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Motifs, topics, commonplaces and characters of the traditional oral narrative in Zumpahuacán: the influence of the Mexican Revolution

Motivos, tópicos y lugares comunes y personajes de la narrativa oral tradicional en Zumpahuacán: la influencia de la Revolución Mexicana

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ABSTRACT

The safeguarding, dissemination, and promotion of oral tradition are essential for helping to preserve the intangible cultural heritage of humanity, as framed by the guidelines of international organizations such as UNESCO. Popular narrative tradition weaves together a whole network of relationships, knowledge, and the history of the community that created it, preserves it, and passes it on, embodying its historical past and present in oral narratives that go beyond legends and myths. We would like to thank the Consejo Mexiquense de Ciencia y Tecnología (COMECyT) for its support in carrying out this work, which is the result of ongoing research and fieldwork focused on collecting oral narratives.

Keywords: Oral Narrative Tradition; Mexican Revolution; Community Identity; State of Mexico.

RESUMEN

La salvaguarda, difusión y divulgación de la tradición oral es pertinente para colaborar con la preservación del patrimonio cultural intangible de la humanidad mismo que se encuentra enmarcado en los lineamientos de organismos internacionales tales como la UNESCO. La tradición narrativa popular amalgama toda una red de relaciones, conocimiento e historia de la comunidad que la gestó, la conserva y la va transmitiendo; su pasado histórico y su presente vertido en relatos orales que van más allá de leyendas y mitos. Agradecemos al Consejo Mexiquense de Ciencia y Tecnología, COMECyT, por el apoyo para la realización de este trabajo que es resultado de una investigación y trabajo de campo de recopilación de relatos orales que aún está en curso.

Palabras clave: Tradición Narrativa Oral; Revolución Mexicana; Identidad Comunitaria; Estado de México.

INTRODUCTION

Traditional oral narrative is found in communities that have remained isolated and distant from modern cities across Mexico. Analyzing some of the stories from these communities opens up the possibility of delving deeper into their most common characteristics, as well as the constants in terms of locations, topics, protagonists, antagonists, and supernatural situations that have found some explanation in the devilish.

In Zumpahuacán, a municipality located on the border between the states of Morelos and

Guerrero, traditional narratives refer to certain constant characteristics that provide a path for analyzing its oral tradition. An important and decisive characteristic is the municipality's location adjacent to the cradle of the Zapatista revolutionary movement, the state of Morelos, a situation that influenced the collective imagination and continues to be present in the popular narrative embodied in legendary characters and supernatural events corresponding to revolutionary Mexico.

Oral tradition

In the context of the analysis of tradition, the oral narrative tradition, sometimes called oralitura, has recently been highlighted for its possibilities and scope of analysis since the UNESCO declaration. It should be noted that this form of cultural heritage is extremely fragile because, as it is inherited and preserved orally and has no written record, it is vulnerable to being forgotten or severely modified in its transmission process, in which the narrators or recipients alter its content and, in some cases, its traditional structure. The preservation and transmission of this heritage are cut short when the keeper or possessor of a story dies. Thus, part of the community's knowledge and stories die with them, affecting the tradition's continuity.

Despite the fragility of oral narrative, it has been preserved in communities such as Zumpahuacán, where the shockwave of globalization has had less of an impact. At this point, it should be added that the younger generations, immersed in technology and influenced by the modern world, are less interested in the preservation or conservation of traditions, as the municipality has a high rate of migration to the United States, which has a direct influence on the identity of the inhabitants and on the perception that the dominant culture is better or deserves more importance than their own.

One important aspect of analyzing traditional oral narrative is that, by collecting, preserving, and analyzing it, it is possible to conserve this form of knowledge and maintain the cultural diversity that provides a sense of belonging and a sense of home to the communities that preserve it. It also paves the way for inter-community and intercultural dialogue, underscoring the importance of research and academic production on oral literature. In this context, Urdapilleta mentions that oral tradition has been studied alongside folkloric studies, the creativity of small communities, and traditional memory and knowledge, since oral narratives are an important vehicle for transmission, especially in societies without writing or with a dominant oral culture. (Urdapilleta:2023,33)

Zumpahuacán

This municipality, located in the State of Mexico, borders the State of Morelos, the cradle of the Zapatista revolutionary insurgency. According to official data, Zumpahuacán has a population of 16 000 inhabitants, the vast majority of whom are engaged in activities related to the countryside, i.e., agriculture and livestock. The climate is hot most of the year, and the soil characteristics are divided into different ecosystems such as jungle, grassland, and forest, promoting the existence of endemic species that are mentioned in oral accounts; that is, species adapted to the environment in which the collective imagination was formed and has been preserved. The way of life and pace of life correspond to that of rural life, which is far removed from the fast pace of the city, as well as positively influencing the preservation of various traditional manifestations, present in the system of values and moral precepts, and being a Catholic people with very strong beliefs about the supernatural. This collective memory is preserved and transmitted from one generation to another, maintaining constants in terms of characters, situations, and locations that structure and interconnect a complex network within

the community. From these characteristics, it is possible to visualize aspects of great interest surrounding the community by highlighting specific features that account for its passage of time and the influence of its historical, social, and religious heritage.

The importance of analyzing the stories of a community such as Zumpahuacán stems from the fact that this form of knowledge inheritance contains not only the story itself, but also, through its study, allows us to delve into the profound meaning of the layers and sublayers of collective ideas formed in the exercise of transmission. That is, by safeguarding and preserving aspects of their past, such as social conflicts and religious ideas, they remain present and alive in oral narratives.

It is worth noting that oral tradition is shaped and reshaped when it is transmitted from a storyteller to a listener, who in turn modifies the story before it is transmitted again. This adds even more complexity to its analysis and enriches it in terms of traditional value, since in the vast majority of cases, the stories contain and preserve elements, characters, situations, and keywords that highlight their traditional nature, as they have been little altered or modified in their essential characteristics, thus reinforcing the dynamism inherent in tradition:

Tradition will be transmitted from one generation to another despite changes that may be due to socio-historical needs or others caused by the person (or persons) responsible for this transmission. Traditions are, after all, social constructs shaped by culture. (Medrano:2001, p. 191)

Thus, as Barnes (1994) points out, tradition is an inherited language in which a series of beliefs is manifested and transmitted by common agreement within the community, since it is the community that selects, safeguards, and continues these beliefs. Medrano mentions the way in which various forms of knowledge, such as oral tradition, are pre-structured by tradition, and thus “we observe that knowledge is social and society permeates knowledge and vice versa” (Medrano, 1991, p. 191).

The traditional form of knowledge is sustained by a community agreement, which is decided by and within the group itself. It is a configuration, structuring, and restructuring that brings together a complex of signs, beliefs, superstitions, ideas, and practices from which human beings who find their belonging to a certain community perpetuate them as a way of representing themselves and others, from the individual and the collective, the way of seeing the world within a certain periodicity. In this way, the analysis of the influence of armed conflicts on the configuration of traditional ideas in Zumpahuacán can be visualized and amplified.

The Mexican Revolution and Zumpahuacán

The armed conflicts and revolutionary groups left a trail of horror in the communities where their presence or passage was terrifying. However, they also influenced the configuration of their idiosyncrasies and imaginaries, which continue to resonate to this day. The Mexican Revolution (1910-1929) had a direct influence on communities where the hacienda system was the dominant economic way of life. A few kilometers south of Zumpahuacán, one of the most important and transcendental armed movements in Mexican history was forged: the Zapatista movement led by Emiliano Zapata, who rallied a vast organization and army with a cause of agrarian justice, that is, the distribution and possession of land suitable for cultivation, in addition to his disagreement with labor exploitation and social injustice. John Womack states that: the most radical movement for justice was not only agrarian, but also national, because

it was not only about the Plan de Ayala with its emphasis on injustice and the need for agrarian justice, but also the entire Zapatista struggle until 1914, when they created new national programs and, at the Aguascalientes convention, already had a program of justice for workers. (El Colegio de México, 2016, 7 min35s)

On the other hand, Castro Domingo indicates that in Zumpahuacán, the Zapatista movement had very specific repercussions because in this municipality, the haciendas, centers of exploitation and social and agrarian injustice, were almost non-existent. Thus, the Revolution influenced the community in different ways: In Zumpahuacán, where haciendas were non-existent, the population identified with the Zapatista causes and, in fact, some joined them. The most interesting thing was that the people of Zumpahuacán joined the Zapatista groups, even though they did not care about the land struggle. In fact, they did not covet land because it had never been a limited resource in the municipality. (Castro:2003,286)

Thus, the presence of the Zapatista groups sowed terror and concern in Zumpahuacán, as there were rumors of savages looting homes, kidnapping women, and stealing food, poultry, and livestock to finance their cause, as recorded in a municipal register: After so much fear on the part of the authorities in Zumpahuacán, on August 23, a group of Zapatistas attacked and assaulted the municipal capital. However, a day later, Second Lieutenant Sánchez's forces left El Zapote to protect the center of Zumpahuacán. Days later, a group of Zapatistas regrouped in Platanar and Ahuacate, on the border with Malinalco. On December 18, the municipal president of Zumpahuacán received an official letter informing him that in San Andrés, a group of more than one hundred Zapatistas had assaulted the locals, not without first committing all kinds of abuses (Castro:2003,278).

In this way, the characters, situations, confrontations, and events of the Mexican Revolution reached the inhabitants in the form of murky, terrifying, and, on occasion, supernatural occurrences. It is important to point out that supernatural and demonic forces are considered completely real among the population due to the Catholicism of the community, which has taken the devil as the ultimate representative of evil and attributed numerous characteristics to him, in addition to his presence and influence, conditioning people's actions. According to community beliefs, the devil is responsible for all the evils that threaten human virtue. Furthermore, his figure is used to justify and explain all the evil in men, as in the stories of Zumpahua.

From this contextual overview, we will analyze different topics, characters, and situations in some stories from the community that are influenced by this historical passage of the municipality and will be analyzed in terms of A) revolutionary characters and their demonization B) money buried in dark caves in some stories collected during the research stay in the municipality of Zumpahuacán from January to May 2025.

A) Revolutionary figures, legendary characters

The characters in some traditional stories set in the context of the Mexican Revolution share certain constants: they display behavior far from good; that is, they are malevolent, unscrupulous beings associated with the devil. This diabolical condition is analyzed by González (2021), who describes it as the souls of people being under the abject obedience of the devil: "The diabolical condition" may refer to the relationship between beings from the otherworld or ghostly configurations that have this condition and human beings. This relationship implies that the souls of these men and women are in one way or another under the control of the character

in question (González:2021,2).

This is the case of General Saavedra, a character who, although he appears in official municipal archives as a leader and revolutionary rebel, is remembered in the collective memory of the community as a man who abused his power and who also possessed supernatural abilities that, as the narrators claim, were given to him by the devil through an *empautamiento*.

It is important to mention that the Zumpahuaqueño narrators refer to the devil as “the friend,” “the bad friend,” or “the bad enemy” and indicate arrangements or pacts that he offers to some person, calling this deal an *empautamiento* or saying that the character in the story was *empautado* or *empautó con el diablo* (bound by a pact with the devil), that is, that there is a pact involved and that this pact leads to sudden enrichment, supernatural powers, and a tragic outcome. General Saavedra is described as a man full of evil and coldness: He had his house here, he lived right there, he held his parties there, his bullfights... it is called El Tamarindo, there in the amates, where that pump is, that is where Saavedra’s corral was, that is where his corn barns were, his house... he stole, he killed people.

The money was also buried, but it was, so to speak, entrusted to the devil. The following story combines both a revolutionary and legendary character, Pedro Saavedra, and the money he buried and “entrusted” to the devil in a cave, a recurring theme in traditional oral narrative, whose currency of exchange for keeping it is to give up one’s soul; to make a pact or be cursed, as in the story “In exchange for a chicken”: I heard that on that hill over there, he buried money, and for that, for San Gaspar. They say he buried money, that he buried gold, and then a man from San Andrés was there with a device looking for it, and they found it, and then the man told my husband, now I no longer have a husband, and from there he says that “we were scratching,” he says. Moreover, when a man came and said, “What are you doing here?” He said, “I am digging here, I already found some money,” and he said, “The money is mine, and I am not going to let you have it.” I kept this money here for you to take, and you are going to give me a hen with all her chicks, and the man from San Andrés believed it was his hen, so he came and said to his wife, “Go, woman, get the hen that has the most chicks. A man appeared to me while I was scratching and said to give him the hen; that he would take the money if not, then no. He said: “My wife will take it, with the chicks,” he said, and then the rude man said: “I will be right back with the damn chicks,” and then he appeared and I said to him, “Here is the hen, I brought it to you with the chicks,” and he said, “No, I do not want that,” and I said, “Then what do you want?” He said, “I want your wife with all her children, and then you can take the money.” Moreover, I got angry and said, “You are fucking out of your mind. Why would I give you my wife and children? He said, “They are not yours, they are mine.

Moreover, he says, “Cover up what you have already dug up and leave, but I am not going to give you permission to take any more.” They covered it up again and said that if anyone wanted to take it, they could hear noises, and there it was. They said it was gold and that it belonged to Mr. Saavedra. This money would indeed be his, but he shared it with the bad guy.

The content of this story revolves around constants, such as the buried money. However, the climax of the story is shown in a possible pact to obtain it and the metaphor of its guardian, who did not ask for a hen with chicks but for human souls, thus replicating the evil behavior of General Saavedra. These characters are related to places such as lonely roads or caves. This is not gratuitous; rather, caves are associated with places in the underworld. These rugged, cold, and dangerous adjectives resemble the unknown and rugged, which is why Saavedra would have

had no better place to hide his money or precious metals than caves, as Ángel Torrejón shares in “El dinero de Saavedra” (Saavedra’s Money).

They say that when he built the corral, people say that he ran over the corral and that if a stone fell, the person who dropped the stone would be killed... he was a general evil, a thief, he went to steal elsewhere, he walked, and he left a lot of money in the caves up there.

The structure continues by referring to a spell and finally supernatural aspects, such as those places being haunted; places where time and space are altered and perceived in a distorted way: Those who want to dig it up are not allowed to; the one who guards it, the bad guy, is like enchanted; that money, it is not so easy to get it out. They say that if you go in, a guy says you have to leave your hat like this so you can go in and take something out, you grab something and jump out quickly because you stay there like enchanted, you cannot get out.

The sudden wealth of this character seems endless and leads once again to caves, money, and the devil’s power in the story “Saavedra”: “Look, there is a cave... at that time it belonged to General Saavedra. Many have wanted to explore it, but I think it is well guarded because they do not allow anything to be taken out.” The story interconnects the treasures, the location topics, and the character in question, as well as mentioning a common practice of the time, in which those who buried money murdered their companions so that no one would know the location of their treasure, as did Saavedra’s companions:

It is so long, wide, and square that it takes about eighteen men to move it, and that is how many he had with him when they hid the treasure. When the general asked them, “Friends, which of you is tired? Raise your hand so you can rest,” they replied, “We are tired, sir.” The poor guys thought they were going to be left there to rest... but he left them there dead, and those are the ones who guard the treasure. To get there and take out that treasure, you have to pass by those skeletons. Who dares to do that? It is very dark, about 8 meters high, and pitch-black inside. I went there, but I did not dare do anything. I looked at the stone and went with three others. There are eight barrels of gold and eight of pure silver, I tell you, the older man who told me, he was there during the revolution, I tell you, now he is old, and I tell you I do not know if it was the older man himself or if it was just a vision, but he was a tough old guy.

Like all characters rooted in oral tradition, Pedro Saavedra’s end is not exempt from cruel decline and a destructive finale. He died alone, with a bullet to the heart: He died because my own family, an aunt named Pascuala, as my dad calls her, and a brother, Auntie, lent me the rifles. Saavedra is coming; he says he is going to kill us. There are only two of us brothers left. My uncle is over in Guerrero; there are only three of us left. I am not giving you anything. You are too young. Do not waste your lives. Behave yourselves. That man... You will not be able to handle him. Okay, you stubborn, foolish brats, I am not going to give you the rifles, but you can have this shotgun. He gave them the shotgun and did not give them much ammunition, just a handful of pellets and shells.

It is very interesting that at the end of this character’s story, it is said that it was a day in accordance with Catholic ideas, since they mention that his life came to an end on Good Friday and that a blessed silver bullet was necessary to defeat evil, Saavedra’s pact with the devil, thanks to an aunt who gave the weapons to those who ended the life of the legendary character, who said: Look, children, I sincerely hope that the bullets I gave you are blessed, because I feel and sense that you are going to do something with that shotgun. She had a hunch, and that was

that. She thought, they killed Saavedra, I did not give them a good weapon. They killed him on Holy Tuesday. All week long, they said he would rise again like Christ. When? What is going to rise again?

The narrator proudly shares the honor of knowing that his ancestors killed Saavedra, as they were men who were part of his family, whose surname is remembered with great respect among the population, who refer to the Pichardos as “the ones who killed Saavedra.”

B) Buried money and dark caves

Buried money is another common motif that directly references revolutionary Mexico, as people hid their valuables underground, including documents of ownership, precious metals, and cash. Popular lore mentions gold or centenarios buried in pots, chests, casseroles, and even barrels.

In some situations, it is claimed that the money may be reserved for some people and not for others; that is, if that money was not somehow predestined for the person who finds it, when it is unearthed, it turns into coal or dirt, as can be analyzed in “Ollas de carbón” (Coal Pots): When we started digging, this person supposedly said to me, “Let us dig.” We were about to arrive, supposedly communicating with the deceased, and he said to me, “Stop.” It was around midnight. “Stop,” he says. “No, we are almost there,” “Not anymore,” but there are the pots. What do you think? When we dug them up... because it was an old house. My grandmother told me that the house there belonged to the landowners, a married couple who had no children and owned rice fields, and that now only the foundations remained. My uncle said, “The flame lights up like this and like that.” We dug, found the foundations, and about a meter down, we found the cover. We hit the pots. They were covered with something like cloth, but it was paper. We could not tell if it was paper or leather, and the pots were found. We hit them, and they broke: pure charcoal.

In this story, we can analyze the call that, according to Catholic tradition, is attributed to the day of the Holy Cross, when lucky people can go to a flame that becomes visible that night. This is how an anonymous narrator shares it in “Lumbrita en el cerro” (Little Light on the Hill): My son-in-law once saw the light. He lives next to the cemetery. Once, he woke up in the middle of the night because he could not sleep. It was May 3rd. He got up and said, “I sat on the edge of my house and saw a little light on a hill,” but on the other side of his house, where the health center is now, on the other side, but right at the foot of a cedar tree, he saw a little flame like that. He said, “What time is it? Who is lighting a fire there?”

This belief is linked to popular Catholicism, since the tradition most closely resembling it holds that the Day of the Holy Cross was established to commemorate the day when Saint Helena found the cross on which Jesus had been crucified. This date was linked to indigenous traditions in which rituals are performed to give thanks for the beginning of the rains and good harvests. In this way, money, land, and fortune became intertwined with treasures and legends surrounding buried treasures, elements that make up the traditional oral stories of Zumpahuacán to this day.

CONCLUSIONS

The analysis of traditional oral narratives can amplify the visibility of the sense of identity of the communities in which the tradition was born and remains, and how it generates a sense of belonging as well as a distinct identity from other communities, thereby shaping community identity.

Warlike episodes such as the Mexican Revolution, in addition to leaving traces of pain, anguish, and dispossession, also generated an honorable way of remembering community resilience in the face of adversity, which establishes a dialogue of tolerance and cohesion as a community in the face of adversity itself, which is jealously guarded in the collective memory with certain elements that add heroism and courage.

The Mexican narrative tradition has placed the devil as the protagonist, thus allowing this figure to be analyzed from perspectives that provide a broader view in correspondence with the supernatural, heroes, bandits, and places that the narrative tradition safeguards, which lends itself to a broad religious, historical, and traditional analysis.

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