

Between Permanence and Adaptation Transformations in Community Forest Management in Cherán, Michoacán

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Article abstract

In the Purepecha community of Cherán (Mexico), forest management is carried out through a community government, a system recognized in the Mexican law, and obtained by Cherán after the 2011 uprising in response to the looting of forests by organized crime. In this context, indigenous traditions and daily forest use practices have changed. This study illustrates how Cherán confronted a socio-environmental crisis and is recovering its means of social reproduction. Specifically, it analyzes community institutions, gendered-power relations, and indigenous rights in the context of community-government relationship to discuss the importance of eco-territorial strategies beyond resistance. Grounded on ethnographic observations, interviews, and literature review, this article illustrates a community's experience of building a path toward autonomous forest management. The case of Cherán provides insights into the development of autonomous community forest management as well as its objectives and relations with forest sustainability.

BETWEEN PERMANENCE AND ADAPTATION

*Transformations in Community Forest Management in Cherán,
Michoacán*¹

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Introduction

Since the second half of the twentieth century, in Latin America, and particularly in Mexico, it has been possible to identify two antagonistic forestry development projects: that of the governments, which promotes the commercial use of forest resources through private initiative, and that of the communities, which seeks to achieve sustainable forest management (Alatorre 2000). In Mexico, mainly during the 20th century, forest management has been framed by forest policies and commercial forestry interventions that have been decontextualized from the realities facing local communities. As a result, they have generated accumulation patterns leading to uneven wealth distribution in the countryside (Garibay-Orozoco and Bocco 2011; Velázquez 2019). In addition, forest politics were sometimes imposed, which led to an attitude of resistance and adaptation by communities to maintain their local autonomy (Bray *et al.* 2005).

It is estimated that the Agrarian Land Distribution³ left approximately

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3. This program, which was part of the broader Agrarian Reform started in 1915, derived from the Mexican Revolution and was executed during the twentieth century to address peasants' demands for land. The Agrarian Law, also part of the Agrarian Reform and contained in the Mexican Constitution of 1917, established three forms of rural land property: national lands, private property, and an agrarian

80% of Mexican forests in the hands of indigenous and peasant communities (Klooster 2003). Paradoxically, this program generated uncertainty about forest use and offered a window of time to recover environmental degradation caused in the preceding decades. Also, the ban on forest conservation, which prevailed between 1948 and 1979, appeared as a type of restrictive logic that favoured corruption and clandestine logging, and laid the foundations for a forest economy characterized by illegality and violence (Garibay-Orozco and Bocco 2011; Jaffee 1992; Velazquez 2019). Furthermore, other modernization processes, such as the opening of roads and the growing agribusiness since the 1990s, have impoverished some regions since communities could not compete with the agricultural productivity and job creation of the most productive areas (Garibay and Bocco 2011). In this context, forest use in the Meseta Purepecha (Purepecha Plateau), a cultural region of Michoacán, was consolidated as a self-consumption activity and clandestine logging remained one of the most profitable activities (Calderón 2004; Velazquez 2019).

In this research, I analyze the case of the Purepecha town of Cheran, Michoacan, community that in 2011, staged an armed uprising as a protest for the illegal logging of their forests, in the face of the indifference of the authorities. Cherán, one of the most populated communities in the region, has experienced territorial transformations and forest conflicts for a long time (Calderón 2010; Jerónimo 2018). As a result, a strong tradition of resistance and defence of forests and community territory has developed (Beals 1992 [1945]; Castile 1974). However, in a more recent stage of forest conflict between 2007 and 2011, intensification of clandestine logging and intentional forest fires affected approximately 9,000 hectares of temperate forests, and the damage reached the spring of *La Cofradía*, a place of high environmental and cultural value (España-Boquera and Champo-Jiménez 2016; Osorno *et al.* 2018; Interview with Adalberto Muñoz 2020).

Between 2008 and 2019, the community suffered kidnappings for forced labour, torture, and assassinations. Violence in the area claimed the lives of at least 21 people who participated in community defence (Gasparello 2018; Muñoz 2011; Proceso 2011). The violence and the forest degradation

sector composed of *ejidos* and *comunidades* (indigenous communities). Major land distribution took place under the presidency of Lázaro Cárdenas (1934-1940). However, although the peasants' and indigenous communities' land possession rights were established in Article 27 of the law, the Mexican government retained ultimate ownership of these lands. A major reform to the law took place in 1992, when the sale of *ejidal* and common land by the possessors was finally allowed (Bray *et al.* 2006).

were stopped in an insurrection that broke out on the eve of April 15, 2011, when a group of women intercepted some loggers and took them to the church of *El Calvario* while congregating the people at tolls of the bells (Desinformémonos 2012; Muñoz 2011; Paredes et al. 2019). The illegal acts were organized and supported by criminal groups in complicity with local authorities but were carried out by inhabitants of Cherán and nearby communities. During the upheaval, municipal police and other authorities were expelled from the community (Martínez et al. 2012; Pressly 2016).

After eleven months of self-defence, collective organization, and negotiations with the Mexican state, Cherán achieved legal recognition of the community government in February 2012 (DOF 1984). Working together with allied sectors, the community designed, through communal assemblies, a government made up of a Major Council and six operational councils⁴, called the Government of K'eri (Aragón 2013). In this context, the community has succeeded in regaining control of their territory and the forests through political subjectivation that claims indigenous autonomy in response to violence and long-standing forest *extractivism* in the Purépecha region (Lariagon and Piceno 2016).

The experience of Cherán shows an example of indigenous autonomy that, on the one hand, is framed by the legal recognition of a community government system. On the other hand, autonomy is built daily through different dimensions, including community forest management. For communities everywhere, the recognition of indigenous rights allows favourable conditions in the forest sector and other areas of their development and helps the communities to discuss with which sectors to relate, what type of projects to implement, what type of exploitation to carry out, and how to distribute the benefits of forest use (Dupuits and Ongolo 2020). This analysis sheds light on the *eco-territorial*⁵ strategies implemented by indigenous communities in contexts of violence, territorial dispossession, and environmental degradation. Furthermore, it is relevant to focus on what cultural identities remain and what traditions need to be adapted in the face of current social changes, particularly in the realm of community forest management.

4. In 2015 two more operational councils were created: the women's council and the young's council.
5. In this study, *eco-territorial strategies* are the decisions indigenous communities have taken to protect their territories and livelihoods. Based on the case of Cherán, they may imply territorial armoring, self-defence, self-government, community-based natural resources management, and often entail the rethinking of the relationship between humans and nature based on local values or cosmogonies.

This article reveals how the community has responded to the difficult task of defending its territory and recovering its forest, as well as what adaptations have been achieved. Furthermore, it analyzes the strategies implemented by the indigenous population to face future challenges related to community forest management. To this end, it tackles the following questions: How has decision-making on community forest management changed since the formation of community government? How has the community responded to the challenges of forest management in different contexts? What are the different strategies to give continuity and autonomy to community forest management?

This analysis relies on a literature review that identified the cultural continuities of institutional arrangements and the relationship between the community and the forest. Also, in November 2020 and January 2021, I conducted semi-structured interviews with former members of the Major Council; members and former members of some operative councils during three periods of community government between 2012 and 2021; some coordinators of participation in assemblies and *fogatas* (neighbourhood bonfires); women involved in the recovery of traditional medicine; community teachers; and indigenous intellectuals.

I begin with a brief review of the social upheaval of 2011 and the forest defence, and the subsequent stages of negotiation between the community and the State. Then, I present the major institutional transformations that have impacted community forest management. Next, I identify the tensions between the indigenous and private sectors related to forest management. Finally, I discuss the current tensions and challenges in community forest management.

The illegal logging: the community vs the plundering

The community of Cherán is located northwest of Michoacán, in the Mexican cultural region of the *Meseta Purépecha*. It is the municipal seat of the homonymous municipality. In 1984, the territory of Cherán was established by an official decree on an area of 22,827 hectares, 16,684 of which are occupied by temperate forests and approximately 2,695 are private property (DOF 1984; INAFED 2010). At the same time, Cherán was recognized as an indigenous community under Mexican law since, like other indigenous communities during the colonial period, it received recognition as an ancient settlement through a royal certificate in 1533 (INAFED 2010; Keyser 2018). It is populated by 20,586 inhabitants, 48% of whom are Purepecha people (CDI 2010; INEGI 2020).

A census of 2,100 community members with property rights accompanied the decree of 1984 (DOF 1984). According to the Agrarian Law, the community members are owners of the forests, which are conceived as communal resources. However, testimonies I collected during interviews in 2020 revealed that only a few community members recognized in the census had actual access to land which, in turn, restricted forest management to possessors of existent titles, primarily private property (Interviews with Adalberto Muñoz and Catalina Hernández 2020). For the rest of forests located in collective-land use, decision-making is supposed to be conducted by community assemblies, as agrarian Law established.

The community-forest relationship relies on forest-based activities such as resin tapping, one of the essential historical activities. This activity is currently carried out by approximately 400 resin workers (Interview with Catalina Hernández 2020). They also take advantage of firewood for domestic fuel and other non-timber goods such as honey, edible mushrooms, and handicraft fibres. In 1976, they established the areas where legal logging would be allowed. These were consolidated as a driving center of forestry activity in later years due to the extraction of wood and resin for the regional market and self-consumption (Beals 1992[1945]; Castile 1974).

Cherán is organized into four neighbourhoods, according to a geographical distribution that arises from the central square, tracing four lines to the north, south, east, and west. This delimitation dates back to the four Purepecha peoples' congregation, carried out in the sixteenth century by the Franciscan missionaries (Velazquez 2019). The Purepecha neighbourhood has represented a historical unit of territorialized social organization that combined religious and political appointments. The cultural celebrations and institutional-electoral processes were also associated with a block boss or neighbourhood boss representing a subunit within the neighbourhoods (Dietz 2017).

The conflict over clandestine logging in the Purepecha region dates back to the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Some fundamental processes that led to the greater exploitation of the forest and land-use changes were industrialized activities and forestry operated by foreign companies (Martínez 2021). In the past two decades, *extractivist agroforestry* projects have overlapped with criminal groups' territorial advance. These have provoked land-use changes and affected traditional agroforestry systems (Guillen 2016; Pérez-Llorente *et al.* 2019). In this sense, community social organization has become a mechanism for the security and defence of their livelihoods (Gasparello 2018b). In the face of threats, the Purepecha

communities had to regroup and (re)activate a forest defence tradition that dates back to the beginning of the 20th century, when the peasant and indigenous communities organized to defend themselves from forest exploitation (Calderón 2010).

On April 15, 2011, the inhabitants of Cherán regained control of their territory and its forests (Pressly 2016; McDonnel 2017). The main components of this achievement were the defence of forests, collective organization, and the struggle for community government, which led to overcoming internal divisions (Aragón 2019; Ventura 2012). During a state of siege in 2011, approximately 190 bonfires were set in the town's streets. The inhabitants also built barricades at strategic transit and surveillance points (Muñoz 2011). The bonfires, barricades, and neighbourhood assemblies, which were already key loci where community political participation took place, were once again used as primary contexts of decision-making (Pérez 2012). The bonfires, also called the *parhangua* (stove), which traditionally occupied the kitchen, were taken to the streets. In this process, the community has recovered the fire, a matrix of Purepecha sociability (Alvarado 2019).

From the upheaval, some critical debates emerged for Cherán. First, the concept of *comunero* (commoner), as it is mainly associated with the men recognized in the agrarian census. Many of them today have died, but no census update has been carried out. This update is a priority for some in the community to clarify the identity of the beneficiaries of use and property rights, as well as the rights to forest harvesting (Interviews with Catalina Hernández and Pedro Chávez 2020). Some even consider *comunero* to be a broader concept, both culturally and politically, that ought to be applied to all people who work collectively to develop the community and feel identified with it (Interview with Jurahmuti Velazquez 2020; Silva 2018). Gender equality in land tenure is also a relevant topic of discussion since women consider it to be their legitimate right, given that they have actively participated in defending the forest and the daily labours of the community government (Interview with Eva Pérez 2020).

History of a crossroads between municipality and community

Cherán was founded as a municipality in 1861 (INAFED 2010). Political administration was based on the laws of the state of Michoacán and the Mexican Constitution of 1857 (Beals 1992[1945]; Valencia 2016). In this period, the civil authority rested in the hands of the public administration, composed of a president and councillors, and the *Ronda*,

the traditional community police. After the Agrarian Reform, the civil authority overlapped with a traditional authority, represented by the *Ronda*, and by the agrarian authority, composed of the assembly of community members whose essential institution was the Commissariat of Communal Property (CCP) (Aragón 2019; INAFED 2010). Under the agrarian law, forest decision-making is supposed to be in the hands of the CCP which, until 2011, was a separate entity from the civil and traditional authorities.

Since 2012, the CCP has been transformed into a Council of the Commons (CC) whose main difference is that the holders are elected by communal assembly and not by means of the agrarian census as established by the agrarian law. Among other issues, it manages territory and forest programs, and convenes the community's population to participate in decision-making.

According to testimonies, another difference between the former CCP and the current CC is the fulfilment of transparency and accountability obligations: “now its holders are appointed in assemblies while in the years when political parties dominated, the holders were appointed by the PRI [Institutional Revolutionary Party] and did not respect accountability responsibilities” (Interview with Adalberto Muñoz 2020). The parties also granted support to farm and forestry workers in exchange for a political commitment in electoral periods. Also “the use of public resources, the management of social programs, as well as the distribution of their benefits were not very transparent” (Interview with Ignacio Soto 2021).

Before 2012, private companies managed the sawmill and the resin tapping/mill. Although the prior administrations did not have any interest in environmental care, this has become a paramount issue because, since 2011, the residents of Cherán have begun to express the need to recover their link with the forest. “The majority of the people turn again to our forest; before we only looked, we saw the destruction, and we hid, today we see that we are part of the solution” (Interview with Trinidad Ramírez 2020).

During the first period of community government (2012-2015), the ceremony of territory cession, a forgotten tradition, was also resumed. Every three years, at the time of transition from one government to another, a walk through the entire territory is carried out:

Before the movement started, [the territory] was already handed over to the authorities of Bienes Comunes but they never made the tour [...] what was not done, and I applaud it, is that now they put a calendar to

make the tour; there are eight days, alternated, every third day a certain part is toured and for that the new [Major] Council has the obligation to go and receive. (Interview with Pedro Chávez 2020)

An important detail is that, during the nascent community government, the CC team worked with the guidance of previous community property commissaries who cooperated in transmitting their experience to the new managers. The work of traveling through the territory together with the previous knowledge in forest management allowed strengthening security while carrying out community monitoring. Because logging and timber harvesting continued to be an activity for domestic use, the CC promoted forest harvesting by issuing permits for cutting and harvesting. Sometimes they continued to confiscate timber, but the most important thing was to “generate an orderly harvesting for the community members, without damaging the forest” (Interview with Eva Pérez 2020).

Another critical council to forest management is the Council of Justice (CJ), responsible for ensuring the security of the territory, resources and community members through the *Ronda* and coordinating the forest rangers. The CJ derives from the commission of honour and justice created during the State of siege, whose primary function was to organize the self-defence bodies. The CJ has the power of conflict resolution through a customary law (Interview with Héctor Durán 2020). However, its resolution capacity through criminal law is restricted, so that some crimes must be transferred to the systems of federal justice.

Forest management: tensions between the community and the private interests

In Cherán, the Community Development Plan enacted in 2015 establishes the following community forest management objectives: a) reconstitution of the community territory; b) avoiding soil loss, and c) sustainable use of forest resources. The Council of Commons has promoted these tasks, and the forest projects carried out have been managed and executed in collaboration with several State agencies. In 2012, the Intensive Forest Restoration Program (PIREF) was launched with support from the National Forestry Commission (CONAFOR). This agency provided funding and technical training to strengthen reforestation work. Through this program, the community forest nursery “*San Francisco Cherán*” was set up (Figure 1), which made it possible to reproduce pine seedlings for sale and reforestation (Figure 2), employ local people, and take advantage of local knowledge for forest management.



Figure 1. Community Forest Nursery, Vivero San Francisco Cherán, Source: Mónica Piceno 2020



Figure 2. Pine plants produced in the community forest nursery, Source: Mónica Piceno 2020

According to Ignacio Soto, a biologist and forestry engineer originally from Cherán, between the years 2015 and 2018, the PIREF fulfilled the vital function of concentrating efforts for the reforestation of the damaged areas in Cherán. The realization of each cycle of reproduction and reforestation was possible thanks to the community members' participation, resources, and knowledge (Interview with Ignacio Soto 2021). At the end of the administration in 2018, the CC announced the reforestation of all the damaged areas.

Nevertheless, some community members consider that during the administration from 2018 to 2021, there was a disconnection on multiple levels between the CC and the Major Council (MC). For example, some considered that the MC has focused on managing social programs without systematically promoting the recovery of the link between the community members and the forest (Interview with Pedro Chávez 2020). These community members also consider that credibility and legitimacy have been lost due to "the lack of reports and records of the community assemblies that could follow up on decision-making about the forest" (Interview with Constanza Rodríguez 2020). In addition, they consider that the internal work is "uncoordinated and disconnected from the people" (Interview with Adalberto Muñoz 2020).

This kind of disconnections and disagreements confirms the relevance of understanding community governments and community forest management as dynamic processes in which individual or ambivalent interests are also at stake.

During the last administration, it has also been possible to identify non-community-based forest projects, such as *Ejido Verde y Resinado*, a private capital project that began in 2015 and is managed by a company by the same name. Moreover, since 2019, the Secretary of Welfare has been supporting the program *Sembrando Vida*, which is part of the National Development Program 2019-2024.

Ejido Verde is a private company dedicated to financing and commercializing pine resin production through a commercial reforestation model based on collaboration with indigenous communities in the State of Michoacán. The commitments undertaken require converting community land to commercial agroforestry plantations to extract pine resin (Ejido Verde 2020). The program has been criticized by some community members who commented that it encourages pine monoculture in the participating plots. They claim that biodiversity has been reduced (Interview with Constanza Rodríguez 2020).

On the other hand, *Sembrando Vida* proposes to “increase productivity in rural areas under a focus on sustainability and regional development” to address the main problems of rural and peasant communities, namely, poverty and environmental degradation (DOF 2020). The program focuses on financing landowners of plots of at least 2.5 hectares. The beneficiaries receive financing and training in exchange for the productive conversion of land with degraded soils or loss of forest cover with potential for biodiversity recovery to establish pastures, cornfields, and *acahuales* (secondary forests) (DOF 2020).

These social programs have been criticized for promoting the adaptation of community forest management to current dominant forest development. It has also led to plans being oriented to the corporate logic of private companies and federal agencies based on social programs, thus compromising the autonomy of community decision-making. *Sembrando Vida*’s results will have to be evaluated in the coming years in comparison with other incentives and community forest management actions.

Even though the forest management projects implemented by the CC have addressed the needs of the moment, the community must discuss and decide on the type of forest harvesting they want. This is made challenging by the fact that, currently, there is a discrepancy between those who are committed to conservation and those who consider that it is time to carry out extensive forest harvesting.

We have already completed the task of reforesting the damaged areas, and now it is time to harvest the wood that is ready to be cut because otherwise it will be wasted; it is an issue we wanted to move forward on, but we still need to continue discussing. (Interview with Ignacio Soto 2021)

Achieving autonomous forest management involves deciding a common type of forest harvesting without the interference of private initiatives or federal agencies. This point needs to be approved by the assemblies, and it would raise critical questions about self-determination in eco-territorial terms: How? For what? For whom to harvest?

However, to understand the construction of autonomy through community forest management in Cherán, it is relevant to consider other factors that represent future challenges for the communities in the Purepecha region. Such are the changes in cultural identity, the territorial dynamics of organized crime, and the socio-economic factors that have led to migration and abandonment of the countryside (Velazquez 2019).

We were reforesting [...] they [entrepreneurs] come and tell the people that they are going to pay to rent their land and for reforestation. But people did not realize the territorial dispossession that these programs do. (Interview with Angélica Méndez 2020)

In this testimony, Méndez refers to the history of reforms, plans, and programs that propose economic improvements to community members based on the rent or sale of their plots, representing a gradual relinquish of collective ownership of the land. Thus, the defence of collective land ownership is intrinsic to regional autonomy. Territorial armouring based on agreements by community assemblies can also be the basis for autonomous community forest management in which the community members make decisions.

Between permanence and adaptation: modification of social and cultural practices

Ten years after the popular uprising in Cherán, the community has achieved a gradual adaptation of its social and cultural practices, mainly motivated by the need to defend the territory and to help the recovery of the forest. The commoners opted for the permanence of identity characteristics to reaffirm themselves as an indigenous community, which allowed them to mobilize civil law in favour of the official recognition of their community government based on their uses and customs (Aragón 2019).

The identity aspects of Purepechan culture have had a profound impact on community forest management, mainly through a system of values in constant transformation, whose main components are respect, mutual aid, and *faena* (collective work) (Interviews with Angélica Méndez and Francisco Rosas 2020). A regressive change to the detriment of the community occurred during the last half of the twentieth century. The lack of respect for the forest and among community members predominated. This had repercussions on the people's link with the land and forest. The abandonment of the countryside and migration, for example, are related to an ideology that despised peasant work: "Before, it was said that those who do not study would be peasants, and dads told their children: 'go study or else you will look like me, all dirty and exhausted; study so that you do not be in the field'" (Interview with Constanza Rodríguez 2020).

Such thinking and the socio-economic difficulties of the Mexican countryside intensified migration to urban centers such as Guadalajara, Morelia, and Mexico City, as well as to the United States, in search

of employment and opportunities to study. The abandonment of the countryside in Cherán led to a decline of not only farming work but also the interest in participating in community affairs.

Within a community, there should be solidarity, help among community members, and now [...] an authority invites to a task and many people do not go, some want that all actions are undertaken by those who are earning [money], that is a very selfish mentality, they do not realize that participation is the most valuable thing in a community. (Interview with Angélica Méndez 2020)

The link between territory and Purepecha identity deteriorated due to discrimination towards indigenous peoples and cultures :

When I was a child at school the teachers told us not to speak Purepecha because that was for Indians [...]. That was the worst mistake because we stopped speaking our language. (Interview with Angélica Méndez 2020)

This aspect had negative repercussions on different Purepechan traditions, such as gastronomy, housing, medicine, and traditional knowledge for forest management.

It is very different to live in the forest near to nature, to the land, to the springs of water. But [...] incredibly, the land gives you everything: food, medicine, and it give you much happiness too [...] They [discriminatory regimes] put it in our heads that this was an old idea [the link with the land] and there is nothing more wrong than that. (Interview with Angélica Méndez 2020)

Another vital subject to highlight is the permanence of the community security system and its adaptation through the creation of forest ranger corps. This community self-defence strategy made it possible to regain control of the territory and watch over the population's security since it "protects the community from traffic and attacks by organized crime" (Interview with Trinidad Ramírez 2020). In this same sense, the permanence of social organization through neighbourhood participation structures, such as bonfires and assemblies, is remarkable. Even though community involvement in public decision-making decreased during the last administration (2018-2021), community members continue to be regarded as a pillar of representativeness, legitimacy, and participation in governance, as they reunite to decide the appointment of the new counsellors for the period 2021-2024.

The permanence of power relations still determines different degrees of access and use of the forest. These are based on the diverging interests

of community members and non-community members (owners and non-owners). Also, some conflicts persist among young people, adults, and elders, as well as due to the exclusion of women from decision making. This issue is reflected in the low degree of participation of women in the CC since the first administration (2012-2015). This council had six incumbents, yet only two were women. They were firmly involved in the *work* “on foot and going to the hill,” even when some of their co-workers distrusted their abilities due to their gender.

There were we at any time, even at night, and the gentlemen began little by little to give us our place [...]. But, unfortunately, within them [the CC holders] some gentlemen did not give us that merit, sometimes we gave our opinion, and they acted as if we [women] did not know anything. (Interview with Eva Pérez 2020)

Based on their experiences, some women testify that their participation is constantly limited by a sexist culture that, despite efforts to transform it, is still part of the community’s uses and customs:

Here, there are women leaders with great capacities, great talents, great knowledge, disciplined, who could develop good roles, which could make magnificent contributions to the community for a development. [...] But sexism here wins. (Interview with Catalina Hernández 2020)

Even though some steps have been taken to reduce internal inequalities in community participation, the population recognizes the need to continue reviewing this sexist culture within the community’s uses and customs. Thus, although indigenous traditions are an element of strength in the community government, the persistence of such sexist practices constitutes one of the weaknesses that need to be overcome.

Another aspect of cultural continuity is the celebration of the *Corpus Christi*, which relates to the ancient cult of *Cuerauáperi* (Purepechan deity of agriculture) and takes place in the first days of June. This Mesoamerican traditional ceremony was adapted from the Christian tradition of celebrating Corpus Christi or *Eucharist*, resulting in a syncretic festivity related to soil and forest, and to traditional sustenance activities such as maize cultivation (Cortés and Baltazar 2010). In Cherán, the Corpus “[...] is like seeing the forest dancing in the streets” (Interviews with Irina Pérez and Catalina Hernández 2020). They create disguises with pine branches and parade with animals through the streets (Figure 3).

However, some community members maintain that the *Corpus* festivity is carried out without paying attention to an orderly management



Figure 3. *El Calvario* church is where the uprising of April 15, 2011 began. It is also where Corpus Christi starts every year. Source: Mónica Piceno 2015.

of the flora and fauna species extracted from the forest. They highlight the stress and damage generated to plants and animals (Interviews with Constanza Rodríguez and Ignacio Soto 2021). For this reason, these community members have proposed replacing animals with other forms of representation. There has been no consensus on this issue due to the relevance and antiquity of the celebration. A review of this tradition and its repercussions in the forest is pending.

Other practices “pending” review are the creation of communal statutes and the updating of the community members census, which determine the continuity of socio-economic programs and the power relations within the community. These discussions are part of projects that aim at the reconstruction of the community’s territorial memory and indigenous identity. However, to be effective, these adaptations will have to include mechanisms that allow the community government to be fully recognized by Mexican agencies and institutions.

Eco-territorial strategies for community forest management

Some of the testimonies collected in Cherán highlighted several concrete proposals to guide the transformation of the community’s forest

management to include objectives that address their own needs. First, the community members confirmed the need to strengthen participation at the bonfires and the neighbourhood assemblies. They consider them to be the most effective form of participation and prevention of corruption because they are built from the grassroots (Interviews with Trinidad Ramírez and Héctor Durán 2020). Without popular participation in these community initiatives, politics seems alien and tends to be left in the hands of politicians.

A second element in the transformation and strengthening of the community's forest management is the defence of the territory and the forest, even though different factors bring significant challenges in the eyes of the community members. One factor is the geographic location of Cherán, situated between Morelia and Guadalajara, two of the largest cities in Mexico, and between Uruapan and Zamora, two main urban and agricultural centers in the Purepecha region. Moreover, the highways that connect Cherán with these towns make the community a strategic transit point for passengers and agricultural products and livestock, both legal and illegal. For this reason, the existence of the community patrol and forest rangers is seen as one of the necessary premises for territorial self-defence.

A third process that community members consider crucial is the revaluation and concurrent adaptation of traditional territorial knowledge and ancestral culture to address the needs of the present. For this reason, community member Francisco Rosas (Interview 2020) believes that it is a priority to "give validity to the forest-based production model, turning back to the forest." Today, many agree that a community forest management plan needs to be decided collectively. It must settle the differences between those committed to conservation and those who consider that it is necessary to harvest in an orderly manner to serve collective needs. Furthermore, it is also necessary to work toward the recovery of the link between the community members and the forest. Recovering traditional forest knowledge from the voice and the experiences of the *K'eris* (old people/elders) as well as from the collective memory and the traditional value system is seen as a necessary step to return to a model of forest management based on solidarity, mutual aid, and *faenas*.

The issues of power and gender relations in land tenure and forest access and use are also aspects linked to territorial strategies for the recovery of Purepechan identity. The review of the aspects that make up "being a communal member, a political category that needs to be redefined in Cherán" (Interview with Jurhamuti Velázquez 2020), together with the

updating of the census of community members and the communal statutes, will make it possible to review the situation of the local authority's system.

Communards have many obligations, living in a place with an autonomous government is a huge responsibility [...] We must break individualism and strengthen solidarity. (Interview with Trinidad Ramírez 2020)

There is the need for a continuous update of forest governance forms and social relations within the community, which will give rise to inevitable adaptations. It will be possible then to achieve what Francisco Rosas (Interview 2020), artist and community teacher of Cherán, considers a "hybridism between the traditional and the present."

Conclusion

The establishment of community government in Cherán is linked to the background political struggles in the Purepecha region, in which territory and forest have been the main assets in dispute. The 2011 uprising showed the people's awareness of their need to take community forest management in their own hands. However, even though Cherán and other communities have regained control of these assets and exercise new forms of government, it is essential to understand the underlying processes that continue to besiege the communities and represent a continuity of previous projects of *extractivist* rationality.

By analyzing the changes in community forest management structures in Cherán, it is evident that this indigenous community has been in constant tension between permanence and adaptation. Some community members consider it unnecessary to rescue ancestral uses and customs; rather, they recognize changes as part of the need for survival. At the same time, given the current decrease in bonfires and neighbourhood assemblies, it is necessary to question elements such as gender roles based on sexism and exclusionist practices that damage and fragment the social fabric of the community.

Adaptations to the demands and expectations of forest use in each era have inevitably led to the appearance of specific initiatives not necessarily in line with community values and needs. Such is the case of the *Ejido Verde* program, which was presented as a solution to the abandonment of the countryside, poverty, and loss of cultural identity. That was supposed to allow the Purepechas to stay on their land, while preserving their traditions. However, the community has had neither a decision-making

role in this program nor the opportunity to choose the mechanisms for its implementation and the distribution of benefits. Even though this program presumes a strong community input in political and commercial decisions, it has nonetheless resulted in a paternalistic approach that proposes to “protect” the communities and “help them.” At the same time, investors take advantage of community resources and territories to generate added value to their commercial transactions.

There is a need for legal provisions that promote respect for the different structures of political organization and decision-making in the communities at the federal level to overcome the bureaucratic impediment to the recognition and exercise of self-determination rights.

The current work of the CC requires an impetus from the community members. This should also be extended to the other operational councils. In addition, community forest management is related to decision-making in other aspects of community life, such as education, housing, healthcare, and food. Thus, a strong community participation in all decisions related to harvesting initiatives will affect these areas of community life and, more broadly, provide the foundation for the autonomy of the Cherán community.

Faced with territorial dispossession and violence, the Cherán community opted for self-defence and community government. This revealed the need to reevaluate community strategies to adapt cultural traditions to new needs and weave them with new forms of governance that support environmental sustainability. This is relevant in contexts where indigenous communities are excluded from decision-making processes in natural resources management and where criminal groups threaten livelihoods for private instrumental and commercial interests.

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- Héctor Durán, Incumbent on the Council of Honor and Justice during 2018-2021 administration and Incumbent on the Major Council during 2012-2015 administration, November 24, 2020.
- Ignacio Soto, biologist, and forestry engineer, Manager of the community enterprise "Vivero San Francisco Cherán" during 2015-2018 administration, telephone interview, January 11, 2021.
- Jurhamuti Velázquez, Psychologist, participant at the bonfires and neighbourhood assemblies, November 19, 2020.
- Pedro Chávez, Incumbent on the Major Council during 2015-2018 administration, November 19, 2020.
- Trinidad Ramírez, Incumbent on the Major Council during 2012-2015

administration, November 18, 2020.

* The names below have been changed for anonymized participants. They are women involved in the rescue of the Purepecha traditional knowledge, such as herbal medicine and ancient uses and rituals linked to the forest. They work to foster equal gender rights in Cherán. Interviews were conducted in November 2020.

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