The Crosses of Huaquechula, Mexico: A Living Tradition

The study of sacred images, in general, and of crosses, in particular, of Mexico, has attracted the attention of scholars from various disciplines. Because the placement or the appearance of such images is context-dependent, one way to understand their contemporary celebration is to take a combined historical and anthropological approach. Drawing on historical sources, audio-recorded interviews, and online newspaper articles, this article illustrates how the crosses of Huaquechula share patterns of devotion to Mexican crosses past and present. It suggests that, based on the qualitative equivalence of their earlier and later purposes, the crosses are a living tradition that, across time, conveys a meaningful message of faith, protection, unity, and collective continuity.

Keywords

Religious celebrations, crosses, divine presence, space and place, landscape, faith, continuity

According to Gonzalo Alejo Martínez, former caretaker of the ex-Franciscan convent, the stories of the crosses were written by Indigenous peoples in a codex where the whole history of Huaquechula was recorded but the Spaniards burned it, leaving only the verbal record that reached him thanks to a 102-year-old man whose grandfather taught him about those events. The duendes [small, mischievous beings] and the apparitions were the beginning of what today is no longer legend but tradition. Now, the fiesta [is] the history that is remembered and observed in Huaquechula every year.

—Ramos Monzón 2006

From traditions, history is made because no one has a book written about it, only a word-of-mouth version. Who knows the truth? No one.

—don Cristóbal, interview, May 7, 2019

IN 1806, THE IMAGE OF A CROSS MIRACULOUSLY APPEARED ON A ROCK ON THE OUTSKIRTS of the Mexican town of Huaquechula. Although the Cross came to be widely venerated, the Bishop of the Diocese of Puebla soon declared that it was neither
“miraculous” nor “appeared” and decided to put an end to the devotion. But the Cross—along with 17 other stone crosses—continues to be celebrated on May 3, Day of the Holy Cross in Mexico.

The study of sacred images, in general, and of crosses, in particular, of Mexico has attracted the attention of scholars from various disciplines. Although it is difficult to trace continuities between the cruciform symbols of the pre-Hispanic past and the Christian cross of the colonial period, certain patterns of devotion to Mexican crosses, both past and present, nonetheless emerge—sacred landscape; sacred place; sacred space; divine presence, presence in place; place-centeredness (Barabas 2010; Christian 1981; Taylor 2010, 2011, 2012). Because such crosses exhibit qualitative equivalence of their earlier and later purposes (Beckstein 2017)—mainly that of protection—they could be considered a living tradition.2 This equivalence of purposes suggests that, across time, a living tradition conveys a meaningful message to its followers (Reese-Taylor 2012).

I was first introduced to the crosses of Huaquechula in 1985 when I was conducting my master’s-level research there. Although May 3 was not the focus of that research, I have returned to Huaquechula regularly and have continued to observe and to participate in the celebration. As my research interests turned to the history of Huaquechula, I felt that this would be an opportune time to examine its crosses more closely. I begin by briefly describing the celebration of May 3 and by reviewing the patterns of devotion to Mexican crosses, past and present, to highlight those that the crosses of Huaquechula share. I then locate the stories of the 17 crosses and of the Holy Cross within their respective historical contexts. From there, I offer my interpretation of the meaningful message that the stories of the crosses convey and suggest that it is broader than that of only protection—it is also one of faith, unity, and collective continuity. I conclude by summarizing my findings as they relate to the living tradition of the crosses of Huaquechula.

Method

This paper draws on historical sources, audio-recorded interviews, and online newspaper articles. In fact, the idea to write this paper came after I had located two early nineteenth-century documents in the Archivo General de la Nación (General Archive of the Nation, hereafter AGN, Mexico City), one pertaining to the Franciscan convent and the other to the Holy Cross. Until then, I had assumed that it would be impossible to trace—or, more accurately, to infer—the history of the Holy Cross, in particular. The stories of the crosses are drawn from two sources—audio-recorded interviews and online newspaper articles (2006–2019). The interviews were conducted on May 7 and May 19, 2019, with a convenience sample of five respondents—two mayordomas (female stewards) of the crosses, doña Isabel and doña Tomasa; two mayordomos (male stewards) of the Holy Cross, don José and don Efrén; and a former sacristan of the parish church, don Cristóbal (all five names are pseudonyms). Voluntary consent was obtained orally from each respondent, who was then given a copy of the consent form. The newspaper articles not only supplemented the stories from the interviews but, because they dated back to 2006, they also reflected changes in how Day of the
Holy Cross had been covered. Taking the lead from William B. Taylor (2012), I asked similar questions of both the interviews and the articles: (1) What is the story of the 17 crosses on the corners of Huaquechula? (2) Why were they placed when and where they were? (3) Why were they important at the time? (4) Why are they important today? (5) What is the story of the Holy Cross? (6) Why did it appear when and where it did? (7) Why was it important at the time? (8) Why is it important today? (Taylor 2012:176). Each respondent was given a copy of his or her interview after it had been transcribed. All oral and written communication with respondents was conducted in Spanish. All Spanish-to-English translations were carried out by the author.

The Celebration of May 3

In 1997, the celebration of the Cross of May 3 in Huaquechula was decreed to be part of the cultural patrimony of the State of Puebla (Gobierno Constitucional del Estado de Puebla). The details of the celebration described in the Decreto (Decree) have changed little since I first became aware of it in 1985.

The celebration begins on April 25. In the home of each of the 17 mayordomos of the crosses, a small shrine with a wooden replica of the stone cross on its respective street corner has been constructed. The 17 crosses are said to have marked the early boundaries—the entrances and exits—of Huaquechula. Every evening, novenas (prayers of petition) are recited, and those who attend are offered light refreshments. At 7 a.m. on May 3, townspeople go out and serenade each of the 17 stone crosses. For the next few hours, each mayordomo de primera (first steward) offers a light breakfast to all who attend. The topiles (assistants to the mayordomos) carrying clay censers—similar to pre-Hispanic stone popoxcómitl—of smoldering copal (pine resin) dance to the sound of the teponaxtli (pre-Hispanic slit-drum made of a hollow log). At around 10 a.m., the bells of the parish church ring to summon the 17 wooden crosses, each accompanied by a brass band, to Mass at noon. After Mass, the bells ring in rogación (petition) that the Holy Cross can be lifted and removed from its niche in the parish church. All the crosses are then carried out and processed around the zócalo (central square). During the procession, the “musical disorder [of the 17 bands] becomes the same piece” (Ramos Monzón 2006).

After the procession, the crowd files past the Holy Cross for the despedida (farewell). It is returned to its niche in the parish church, and the wooden crosses are returned to their respective shrines. The celebration continues in the homes of mayordomos de segunda (second stewards), who offer a typical Mexican dish to all who attend. The topiles dance the traditional Tres de Mayo (May 3), carrying baskets of tortillas or tamales, a platter of either a pig’s head cooked in marinade or else a turkey cooked in mole poblano, bottles of liquor, and trays of flowers and candies. In the evening, each mayordomía (lay brotherhood devoted to a barrio-level image) meets to name the mayordomos who will sponsor the crosses the following year. At 9 p.m., the celebration ends with a fireworks display, including the quema de toritos.

According to the 1997 Decree, the celebration must preserve these “popular and religious traditions,” transmitted from the “pre-Hispanic period” in their “purest manifestation.” By 2013, the Municipal Government was preparing the application
for Huaquechula to become a Pueblo Mágico (Magic Town),\textsuperscript{11} and in 2015, it expanded the celebration from 1 day to 2 days in order to attract both national and international tourists. On May 4, three new events were held. At 1:30 p.m., a mass of “abundance and good crops” was held on the riverbank where the Cross first appeared; at 3 p.m., a regional dance festival was held in the atrium of the ex-Franciscan convent; and, in the evening, the celebration ended with a \textit{baile popular} (popular dance). Promotional slogans and attractive posters created by the Municipal Government abounded: Huaquechula is “The Place Where Tradition Never Dies,” a place of “Magic Traditions and Religious Syncretism”; May 3 is referred to as the “Devotion to the Holy Cross,” and everyone is urged to “Come and Experience It for Yourself.” By 2017, the focus was on the Municipal President, who now led the procession around the zócalo after Mass. “As Council members,” he explained, “what we do is to join in the activities that the inhabitants carry out. However, the majority of the preparations is in the hands of the Huaquechulenses” (Torre 2017). After an earthquake shook Huaquechula in September 2017 and caused almost irreparable damage to many buildings, including the parish church and the ex-Franciscan convent, the celebration was scaled back again to only 1 day, May 3.

\textbf{Mexican Crosses Past and Present}

The study of sacred images, in general, and of crosses, in particular, of Mexico has been a multidisciplinary effort by ethnographers, historians, and archaeologists, among others. In pre-Hispanic Mesoamerica and medieval Europe, cruciform symbols and crosses were related to fertility, the agricultural cycle, and protection (Broda 2003:22; Christian 1981:184; Taylor 2012:154). Because elements of medieval European rituals have survived in some regions of Mexico, Johanna Broda calls for a combined historical and anthropological approach to understanding contemporary Indigenous rituals as a creative process of constant re-elaboration, “not as the direct and uninterrupted continuity of the prehispanic past” (2001:167). But it is tempting to do so (Taylor 2016:127), and such studies end up “tacking back and forth between the present and the precolonial past . . . skipping over the centuries in between” (Taylor 2016:159n107). As Broda herself admits with regard to the rites of the Holy Cross, “the history of their introduction during the colonial period is not well known and requires future research” (2001:195).

A case in point is Huaquechula, where no evidence of the cruciform symbol in pre-Hispanic Cuauhquechollan has come to light, and what information exists on the Franciscans in colonial Huaquechula is fragmented. Thus, it is almost impossible to discuss the “complex syncretic processes” of “symbolic reinterpretation,” “symbolic re-elaboration,” or “ideologization” (Broda 2003:17) as do, for example, Broda (2001) and Ramiro Alfonso Gómez-Arzapalo Dorantes (2012), both of whom draw on the work of Félix Báez-Jorge (1998) in their studies of the Holy Cross in Guerrero. There is, however, the early sixteenth-century Mapa Circular de Cuauhquechollan (Circular Map of Cuauhquechollan) created in the Indigenous tradition. The circular style of the map is representative of what Barbara Mundy calls a “communicentric projection” of the boundaries of an altepetl—an “inviolable circle” that visually conveyed the idea.
of its “importance, unity, and perfection” (Mundy 1996:116). If one infers from this style the cultural creation of “sacred landscape,” “sacred place,” and “sacred space” (Reese-Taylor 2012:752), it would share patterns of devotion to Mexican crosses past and present.

To borrow from Taylor, sacred images are placed or, alternatively, appear “in certain times and places, with certain values, for good reasons” (2010:7). If early friars suspected idolatry, they would order Indigenous peoples to make many crosses and to place them at the entrances to their towns, a “topographical exorcism” of the colonial landscape (Taylor 2012:156). Such a territorial display of the sacred brings about the “power of enclosure” not only to protect a town from dangerous forces but also to separate it from others (Barabas 2010:17). Miraculous images such as crosses appeared as an expression of “divine presence” that was necessary for “collective well-being” (Taylor 2010:7), their “presence in place” inseparable from their location in a “sacred landscape” (Taylor 2012:178). The crosses were said to “choose” the place where they would remain and the town that they protected (Barabas 2010:16; Christian 1981:78). Their shrines, too, were “place-centered” (Christian 1981:75; Taylor 2011:4)—beasts of burden carrying sacred images would not move; the images would return to the place where they first appeared, often delivered by “angelic” young men in white who then disappeared. Some shrines were said to have “healing powers” or to perform “restorative miracles” (Christian 1981:93; Taylor 2011:3).

If the boundaries of a town are marked by crosses, they are reinforced during processions around barrios, around the town, to the fields, or to or from the church (Barabas 2010:16; Taylor 2012:157). Just as crosses bring about the power of enclosure, processions are “rites of enclosure” that impede the entrance of dangerous forces (Barabas 2010:16).

At the National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH) in Mexico City, one reason why sacred images are valued is because they are associated with “living traditions” (Scheper Hughes 2010:197). For the purposes of this paper, I adopt Martin Beckstein’s model of a living tradition. In a word, a living tradition is dynamic. Although its meaning is “pre-structured,” it is not “pre-determined” because its recipients are “active interpreters” of it (2017:500). The “guiding idea,” however, is that, if there has been no significant change in the context of living, the tradition material—“sets of beliefs, customs, teachings, values, [and] practices”—will be the same; if there has been a change in the context of living, the tradition material will be different (Beckstein 2017:492, 501). At the same time, because a living tradition has a “conservative intent,” its authentic continuation consists in the “qualitative equivalence” of its earlier and later purposes (Beckstein 2017:501; see also Christian 1981:178)—in the case of Mexican crosses, protection. This model suggests that, across time, a living tradition conveys a meaningful message. By way of stories, people selectively recount events—even fragments of events—from the past that are meaningful to them at different points in their history, with little attention paid to temporal flow (Reese-Taylor 2012:755). The stories are then re-enacted through religious rituals or ceremonies that culturally create sacred places, sacred spaces, and sacred landscapes (759).

As I will illustrate, the crosses of Huaquechula share the patterns of devotion of sacred landscape, sacred place, and sacred space, and they exhibit qualitative
equivalence of their earlier and later purpose of protection. An appropriate place to begin, then, is to locate the stories of the 17 crosses and the Holy Cross within their respective historical contexts.

The Early Franciscan Presence

In the early sixteenth century, the Franciscans established themselves in Huaquechula, but relatively little is known about their presence. Fray Toribio de Benavente Motolinía (Motolinía [1541] 1995:92–3), one of the first to come to know the town, described how, for 3 years, an Indigenous noble and his family regularly attended religious ceremonies in a monastery 8 leagues (24 miles) away because Huaquechula did not have one of its own. So great was his influence that the señor (lord) of Huaquechula convinced friars to build a small monastery in the town. What would become the Convent of San Francisco was built between 1530–1540 and 1550–1560, interrupted by the epidemic of 1545–1548 (Kubler 1972, 1:64). In the late sixteenth century, the Spanish Crown ordered that regular clergy (members of monastic orders) be replaced by secular clergy (diocesan priests under a bishop’s authority). In Huaquechula, this change occurred in 1640, after which the Franciscan convent was abandoned for many years (Asselbergs 2004:271n66; Gerhard 1993:57), and the parish church would have been built.

Soon after the conquest of Mexico, the regular clergy established cofradías (lay brotherhoods that promoted a town- or parish-level devotion) to facilitate the conversion of Indigenous peoples to Christianity. Over time, cofradías came to serve various cultural, social, political, and, perhaps most importantly, economic functions (Serrano Espinoza and Jarillo Hernández 2013:15). As the Indigenous population began to recover, the number of cofradías increased, as did viceregal concern over how they used their funds. By the time of the Bourbon reforms of the mid-eighteenth century, the solution was to reduce the number of cofradías and to remove the basis of their economic support (Gruzinski 1985:175). As a result, many—such as those in Iguala, Guerrero (Sepúlveda y Herrera 1976:14)—were transformed into mayordomías. It is possible that the cofradías of Huaquechula, too, were transformed into mayordomías.12

The Stories of the 17 Crosses

Although the stories of the 17 crosses are both varied and rich in content, few mention the clergy, either regular or secular. Instead, one purpose in particular of the crosses stands out—the protection of Huaquechula from dangerous forces such as duendes, la Llorona (weeping woman), naguales (sorcerers), brujas (witches),13 epidemics,14 and the uncertainties of the Mexican Revolution (1910–1920).

One story tells of how in the seventeenth century, duendes would dance on the street corners at night, scaring passersby with their pranks. The townspeople told the parish priest, who recommended that they place crosses on the corners where the duendes were seen. But the duendes did not leave; they simply moved to other
corners. As a result, 17 crosses were placed around the town for protection. Another story—unfortunately undated but certainly more sinister than the first—told of brujas who lived in the hills surrounding Huaquechula. To amuse themselves, they would go out at night to homes in which there were newborns whom they tossed and bounced around as if they were balls. Because of the “blows” that they received and the “cold,” the newborns would die.\(^{15}\) Unable to explain what was happening, their parents told the parish priest, who recommended that they place crosses on the corners near to where they lived and around the town for protection (Cultura y Turismo Huaquechula 2011).

Don Cristóbal described why the crosses were placed on the corners of Huaquechula:

Duendes started to appear. They came in through the entrances [of the town]. The old people said that a cross of stone should be placed. . . . We don’t know which was the first. Then they started to place crosses in all the entrances to prevent duendes, diseases, from entering but [the people] were most afraid of duendes. They frightened children, the elderly, women. When they saw that [the first cross] controlled the entry of duendes, they raised crosses in each entrance. I don’t know what a duende is. One imagines that it’s a dwarf with an ugly face and that it goes around scaring [people]. Suddenly, it appears, and you don’t know where it came from. (interview, May 7, 2019)

Doña Tomasa recounted several stories of apparitions that had frightened her father:

When the town still didn’t have electricity, and the streets were very dark, [my father] had gone out to see his girlfriend. It was dark when he was coming home, and he said that a penitent, like those who come out in Holy Week, started to follow him. He said, “I saw it covered like a penitent who comes out in Holy Week but . . . it’s not Holy Week [and] they only come out on Good Friday at noon and this was around ten o’clock at night. Yes, it scared me and I ran.” On another occasion, a woman dressed in white and floating in the air called to [my father]. He was afraid and ran home to tell his mother, who told him, “That’s what you get for going out at night. Don’t go out at night, or she’ll scare you.” (interview, May 7, 2019)

Don Efrén, was of the opinion that it’s chance, whoever has the chance to encounter those spirits because not all of us have that gift, that belief, to see them. I leave for the fields; later I shower at one, two, three in the morning. I’ve never had the chance to see anything but, other people, yes, they see la Llorona, they see a body without feet, they hear them cry, they hear the famous hachero (axeman), they hear duendes. (interview, May 19, 2019)

His wife, who was present during the interview, added: “Some people say that they’ve seen duendes here in the zócalo. They’re like children who run around playing pranks, but we never—and we live here, nearby—but never, thank God, we’ve never seen anything. But there are many people who say that they see them, they say that they hear them, la Llorona, duendes . . . they hear the dead cry” (interview, May 19, 2019).
Although such entities might frighten townspeople, naguales and brujas are of another order. Doña Isabel said:

The nagual, the bruja, have always existed. Many people hear chains. And not long ago, on [one] street, people say that they heard the sound of heels, but, when they went outside, they didn’t see anything. And they say that, one day, a man went outside and said, “I’m going to follow it to see where it goes.” He heard the sound of heels leave the town, but he never saw anything. As a result of all that—the bruja, the nagual—the crosses were placed [and] everything decreased. (interview, May 7, 2019)

Among several stories that doña Tomasa told was one in which her father

and his friends saw a burro. They thought it was lost, so they caught it and mounted it, but it threw them off. They chased it, but it disappeared. They realized it wasn’t a normal burro. There was a woman who used to turn into a burro, into a nagual. The curious thing was that the burro disappeared into the house where the woman lived to turn itself into a person again. My father said that she used to recite evil prayers and go to the cemeteries at midnight. She had to look for the grave of an accident victim so that, [upon] leaving the cemetery, she turned into an animal, into a dog, a burro. [My father] also told us that, in order to rob people, naguales would cut off their finger and, with their finger and their prayers, open the [doors of houses]. (interview, May 7, 2019)

If naguales can rob, they also can kill. Doña Tomasa continued:

And, six years ago, dogs entered a man’s house to rob him. He wanted to scare them away, but they went onto the roof, shoved him off of it, and killed him. Townspeople killed the dogs and buried them at the back of the man’s land, but when they went to disinter them so that the members of the Municipal Council could see them, they were no longer there. (interview, May 7, 2019)

But the crosses protect from more than otherworldly entities. During the Mexican Revolution, said don José, “they say that there were many problems. There were guerrillas (armed groups) who wanted to take the town, and they placed [the crosses] to protect it so that they wouldn’t take it. The crosses were placed on the corners, at the exits of the town, for protection” (interview, May 19, 2019). Said don Efrén, “Our grandparents told us that they placed the crosses to protect the town because the Zapatistas, the government, devastated it” (interview, May 19, 2019).

If few of the stories mention the clergy, the question arises as to the relationship between Huaquechula and the Church. In Totolapan, Morelos, there has been “a long history of positive and productive, mutually satisfying, lay-clergy relationships” (Scheper Hughes 2010:207). In Cruz del Palmar and San Luis de la Paz, Guanajuato, “each [side] recognizes the need to cooperate” (Lastra, Sherzer, and Sherzer 2009:124). Elsewhere, there have been ample opportunities for the development of what Gómez-Arzapalo Dorantes refers to as “popular indigenous religiosity” due to the absence of,
or conflict with, the clergy (2012:38). And, of course, there was the dispute between Huaquechula and the Convent of San Francisco over water (described below).

The Appearance and Fate of the Holy Cross

Toward the end of December 1804, the Trustee of the convent approached the governor sub-delegate of Atlixco through his legal representative to report that “some people” had been “defrauding” Huaquechula of water to such an extent that the convent no longer had enough for its needs. He requested that a sluice gate be placed at the entrance of the aqueduct so that the convent could receive the naranja of water (1.8 gallons per minute) that the Spanish Crown had awarded it. The sub-delegate immediately consulted an assessor in Puebla who decided in favor of the Trustee’s request, going so far as to say that a sluice gate be placed “wherever it is most appropriate.” Only then did the sub-delegate notify the Huaquechultecas to attend the act of possession that would proceed in mid-January 1805.

Once the crowd had assembled, the Huaquechultecas stated through their legal representative that although they did not oppose the convent’s right to use the water that the Crown had originally awarded it, they did oppose it being given continuous possession of the naranja of water. They appealed to the Royal Audience (the highest court of the Crown in New Spain). The lawyer who was assigned to their case argued that not only was the Trustee claiming “imaginary rights” to the water that the town used, but the assessor, unaware that the Huaquechultecas had not been notified in advance, had decided that a sluice gate be placed “without assigning [it] a location.” Ordered by the Royal Audience to respond to those allegations, the sub-delegate did so in full support of the Trustee and then launched into an impassioned description of how, for some time, Huaquechula had been ruled by “discord, scandal, and iniquity” and engaged in “noisy disputes,” mainly against its priest. He blamed the legal representative of the Huaquechultecas for inciting them against the Franciscans, making them believe that they had to “throw off [the] yoke” of “tyrants” and convincing them to withdraw their economic support of the convent. Under such circumstances, no priests would go to the town for fear of experiencing the same fate. In mid-March, the Royal Audience ordered that the Indians be allowed to exercise their right to pursue their case in other courts. Here, the document ends.

In agricultural communities, sacred images often appeared in places of significance to them, such as near water, and returned to those sacred places as a metaphor of resistance to the growing demands of the Church (Christian 1981:91). Such, perhaps, were the circumstances of the appearance of the Holy Cross in Huaquechula. Its fate, however, was sealed by the timing of its appearance—during the Bourbon reforms when new devotions promoted by Indigenous peoples were viewed in a negative light (Gruziński 1985:181–2).

On August 30, 1806, the image of a Cross miraculously appeared on a rock on a riverbank on the outskirts of Huaquechula. Townspeople moved it to shore and successfully petitioned the viceroy for permission to honor it by building a small shrine in the woods near the river. To cover the image, a silver medallion—embossed with
a Cross flanked by Mary Magdalene and John the Baptist—was created, and prints of it began to circulate widely throughout New Spain. Within a few years, devotees began to arrive from afar, especially around Day of the Holy Cross.

In early 1810, the Bishop of Puebla went to Huaquechula to see the Cross for himself. It was, he concluded, neither “miraculous” nor “appeared.” The image was nothing more than a crude carving that, at best, marked the boundaries of an Indigenous person’s fields or was the work of a passing priest. The main miracle attributed to it—the healing of a lame man—was a “hoax.” The prints were an “abominable superstition” because they did not depict the actual Cross but the image on the silver medallion that covered the crude original. The pilgrimages involving large gatherings of people of both sexes were “scandalous”—they could give rise to the worst “wrongdoings and obscenities,” either in the small huts of townspeople where some pilgrims stayed or, for lack of sufficient lodgings, in the woods where the shrine was located.

The bishop decided to put an end to what he condemned as a “false and dangerous” devotion. He ordered that devotees give the scapulars and prints, the stone chips (relics) from the rock, and the soil next to it to their parish priests; that the rock be demolished; and that the shrine be destroyed, and the license revoked. He also ordered that, as quickly and as quietly as possible, the carving of the Cross and the silver medallion that covered it be sent to him. But six men could not lift the Cross from the shrine. When it was finally loaded onto a mule-drawn cart to be transported to Puebla, the cart broke, and another had to be brought from a nearby town. The Cross refused to go anywhere.

The Stories of the Holy Cross

Not only do the stories of the Holy Cross omit the dispute between Huaquechula and the convent over water, but they diverge from the fate of the Holy Cross. Instead, they reflect the patterns of sacred place; the divine presence of the Cross, its presence in place; and its place-centeredness.

One of the ways in which events from the past are made relevant in the present is by inserting historical individuals into them (Reese-Taylor 2012:759–60). The appearance of miraculous images, in particular, symbolically legitimized local sovereignty by seeming to choose Indigenous notables as their advocates (Osowski 2008:634). According to the 1997 Decree, on August 30, 1806, a Cross of stone appeared on the bank of the Huitzilac River to José Bernardo Salamanca, the last cacique (hereditary Indigenous ruler) of Huaquechula. Joyfully, the people carried the Cross to the parish church, offering it flowers, incense, and music. According to similar information housed in the elusive Parish Archive (Sinergía Radio 2013), a Cross of stone appeared at the foot of the Atila (Huitzilac) River on land belonging to the cacique don Bernardino Salamanca. The townspeople were called, the Cross was washed with holy water, and it began to be venerated. Some stories from online newspaper articles echo the claim that it appeared to the cacique Bernardino Salamanca (Ayala 2015; Cano 2016; Redacción 2019). Others claim that it appeared to the cacique Gonzalo Alejo Martínez (Llaven 2010; Puebla y Sus Municipios 2012; Hernández 2013). Still another claims that it was Bernardino Salamanca, a labrador (farmer) between 1807–1830,
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who found the Cross (*Cultura y Turismo Huaquechula* 2011). “Good things are always given to humble people,” said don Cristóbal. In his opinion, 

Bernardino Salamanca wasn’t a *potentado* (ruler); he was a *peón* (worker), a *peón del campo* (farm worker). He was a believer so, to reaffirm his faith, [the Cross] appeared to him, and as a result, the people have more faith, their faith is reaffirmed. (interview, May 7, 2019)

The other respondents in this study did not even mention the name of the individual to whom the Cross appeared. To doña Tomasa, he was a *campesino* (peasant farmer) (interview, May 7, 2019); to both don José and don Efrén, he was “a person” (interview, May 19, 2019), to doña Isabel, the Cross simply appeared (interview, May 7, 2019). The focus was almost exclusively on the Cross itself—its divine presence, its presence in place—not on a particular individual and even less on an Indigenous notable.

Don Cristóbal explained that “the Cross appeared in Huaquechula because there was much religiosity, the people were very devout” (interview, May 7, 2019). Doña Isabel commented that “the Cross was important because it appeared in Huaquechula—God was with the town” (interview, May 7, 2019). Don Efrén mused, “I don’t know why [the Holy Cross] appeared in a place on the river. Perhaps it was the work of God who ordered it” (interview, May 19, 2019). There is only one way to explain the miracle of artistic creation, writes Jennifer Scheper Hughes (2010:39–40)—the Cross was of “heavenly origin: fashioned and molded by God, the divine artist.” Several respondents personified the Cross itself. Doña Tomasa ventured, “We believers have more respect for the Cross because it was appeared, something very strange—a miracle, one can say. It chose Huaquechula [because] we Catholics are people who venerate it. And if it goes to another [place], maybe it would say, ‘No, here they’re not going to respect me’” (interview, May 7, 2019). Said don José, “We don’t know why the Cross appeared in Huaquechula. Many people think that it chose Huaquechula because in no other place is there another Cross” (interview, May 19, 2019). As did sacred images in other contexts, the Holy Cross affirmed “the prestige and power of [Huaquechula] in relation to other . . . *pueblos* [towns] that were not so well protected” (Gruzinski 1990:217).

Again, according to information housed in the Parish Archive, in 1810, the Bishop of Puebla ordered that the Cross be taken to Puebla. After the townspeople began to attribute “natural phenomena” to its absence, the Cross was returned to Huaquechula with an inlay of a splinter of the True Cross in it (*Sinergía Radio* 2013). Don Cristóbal recounted how the Cross was place-centered:

When they lifted the Cross onto the cart, it broke; the animals couldn’t move, so they took it to the train station [at] Teruel,20 between Teyuca and Tepeojuma. When they put it on the train car, the train couldn’t move with such a heavy load. When the Cross wants to leave, it becomes light and, when it doesn’t, [then] no. It went to Puebla [two respondents said to Rome] where they put a sliver of the True Cross in it because the Archbishop accepted that it was a Cross. They sent it to Atlixco, and it stayed in the barracks of Carmen. What happened? An epidemic broke out [among] the soldiers, and someone said that they had neglected the Cross. They put it back
on the train, and [it] traveled quickly to Teruel where two boys were waiting and brought the Cross in a cloak to the parish church. Then what happened? The boys disappeared. (interview, May 7, 2019)

The boys at Teruel were not unlike the “mysterious Indian” who brought the Cristo Aparecido (Christ Appeared) to the convent at Totolapan and then vanished—he was “a mere porter, bearer of God’s gift into the world” (Scheper Hughes 2010:40). Why else would the two boys have appeared and then disappeared?

That the Holy Cross still cannot be moved without difficulty is one of the reasons why it is considered miraculous. Doña Tomasa wondered:

I don’t know if you’ve noticed in the celebration that, when the [Cross] is going to go out to the processions, the bells don’t stop ringing. And you’ve noticed how many men carry it because it’s quite heavy, and if the bells don’t ring what they call rogación, they can’t carry the Cross. That’s why it’s very miraculous, and if you notice, it’s not very thick. I don’t know if you’ve seen it up close, [but] it’s not very thick, but it has its history—they don’t move it from one place to another that easily. (interview, May 7, 2019)

Don Efrén explained:

We have the belief and the custom that, when we take it down from its altar, from its niche, for May 3, for the novena, or for August 30, one has to ring the bell [of the parish church], one has to ring in rogación so that the Cross feels less heavy and ask permission of it, “Give us permission to take you down, give us permission to venerate you.” (interview, May 19, 2019)

He added, “It’s a flat stone, not very big, but it’s heavy to carry between nearly four or, at least, six [men]” (interview, May 19, 2019). “On one occasion,” Ayala (2012) was told that “the bells were not rung well, there was no faith, and the Cross was so heavy that no amount of effort could remove it [from the parish church].”

“Since the appearance of the Holy Cross,” said the Director of Culture and Tourism, “the tradition of caring for it and being grateful for the miracles granted has never ended” (Ayala 2015). As one of the mayordomos de segunda described it, the celebration of the Cross is “a way to give back to the Lord everything He gives us” (Flores Jácome 2018).

The Meaningful Message of the Living Tradition

If, because of the qualitative equivalence of their earlier and later purposes, the crosses of Huaquechula are a living tradition, what meaningful message does the tradition convey?

Above all, it is a message of faith in God. “The Cross is important for our faith, for our faith,” said don Efrén, “that we continue to have faith and the belief that the Cross is very miraculous. We have faith because, when we’re troubled, in whom do we put our trust? In God, in the Holy Cross, in the Virgin of Guadalupe. Each person has a faith, an image” (interview, May 19, 2019). “The majority of us go to venerate
the Holy Cross,” said don José. “We state our problems, our complaints, and ask it to help us to solve them. We do the same with the crosses on the corners” (interview, May 19, 2019).

It is, of course, also a message of protection. Doña Isabel stressed the purpose, both past and present, of the 17 crosses: “The people attached importance to them because they were going to protect us, to protect us from evil. . . . The crosses protect us, they’re [still] there because they protect us” (interview, May 7, 2019). As to the purpose of the Holy Cross, don Cristóbal stated with conviction, “[It] protects against all evil, all evil” (interview, May 7, 2019).

At this point, the question arises as to whether the 17 crosses were placed on the corners of Huaquechula before or after the Holy Cross appeared on the riverbank. Some stories state that the 17 crosses are “replicas” of the Holy Cross (Ayala 2012; Guzmán Montiel 2014; Puebla y Sus Municipios 2012)—that is, they were placed after the Holy Cross appeared. The wife of don Efrén agreed: “The Cross has worked many miracles, it has worked many miracles, and the people . . . that was when the Cross was brought, that was when they started to place crosses on the corners of the barrios” (interview, May 19, 2019). Don Cristóbal offered a later time line: “We have almost nothing written down, but it’s thought that [they were placed], well . . . let’s say some 100 years after, 50 years after, or 80 years after the appearance of the Cross” (interview, May 7, 2019). Given, however, that the main purpose of Mexican crosses, both past and present, is protection, “[temporal] flow,” as Reese-Taylor (2012:760) would suggest, “is often suspended.”

Further, the meaningful message is one of unity, of collective well-being. Huaquechula has a long history of division between its barrios. Oral tradition has it that, after pre-Hispanic Cuauhquechollan was forced to move to its present location in AD 1443, it consisted of nine barrios (Asselbergs 2004:55). By around 1555, Guacachula consisted of only four barrios (Paso y Troncoso 1905, 1:111–2 [Guacachula, f. 81]). The 1997 Decree gives an undated account of how the Franciscans tried to resolve the divisions by placing crosses on the corners and entrusting certain families with caring for and venerating them. Over time, two mayordomos, “distinguished and beloved” persons in the town, were entrusted with that.21 According to the former caretaker of the ex-Franciscan convent, priests, who in 1827 saw no solution to the aggression of the residents of the barrio,22 ordered that a stone cross be made and placed on a plot of land in front of the house of the (unnamed) cacique. He added that some residents of Huaquechula claim that the Cross appeared there as a sign that the cacique would punish those who behaved badly, so they settled down (Ramos Monzón 2006).

The different costumes worn on Day of the Holy Cross today also reflect the division between Indians and Spaniards characteristic of New Spain’s caste society. In the barrio de arriba (above), women wear the Indigenous huipil (blouse) and carry clay censers adorned with flowers. In the barrio de abajo (below), women wear the higher-status costume of the Charra de Damanzo, a close-fitting skirt with sash and frets. Men wear either cotton pants, pleated shirts, and a red kerchief around their neck or the clothing of a chinaco (man of lower social status) or of an overseer (Cultura y Turismo Huaquechula 2011).
Huaquechula is not unique in its divisions between barrios. María Teresa Sepúlveda y Herrera (1976:18) notes the frequent clashes between groups in Iguala, Guerrero, over the possession of the miraculous patron image of San Nicolás Tolentino that reflect an old rivalry between the “barrio de arriba” and the “barrio de abajo” related to socioeconomic status. In Huaquechula, however, the divisions are resolved through the celebration of May 3. As doña Tomasa explained, “the crosses unite the town because, years ago, there were conflicts between the barrio de arriba and the barrio de abajo. With this ceremony, the town is united by regional or traditional dances . . . a union of the town because the people live together better” (interview, May 7, 2019). When don José became president of the parish committee, he told the mayordomos:

It was a fiesta of the Holy Cross, the fiesta of the town, the union of the town. Before, the town was divided. [The fiesta] is the union of the town because all the crosses, de abajo, de arriba, all are brought together in the parish church. From there, all accompany the procession of the Holy Cross, and on each of the corners the Holy Cross is celebrated. (interview, May 19, 2019)

Don Efrén explained: “The appearance of the Cross was good for the town because, as a result, it’s venerated [by] the whole town—for the union, for the union because, every May 3, every August 30, we find ourselves in the parish church living together in harmony” (interview, May 19, 2019).

During Holy Week in San Miguel de Allende, Guanajuato, “[union] among the people is the key” to successful celebrations (Correa 2001:447).

Not only is spiritual union necessary . . ., but union, in terms of active participation and economic cooperation, is crucial, even though each person and every family give whatever they are able. (Correa 2001:448)

So it is on Day of the Holy Cross in Huaquechula. Said doña Tomasa:

There are corners that lack mayordomos. On some corners, they say, “No, there are none, we don’t have any,” but at the final rosaries, if there are none, if there were none before, on those days, a person appears voluntarily [and] says, “I’ll serve as mayordomo.” And there are those who name the topiles. Those people voluntarily dance what they are offering—bread, hot chocolate, mole—and they give it out to the people who visit the house of the mayordomo. (interview, May 7, 2019)

“Today, without asking [people] for anything, there are those who offer to be mayordomo, to give a kilo of mole, a kilo of chocolate, a turkey, a piglet in order to make the feast,” said don Efrén (interview, May 19, 2019).

Finally, it is a message of collective continuity (Gruzinski 1990:206). As they do in Xalatlaco, State of Mexico, the mayordomías in Huaquechula provide for this:

The fiesta coordinated by [a] mayordomia is converted into a continuum that in the eyes of the inhabitants seems to have no beginning nor end, because its origins appear
to be lost in the shadow of time and it is taken for granted that it will continue being carried out as it should be. (Gómez-Arzapalo Dorantes 2010)

**Conclusion**

By locating the crosses of Huaquechula as far as possible in their respective historical contexts, it seems clear that they were placed or appeared “in certain times and places, with certain values, for good reasons” (Taylor 2010:7). First, it is reasonable to assume—although it is not supported by all of the stories—that the 17 crosses were placed on the corners of Huaquechula during the early colonial period to protect it from dangerous, otherworldly forces. Second, it is likely no coincidence that the Holy Cross appeared immediately after the dispute between Huaquechula and the Franciscan convent over water.

Based on those past events, certain shared patterns of devotion to Mexican crosses past and present emerge. The 17 crosses on the corners that are said to have marked the early boundaries—the entrances and exits—of Huaquechula recall the idea of a “sealed enclosure” (Mundy 1996:117)—a sacred landscape—of the sixteenth-century *Mapa Circular de Cuauhquechollan*. The riverbank where the Holy Cross appeared, the barrio of Las Ánimas where its shrine was built, and the parish church to where it was taken, or alternatively to where it was returned, are sacred places. That the Holy Cross appeared either because of a work of God or else because it chose Huaquechula speaks to its divine presence, its presence in place. With difficulty, it was removed from its shrine and, later, was returned to Huaquechula from Puebla because it was place-centered. Just as the crosses bring about the power of enclosure, the procession of the crosses around the zócalo on May 3 symbolizes the rite of enclosure of sacred space.

If, as this paper suggests, the crosses of Huaquechula are a living tradition in that they exhibit qualitative equivalence of earlier and later purposes, one must ask what has changed and what has not changed in the context of living. Of course, much would have changed since the colonial period when the 17 crosses were placed on the corners and the Cross appeared on the riverbank, but the historical sources are fragmented, and oral tradition fills in only some of the gaps. Although the distant past of the Franciscan presence has all but disappeared from the stories, the purpose of the 17 crosses has not. They were placed to protect Huaquechula, and they continue to do so. And, although the dispute between Huaquechula and the convent over water is omitted from the stories, and the fate of the Holy Cross diverges from that of the archival document, its actions are the same—it appeared, it performed, and it continues to perform miracles.

Much more recently, the 1997 Decree instilled pride in the celebration of May 3, but only the details of how it is carried out, not of the stories, are still adhered to. In an attempt to keep the traditions of Huaquechula alive, a Casa de Cultura (House of Culture) was opened (Ayala 2012), but within a few years, it had closed. Its closure, however, has not prevented some townspeople who have left Huaquechula from offering to become mayordomos, thus contributing monetarily to the continuity of the celebration (Ayala 2012; Bueno 2018). After the Municipal Government began to
prepare the application for Huaquechula to become a Pueblo Mágico in 2013, and after it began to promote May 3 as a tourist attraction in 2015, newspaper coverage of the celebration began to focus on the Holy Cross to the exclusion of the 17 crosses. But neither appears to have had much of an effect on the tradition material that I was first introduced to in 1985—the stories of the 17 crosses remain as rich and varied as those of the appearance of the Holy Cross remain similar. Nonetheless, in adopting the concept of a living tradition, a word of caution is in order: “[Verbatim] reproductions of a tradition material imply . . . that relevant circumstances have not changed at all, which, in many situations, will not be particularly convincing” (Beckstein 2017:506).

By way of a conclusion, the stories of the 17 crosses and those of the Holy Cross have sometimes been described as running parallel to one another (Hernández 2013; Puebla y Sus Municipios 2012). They are better described as having merged into one to convey a meaningful message—faith in God that the crosses protect Huaquechula, that the celebration unites it, and that the mayordomías provide for its collective continuity. Perhaps, then, the thread that connects the stories can be summarized in the simple but eloquent observation that the crosses are “the core of the unity and the community” of Huaquechula (Domínguez Ríos 2015).

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Notes

1. Huaquechula is located 59 miles southeast of Mexico City, 29 miles southwest of Puebla (the capital of the State of Puebla), and 12 miles southwest of Atlixco, Puebla.

2. Sacred images, including crosses, have also been studied as examples of “local religion” and “lived religion” (Christian 1981; Scheper Hughes 2010).

3. The Decree appeared in the *Periódico Oficial* (Official Periodical) of the Constitutional Government of the State of Puebla. Its purpose is to disseminate such information as laws, decrees, and resolutions that are of public interest.

4. The 17 crosses are called Reixtla, Caltempa, La Palma, Acolco, El Cedro, Meneses, Tres Cruces, Cruz Verde, Las Flores, Las Ánimas, El Platanal, Cortés, Petlacalco, Avelar, Pliego, Conchita Rosario, and El Zócalo (the original cross in the atrium of the ex-Franciscan convent).

5. Hot chocolate, *atole* (a hot drink made from corn gruel), bread, and tamales.

6. *Mole poblano* (chocolate-chile sauce) or *pipián verde* (green pumpkin-seed sauce) to which pork, chicken, or turkey is added.

7. Although it is said that the origin of the “traditional” Tres de Mayo is unknown, it has been variously identified as the *raspa* (Veracruz), the *jota* (Aragon, Spain), the *iguana* (Guerrero), and the *tlaxcalteco* (jarabe folk dance, Spanish and Mexican).

8. A mayordomía is a lay brotherhood composed of the members of a particular *barrio* (Spanish ward, often the same as a pre-Hispanic *calpolli*, a subdivision of an *altepetl* or pre-Hispanic city-state) who are devoted to one sacred image (Taylor 1996:303). Each devotion is sponsored by individual mayordomos. The origin of the 17 mayordomías of Huaquechula is uncertain.
9. In the quema de toritos, young men don reed frames in the shape of bulls to which fireworks are attached and then lit.

10. References to the pre-Hispanic period are made now and again. Angelina Bueno (2018) writes that May 3 is an “ancient tradition” that originated in the pre-Hispanic period as part of the agricultural cycle that begins in May. The ancient inhabitants of this part of Puebla offered their gods the seeds that they would sow so that harvests would be abundant. This assertion is not supported by any evidence from Huaquechula. In fact, it comes from Ostotempa, Guerrero (Sepúlveda y Herrera 1994:79).

11. The Government of Mexico created the Pueblo Mágico Program in 2001 to stimulate tourism development in selected sites. Among the criteria that a site must meet to become a Pueblo Mágico is that it must be close to a large tourist destination; it must be reasonably accessible by highway; it must possess some historical or religious attraction; and it must have shops and restaurants that would benefit from tourist spending (Armenta 2014). Huaquechula meets all of these criteria.

12. In 1696, Huaquechula had four cofradías—Santísimo Sacramento (Holy Sacrament), La Purísima Concepción (Our Lady of the Assumption), and San Diego (Archivo Franciscano [Franciscan Archive], Cholula, Puebla, caja 20, exp. 1586.1, fs. 1r, 4r–4v). It might be too much to hope that the four cofradías corresponded to Huaquechula’s four barrios—Cuyametepec, Hasichuca, Cuyacan, and Tlalnabaca (Paso and Troncoso, Suma de visitas [1550] 1905, 1: f. 81f). By 1776, Huaquechula had only three cofradías, although which of the four no longer existed is not mentioned (Archivo Franciscano, caja 129, exp. 1655.16, fs. 90r–91r).

13. Duendes are small, mischievous beings. La Llorona (Weeping Woman), abandoned by her husband, drowned their two children in anger and grief. Condemned for eternity to wander the earth in search of their bodies, she can bring misfortune, even death, to the living. Naguales are sorcerers who are able to transform themselves into animals and to use their powers for good or for evil. Brujas are witches. Such beliefs—“survivals” of pre-Hispanic or colonial traditions—are also held in Candelaria, Coyoacán (Lagarriga Attias 1993:283).

14. During the colonial period, waves of epidemics—1545–1548, 1576–1581; 1629–1631; 1692–1697; 1736–1739 (Gerhard 1993:24)—had devastating effects on the Indigenous population. One can infer their effects on Huaquechula from available population figures. In 1520, the population of the altepetl of Cuauhquechollan was estimated to be between 10,000 and 12,000 (Cortés [1520] 1993:92). By 1568, it had dropped to 10,329; by 1595, to 5,625; by 1646, to 2,922 (Cook and Borah 1979, 3:29); and, by 1681, to 2,000 (Gerhard 1981:table 1). By 1744, it had risen to 1,030 “Indian families” (Villaseñor y Sánchez [1746] 1952, 1:348)—possibly more than 5,000 people.

15. In their study of rural Tlaxcala, Hugo G. Nutini and John M. Roberts comment on the seasonal nature of such a phenomenon. On colder winter nights, a mother breastfeeds her infant under the blankets of her bed, falls asleep, and accidentally smotheres it. The bruises that result are attributed to bloodsucking witches (1993:237).

16. In Ostotempa, Guerrero, the people’s attachment to “magic ceremonies” to petition for rain is due, in part, to the lack of a priest (Sepúlveda y Herrera 1994:71). In Acatlán, Guerrero, the relations between Presbyterians and parishioners are “tense and very conflictive” (Gómez-Arzapalo Dorantes 2012:36). Even in San Luis de la Paz and La Cruz del Palmar, parish priests are often at odds with fiesta leaders whom they accuse of paganism, idolatry, and black magic (Lastra, Sherzer, and Sherzer 2009:137). In Candelaria, priests have opposed some practices of popular religiosity, which has led to a “certain separation” between the religious organization of the community and that of the church (Lagarriga Attias 1993:283). Such entities as pre-Hispanic naguales and the colonial-era devil function in social control because that of the Church is not “sufficiently strong” (Lagarriga Attias 1993:286).

17. AGN, Tierras (Lands), Vol. 1354, exp. 7, fs. 28 (1804–1805).
18. AGN, Clero Regular y Secular (Regular and Secular Clergy), Vol. 215, exp. 29, fs. 604r–638r (1813).
19. If José Salamanca was not the “last cacique” of Huaquechula, he was its escribano (scribe) in 1805 (AGN, Tierras, Vol. 1354, exp. 7, fs. 28).
20. Teruel was located on the Puebla-Atlíxco-Matamoros railroad line.
21. The mention of the two mayordomos might refer to the decline of cofradia property in the late eighteenth century and the beginning of the individual sponsorship of fiestas (Taylor 1996:315).
22. Unfortunately, the former caretaker did not explain the significance of the year 1827 nor did he identify the barrio by name. Likely, it was Las Ánimas.

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