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Biography

Maranyeli is an Organizational Studies Major with a minor in Psychology. Her passion for education began at an early age. As a first-generation student, her passion for education include such diverse topics as social justice, computer science, and business development. Her family and life experiences have sparked her aspirations to pursue her doctorate in Organization Development. Maranyeli aspires to develop programs that serves underrepresented groups and teaches them technical skills including programming and cyber security as well as the ethics in technology. Her other interest includes traveling, learning about new cultures and going on adventures.

Saving the Resistance: The Purépechan People of Northern Mexico

Abstract

The indigenous Purépechan people of Mexico have endured a long history of conflict. Throughout their struggles, including those of conquest by the Aztec Empire, and the Spanish; and all the historical trauma endured, they have managed to preserve their culture and remain resilient in the face of adversity. By exploring their history, economic system, social and political organization, ideology and religion, we can help preserve what remains of these incredibly strong indigenous people who were among the few indigenous tribes to have resisted the Aztec Empire takeover.

The Purépechan people are an indigenous people who reside in the northeastern region of what is the present-day state of Michoacán, Mexico. Although the terms Tarascan and Purépechan are used interchangeably, the people prefer to be called Purépechan (Bricker et al, 2000). The term Tarascan refers both to the language they speak as well as the pre-conquest region they occupy. “Purépechan” is defined as “village people” or “people of the countryside” (Bricker et al, 2000). The Purépechan are known for many things, including their architecture style, artwork, and attire.

One of the most prominent features of their architecture consisted of Mesoamerican pyramids, a common feature to Central America (Aranda, 2014). The Purépechan people traditionally lived in wood, adobe, and shingled roof housing. Small populations still live in rural villages in present-day Michoacán, Mexico. They are also known for their artwork, especially mosaics and feather artwork which are often sold to tourists in Mexico. Many Purépechan still dress in their traditional attire, which consists of colorful hand-woven shirts and long, dark skirts for the women or white “suites” for the men (Ramirez, 1988, p. 116). All their clothing is made of wool, which helps to keep them warm in the high elevations where they reside.

The Purépechan’s economic system has long been heavily agricultural, but they are also known for their pottery work, basket

weaving, wood work, textile forms, and fishing expertise. Currently, the Purépechan are known for their expertise in hunting and gathering (Mejia-Arauz, Obrt & Correa-Chávez, 2013). Growing cash crops is also a large part of their current economic system; the Mexican federal government oversees distributing plots of lands for the Purépechan people to use (Mejia, 2013). In Michoacán, Mexico, the current form of employment for many Purépechan is guiding tours by horse and boat. However, souvenirs have also become a valuable form of employment (Aranda, 2017). With globalization and the spread of technology, many Purépechan people have also been forced to migrate to make ends meet.

Social and Political Organization

The Purépechan, like many other indigenous groups, have a rich history full of myths and legends about their origins. Along with the Purépechan having many gods, they also believed their king was a celestial being (Ramirez, 2009). As with many tribes that have been conquered, their religious ideology is changing to a more monotheistic approach and they are attempting to establish a blend between the past and present ideologies. They often describe themselves as being “Post-Catholics,” which means they mix their ancestral beliefs with Roman Catholic rituals (Glenhill, 2014).

The Purépechan have faced various problems since the contemporary state of modern-day Michoacán was established. Like many other indigenous peoples, the invasion of what we consider “modern” cultures took a great toll on the indigenous people’s culture. To understand how the Purépechan are living the way they are today, we must go back to the 16th century. During this time, the Spanish Empire invaded the Aztec Empire, who were fierce enemies of the Purépechan. The Spanish Conquest of the Aztec Empire began back in 1519 under General Hernan Cortés (Ramirez, 2009). The Aztec people feared the Purépechan because they had metal war weapons (Barajas, 2009, pg. 68). This kind of technology allowed for the Purépechan to have an advantage over the Aztecs.

The Purépechan people have always been politically and militarily strong. They were among only a handful of indigenous tribes who were not conquered by the Aztec Empire (Aranda, 2014). The Purépechan were

also known for respecting other indigenous tribes. Many of the other indigenous groups around the area voluntarily asked to be part of the Purépechan Empire, as they respected others and allowed them to speak their own languages as well as elect their own local leaders; additionally, the Purépechan only had a few requirements to be considered a part of the empire, such as requiring subjects to pay taxes to the king and fight whenever there was a war (Weiner, 2014).

The Aztec Empire understood that the Purépechan were a threat so when the Spanish began their invasion of the area, the Aztecs joined forces and created an alliance with the Spanish. This allegiance caused the Purépechan to become frightened since the Spanish had many advantages when it came to military technology. The Spanish had trouble conquering all the Purépechan Empire due to the many natural barriers protecting them (Weiner, 2014). Yet, the conquest of the Aztec Empire had a domino effect on the rest of the indigenous people living in the area; and as with the other great empires in the region, the Purépechan eventually fell to the Spanish. However, this was not due to a direct conquest by the Spanish, but rather the conquest of its surrounding, neighboring rivals (Matthew, 2017).

Modern Conflict: Discrimination

The modern-day state of Michoacán is where the Purépechan currently reside. Unfortunately, like many indigenous groups, they are treated like second-class citizens by the majority in power. In this case, that group is the Mexican people who are descendants of the Spanish. Today, the Purépechan people face discrimination in various sectors including housing and employment. There are many reports of Purépechan having to take exams for employment and being discriminated against at job interviews. The amount of reports has reached such high levels that international organizations for indigenous rights began to get involved. The Permanent Forum of Indigenous Affairs of the United Nations has denounced the treatment of the indigenous people of Latin America and claimed they are being mistreated in ways similar to the mistreatment they faced during colonization over five hundred years ago (Javie, 2013).

My grandfather is a Purépechan and used to speak Tarasca. He would rarely talk about his past, and up until recently he had only told me

a few stories about his childhood. He explained to me the struggles the family faced and the discrimination they endured daily due to their heritage. By learning Spanish and eventually English to assimilate into the mainstream Mexican society, he gradually lost his language. It was heartbreaking to realize our culture was fading away. Society seems to be forgetting about the great Purépechan people and that is preserving their culture is vital before another ancient culture fades away.

Work Discrimination

The Purépechan have a long history of discrimination when it comes to jobs. They have been discriminated against since the Spanish conquered Mexico back in the 1500s (Wiener, 2014). In Mexico, although there are laws that prohibit work discrimination, a large number of employers still practice discrimination against them. The Purépechan continue to work the worst jobs for the least amount of pay to survive. When getting a job is a problem, other problems follow close behind, such as lack of housing or food. It is a vicious cycle that has impacted the Purépechan for generations.

Historical Trauma

There are number ways the Purépechan have been affected due to the historical trauma they have endured. The Purépechan people deeply distrust the government, and many do not attend school. As a result, they do not speak the mainstream language of the country where they reside. Only a few attend high school when they move to the U.S. (Olson, 2013). This lack of education strongly impacts their ability to attain jobs; due to this, many are forced into menial, low wage, jobs. Employers have been known to take advantage of this mistrust and lack of education and do so by exploiting these workers and exposing them to harsh working conditions. Some employers pay the Purépechan workers below minimum wage, so they must find jobs where they can work 60 hours a week to make ends meet (Kelly, 2008). Some of the employers have been caught lumping all Mexicans together, and since the majority Mexican population dislikes the Purépechan, they face double discrimination. This type of abuse and discrimination has caused some of the Purépechan population to lie about their origins. There have been interviews with Purépechan—

especially the youth—where they claimed that they know people who have lied or have themselves lied about being Purépechan and have taken the identity of other cultures in order to decrease the discrimination they face (Olson, 2013). This type of historical trauma is a vicious cycle that has the potential to spread into future generations if something is not done to change it soon.

Mistrust of Government and Lack of Education

One of the clearest ways in which the Purépechan population is falling behind can be traced back to the mistrust that they have for authority and the government. Many Purépechan who migrated into the U.S. as children are out of school and most do not speak or write Spanish (Olson, 2007). This, of course, makes the job of the teacher even tougher and many Purépechan fear the government so they do not accept the extra assistance, such as after school programs. This type of cycle pushes many of them back to their roots which may seem odd in modern times. Unfortunately, child marriage is still rampant in many parts of Mexico, especially places with a large concentration of indigenous people (Fredrick, 2017). As many Purépechan migrate to the United States, the United States government is struggling to understand and educate them, creating a wider trust gap between both parties.

Housing Discrimination

The Purépechan have been discriminated against to the point where in the 1970s, many began to move from their *pueblo* (“town”) of Ocumicho in Mexico to Thermal, California (Kelly, 2008). They began moving into a trailer park called Duroville, which in Spanish means “Hard-ville.” It has since been shut down due to the terrible living conditions (Olson, 2013). To add to these terrible conditions, many of the residents worked in the agricultural fields, which was hard labor for little pay (Olson, 2013). The local community began complaining to the city about Duroville. There were so many complaints that finally, on June 30, 2013, Duroville was closed down and over 4,000 people were left homeless, all Purépechan (Olson, 2013). This type of housing discrimination is what the Purépechan must face daily, both in the United States and outside it.

Cultural Preservation

Although the Purépechan enjoy making and showing off their beautiful traditional clothing which they spend hours sewing intricate patterns into, they rarely ever wear them because that would make them targets for even more public discrimination (Olson 2007). It is extremely heartbreaking to see a culture that once flourished and was one of the only ones to have resisted the Aztec Empire being treated the way they are today. The international community has already begun to get involved in assisting the Purépechan in attaining equality and educating people on the issues this population faces.

Further research is needed to better understand some of the key issues—one of those being the mistrust between the Purépechan and authority such as governments. Funding should be allocated to create programs, so they may learn to speak and read Spanish while at the same time retaining their native language. The international community can also be their voice and assist with resources to help get the Purépechan legally get the help when they need it so they don't feel the distrust for authority that they currently have. Taking small steps to protect such an ancient and rich culture is going to take work, but the world cannot let another ancient culture and language die. Protecting them and recording the Purépechan culture and language is something we must do soon before they are gone forever.

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