

The History of Indigenous Michoacán: A Struggle for Freedom and Survival

by John P. Schmal

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The State of Michoacán de Ocampo

The State of **Michoacán de Ocampo** occupies 58,599 square kilometers and is the sixteenth largest state in Mexico, taking up 3.0% of the national territory.

Politically, Michoacán is divided into 113 municipios. With a population that was tallied at 4,584,471 in the 2010 census, Michoacán has the ninth largest population in Mexico (3.8% of the national population). The capital of Michoacán is Morelia which had a population of 597,511 in 2010.



Sources: INEGI, Superficie de la República Mexicana por Estados. 2015; INEGI, 2010 Population Statistics.

Michoacán's Relief

Dominated by the mountains of the Sierra Madre Occidental, Michoacán extends from the Pacific Ocean northeastward into Mexico's central plateau.

Michoacán is a rugged mountainous state, dominated by two large mountain ranges (**Sierra Madre del Sur** and the **Neovolcanic Axis**) that cover 63.2% of the surface of the state.

Plains, low hills and plateaus make up another 30% of the state, primarily in the southeastern region.



Sources: Cuéntame, Página de inicio / Información por entidad / Michoacán de Ocampo; INEGI. Anuario Estadístico y Geográfico de Michoacán de Ocampo 2017.

The Neovolcanic Axis

The Eje Neovolcánico – also known as the **Neovolcanic Axis** or **Transverse Volcanic System** – crosses through central Mexico from Veracruz on the Gulf coast to Jalisco on the Pacific coast.

It has an approximate length of 920 km (572 miles). Its width varies from 400 km (249 miles) to about 100 km (62 miles).



Source: Lifepersona.com, “Transversal Volcanic System of Mexico: Characteristics and Location.” Online:

<https://www.lifepersona.com/transversal-volcanic-system-of-mexico-characteristics-and-location>.

Included in this region is the **Michoacán–Guanajuato Volcanic Field**, which contains 1,400 vents. Its most famous volcano was the **Parícutin volcano** which began in 1943 as a fissure in a cornfield owned by a Purépecha farmer and grew quickly. The nearby villages of Parícutin and San Juan Parangaricutiro were both buried in lava and ash. However, the eruption of El Parícutin ended in 1952 and it is believed to be monogenetic volcano, which means that once it has finished erupting, it will never erupt again. Any new eruptions in the Michoacán-Guanajuato volcanic field will erupt in a new location.

The Purépecha of Michoacán

For more than a thousand years, **Michoacán** has been the home of the **Purépecha** Indians. The name Michoacán derives from the Náhuatl terms, michin (fish) and hua (those who have) and can (place) which roughly translates into **“Place of the Fisherman.”**

In the 13th and 14th centuries, Michoacán consisted of several small city-states that competed with each other in the military and economic realms. These city-states were internally stratified, with elaborate civic and religious architecture.

Eventually, a leader named Tariacuri (who reigned circa about 1350-1408) consolidated power in the city of Pátzcuaro, conquering the other city-states in the Lake Pátzcuaro Basin and establishing the Triple Alliance. During the 15th Century, a rapid process of cultural assimilation and political unification brought the different groups of the region into a United Tarascan ethnicity and socio-political system.

Sources: Tumblr. Tlatollotl: What Was the Tarascan Government Like”; Gerónimo de Acalá, *Relación de las Ceremonias y Ritos y Poblacion y Gobierno de los Indios de la Provincia de Michoacán* (2013); J. Benedict Warren, *The Conquest of Michoacán: Spanish Domination of the Tarascan Kingdom 1521-1530* (1985); Mike Cartwright, "Tarascan Civilization." *Ancient History Encyclopedia* (Last modified December 11, 2013).

The Purepécha of Michoacán

Eventually, the Purépecha Kingdom would control an area of at least 45,000 square miles (72,500 square kilometers), including parts of the present-day states of Guanajuato, Guerrero, Colima, and Jalisco. However, 240 miles to the east, the Aztec Empire, centered in Tenochtitlán, had begun its ascendancy in the Valley of Mexico.

The Purepécha Empire (Circa 1500)



Source: Mike Cartwright, "Tarascan Civilization." Ancient History Encyclopedia (Last modified December 11, 2013). Online: https://www.ancient.eu/Tarascan_Civilization/.

Map Source: Tumblr. Tlatollotl: "What Was the Tarascan Government Like." Online: <https://tlatollotl.tumblr.com/post/154284146371/what-was-the-tarascan-government-like>.

The Purepécha Versus The Aztecs

Over time, the Aztecs came into conflict with their western neighbors. In 1468, the Aztecs launched a powerful offensive against the Purépecha. This offensive turned into a bloody and protracted conflict that lasted until 1478.

The Purepécha and Aztec Empires (Circa 1500)



Finally, in 1478, a force of 32,000 Aztec warriors engaged an army of 50,000 Tarascans in the Battle of Taximaroa (today the city of Hidalgo). After a daylong battle, the Aztecs withdrew, with a loss of 20,000 warriors. The Purépecha continued to put off the Aztecs up to the arrival of the Spaniards. In the map at the upper right, the Tarascan Empire is green, while the Aztec Empire is light purple.

Map Source: Maunus, "The Location of the Tarascan State in Relation to the Aztec Empire in Mexico," Sept. 20, 2010 (Originally uploaded on Aug. 31, 2006).

The Purépecha Language

Today, the Purépecha language is recognized as a **language isolate** that is not even provisionally linked with any other neighboring language. Its origin and early history are shrouded in mystery. Some prestigious researchers have suggested that Tarascan is distantly related to **Quecha**, one of the many languages in the Andean zone of South America. Some historians have regarded Purépecha as a **hybrid language**, the product of a wide-ranging process of linguistic borrowing and fusion.

The Present Distribution of the Purépecha Language in Michoacán



The Purépecha language presently consists of 22 consonants and six vowels. Today, the language is spoken mostly in rural communities in the highlands of Michoacán. Ethnologue counts Purépecha as two languages: a central language, spoken by approximately 40,000 people (2005) around Pátzcuaro, and a western highland language, spoken by 135,000 speakers (2005) around Zamora.

Source: Wikipedia, "Purépecha Language."

The Spaniards Enter Michoacán (1522-1526)

The first Spanish colonizer to have contact with the Purépecha Indians was **Cristóbal de Olid**, in 1522, who by peaceful means got the Indians to recognize King Carlos V, without their leader (Cazonci) Tangáxuan losing his status as ruler. Although the Purépecha army may have numbered 100,000, the kingdom chose not to fight when Spanish forces arrived soon after.

In 1524, King Tangoxoán visited Mexico City and was baptized the next year with the Christian name of Francisco. Later, he asked the bishop to send Catholic priests to Michoacán. Meanwhile, fifteen young Tarascan nobles were sent to Mexico City in June 1525 to study at the newly built Franciscan school.

Although the Purépecha tried to cooperate, the suspicious relations between the Spaniards and their new subjects grew more tense and, **in 1526, Tangoxoán was imprisoned as a means of persuading him to turn over the treasures of the Tarascan state to the Spaniards.** After destroying the Purépecha temples, the Franciscan missionaries built a large Franciscan monastery in 1526.

The King is Murdered (1530)

In December 1529, The President of the First Audiencia in Nueva España (Mexico), **Nuño Beltrán de Guzmán**, left Mexico City with a force of 350 Spaniards and over 10,000 Indian allies. He also brought along King (Cazonci) Tangoxoán as a hostage, demanding that he turn over all his gold to Guzmán.

On February 5, 1530, the Cazonci was accused of treason and interrogated under torture. Soon after, **the King was executed on Feb. 14, 1530, allegedly because he had abandoned Christianity and had lapsed back into paganism.** Guzmán had Tangoxoán dragged behind a horse and finally burned at the stake.

According to the historian J. Benedict Warren, **“the execution of the Cazonci was the most symbolic act marking the end of the pre-Spanish kingdom of Michoacán and the completion of the Spanish conquest of the region.”** In the following decades, Tarascan puppet rulers were installed by the Spanish government to rule the area.

Source: J. Benedict Warren, *The Conquest of Michoacán: Spanish Domination of the Tarascan Kingdom 1521-1530* (1985).

Tata Vasco de Quiroga: The Protector of the Purépecha

The cruelty of **Nuño de Guzmán** stunned and horrified the Tarascan people who had made their best efforts to accommodate the Spaniards. **Guzmán's forces plundered the kingdom, destroying temples, houses and fields.** Eventually, Guzmán was disgraced and arrested and returned to Spain in 1537 to stand trial for his crimes.

Fearing for their lives, many of demoralized Purépecha population either died or fled far into the mountains to hide. Eventually, **Don Vasco de Quiroga**, who became the Bishop of Michoacán in 1538, played an important role in ameliorating the physical and moral damage inflicted by Guzmán on the people of Michoacán. Quiroga rapidly gained the respect and friendship of the natives and became their protector. He was known to them as **Tata Vasco (Father Vasco)**. Quiroga died on March 14, 1565 at the age of 64 in Pátzcuaro, Michoacán, Mexico.

Vasco de Quiroga



Source: Bernardino Verástique, "Michoacán and Eden: Vasco de Quiroga and the Evangelization of Western Mexico" (2010).

The Indigenous People of Modern Day Michoacán

The 1921 Mexican Census

Mexico's 1921 census asked people to categorize themselves by three primary categories: Pure Indigenous, Indigenous Mixed with White, and White. Michoacán and the neighboring state of Guanajuato both had very high rates of mestizaje (mixed racial populations): 96.3% and 70.6%, respectively.

The Racial Classifications of Michoacán and Guanajuato in the 1921 Census

| Racial Classification | Guanajuato: No. of Persons | Guanajuato: % of Total State Population | Michoacán: No. of Persons | Michoacán: % of Total Population |
|--|-------------------------------|---|------------------------------|--|
| Indígena Pura | 25,458 | 3.00% | 196,726 | 20.90% |
| Indígena Mezclada con Blanca | 828,724 | 96.30% | 663,391 | 70.60% |
| Blanca | 4,687 | 0.50% | 64,886 | 6.90% |
| Question Ignored or Other Classifications | 1,395 | 0.20% | 14,101 | 1.50% |
| Total Population | 860,364 | 100% | 939,849 | 100% |

Classifications: Indígena Pura (Pure Indigenous Origins); Indígena Mezclada con Blanca (Indigenous Mixed with White); Blanca (White); Extranjeros sin distinción de razas (Foreigners without racial distinction) One percent of the population of the Republic of Mexico chose a fifth option: "Cualquiera otra o que se ignora la raza" (persons who chose to ignore the question or "other.")

Source: Departamento de la Estadística Nacional, "Anuario de 1930" (Tacubaya, Distrito Federal, 1932).

Indigenous Michoacán in the 2010 Census

In the 2010 census, Michoacán was ranked 13th among the Mexican states with 3.5% of its population speaking indigenous languages. The single largest group among the indigenous speakers were the Purépecha who represented 83% of Michoacán's total indigenous-speaking population. Náhuatl was the second most common language spoken in the state. The Nahuas primarily lived in the coastal region, while the Mazahua and Otomi Indians occupied five eastern municipios.

The 2010 Census: Indigenous Languages Spoken in Michoacán

| Indigenous Language | Population 3 Years and Older Who Speak an Indigenous Language | Percent of all Indigenous Speakers |
|---------------------------------|---|------------------------------------|
| Purépecha (Tarasco) | 117,221 | 83.2% |
| Náhuatl | 9,170 | 6.5% |
| Unspecified Indigenous Language | 5,457 | 3.9% |
| Mazahua | 5,431 | 3.9% |
| Mixteco | 1,160 | 0.8% |
| Otomí | 592 | 0.4% |
| Zapoteco | 321 | 0.2% |
| Total | 140,820 | 100.0% |

Source: INEGI. Censo de Población y Vivienda 2010: Tabulados del Cuestionario Básico: Población de 3 años y más que Habla Lengua Indígena por Entidad Federativa y Lengua.

Michoacán's Indigenous Municipios (2010 Census)

In the 2010 census, only two Michoacán municipios had indigenous speaking populations greater than 50%: Chichota (with 19,743 indigenous speakers; 58.1% of the municipio's inhabitants) and Charapan (with 5,982 indigenous speakers; 52.2% of the municipio's inhabitants). These two municipios accounted for 27.4% of the entire indigenous speaking population of the state.

**The 2010 Census: Michoacán Municipios
With the Largest Indigenous-Speaking Populations**

| Municipio | Speakers of Indigenous Languages | Percent of Indigenous Speakers in the State | Primary Language Spoken |
|------------------|---|--|--------------------------------|
| Chilchota | 19,743 | 14.0% | Purépecha |
| Uruapan | 18,833 | 13.4% | Purépecha |
| Los Reyes | 11,207 | 8.0% | Purépecha |
| Nahuatzen | 10,256 | 7.3% | Purépecha |
| Paracho | 10,189 | 7.2% | Purépecha |
| Tangamandapio | 8,706 | 6.2% | Purépecha |
| Quiroga | 7,585 | 5.4% | Purépecha |
| Aguila | 7,153 | 5.1% | Náhuatl |
| Charapan | 5,982 | 4.2% | Purépecha |
| Zitácuaro | 5,261 | 3.7% | Mazahua |

Source: INEGI, Población de 3 Años y Más Que Habla Lengua Indígena por Entidad Federativa y Lengua Según Condición de Habla Española y Sexo.

Purépecha Language

In the 2010 census, 128,344 persons in the Mexican Republic spoke the Purépecha language. In total, 117,221 (or 91.3%) of the Purépecha lived in Michoacán and of that number, 11,083 (9.5%) were monolingual and did not speak Spanish.

The Purépecha Language in the Mexican Republic (2010 Census)

| State | Population 3 Years and More that Speak the Purépecha Language | Percent of Population 3 Years and More that Speaks the Purépecha Language |
|----------------------------|---|---|
| Michoacán de Ocampo | 117,221 | 91.3% |
| Jalisco | 3,960 | 3.1% |
| Baja California | 1,659 | 1.3% |
| México | 1,464 | 1.1% |
| Distrito Federal | 1,276 | 1.0% |
| Guanajuato | 568 | 0.4% |
| Colima | 405 | 0.3% |
| Other States | 1,791 | 1.4% |
| Purépecha (Tarasco) | 128,344 | 100.0% |

Source: INEGI, Censo de Población y Vivienda 2010: Tabulados del Cuestionario Básico: Población de 3 Años y Más Que Habla Lengua Indígena por Entidad Federativa y Lengua Según Condición de Habla Española y Sexo.

The 2015 Intercensal Survey

INEGI's 2015 Intercensal Survey, published in 2016, indicated that the % of people who are traditionally indigenous exceeds the % of people who actually speak indigenous languages. The data for Michoacán and other selected states are shown below.

Linguistic and Ethnic Identity in Mexico (2015)

| State | Status of People Who Consider Themselves to be Indigenous | % of the Total Population That Consider Themselves to be Indigenous | % of Persons 3 Years of Age and Older Who Speak an Indigenous Language |
|-----------------------------|---|---|--|
| Oaxaca | No. 1 in Mexico | 65.7% | 32.2% |
| Yucatán | No. 2 in Mexico | 65.4% | 28.9% |
| Michoacán | No. 11 in Mexico | 27.7% | 3.6% |
| Guanajuato | No. 25 in Mexico | 9.1% | 0.2% |
| Aguascalientes | No. 22 in Mexico | 11.7% | 0.3% |
| Jalisco | No. 24 in Mexico | 11.1% | 0.8% |
| Zacatecas | No. 29 in Mexico | 7.6% | 0.3% |
| The Mexican Republic | All States Combined | 21.5% | 6.5% |

Source: INEGI, "Principales resultados de la Encuesta Intercensal 2015. Estado Unidos Mexicanos: III: Etnicidad." Online: http://www.senado.gob.mx/comisiones/asuntos_indigenas/eventos/docs/etnicidad_240216.pdf

Michoacán's Indigenous Pueblos (2015)

As noted in this Comisión Nacional para el Desarrollo de los Pueblos Indígenas (CDI) map, most of Michoacán's Nahuatl speakers live in the coastal region, while the Otomí and Mazahua live in the far eastern region. The Purépecha live in the central northern region.

