Territory as Geosymbol: Mennonites, Rarámuris, and Mestizos in Cuauhtémoc, Chihuahua

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This article explores interethnic relationships between Rarámuri, Mennonite, and mestizo communities of the Cuauhtémoc region of Chihuahua in northern Mexico. Mestizo identity, prevalent throughout the nation, refers to the biological and cultural connections between individuals of different ethnicities. Relationships between 16th-century Spanish colonizers and Indigenous peoples resulted in combined ancestry, characteristics, and customs, leading to the formation of national identity in Mexico. Within the context of the multicultural region of Cuauhtémoc, the term mestizo is also used to broadly indicate those inhabitants of the region who are neither Mennonite nor Rarámuri. Individually, these latter two groups have come to represent this part of the state as well. They are characterized by distinct, deep-rooted cultural identities and worldviews. The Rarámuri are Indigenous peoples of the Sierra Madre Occidental (the Sierra Tarahumara), a mountain range west of Ciudad Cuauhtémoc. The Mennonites are a European migrant group settling in the Cuauhtémoc region in 1922 following an exodus of approximately 7,000 members from Canada. Currently, most Mennonites in the region are Mexican by birth.

This research adopts a hermeneutic analysis and qualitative ethnographic approach based on in-depth interviews with migrant agricultural labourers. Utilizing a snowball strategy where potential subjects assist in recruiting others, a total of 25 interviews were conducted with ten Rarámuri, ten mestizos, and five Mennonites participants.[1] The theoretical concepts of territory, forced migration, and migratory grief form the basis for analysis of intercultural confluence and influence between these ethnic groups as they define their geographical space within the region. This relationship occurs in the search for economic and social well-being. The results of the study indicate that Mennonites, Rarámuris, and mestizos from the Cuauhtémoc region have achieved an interethnic relationship based on the resolution of the needs and problems generated in a shared territory. According to Conzen et al. (1992),

> Ethnic groups in modern settings are constantly recreating themselves, and ethnicity is continuously being reinvented in response to changing realities both within the group and the host society. Ethnic group boundaries, for example, must be repeatedly renegotiated, while expressive symbols of ethnicity (ethnic traditions) must be repeatedly reinterpreted. (p. 5)

Within the Cuauhtemense communities, the result of this process is a combined regional identity.

Contextualization

The confluence of cultures in the northwestern region of Chihuahua is primarily due to its unique geographical configuration. Ciudad Cuauhtémoc, with a population of 169,000, is located 105 km from the capital of Chihuahua City. It is the "gateway" to the Sierra Tarahumara. As Carl-Klassen (2018) indicates, "Cuauhtémoc and the surrounding region is celebrated as 'La Tierra de Tres Culturas,' 'The Land of the Three Cultures': mestizo, Rarámuri, and Mennonite." In 2014, this informal designation was made official by the state legislature which declared Cuauhtémoc the "Municipality of the Three Cultures." Furthermore, the city's growing commercial activity makes it a meeting point for neighbouring towns and ranches. Extending north from the city, the Mennonite commercial corridor is located on the road to Álvaro Obregón. It bisects the Mennonite colonies of Manitoba and Swift Current. Most of the businesses are Mennonite-owned and generate employment for mestizos and Rarámuris. One of the main activities in the region is apple production. As the mestizo apple industry has expanded and industrialized,

thousands of Rarámuri migrants have come to be employed during the thinning and harvesting seasons.

Rarámuri Migration to Cuauhtémoc

The Rarámuris, also known as Tarahumaras, are Indigenous peoples of the state of Chihuahua. Archaeological evidence shows they have continuously inhabited the Sierra Madre Occidental (known as the Sierra Tarahumara) for approximately 15,000 years. The Sierra Tarahumara is divided into two large zones (Upper and Lower Tarahumara) and covers 17 municipalities. After the conquest of Mexico by the Spanish in the 16th century, Jesuits came to the region to evangelize. This caused many Rarámuris to retreat farther into the mountains, while others accepted the new religion, remained in their towns, and tried to preserve their worldview. The guiding principles of the Rarámuri are family and the *Kórima* (circle of sharing). Central to community life and consistent with a subsistence strategy, this includes strong ties of mutual aid (mainly food for the less fortunate and for those experiencing failed corn harvests).

In the pursuit of survival and well-being of their families, factors such as drought, scarce natural resources, and insecurity due to drug trafficking currently force Rarámuris to migrate as agricultural day labourers. In cities like Cuauhtémoc, they are acutely aware of their economic and social vulnerability. Reserved, and afraid of the mestizos whom they call *chabochis*, Rarámuris avoid approaching other ethnic groups as much as possible, although some acculturated members manage the outreach and well-being of the community.

Mennonite Migration to Cuauhtémoc

Mennonites are a religious group that originated in central and northern Europe during the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century. Characterized by non-resistance (pacifism) and adult baptism, they migrated to preserve their worldview. In 1922, about 7,000 Mennonites left Canada and arrived by train in the region of San Antonio de los Arenales (now known as Ciudad Cuauhtémoc). They brought household goods, construction materials, animals, and implements necessary to start a new life. After obtaining privileges from President Álvaro Obregón, exempting them from military service and swearing of oaths as well as granting them the freedom to practice their religion and the right to have their own schools, the

group purchased lands from the Zuloaga family, near the Bustillos Lagoon.

The first Mennonite settlements, Manitoba and Swift Current Colonies, known colloquially as the *campos Menonitas* (Mennonite fields), consisted of multiple villages divided into family farms. The guiding axes of this cultural ethnic group were religion, family, work, and the conservation of a Mennonite worldview. Today, Mexican Mennonites are divided into two factions: traditional (conservative) and liberal (progressive). The former represent 80% of the total Mennonite population of approximately 35,000 people living in the region. In the traditional educational system, preserved from previous centuries, children study until the sixth year of primary school and then go out to work alongside their parents. Television, music, the media of the Mexas (as they call the mestizos who live in the city of Cuauhtémoc), and inter-ethnic marriage are prohibited. Many Mennonites resist contact with members of other ethnicities through social isolation and by not allowing women, the elderly, and children to learn the Spanish language. In this way, they feel their cultural identity will best be preserved. By contrast, liberal Mennonites, representing 20% of the total Mennonite population, are more open and adapting towards modernity. This is evident in their use of advanced technology in their dairy and metalworking industries. Their educational system has also been changing, and their youth now continue on to secondary education. Liberal Mennonites also have far greater contact with mestizos and Rarámuris.

Territory as an Influence Between Groups

The expansion of the San Antonio de los Arenales train station into the full-fledged city of Cuauhtémoc was intimately connected with the arrival of Mennonite settlers. After their purchase of portions of the Zuloaga estate in the Bustillos Valley, commercial relations intensified. Along with pre-existing mestizo and Indigenous inhabitants of the region, Mennonites and other new migrants[2] underwent a process of acculturation that can also be understood as a process of territorialization. Raffestin (1980, cited in Giménez, 1999) argues that when a geographical space is appropriated, reformed, and culturalized by a human group, it develops into a territory. According to Giménez (1999), this becomes a geosymbol and a space to create new symbolic representations:

As organization of space, it can be said that the territory responds primarily to the economic, social, and political needs of each society, and in

this sense its production is sustained by the social relations that permeate it. But its function is not reduced to this instrumental dimension: the territory is also the object of symbolic operations and a kind of screen on which social actors (individual or collective) project their conceptions of the world. (p. 29)

Once a space is appropriated, social relationships between people inside and outside the territory are critical. These provide the foundation for survival, well-being, and growth. By necessity, commercial, social, and political relationships may be dictated. In the case of a multicultural territory, intercultural relationships also initiate a process of identity formation in which each group may seek to transform this space in accordance with a community's needs, beliefs, customs, and pursuit of a sense of belonging. Such interethnic relations occur when groups come together in a shared geographical space. In the case of Cuauhtémoc, the initial relationships were forced. On the one hand, Mennonites and mestizos required labour for their agricultural activities. On the other, Rarámuris needed work. These dependent socio-cultural and economic circumstances required interactions between mestizos, Mennonites, and Rarámuris.

In Cuauhtémoc, Mennonites and Rarámuris preserved elements of their identity, norms, forms, customs, and beliefs through collective memory manifested in oral history, one of the main mechanisms that generate social cohesion in communities. Giménez (1999) maintains that when one emigrates to distant lands, one often takes along "the homeland within" (p. 34)—meaning individuals travel not only with their belongings and material things, but also with their history, culture, lifestyle, and love for their place of origin.

> That is why the territory can be considered as a refuge zone, as a means of subsistence, as a source of resources, as a geopolitically strategic area. as a political-administrative constituency, etc., but also as landscape, as natural beauty, as a privileged ecological environment, as an object of emotional attachment, as a homeland, as a place of inscription of a historical past and of a collective memory, in short, as a "geosymbol." (Giménez, 1999, p. 29)

The influence of dominant culture, relationships, and contact with new technologies and modern practices derived from multicultural interactions reconfigure cultural practices even when groups try to preserve their customs and traditions as symbolic elements of their cultural identity. Llanos (2010) indicates that the spatial concept of territory should also allow us to study social reality from the perspective of globalization.

Migratory Grief

Migration is a continuous historical process driven by a range of factors including forced relocation of diasporic communities as well as more voluntary forms of migration that may be the product of external forces and community needs. According to Gabiam and Fiddian-Qasmiyeh (2017), "Diasporas are frequently defined in relation to the dispersion of a group of people or its expansion to at least two countries of the world; an orientation towards a real or imagined homeland" (p. 732). In the case of diaspora, migration occurs involuntarily due to factors that endanger the community or group. These factors include religious persecution, discrimination, lack of opportunities, and economic, social, and food insecurities. In such instances, migrants suffer a loss of their belongings, friends, family, and past sense of security. The result is what Achotegui (2009) describes as Ulysses syndrome, or migratory mourning. This psychological condition is caused by chronic stress experienced by the migrant. The suffering inherent to the diasporic process is accentuated when the migrant arrives in a space perceived as geographically and socially hostile. Almenara Niebla (2017) suggests that low levels of acceptance by host societies (alienation) define diaspora. Accordingly, the maintenance of group solidarity and traditions are reinforced in migrant communities. In the case of Cuauhtémoc, forced migration, albeit for very different reasons, along with the search to preserve identity, are points of confluence between Rarámuris and Mennonites.

Social Vulnerability Due to Migration

When Rarámuri arrive in Cuauhtémoc, most families face the immediate need to locate housing. Some turn to shelters supported by civic associations. Others, arrivals by a process of chain migration from the Sierra Tarahumara, go to relatives residing in the Rarámuri Rayénari settlement located on one of the city's fringes. Housing is one aspect of the vulnerability experienced by the Rarámuri community. It is one that neither the municipal government nor the large-scale agricultural employers actively seek to resolve. Another aspect of Rarámuri precarity is health care. Services are not accessible for those living on the street, in overcrowded shelters, or in improvised settlements such as Rarámuri Rayénari. Rarámuri often resort to insufficient social assistance for support. This is notable because the social practice of *Kórima*, present in sending communities in the Sierra Tarahumara, is not perceived in the same way

in urban Cuauhtémoc. When Rarámuri travel from house to house asking for help, mestizos perceive this as akin to requesting charity. They often offer things that they find no longer useful, or food that is left over. In the Tarahumara mountains, families support each other by sharing food and shelter when one has trouble surviving. The Rarámuri hope the same thing will happen in the city. Unfortunately, the dominant community does not understand this.

Working conditions in the city constitute another dimension of vulnerability for Rarámuri migrants. As Martínez Corona and Hernández Flores (2012) note, conditions are characterized by low wages, long working hours, insufficient facilities and services, overcrowding, and lack of education, health, and food services. As if that were not enough, they are excluded, discriminated against in various ways by the authorities, agricultural entrepreneurs, and society (pp. 73–74). For Mennonites, social vulnerability includes aspects such as low educational levels and, particularly for women, the elderly, and children, language barriers when communicating with medical practitioners.

Migratory Suffering

As previously noted, one point of confluence for both ethnic groups is migratory grief or Ulysses syndrome, manifested when members of a community or group are forced to separate from their territory of origin, family, friends, and belongings. When the Rarámuri migrate from the Sierra Tarahumara to the city, they walk between fifty to one hundred miles from their place of origin. They leave behind belongings and people, but also must put aside their customs, traditions, and clothing, or combine their own customs with those learned from other ethnic groups. The pain and nostalgia for what they left behind is evident in oral accounts. As one Rarámuri father recounted:

> I liked living in the Sierra more, everything is natural there, we respect our land and we don't get as sick as here in the city. I would return, but there is no food or work there. (Oral communication, 2019)

For Mennonites, the experience of migratory grief has an important, transgenerational impact on families. According to Achotegui (2009), a characteristic of migratory grief is "emotional coming and going" in relation to the country of origin. A constant desire for relationship and bonding with the family that stayed and a longing for life in the place left behind cause the "rekindling" of

mourning, because these links remain active throughout the subject's life in a conscious and sometimes unconscious way and are transmitted from generation to generation. As Sarah Ens (2020) writes, "after centuries of persecution and displacement, Canadian Mennonites built their communities in the prairies with the intention of isolating from the wider, secular world" (p. xi). The process was similar in Mexico, where families also experienced a collective mourning for the land they had left. A Mennonite father recounted,

> My grandparents were very young when they arrived with a single 4-year-old daughter. My grandmother cried constantly about her friends and family that didn't come. Soon after she wanted to return, but she couldn't. (Oral communication, 2018)

When parents find it difficult to work out their own migratory mourning, "their children inherit this confusion and lack of identity that can sometimes make it difficult for them to move forward in life" (Rozo Castillo, 2007). As one study participant explained,

> We teach our children the customs, religion and way of life so that they do not forget their origin. I think that we also infect them with the pain of [not being able to return] to Canada, although they do not know it and neither do we. It was what our grandparents taught us. (Oral communication, January 21, 2018)

From Confluence to Influence

The concept of a "constructed territory" (Flores, 2007, p. 37) is generated from the appreciation of a space where local actors come together to carry out collective actions that create bonds of solidarity and build cultural identity. Currently, in Cuauhtémoc, that process is incipient. However, it is gaining strength as exemplified by a number of activities such as exhibitions, concerts, festivals, and cultural forums. Paramount among these is the annual Festival of the Three Cultures staged by the Cultural Institute of Chihuahua. The goal is "to make the three cultures visible and that the members of each one participates. In this way, it is possible to make society more empathic towards the vulnerable and propose solutions to social problems" (R. Manríquez Moreno, oral communication, 2019).

Two festival events for the Rarámuri are the Omáwari (meeting of sister Indigenous nations) in the Rayénari settlement and the Yumari (celebration of the Virgin of Guadalupe) where traditional Rarámuri games such as the *rarajipari* and *ariweta* (ball and hoop races for men and women respectively) are organized. Mestizos and

Mennonites are allowed to observe, but do not play, and mestizos reciprocate by bringing donations of clothing, food, and household goods. Mennonites commemorate the anniversary of their arrival every March 8 with a Mennonite Expo and a parade, celebrate Pumpkin Day, where crafts and typical food are appreciated, and organize a Christmas light procession. At these public activities, Mennonites, Rarámuris and mestizos observe and learn from each other. According to Flores (2007), when people share a territory, they may be forced and motivated to carry out collaborative activities. This offers opportunities to share cultural elements, create sociocultural links, and break taboos about interactions that prevent the formation of community identity.

In addition to events, recurring discourse and representations of citizenship in Cuauhtémoc delimit and support the process of turning the territory into a geosymbol. The following assertions lay claim to a regional identity, pride, and a lived sense of belonging expressed by members of this multicultural community: "We are the city of the three cultures," "Cuauhtémoc is the region where the Mennonites live," "we have the largest commercial corridor in Latin America," "we are the door to the Sierra Tarahumara," "I am from where the fastest runners on the planet come from," "the land of cheeses and apples." Yet Giménez (1999) cautions that territory can also be identified through "the appropriation of space, the border, and power" (p. 27). In the case of Cuauhtémoc, such borders are not necessarily demarcated by geographical limits, even though visible limits are evident in the region. A cultural border is also apparent and occurs when a group invisibly delimits its borders based on resistance to social interrelation. Since their arrival in the region, Mennonites delimited their geographical space on the land purchased from the Zuloaga family and began their community life in the image and likeness of their place of origin in Canada. This appropriation of territory into geosymbol preserved practices and customs enshrined in space in ways that would remind Mennonites of their past—from the construction of the Manitoba and Swift Current Colonies to the naming of villages after prior sites in Canada and the Russian empire (Blumenthal, Blumenort, Bergthal, Hochfeld, and Steinbach) and streets with typical Mennonite surnames (Froese, Rempel, and Loewen).

While there appear to be no physical barriers in the colonies that prevent the passage of members of other ethnic groups, the Mennonites have enforced invisible borders. These include the language barrier that disproportionately affects Mennonite women, older adults, and children. The intention is to restrict personal interaction with Spanish speakers. The preservation of separate religious and

educational systems interwoven with the collective symbolic struc-
ture of the Mennonite community is another example of attempts to
preserve a cultural frontier. As Dyck (2007) argues,

> this self-imposed separation from Mexican society, and the subsequent
> perceptions Mennonites constructed about Mexicans, . . . were also
> heavily influenced by ideas of racial superiority. (p. 16)

Such racist ideas of Anglo-Saxon superiority, perpetuated from gen-
eration to generation, also influence the cultural and language bar-
riers that Mennonites construct in Cuauhtémoc. Over time these
barriers have blurred. Business exchanges, shopping, attendance at
cultural events, and restaurant patronage extend across the bound-
aries between the colonies and neighbouring municipalities. At pre-
sent, the liberal schools and churches in the Manitoba Colony of
Cuauhtémoc also receive children and adults of other ethnic groups.

While Mennonites appropriated the space to the north of
Cuauhtémoc in the construction of their colonies, Rarámuri inhab-
itants of the Rayénari settlement have their territory delimited
within the urban sprawl. In this space, rules derived from a Ra-
rámuri worldview transplanted from the Sierra are followed and ex-
ercised by an authority structure reflecting political structures from
the Sierra Tarahumara. Leadership is made up of an Indigenous
governor (*siriame*) and associated leaders (*caciques*) within a struc-
ture supported by the mestizo municipal government. Like the Men-
nonites, Rarámrui employ a language barrier as a cultural border.
They follow Indigenous tradition and customary law (*usos y costum-
bres*) even when they have, for reasons of survival, migrated from
their ancestral territory.

Inter-Ethnic Relations and Cultural Identity

Despite the persistence of visible and invisible borders in
Cuauhtémoc, a sense of cross-cultural identity exists in the territo-
rial space inhabited by the three cultures. Thus, this geographical
space has become a multicultural territory with a diversity of inter-
ethnic social processes, among which labour relations have pri-
macy. The need for labour of the Mennonites and the need for work
of the Rarámuri are main factors of the interrelation. The Mennon-
ites, dedicated to agriculture and dairy production, require workers
to live with their families on their farms. However, these needs are
often interwoven with spiritual imperatives. For their part, the Men-
nonites base their relation to the Rarámuri in the mandates they

receive from Christian practices encouraging them to support the needy. This interaction between charity and labour is evident in the following quotes:

> I am an apple producer, but I am also a watermelon producer. I harvest many tons. Then, later, I fill about two or three trucks with watermelon and take them to the mountains so that the Tarahumaras have something to eat. Sometimes I even bring some and let them work here with me. (Oral communication, 2019)

> I like giving work to the Tarahumaras because they are more honest. Also, the Bible tells us to help the poor and my wife gives them food. Some of the children even learn Mennonite words. (Oral communication, 2019)

When they migrate from their place of origin in the Tarahumara mountains to Cuauhtémoc in search of work and housing, Rarámuri normally travel as a family unit. This can increase their vulnerability. As one Rarámuri migrant mother explained,

> when we arrived at the farm of the *menones* they are kind, they give us a place to live. At first, we did not know what to do with the children, they just played, but later they told us that they would take them to their children's school, so the children from us they have been learning the *pleutdiesh*. (Oral communication, 2019)

The preceding quotes regarding the Mennonite-Rarámuri relationship suggest Mennonites employ Rarámuri workers because they represent a reliable day-labour force, and this also aligns with the Mennonite commitment to helping others. In this respect, Rarámuri migrants receive dignified treatment, accommodation, and payment. Many migrants from the Sierra prefer to look for work with Mennonites and not with mestizo apple producers, who are perceived as not attending effectively to the needs of their Rarámuri labourers and thus increasing their urban social vulnerability.

> It is common to see that if a family comes to work with the Mennonites, they offer them a place to live, provide them with food, shelter; There are even Mennonites who share the harvest with their workers, there are cases of Rarámuri children who speak Plautdietsch, the language of the Mennonites. (Mennonite father, oral communication, 2019)

Mennonite-Mestizo Relationships

The relationship between Mennonites and mestizos is different from Mennonites and Rarámuri. The Álvaro Obregón commercial corridor has become an axis of economic development in the state of Chihuahua. Along the corridor, metal-mechanic industries, restaurants, food, and the sale of seeds and agricultural implements are concentrated. Mennonite businessmen depend on mestizo professionals for specialized jobs such as accounting, engineering, and marketing. This is necessary given that most of the members of the Mennonite community only study up to the age of thirteen. Lack of postsecondary education has generated a unique and significant demand for mestizo employment. At present, however, the Mennonite-mestizo relationship is no longer limited to the economic aspect. Since the 1990s, there have also been social, cultural, and religious interrelations that began with mixed marriages in the liberal faction of the Mennonite community. As a result, mixed-race people have converted to the Mennonite religion. Their children grow up with a new perspective, where cultures and languages mix. As one mestiza mother who married into a Mennonite family recounts,

> I remember when I got married everyone was amazed. In my house there was no problem, but my Mennonite husband's family stopped talking to him for a long time. He has always been progressive, he changed from his traditional church to a liberal one where they accepted me. Now my two children are proud to have two cultures. (Oral communication, 2018)

Conclusion

In Cuauhtémoc, processes of interculturality were essentially forced by contextual circumstances, including hierarchical labour relations and differential educational levels. Yet they have persisted in the local effort to develop the Cuauhtemense identity, made up of these three ethnic groups. As in other intercultural communities where ethnic minorities interact with the dominant community, there are persistent vulnerabilities. Rarámuris are far more vulnerable in economic, social, educational, and health aspects than Mennonites and mestizos. In a globalized world, the vulnerabilities of groups seeking to remain endogamous, as in the case of the Mennonites, act against them. Modernity is reaching this community and affecting the peripheral part of their community, but perhaps not the core of their cultural identity. The Rarámuris are more prone to acculturation for survival reasons. However, the leaders of their urban settlements are still engaged in actions to rescue their cultural

identity. A characteristic of this multiethnic context is mixed marriages. In earlier times, both the Mennonites and the Rarámuri prohibited their members from marrying mestizos. Today this process occurs in both groups and reinforces the thesis of this research on confluence and interethnic influence.

Interculturality entails an epistemological position that considers diversity as a positive source of personal and social development. It is a proactive effort seeking an ideological change in the social system, linked to the construction of increasingly equitable and participatory societies characterized by coexistence, equity, respect, acceptance, and inclusion. When the customs, traditions, and lifestyles of some are observed, apprehended, and shared by others, a sense of belonging and shared cultural identity emerges. Even when people have different worldviews, shared territory results in cross-cultural influence. This may be incipient but it is nevertheless observable and growing. The municipal government retains social and economic power; it also makes an effort to carry out inclusive cultural activities that promote interculturality and respect for the worldview of Rarámuris and Mennonites. Some Mennonite civil associations also manage cultural activities that enhance cultural identity and contribute to reinforcing the identity of Cuauhtémoc as a geosymbol. Nevertheless, it remains important to restate that the regional socioeconomic power of the Cuauhtémoc region is produced by Mennonites and mestizos with the Rarámuri, the most vulnerable ethnic group, as a dependent source of regional labour.

Notes

[1] For the analysis and interpretation of the information collected, the interviews were transcribed and categorized through the ATLAS.ti (2008) program. The triangulation of data, researchers, and participating subjects reinforced the validity and reliability of the research.

[2] Settlers of Chinese, Lebanese, Spanish, and Japanese origin also immigrated to Chihuahua in the early 20th century.

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