village commons and commoners. From this position, he introduced and controlled a process of group decision-making through assemblies, and established alliances with regional and national organisations for agrarian commoners and workers. He also began to fight with the ranchers in the municipal seat in Quiroga to regain land they had occupied. In the struggle between the P'urhépecha commoners of Santa Fe and the mestizo ranchers of Quiroga, the key symbols of what would come to be P'urhépecha ethnicity were created and developed in the aesthetics of revolutionary socialism. The most important symbol to emerge was a P'urhépecha flag in the centre of which was a raised fist signifying the main slogan of the struggle, *Juchari Uiniapikua* (Our strength). Police intervened in the conflict in 1979, and the leader Domínquez and his closest supporters were imprisoned. The ethnolinguistic programme students in Pátzcuaro actively supported Santa Fe in their fight to free their leaders and recover their lands, as did the Unión Campesino Emiliano Zapata (UCEZ), a regional commoner movement organised as a union.

Santa Fe's heroic defence of its territory is now legendary and viewed by many as part of a continuing ethnic struggle for P'urhépecha autonomy. Nevertheless, between 1979 and 1981, both during and following the tensions that erupted between Santa Fe and Quiroga, the key P'urhépecha actors were clearly divided along lines of social class. Indeed, once freed and celebrating the successful defence of Santa Fe's territory, Elpidio Domínquez proceeded to support an initiative to construct a nuclear power plant on the community's lakeside lands. His support was congruent with his revolutionary socialism, his ties to the Nuclear Workers Union (NWU), and his desire to create a 'worker-peasant block' in Santa Fe (Alvar, 1985, p. 115, cited in Dietz, 1999, p. 252). However, a younger generation of villagers organised *against* the nuclear plant and openly opposed Domínquez. This group, the Student Cultural Committee of Santa Fe,³ received the support of P'urhépecha intellectuals working in the State University and bureaucracy in Morelia, as well as that of some participants in the Ethnolinguists programme from Pátzcuaro. The nuclear plant was rejected by the Santa Fe assembly of commoners and the federal government withdrew the project when the newly elected governor of the state, Cuahatemoc Cárdenas, joined project opposition in solidarity, not only with P'urhépecha

3 El Comité Cultural Estudiantil de Santa Fe.

intellectuals and the Santa Fe students but also with hotel owners, foreign residents and several regional groups concerned with environmental issues in the Pátzcuaro basin (Dietz, 1999; Zárate Hernández, 2001). Both the Santa Fe assembly leader and the NWU accused this successful but socially diverse opposition of 'imperialist conspiracy' (Dietz, 1999, p. 254).

While the language of revolutionary socialism had articulated political solidarity between peasant communities and peasant and workers' unions for decades, in 1981 it failed to create a politically effective allegiance between Santa Fe's commoners and the NWU. Between 1979 and 1981 the terms of revolutionary socialism as applied to the struggles in Santa Fe began to be appropriated by P'urhépecha intellectuals and resigified and rearticulated into a trans-class idiom which would come to form the basis for the celebration of the New Year and the rising profile of P'urhépecha ethnicity.

Kurhikaueri K'uinchekua: the P'urhépecha New Year celebration

P'urhépecha intellectuals who had actively participated in the events of 1979–81 in the Pátzcuaro basin, especially in the struggles in Santa Fe, came up with the idea of an annual celebration of P'urhépecha revitalisation. In addition, the Catholic priest and anthropologist, Agustín García Alcaraz (1941–2003), a professor in Pátzcuaro's ethnolinguists programme and scholar of P'urhépecha history and culture (who most probably researched the date of the New Year), was an important intellectual force behind the festivities. The founding organising committee was somewhat diverse but many participants were teachers in the bilingual, bicultural educational programme. Others were ethnolinguists or professors from the Centre for the Study of P'urhépecha Culture at the state university. Some were leaders in the Consejo Supremo or reporters for the P'urhépecha page of the regional newspaper, *Voz de Michoacán*, or workers at the radio station, Radio-Purhé. The founding group also included some mestizo advocates of P'urhépecha culture.

During most of the New Year celebrations' first decade of existence (1983–92), preparations depended on the individual ability of the founding intellectuals to organise its hosting in consultation with fellow members of their home communities. During these years a basic protocol for the preparation and structure of the event began to evolve. It is built on a complex series of associations between cosmologies, customs, the Mesoamerican calendar and the constellation Orion, creating the selective tradition that determined the date of the P'urhépecha New Year. The most significant of these associations is between Kurhikaueri, the P'urhépecha sun god, and the Mesoamerican calendar.

The calendar, called *huriyatamiyucua* in P'urhépecha, is literally a 'sun count': the word stems from *huiryata* (suns) and *miyucua* (count), thus symbolising the solar cycle and also referencing the sun as an object of veneration. The 'sun count', is a variant of the Mesoamerican calendar and comprises 18 months, each of 20 days, with five days left over annually ($18 \times 20 = 360 + 5 = 365$). Each month is named after its ritual feast day. Numerous connections can be made between the Mesoamerican calendar and sun worship, as well as between Christian celebrations and the annual solar cycle: for instance, the winter equinox approximates the celebration of the Nativity, while 2 February marks two Mesoamerican months or 40 days (the Judeo-Christian's traditional 'quarantine' period after childbirth, followed by a purification rite for mother and child). In Mexico, that date is also the Catholic celebration of Our Lady of the Candles (Candlemas Virgin), when candlelight and fire are associated with purity. Through this association, the P'urhépecha new fire celebrates a cycle of rebirth and resurrection that culminates on 2 February.

The new fire is, then, the central emblem of the P'urhépecha New Year, and dominates the symbolism of the event, along with the calendar stone and P'urhépecha flag created during the Sante Fe struggle, although several other icons or images have also been incorporated into the celebration over the past almost-30 years. The other key P'urhépecha symbols reiterate and narrate the relationship between fire, sun and the god Kurhikaueri ('he that emerges making fire'), who is the principal god of the Uakusecha (eagle clan) and also the god of war associated with the sun.⁴ Indeed, at least since the celebration of new fire took place in the island community of Xaracuaro (2011), the event has been referred to as Kurhikaueri K'uinchekua or Kurhikaueri's Festival. A large fire surrounding a white obsidian arrowhead (*ts'ina pu urápiti*), depicted on the P'urhépecha flag, represents the war god Kurhikaueri, thus connecting images of war with the dominant solar symbolism. The clenched fist at the flag's centre, representing Juchari Uinapikua, is framed like a coat of arms with four arrows that point cardinally to each side of the flag. The different colours of each quarter of the flag represent the four regions of the P'urhépecha homeland: blue for the Pátzcuaro Basin, green for the P'urhépecha Highlands, yellow for the narrow Duero River Valley called the Canyon of the Eleven Towns (La Cañada de los Once Pueblos, or Eráxami in Purhépecha), and red (or purple) for the Zacapu Basin.

Although each celebration of the P'urhépecha New Year reflects the ideas and creativity of the host town, the founders and former hosts of the event, who are now referred to in P'urhépecha as Tamapu T'erunchitiecha (the elder

4 The Uakusecha established the Tarascan state with its capital at Tzintzuntzan, under the leadership of Kurhikaueri's representative on earth, the Caltzontzin.



Figure 9.1. Kurhikaueri K'uinhekua – parade on the island of Xaracuaro, 2011. Photo: Aída Castelleja.



Figure 9.2. P'urhépecha flag on pilgrimage from Xaracuaro to Konguripu 2012. Photo: Aída Castelleja.

hosts), have formally recognised the form of reciprocity that evolved during its second decade. This organised cooperation now defines and sustains the event's protocol and the calendar stone engravings register this association. The calendar stone has an eight-inch-square base and a four-inch-square top with four vertical faces on which the symbols emblematic of each host town are inscribed, along with the year when the celebration was held in Mesoamerican numeration. Three faces of the stone are filled with the names of ten host towns, bringing the history of the event up to 2012. Thus, from the bottom to the top and moving clockwise, the calendar stone will eventually register 40 years of celebrations and reciprocity among host towns, and if the bottom and top faces of the stone are also used, the count could equate with the 52-year cycle in which the ritual day and sun cycles in the Mesoamerican calendar coincide.

The protocol revolves around the insertion of these new symbols (flag, calendar stone and the new fire emblem) of P'urhépecha ethnicity into the traditional ceremonial context of patron saint celebrations. At the same time, it reflects a certain tension between, on the one hand, the cultural celebration of P'urhépecha dance, dress, food, song, music and games and, on the other, a solemn ceremony of ritual respect for an ethnicity tied to Kurhikaueri and the annual rite of lighting a new fire. This respectful ceremony revolves around the dominant symbols of the new fire, the P'urhépecha flag, and the calendar stone; and the secondary symbols with their more local references to specific P'urhépecha communities or prominent personalities. As with the images kept in the homes of people responsible for a particular year's cycle of celebrations for a specific saint or church or hospital manifestation of the Virgin, in the year leading up to the event the dominant symbols are held in the homes and church of the host town's authorities. On the day itself – 1 February – they are placed on an altar decorated and filled with offerings of bread in the form of animals and fruit, and a local sugarcane alcohol called *charanda*. Since 1995 when the P'urhépecha New Year was celebrated in the town of Tarecuato, it has also become common to hold a midday Mass alongside the symbols. Afterwards, they are paraded through the town on the same route used for religious images during patron saint processions and accompanied by the authorities responsible for the event as well as by *wananchecha* (young maidens who decorate, dance with, and care for the symbols just as they do for patron saints and Virgins). Each person dresses in their town's traditional style and is adorned with ribbons, the colours of which represent the regions of P'urhécherio, or the P'urhépecha homeland, as mentioned previously. It is common for the symbols procession to end with each participant solemnly

saluting the P'urhépecha flag by raising a clenched left fist to symbolise Juchari Uinapikua).⁵

The protocol also involves petitions from the authorities of towns aspiring to host the celebration the following year. A formal request must be made to all the former hosts at the beginning of their special assembly. It is also appreciated if a town's representatives offer a public greeting to the town hosting the event. They must demonstrate that they have the support of the local elected officials, and it is also considered correct for a town to make the request at least twice before being granted the honour. In addition, the town must have a history of participation in past festivities, which involves preparing and bringing traditional dance groups or musicians, a team to compete in the traditional game of *wárhukua*, individual players for a board game called *Kuiliche*,⁶ or other cultural acts such as poetry and theatrical skits. These performances are recognised as a fundamental part of inalienable P'urhépecha cultural heritage but also constitute an important part of the performance repertoire in a growing regional tourist industry.

The selection process for each year's host has evolved over the years and has been a source of contention regarding the legitimacy and orientation of the celebration. In the early years, individual hosts were selected from among the festival founders owing to their local prestige and ability to gather support in their communities of origin. This was followed by a period when the promoters of the event, in particular several Catholic priests working in P'urhépecha communities, used their influence on respected members of their parishes. An example of this process is captured in the host's speech at the town of Cocucho in the P'urhépecha highlands:

Over there in Ichupio when we went there [refers to the Cocucho Choir participating in the celebration in 1992], the important people had a meeting and then they called us and said, 'Mister Luis, it's your turn, it's your turn to take the calendar stone' [host the celebration]. But I said, 'Father, you say that (I said this to Father Agustín), you say that the "elders" are who can take the stone, I'm nobody in my town, I'm just a commoner. But let me ask the girls in the choir.' And they told me, 'Mister Luis, well, they are offering us this and we will help, we will help you do the celebration.'

- 5 In Mexico, the national flag is saluted with the right-hand palm down crossing the chest.
- 6 *Wárhukua*, played with carved sticks and a ball made of natural rubber, is fairly similar to hockey. At the New Year celebration it is common to set the ball on fire. *Kuiliche* involves moving pieces over 52 spaces based on the throwing of slotted sticks that determine the number of movements according to the vigesimal system based on units of five. This gives the game its name in Purhépecha; *kuiliche* refers to a configuration of five.

And God will repay you if suddenly I forget and can't speak. God will repay you, if suddenly I can't speak. But I'm trying to explain how the celebration came to our town. [applause]

[crying] I cry because I thought that our town wouldn't understand this celebration and that the people would say: 'Look at that, this "important person! He's a fool!"' And now I cry for joy because our people are so good.

(Luis Pasaye, host Cocucho 1993, speech in P'urhépecha, translated by Manuel Sosa Lázaro and the author)

The speech demonstrates both how the festival founders used their influence to recruit annual hosts, and how popular support for the event was growing. By mounting the festival in their respective towns, the hosts of the P'urhépecha New Year are entitled to participate in the assembly, which is an integral part of the programme, and to receive petitions from towns that aspire to host the event. The deliberations over who will be the next host, held during the evening, generally last two to three hours to the accompaniment of traditional dances, music, songs, oratory and, on some occasions, short theatre pieces performed by different P'urhépecha towns, villages, hamlets and urban *barrios* (districts). This festival also generates a space for speeches about cultural revitalisation and proclamations of inalienable P'urhépecha collective rights but, most importantly, it constitutes a cultural exchange between the host village and all P'urhépecha settlements through which they share formally their performance traditions, crafts and opinions. Close to noontime on 1 February, recent celebrations have included a bartering market called *Kejpaku Ka Mojtajperakua* for the exchange of the different artisanal crafts associated with specific towns. This is consonant with the formal requirement, imposed since the first festival in 1983, that the host town reduce its commerce to a minimum during the times when the hosts are providing midday and evening meals. The consumption of alcohol is also prohibited (as far as is possible).

The celebration culminates in the lighting of a new fire. As it begins to blaze, the hosts for the following year are publicly announced and the P'urhépecha symbols are formally exchanged along with gifts of bread, fruit and sometimes small pieces of pottery tied to ribbons and hung around the necks of the new hosts. They and all the former hosts must then dance with these symbols. Several speeches are delivered, including the new hosts' public expressions of gratitude for the recognition received, pledges of support for the upcoming celebration by the Tamapu T'erunchitiecha, or former hosts, and acknowledgement of the help received during the current celebration.

An evolving subaltern public sphere

By the start of the 21st century, the celebration had evolved into a collective event in which the principle of organised reciprocity that had traditionally sustained the ceremonial cycle of every P'urhépecha village or town over almost five hundred years was recognised as applying to the four regions of the P'urhépecha homeland. Just as the barrios and moieties in each village organise the celebration of patron saints and virgins, the communities of the four regions would rotate the responsibilities of hosting the New Year and all would reciprocate by bringing music, dance, theatre, poetry, sport and speeches to share with their fellow P'urhépecha from the different localities situated within the homeland.

Indeed, the celebrations for patron saints and virgins in P'urhépecha villages and towns during the colonial period in Michoacán revolved around ritual orders formed by brotherhoods and organised by kindred groups residing in barrios and moieties. These brotherhoods, led by named officials, administered the properties of the saints and virgins, using the income to organise the annual ceremonial cycle of devotion and celebration of the images housed in the village and town churches and Marian hospitals. The Bourbon reforms of the second half of the 18th century,⁷ followed by Mexico's independence (1810) and a period of liberal reforms, led to the properties of patron saints and virgins being officially confiscated and redistributed, and promoted local strategies to retain and sustain each ceremonial cycle. The system of ritual orders described above was translated into one of *cargos*⁸ associated with the hierarchy of officials in the colonial brotherhoods, transforming them into local spheres of exchange still sustained by the kindred groups described above (Chance and Taylor, 1985; Chance, 1990). Through the New Year celebrations, or Kurhikaueri K'uinchekua, in the period between 1993 and 2000, the organisation of reciprocity at village or town level in the cargo system was extended to establish a new sphere of ritual exchange between the four regions constituting P'urhécherio. In so doing, the festival came to represent a P'urhépecha public sphere. For example, when the 2002 celebration was held in the town of Carapan, two leaders of the commoners from the island community of Janitzio in Lake Pátzcuaro travelled there directly upon being

7 Various kings of the House of Bourbon introduced these legislative reforms (*Reformas Borbónicas*) in both Spain and Spanish America. In the latter they were designed to make the administration more efficient and promote economic, commercial and fiscal development in the hope of boosting Spain's economy. The reforms were also intended to limit the power of Creoles and reestablish Spain's primacy over its colonies.

8 The cargo system (also known as the civil-religious hierarchy, fiesta or *mayordomía* system) is a collection of secular and religious positions held by men or households in rural indigenous communities throughout central and southern Mexico and Central America.

released from imprisonment after serving 19 months for violating the state's ban on fishing in the lake. The commoners had been granted a presidential pardon and were received as heroes by the council of former hosts. It greeted them publicly in the name of the 21 communities from the four P'urhépecha regions who had hosted the New Year and celebrated their release from prison, yet it still protested about the presidential pardon proclaiming that:

From here, la Cañada de los Once Pueblos, we, the members of the Council of the *Petámütis*, from the Four Regions, from the Four Winds of Michoacán, see that the traditions, customs, and practices of the indigenous peoples of Mexico continue to be abducted. The house of our ancestors, the lands, forests, rivers and the spirits of justice, health and education, just like many other brothers of humanity and nature, are still imprisoned (*Cambio de Michoacán*, 2002, p. 7; author's translation).

In short, a presidential pardon only proved that respect for the P'urhépechas' inalienable right to their costumes and practices in their homeland was not yet recognised. However, through this process, recognition of a new subaltern public sphere, where the inalienable rights and possessions of the P'urhépecha Nation could be proclaimed, reaffirmed and revitalised, appears to have begun among former host community members from its four regions. Acceptance from regional and national media and many of the neighbouring mestizo towns and cities followed later.

It was no coincidence that the presidential pardon was issued on 2 February, nor that the newly freed local leaders of the island community of Janitzio came to proclaim their inalienable rights at the P'urhépecha New Year Celebration. Not only had it become an important media event, both regionally and nationally, but Janitzio was already a nationally recognised locus of indigeneity. Indeed, as Hellier-Tinoco (2011) documents, it was in Janitzio that a major and prolonged process commodifying the P'urhépecha All Saints celebration ('The Night of the Dead') and also dances like the 'Dance of the Old Men' had begun. This commodifying agenda was initiated in the 1920s as part of a national programme for assimilating indigenous culture into a national project through which indigenosity was to be celebrated as a foundational source for Mexican nationalism, and could also be performed, represented and consumed. At the same time, the folklorists, musicologists and government officials who came to Janitzio to observe, register and reproduce local performances in new nationalist and often commercial contexts communicated a deep recognition of the village's authenticity as well as the villagers' cautious reception of efforts to folklorise their ritual practices and creative performances (Hellier-Tinoco, 2011, p. 78). Hence, in 2002, leaders of Janitzio came to celebrate their freedom and proclaim their inalienable rights at a new P'urhépecha celebration

where these commodified practices of song and dance were now recast as authentic acts of reciprocity between members of the Nation. The New Year or Kurhikaueri K'uinchekua had become an authentic collective P'urhépecha event in which previously commodified performances could be resignified in a celebration of ethnic revitalisation.

Likewise, at the 2012 celebration staged in the community of Conguripo, the Council of Petámutis, now formally recognised as the Council of Tamapu Terunchitiecha (elder hosts), publicly recognised the city of Cherán's achievements by inviting its leaders to narrate their heroic resistance and acts of self-determination in the previous year and bestowing a staff upon them, a common symbol of leadership in the hierarchical system of religious cargos in the P'urhépecha village ceremonial cycle. In April 2011, residents in several of the original village barrios had heroically defended the city from a criminal group that was illegally logging Cherán's communal forests.⁹ Since the problems with this criminal group were tied to factionalism between different political parties, representatives of Cherán's four main barrios petitioned to be allowed – on the basis of their customs as an indigenous community and in accordance with reforms of the Mexican Constitution – to create a municipal government based on P'urhépecha traditions of governance without the representation of political parties. The courts upheld their petition and in January 2012 a government based on custom was created.

Purhécherio, celebration and decommo-ditisation

The orientation of the celebration, as symbolised by the lighting of the new fire, has revitalisation at its core, but at the same time several contending forms of participation and reception (Roth-Seneff, 2010). Fundamentally, the new fire symbolises P'urhépecha revitalisation and the festival honours the pre-Hispanic sun god Kurhikaueri but, again, the growth in spontaneous popular participation in the celebration evolved from the expansion of village or township spheres of ritual exchange to one represented by the host-sites and their relationship to the four regions of P'urhécherrio. The symbols of the Kurhikaueri K'uinchekua are treated as patron saints in annual village celebrations: they are placed in altars, a mass is given for them, and they are taken on processions accompanied by wananchecha. New Age movements have also become actively engaged, bringing their own interpretations to the lighting of a new fire by the P'urhépechas, who are celebrated as a millenary cultural group speaking a language with no known living related languages. But

9 Communal in the sense that the forests, while generally belonging to individual commoners, are treated as patrimony of the indigenous community.



Figure 9.3. Taking the old fire (*Ch'upiri Tamapu*) to Nahuatzen, 2013. Photo: Aída Castelleja.

there is also a popular secular emphasis on ethnic revitalisation and a subaltern critique of the dominant capitalist Western and mestizo Mexican societies.

Within this subaltern critique, the festival is proclaimed to be an example of the cultural display of P'urhépecha creativity, not as commodity but as an offering of one village or town, city or barrio to the P'urhépecha Nation. The New Year, or Kurhikaueri K'uinchekua, has evolved by expanding the logic of this village reciprocity to a new sphere of public discourse and spectacle. Within this, performances of fragments of the traditional dances that accompany the rituals and ceremonies in towns and villages have become part of the Kurhikaueri K'uinchekua celebration. Many of these fragments were extracted from their original ceremonial context to be performed for international visitors in the region's hotels, restaurants, tourist venues or colonial cities, designated 'Magical Cities' by the state and federal tourist boards. Similarly, P'urhépecha bands and trios who have performed all over the region, in migrant communities in the United States, and in several national and international films, participate in the Kurhikaueri K'uinchekua as representatives of their home communities and as members of the P'urhépecha Nation. Many of these have a catalogue of

recordings and are widely followed by both P'urhépecha speakers and fans of world music. The festival decommodifies these performances, now presented as culturally inalienable, and is a spectacle that legitimises the performers as authentic ethnic members of their hometown communities in P'urhécherio and, therefore, part of the Nation.

Since the 2005 celebration in Caltzontzin, the 'old' fire (*Ch'upiri Tamapu*) about to be renewed has been carried in embers and in procession from the town of the last year's celebration to the community that will light the new fire (*Ch'upiri Jimbani*). The idea is to walk the P'urhépecha Nation's old roads and trails. Recent years have also seen migrant communities in cities in California, Washington or Illinois celebrating Kurhikaueri K'uinchekua at New Year, following an abbreviated version of the protocol established by the council of former hosts or Tamapu Terunchitiecha. These developments underscore the significance of the ceremony to the P'urhépecha people and illustrate how it allows them to identify with and participate in the New Year rituals.

Conclusion

As Charles Taylor notes, 'the public sphere was a mutation of the social imaginary, one crucial to the development of modern society' (2004, p. 85). Most importantly, however, the public sphere is a peculiarly secular metatopical common space. Taylor argues that topical common spaces are the focused, purposeful gatherings of 'deliberative assembly: a ritual, a celebration, or the enjoyment of a football match or opera' or, in general, a '[c]ommon space arising from assembly in some locale' (ibid., p. 86). In contrast, a metatopical common space could be termed a node of 'non-assembly' constructed out of all these topical spaces. As Taylor recognises, this metatopicality is not new. Max Weber offered important descriptions of the church and state as common metatopical spaces that emerge from social relations in some way guaranteed through constitutive political or hierocratic actions (1964, pp. 5–45). What is new, however, is that the public sphere is secular and not constituted by 'something' that transcends 'common contemporary action' (Taylor, 2004, p. 93). The public sphere does not emerge by divine consignment nor by political constitution but through common action in the construction and operation of symbols as mediums of communication and through access to the world by reasoned communicative exchange (Habermas, 1991).

In the villages, towns and barrios of municipalities in the state of Michoacán, populated by P'urhépecha speakers, the civil-religious ceremonial cycle comprises a series of common topical spaces for ritual and ceremonially focused gatherings, organised around a complex system of reciprocity within and between kindred groups. In these celebrations, the traditional cultural

performances are carried out in their original devotional context and speak to the common metatopical spaces of church and state. However, as argued in this chapter, a new, more secular form of celebration has emerged in the region in the last three decades: instead of civil religious cargos that rotate between the barrios of one community, it is the villages and towns of the four regions of P'urhécherio that reciprocate in hosting and mounting Kurhikaueri K'uinchekua. In this festival, fragments of the ceremonial performances devoted to patron saints and virgins (the same ones that constitute the touristic repertoire of dance, music, song and craft) are decommodified, with the New Year serving as synecdoche for authentic P'urhépecha culture.

Bibliography

- Barth, F. (1969) 'Introduction', in F. Barth (ed.), *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries. The Social Organization of Cultural Difference* (Norway: Universitetsforlaget).
- Cambio de Michoacán* (2002), vol. 10, no. 3385, 3 Feb.
- Chance, J.K. (1990) 'Changes in twentieth-century Mesoamerican cargo systems', in L. Stephen and J. Dow (eds.), *Class, Politics and Popular Religion in Mexico and Central America* (Washington, DC: Society of Latin American Anthropology and the American Anthropological Association), pp. 27–42.
- Chance, J.K. and W. Taylor (1985) 'Cofradías and cargos. An historical perspective on the Mesoamerican civil-religious hierarchy', *American Anthropologist*, vol. 12, no. 1, pp. 1–26.
- Dietz, G. (1999) *La comunidad purhépecha es nuestra fuerza. Etnicidad, cultura y region en un movimiento indígena en México* (Quito, Ecuador: Ediciones Abya-Yala).
- Habermas, J. (1991) *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere. An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. T. Burger (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press).
- Hellier-Tinoco, R. (2011) *Embodying Mexico: Tourism, Nationalism and Performance* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press).
- Piccato, P. (2010) 'Public sphere in Latin America: a map of the historiography', *Social History*, vol. 35, no. 2, pp. 165–92.
- Rojas, T. (2005) 'Luis Reyes García', *Ichan Tecolotl* (Mexico: CIESAS).
- Roth-Seneff, A. (2008) 'Sobre la autosuficiencia de una categoría. Etnicidad en México antes y dentro de la globalidad neoliberal', in F. Gómez Carpineiro (ed.) *Sendas en la globalización. Comprensiones etnográficas*

- sobre poderes y desigualdades* (Mexico: BUAP, CONACYT, Casa Juan Pablos), pp. 55–81.
- (2010) ‘Modernidad como regimen de significación y apropiaciones de la fiesta tradicional mexicana’, in E. Araiza (ed.), *Los artes del ritual. Nuevas propuestas para la antropología del arte desde el occidente de México* (Zamora: El Colegio de Michoacán), pp. 159–74.
- Smith, G.A. (2011) ‘Selective hegemony and beyond-populations with “no productive function”: a framework for enquiry’, *Identities*, vol. 18, no. 1.
- Taylor, C. (2004) *Modern Social Imaginaries* (Durham, NC: Duke University).
- Weber, M. (1964) ‘Conceptos fundamentales de la sociología’, in *Economía y Sociedad*, trans. J.M. Echavarría et al. (Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica), pp. 5–47.
- Zárate Hernández, J.E. (1999) ‘La reconstrucción de la Nación Purhépecha y el proceso de autonomía en Michoacán, México’, in W. Assies, G. van der Haar and A. Hoekema (eds.), *El reto de la diversidad* (Zamora: El Colegio de Michoacán), pp. 245–67.
- (2001) *Los señores de utopía. Etnicidad política en una comunidad p’urbépecha: Santa Fe de la Laguna-Ueamuo*, 2nd edn. (Zamora: El Colegio de Michoacán, CIESAS).