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“Bosques Si, Tala No”: The Uprising of Cherán K’eri

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An Honors Project for the Program of Latin American Studies

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Para mi madre

For my mother

Table of Contents

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Introduction

When we arrived at the bus station in Zamora, people in front of us had already started a line. Some women had *rebozos*, a cotton shawl, wrapped around their heads or hanging behind their back. They had large black, thin blue, and white stripes, and they were the same style most women wore in the sierra region of the Purépecha Plateau. This was our final leg of the journey to Cherán. For the next ten weeks, my mother and I would be in her hometown. As we waited for the bus to arrive, I started sweating, and I had to take off my jacket. Then arrived the familiar white bus with a minimalistic outline of a monarch butterfly and the word "Purhépechas" above. The driver got out, opened the cargo doors, and quickly started boarding the people. As soon as I walked into the bus, I was hit by a wall of stuffiness and heat. Once we got on the highway, it started raining, but people had their windows down because there was no AC. Getting sprinkled with a couple drops of rain was better than dealing with the heat. I tried as hard as I could to open my window, but it did not budge. For all of the bus line's downfalls, everyone in the sold-out bus knew it was the best way to get home. It reminded me of the times my mom brought my sister and I to Cherán for the summer when we were little. In those years, my whole family would get in our red pick-up at the crack of dawn, and my dad would drive us down to Monterrey, Nuevo León. We would spend a couple of days in the city to visit family members from my dad's side, and then he would drop us off at the bus station. We would say goodbye to my him for the summer and begin our long journey to Cherán.

We had arrived to Guadalajara the night before from Houston and had taken a bus to Zamora in the morning. Now, we were only a 90 minute bus ride away from Cherán. Before heading to the bus terminal, my mother and I went to our favorite restaurant in Zamora, Carnes Toluca. The restaurant was located in a busy area of town, so I was surprised by the lack of buses

honking and people rushing to cross the street. I did not remember the city like this. Zamora is the third largest city in Michoacán, and an important economic hub for the agriculture sector. I asked my mom why the city felt so empty. She said it was because it was Sunday and most people were at home with their families. Additionally, she believed that there were fewer people coming into Zamora to do commerce, so many businesses were closed. But this could not explain the total silence in the streets. I was used to seeing long lines at the bus stations, street vendors selling freshly cut fruit, and cars and motorcycles struggling to move down congested streets. As I was about to fall asleep on the bus, I remembered a short news segment that aired on the TV of our small hotel room in Guadalajara. While my mom and I were packing our bags, a reporter on the news talked about a violent altercation that happened in Zamora. The Jalisco Nueva Generación cartel had attacked and killed local police. The reporter characterized the altercation as shocking because this kind of violence had not happened in the city. This was a reminder that cartel violence still has an impact on this region to this day.

I suddenly woke up because the bus was shaking and the window next to me kept rattling in place. The driver was speeding through the turns of the winding inclined road that lead from Zamora to Cherán. “We’re almost home,” I thought. I looked out the slightly tinted window beside me and noticed brown areas across the green mountains around us. The most visible trees from this distance were pine trees, and pine trees did not change color. A couple of kilometers down the road, there were pine trees with deep black trunks and more than half of the needles around their branches were dark brown. This area had been burned. A couple minutes later, there was a metal sign hanging above the highway. It is common for towns in the *Meseta Purépecha* (Purépecha Plateau), in the western Mexican state of Michoacán, to have signs at its limits that

welcome travelers to the community and highlight an area of pride for the town.[1] The sign we were about to drive through had large blue faded letters that read, "*¡Bienvenidos a Cherán, K'eri!* (Welcome to Cherán K'eri!)" and right below it there were green letters that said, "*Aquí Nos Regimos Bajo Nuestros Usos y Costumbres* (Here We Govern Ourselves Based on Our Uses and Customs.)"[2]

Cherán K'eri

This project centers on the social movement that led the townspeople of Cherán K'eri to rise up against their municipal authorities to protect their forest. Cherán K'eri is an indigenous community located in central western Mexico in the state of Michoacán. It is part of a region known as the *Meseta Purépecha* or the Purépecha Plateau. Cherán is both a town and a municipality.[3] The municipality of Cherán is one of the few in the state of Michoacán that is headed by indigenous people. The town is surrounded by hills and mountains which have lush coniferous forests. Land in Cherán is communally owned which means that everyone in the community has access to it, and the community has to approve of any kind of change in *uso de tierra*, or the use of the soil. My mother is from this Purépecha community, and I still have family in the town. People in the community depend on the land and the forest for subsistence farming, growing produce to sell in local markets and in nearby communities, cattle grazing, and to find medicinal plants.

[1] The Purépecha Plateau is in the highland region of Michoacán.
[2] Article 2 of the Mexican Constitution states that indigenous communities have the right to govern themselves based on "usos y costumbres." The article was adopted in 2001. The phrase literally means uses and customs, but it refers to indigenous customary law. These laws date back to the Spanish colonial period.
[3] A municipality includes more than one city or town, and it is the second level of administrative divisions in Mexico, after the state. A municipality is in charge of public services, safety, parks, etc. A town or *localidad* is at the lowest level of the administrative division. There are other towns and *ranchos* that are a part of the *Municipio de Cherán*.

From 2007 to 2011, organized crime took over the community. Townspeople did not feel safe because the cartel and their allies would threaten, kidnap, or disappear people that opposed them. Some of the cartel's allies would go into the town's communal forests to log pine trees and set the forests on fire. Townspeople called these illicit tree loggers *talamontes*. In April of 2011, the town rose up to protect their forest by kicking out the police, politicians, *talamontes*, and organized crime. Then, they fought a long legal battle at the state and federal levels to assert the right to govern themselves based on their *usos y costumbres.* On November 2, 2012, the Federal Electoral Tribunal ruled:

> *Se determina que los integrantes de la comunidad indígena de Cherán tienen derecho a solicitar la elección de sus propias autoridades, siguiendo para ello sus normas, procedimientos y prácticas tradicionales, con pleno respeto a los derechos humanos.*
>
> It is determined that the members of the indigenous community of Cherán have the right to petition their elections of their own authorities, following their norms, proceedings and traditional practices, with ample respect of human rights.[4]

Since then, the community has been governed by a *Consejo Mayor* (Town Council) featuring three members of each of the four neighborhoods.[5] Each member is known as *K'eri*, which is a Purépecha word that translates to "great." It is used to denote respect and typically refers to wise elders. There are other councils within the government, like *Bienes Comunales* (Council of the Commons), which are elected through the same voting system as the *K'eris*. Each neighborhood has their own meetings where important issues are discussed, and members of the town's government present the work their council has done. In addition, the community has banned political parties.

[4] Rosalva Durán v. Consejo General del Instituto Electoral de Michoacán, SUP-JDC-9167-2011 (TEPJF 2011)
[5] The Consejo Mayor was established after a legal battle against the federal government. Cherán was able to successfully argue that it could govern itself based on "usos y costumbres" "(uses and customs)."

The Mexican War on Drugs

Cherán's uprising connects to the larger history of the Mexican War on Drugs. In December of 2006, President Felipe Calderón declared a war against organized crime in response to over 500 murders that happened in Michoacán due to cartel violence that year. The initial plan was called *Operativo Conjunto Michoacán* (Operation Michoacán), and it sought to seal the coast and highways, eradicate illegal crops used for drug production, apprehend people involved in the drug trade, and dismantle key areas in the drug trade.[6] Soon after, a similar plan was implemented in other areas that had a strong cartel presence. In spite of these efforts, cartel violence significantly increased during the years of the Calderón administration.

In a study published in 2018, researchers used data collected from the Drug Policy Program at the *Centro de Investigación y Docencia Económica* (Center for Economic Investigation and Teaching) to conservatively estimate that 52,175 homicides were linked to organized crime from 2006-2011. This study also notes that the number of homicides connected to organized crime at the beginning of the War on Drugs in 2006 was 732. In 2011 alone, the number had increased to 16,968.[7] The number of homicides were likely much higher due to severe underreporting, and they do not consider the thousands of people that were disappeared by organized crime during that time period. These numbers show that the state's plan failed. Instead of reducing drug-related violence, the War on Drugs caused a significantly increase in cartel violence during the years of the Calderón administration. In fact, some people in Cherán told me that President Calderón's actions pushed organized crime out of the cities of Michoacán

[6] Claudia Herrera Beltran, "El gobierno se declara en guerra contra el hampa; inicia acciones en Michoacán" *La Jornada* (2006): Accessed April 29, 2020, https://www.jornada.com.mx/2006/12/12/index.php?section=politica&article=014n1pol

[7] María del Pilar Fuerte Celis, Enrique Pérez Lujan, and Rodrigo Cordova Ponce. 2019. "Organized Crime, Violence, and Territorial Dispute in Mexico (2007–2011)." *Trends in Organized Crime* 22 (2): 195

and into rural areas. These areas have higher populations of indigenous people. They also believed that because trading drugs became more difficult, organized crime started to look for other avenues to make profit. They argued that this led organized crime and their allies to come to Cherán and start logging.

The United States' foreign policy has played a key role in counter narcotics programs throughout Latin American and in the Mexican state's attempt to crush the operations of the cartels in the country. Before the Mexican Drug War began, the United States had spent decades aiding Colombia in their war on drugs. John Lindsay-Poland writes, "As the Cold War declined in importance after 1989, U.S. military and police assistance to Colombia steadily grew under the rubric of counternarcotics programs."[8] The United States government stated their involvement in Colombia was to cut the production of drugs like cocaine. Although Colombia's armed forces killed Pablo Escobar, the leader of the Medellín Cartel, and reduced cocaine production, violence in the country increased dramatically. In 2000, the U.S. government funded the Plan Colombia which was "focused on the 'transformation' and 'modernization' of the Colombian armed and police forces in order to fight the FARC and ELN, and *maintain control of strategic territories*."[9] The plan gave funding and training to Colombian military forces. Plan Colombia was used as a model to implement the Mérida Initiative in Mexico which was signed in 2008. Thus, Cherán's movement to kick out organized crime is linked to broader global histories of cartel violence and American interventions.

Methodology and Ethical Considerations

[8] John Lindsay-Poland. 2018. *Plan Colombia: U.S. Ally Atrocities and Community Activism*. Durham: Duke University Press, 32.
[9] Gian Carlo Delgado-Ramos, Silvina María Romano, and Mariana Ortega Breña. 2011. "Political-Economic Factors in U.S. Foreign Policy: The Colombia Plan, the Mérida Initiative, and the Obama Administration." *Latin American Perspectives* 38 (4): 95

Most of the scholarship written about this Purépecha movement centers on the autonomous government the community formed or the town's reforestation efforts.[10] This scholarship often neglects the emotional value that the community of Cherán and other similar communities give to the forest that surrounds them. Some scholars have talked about townspeople regaining a sense of dignity by stopping the *talamontes*, but this idea has not been fully explored.[11] My research investigates the affective connection to nature, drawing from groundbreaking scholarship in anthropology and political ecology on this subject.[12] As Roberto J. Gonzales illustrates in his book *Zapotec Science*, indigenous farmers living in rural Mexico have their own epistemology which centers on their connection to nature.[13] My project adds to this literature by exploring how this kind of affective connection was used to mobilize people to push for change.

This thesis is the result of a multi-year research in Cherán. Most of the interviews were recorded over a ten-week period in the summer of 2019, I went back to Cherán, after conducting, following preliminary research in the winter of 2018. I conducted ethnographic research through interviews, oral histories, landscape histories, and participant observations. I was able to get approval from the *Consejo Mayor* to conduct my research. I learned about the history of the landscape of Cherán by hiking various hills. I went to two townhall meetings every week and attended different cultural events. I was able to conduct thirty interviews with townspeople. I

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[10] Osorno-Covarrubias, S Couturier, and M Piceno Hernández, "Measuring from Space the Efficiency of Local Forest Management: The Successful Case of the Indigenous Community of Cherán, Mexico," *IOP Conference Series: Earth and Environmental Science* 151 (May 2018): 6, https://doi.org/10.1088/1755-1315/151/1/012010.
[11] Josefina María Cendejas, Omar Arroyo, and Angélica Sánchez, "Comunalidad y buen vivir como estrategias indígenas frente a la violencia en Michoacán: Los casos de Cherán y San Miguel de Aquila," *Revista Pueblos y fronteras digital* 10, no. 19 (June 1, 2015): 261, https://doi.org/10.22201/cimsur.18704115e.2015.19.53.
[12] Anna Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 155.
[13] Roberto J. Gonzales, *Zapotec Science: The Farming and Food in the Northern Sierra of Oaxaca*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001).

used snowball sampling to identify some of the people I interviewed; I would ask my informants who they thought I should interview. Additionally, there were individuals who did not want to be interviewed, but provided the names of people I should interview instead. Generally, men were more willing to talk to me than women. Often, women I sought to interview told me they were not very involved in the movement and suggested I talk to someone else. My mother and I would explain that I was going to interview other townspeople as well, and some women would change their mind. Men tend to be more involved in politics and government compared to women which might explain the initial hesitance of some of the women I tried to interview.

My mother came with me to Cherán which made people realize that I was part of the community as well. This opened doors for me which would have taken more time to open if I was there alone. Her presence helped ease some women about our interviews. Some of my informants viewed me as an insider because my family was from the community, but in some ways, I was also an outsider. I grew up in the United States, and I do not speak Purépecha. During my fieldwork, I had to ask questions that to townspeople seemed to have obvious answers. In regards to the issue of language, the majority of townspeople speak Spanish, but I do lament the lack of Purépecha in this thesis. During my time in the town, my mother and I went to Purépecha classes. I wanted to preserve the voice of my informants as much as possible which is why I opted to leave the transcribed versions of quotes in Spanish alongside the translated versions.

It was important for me to protect my interviewees and respect the silences they chose to take. All of the names used in this thesis are pseudonyms with the exception of a citation to a particular personal archive. Some people I interviewed opted to keep silent about certain issues. For example, my interviewees would talk about organized crime or *el crimen*, but they would not

mention particular people who were involved. I wonder if increased rapport would have minimized these silences. I only had ten weeks in Cherán. By the end, I had started to develop relationships with people I interviewed or saw frequently. My mother and my uncle helped speed up the process of rapport with certain individuals, but I could have benefitted from having more time to develop strong ties with community members.

The Water, the Land, and the Trauma

Through this thesis, I examine townspeople's agency during a time period they lived under a narco state. In Chapter One, I analyze the context of Cherán before the uprising to figure out how organized crime took over the community. In 2007, the town held a divisive mayoral election which divided the community based on political parties. This division aided the candidate who had made a deal with organized crime to support his campaign. This election was key for the leaders of the cartel because there was a lack of unity in the community and there was now a candidate in office who owed them. After a series of questionable deaths, the majority of townspeople lost faith in the police and mayor to protect them. Ultimately, the supporters of the mayor's rival ousted him, but the state of Michoacán still recognized him as the mayor. The political system in Cherán was fractured, and organized crime was able to take advantage. They increased kidnappings, threats, and began logging. The townspeople I interviewed, particularly the men, described feeling *impotencia* (impotence) during this time. They defined *impotencia* as an inability to act that frustrated them, and this differs from Western understandings of impotence as a medical condition.[14] I argue that this period before the *levantamiento* (the

[14] *Impotencia* does not have sexual connotation, but it does connect to gender roles. Men in Cherán were expected to protect their family and community. Since they were unable to carry out this role while organized crime was in the community, men felt extremely frustrated.

uprising of 2011) left townspeople with trauma that they continue to live with. I analyze my family's experience of a kidnapping to highlight the pain that this time period has left.

Chapter Two analyzes the conditions that led to the uprising itself. As chapter one touches on, townspeople have with the forest and water in their community. My informants noted that water is life and that they had an emotional connection to a spring the *talamontes* were endangering in 2011. In the end, it was a group of women who lived near the spring that were able to rally the community together to protect their communal lands. I use James C. Scott's theory of "hidden transcripts" to highlight the complex power relationship between organized crime and townspeople. [15] I draw on Scott's idea of "storming the stage" and Mikhail Bakhtin's idea of the "carnivalesque" to interpret the moment towns people rose up against the *talamontes*.[16]

I conclude by looking at the lasting impacts of the uprising. There is an increasing number of indigenous communities in Mexico that want to govern themselves based on *usos y costumbres*. I analyze the response the administration of Andrés Manuel Lopez Obrador has offered and link this moment to the Zapatista movement of the 1990s. Finally, I note how townspeople of Cherán have had a renewed sense of pride in their heritage since the success of the movement.

[15] James C. Scott, *Domination and the Art of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), xxii.
[16] Ibid., 16.

Chapter 1: Violencia y amenazas/ Violence and Threats

"*¿Como recuerdas los años justo antes del levantamiento?* (How do you remember the years just before the uprising?)" When I asked Luisa this question, she measured every single word in her answer. She had an old, bulky television mounted to the wall, and although she had lowered the volume, the upbeat intro to the Mexican comedy show *Vecinos* was louder than her soft voice. I was worried I would miss what she was saying, so I inched my audio recorder closer to her. We were in her clothing store, sitting behind a glass counter which displayed children's clothing imprinted with characters from *El Chavo del Ocho*, Paw Patrol, and Disney Princesses. Luisa did not get many sales at her store, but she said working there helped her pass the time. She sat in a couch with my mom, and I sat next to Luisa in a small chair made for children.

About an hour before, I was preparing for the interview, and my mom briefly mentioned that Luisa had lost her husband during the time when things were bad in Cherán. My mom encouraged me to ask her about it, but not directly. My mom and Luisa were childhood friends, so she felt Luisa would be comfortable talking to us about her husband. While I read the consent form to her, Luisa had noted that we should have told her about my research earlier in the week. She suggested that we could have gathered the other women who lost their husbands for a group interview. They had done this before for journalists and researchers, but she scratched that idea shortly after she mentioned it. She admitted that some of the women would have declined because they were tired of having to remember those times. Once the interview started, I realized she was one of those women.

As I kept asking follow-up questions about the time when violence engulfed Cherán, Luisa's eyes got large and watery. It was as if she was waiting for me to ask her about her husband, but at the same time, pleading with me not to. Although I had plenty of questions to ask

her, I abruptly ended the interview. My mom looked at me in disbelief. Before arriving in Cherán in early June of 2019, I had a feeling that the families and friends of men and women who were killed or forcibly disappeared by organized crime would still be dealing with that loss. I did not expect the wounds from that time period to be as present as they were to Luisa, and I could not continue the interview in good conscience. As I started to pack my things into my canvas tote bag, my mother asked me, "*¿No le vas a preguntar?* (Aren't you going to ask her?)" "*No, ma*," I replied, "*Ya nos podemos ir.* (We can leave.)"

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Many people in Cherán continue to experience trauma because of the violent past. The Mexican media's coverage of the Drug War has focused on the experience of people living in urban centers. The experiences of the townspeople of Cherán expand this narrative by adding rural and indigenous perspectives. The majority of the people I interviewed showed strong emotions when I asked them to describe what it was like to live in Cherán around 2007 through 2011 when organized crime had a strong hold over the community. I warned my interviewees that my questions might cause people to feel anxiety or sadness, and I told them they could stop the interview at any point. Some women, like Luisa, expressed sadness or avoided being interviewed. The men I interviewed remembered feeling a sense of *impotencia* (impotence) while organized crime increased its power over the daily lives of people.

Despite these traumatic memories, the history of this moment also illuminates how concerned townspeople were able to challenge local authorities when injustices happened. Thus, the experiences of people in Cherán brought up the following questions for me: How did organized crime use violence to stop townspeople from organizing? How much agency did people have during this period? How does this trauma continue to impact people to this day? In

this chapter, I answer these questions by analyzing Cherán's experiences before the town's uprising and under a state allied with organized crime. I discuss when my interviewees first remember organized crime appearing in their community. Additionally, I look at efforts made by townspeople to organize against or ignore the demands of this group and how organized crime responded. Eventually, most townspeople no longer recognized the mayor due to a series of questionable deaths involving police and organized crime. Finally, despite the fact that these experiences happened almost ten years ago, I argue they continue to shape people's lives because they continue to feel the trauma of the violence of that time period.

Llego el problema/ The Problem Arrives

In order to understand the power organized crime was able to have in Cherán, it is important to understand the political landscape of the town at the time. Organized crime did not simply arrive into the community and started to assert their power. Some townspeople would reference the time before the uprising as when things were "*malas* (bad)" or "*feas* (ugly)," and others would understand what they meant. Before the bad time started in Cherán, the town went through the divisive mayoral election of 2007. My interviewees remember the mayoral election as disruptive to the point that it even impacted family life because even families were divided based on the candidate they supported. Locals see the extended family as one of the most important social pillars of community. It is expected that one can depend on their extended family for financial, social, spiritual, and emotional support. In the town there is a limited amount of economic opportunities which makes family all the more important.

Some community members recognized that the winning candidate, Ricardo, worked with organized crime to buy people's votes. This corruption did not surprise my interviewees. Once

Ricardo became the mayor, the town was rocked by a number of deaths. The mayoral election divided the community and the murders stunned people. Nevertheless, supporters of Ricardo's political rival, Leonardo, were still able to mobilize and push for political change.

Before the June sun was about to set, I went to do an interview with a friend of my uncle Miguel. *Tio* Miguel had set up the meeting, but he only mentioned that I would be speaking to a man named Tadeo and that he was a trusted town elder. Once the interview started, Tadeo mentioned he was a retired schoolteacher who had spent all of his life in Cherán. He was now a proud grandfather, and his grandson ran around their house wearing a blue Paw Patrol shirt. Tadeo was a part of the first *Consejo Mayor* (town council) in Cherán. My mother, Tadeo, and I sat in three white plastic chairs close to his garage, and his dog laid down between our chairs. He had a strong voice that commanded respect. He was adamant that political parties caused divisions in the town. In 2007, two people that belonged to the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD) became candidates for the mayoral election. The PRD was the most popular party in Cherán since the late 1980s. Tadeo believed that the two candidates divided PRD supporters. In addition to these two candidates, there were five more. Tadeo firmly noted:

> *Llego el odio a Cherán. Llego el rencor a Cherán porque entre la propia familia no nos podíamos ver. Por qué razón: si [Tadeo] era de un partido y [José] era de otro. Ah, pues por esa razón ya no, ni nos saludábamos. Aunque fuéramos de la misma familia.*
>
> Hate arrived in Cherán. Then came resentment because even within the family, we could not see each other. Because [Tadeo] followed a certain party and [Jose] was part of another. Ah well, for this reason we could not, we would not even greet one another. Even though we were from the same family."

The 2007 election was grueling and hard fought. Other people I interviewed also noted the division that this election brought. Like Tadeo, they commented that it went as far as dividing

families. The election impacted the family which is one of the town's most valuable institutions. Family members supported different politicians and political parties, and this resulted in arguments. Tadeo argued that townspeople cared more about their party and their candidate winning than sustaining their relationships with people they disagreed with. The election was tearing the fabric of communal life in Cherán.

Ultimately, the candidate representing the Party of Institutional Revolution (PRI), Ricardo, was able to take the presidency in 2008. Tadeo mentioned that there were irregularities in relation to the amount of funds that were spent on the election by the PRI. He believed that some people voluntarily sold their votes for cash. Although Tadeo illustrated the influence of organized crime in the election, he also argued that townspeople had a level of agency in the process. He said there were people that chose to sell their vote. He emphasized that they were not threatened or forced to vote for Ricardo. These people lived in the poorest part of the municipality. I did not actively seek people that sold their vote, and my interviewees did not mention selling their vote. I can only speculate that the monetary benefit was a motivating factor for the people who decided to sell their vote.

Tadeo believed that during the day these *comuneros*[17] would rally and show support for one party, but privately they knew they would support Ricardo. Tadeo asked:

> *¿Y con que se iba a pagar todo ese dinero que se manejó? ¿Qué es lo que lo iba a pagar? Ah pues, ellos ya sabían de donde iban a cobrarse, y donde iban a cobrarse eran con los recursos naturales que teníamos.*
>
> And how were they going to recover all of that money that was used? *What* was going to pay for it? Oh well, they already knew from where they were going to repay themselves, with the natural resources that we had.

[17] A fellow townsperson.

Tadeo does not specify what he meant when he used "they" or who was working with "them." He was referring organized crime, but he did not want to state it. He alleged that Ricardo, the winning candidate, was able to get in power because he colluded with organized crime to ensure he would get votes by paying some townspeople to vote for him. In his eyes, this was not a free favor because members of organized crime expected things in return.[18] Once Ricardo took office, Tadeo stated that other irregularities began to happen. The suspicious deaths of two men and the murder of Ricardo's political rival made some townspeople question his legitimacy, and the supporters of his rival used the deaths to pressure Ricardo to vacate his position.

Like Tadeo, Chavo felt it was important to describe the political division that existed in Cherán before and after Ricardo was elected. Chavo is a middle-aged man who owns a small *lonchería* and *tortilleria*. He was often very outspoken and emotional at the community meetings that would happen every Wednesday in our neighborhood. He also volunteered at the community radio station where he had his own news show. He had spent 17 years living in the United States. He had left Cherán when he was young to work in agriculture. Two of his children were born in the United States, and his youngest child was born in Mexico. In 2006, he decided to stay in the town with his family instead of returning to the United States by himself. My mother and I met him in his *lonchería* where the sizzling of the grill overpowered the buzzing of the motorcycles and cars driving by.

Chavo recounted that a couple months into Ricardo's term, the municipal police killed a young man.

[18] Corruption has a long history in the Mexican political system. The film *Ley de Herodes (Herod's Law)* illustrates political corruption in the PRI during the 1940s and how it impacted a small town in Mexico. Although Tadeo's assertion might surprise some readers, corruption has been a part of the political system he engaged with.

> *Era una fiesta patronal de las que se hacen aquí en Cherán…Los policías agarraron a este joven para llevarlo a la cárcel, pero nunca llego a la cárcel. Al joven este, lo mataron en el trayecto de la plaza hasta la cárcel. Lo dejaron tirado cerca de campo de futbol.*
>
> It was a party for a patron saint which happen here in Cherán…The police seized this young man to take him to jail, but he never made it. This young man was killed on the route from the plaza to the jail. They dumped him near the soccer field.

People in Cherán were outraged. They could not believe that this had happened. *Fiestas patronales* are large celebrations where people honor the patron saint of their town. Church services are followed by a dance where people celebrate and drink. A coalition of concerned townspeople began to ask the mayor for answers relating to this murder. How was it possible that this young man was killed? How could this happen in our town? The most vocal group among this coalition was the one who supported Leonardo, Ricardo's most popular political rival. This coalition forced an investigation of the municipal police, and some officers were fired for their involvement in the incident. Additionally, the investigation also found that the majority of the police force was not from Cherán. Some of Ricardo's supporters began to speculate that these officers from outside of the community were working with organized crime.

A couple of months later, an older man was killed by the police, and the majority of townspeople had enough. Chavo noted that the mayor was blamed for these deaths. He was shocked by these deaths because he stated that these types of deaths did not happen in Cherán. He believed Ricardo's administration did little to respond to these unfortunate events.

Cherán had a large amount of political instability which increased when Leonardo's followers organized to take over the town hall. They kicked out Ricardo, and no longer recognized him as the mayor. Ricardo's authority in the community decreased significantly as a

result. At the same time, Ricardo was still recognized as the mayor by the state and federal government.

> *Realmente él era el presidente constitucional. Aquí en Cherán, lo desconocieron, pero estaba reconocido a nivel estatal y a nivel federal. Él seguía siendo el presidente, y el presupuesto le seguía llegando a él.*
>
> He was the constitutional mayor. Here in Cherán, they no longer recognized him, but he was still recognized at the state and federal level. He was still the mayor, and the budget kept coming to him.

Since Ricardo could no longer occupy the town hall, he had to rent shop areas to use as his government offices. Meanwhile, the people that supported Leonardo had taken over town hall, but they had no recognition from the state. This instability stemmed from the dissatisfaction most townspeople felt because of the deaths of their neighbors at the hands of police officers.

A couple days later, the instability escalated even further when Leonardo was kidnapped and murdered. Chavo recalled:

> *Habían secuestrado al maestro Leonardo. Que llegaron con algunas camionetas, con elementos fuertemente armados al lugar de su trabajo. Y se lo llevaron. Y pues la gente se movilizó. No se pudo hacer nada... Como Ricardo fue el presidente y Leonardo, con su gente, lo sacaron de la presidencia, pues ellos tuvieron algo que ver para que secuestraran a Leonardo.*
>
> They had kidnaped Leonardo the teacher. They arrived to his place of work with some trucks with highly armed elements. And they took him. And the people started to mobilize. Nothing could be done…Because Ricardo was the president and Leonardo, with his people, took him out of the presidency, well they had something to do with the kidnaping of Leonardo.

Two days later, police officers found Leonardo dead in a dumpster in the nearby town of Cheranastico. Chavo pointed to this moment as the time that "*el problema*" started. Over a series of months, these surprising deaths had rocked the town. Ricardo and his administration were blamed for the deaths even though people did not allege that he had played a direct role in two of

the three deaths. The fact that Leonardo, whose followers had ousted him, was kidnaped and killed drew anger from the community. Some of my informants believed Ricardo did play a role in Leonardo's death. Chavo commented that townspeople believed the kidnaping was done by people working for organized crime. Regardless, these deaths showed that Ricardo was not able to ensure the safety of the community. The majority of townspeople agreed that the mayor was not a legitimate leader since they believed he could not protect them.

This was the state of Cherán before organized crime took control of the town. The community was divided as a result of a mayoral election. There was a growing sense of lawlessness because of three deaths of community members. Despite this, a group of concerned citizens was able to organize to force Ricardo out of office. He no longer had the trust or the faith of the town even though he officially still held the position of mayor. Although Leonardo's supporters did this to bring stability back to the community, it meant that there was no clear leadership in the community. Under these circumstances, organized crime slowly gained a larger presence in the town.

La Navidad oscura/ A Dark Christmas

Between 2009 and 2011, my interviewees remembered organized crime becoming more violent and increasing their demands on the people in Cherán. Their activity began to impact townspeople's daily lives. Men were usually the target of physical assaults, kidnappings, and threats, and this took a toll on people's emotional wellbeing. This section underscores the effects of *el problema* by looking at my family's experience with the kidnapping of one of my uncles, *tio* Patricio. There were many disappearances and kidnappings in Cherán during this time period, but by focusing on my family's story I am able to show a more intimate look into this time

period in Cherán's history. The stories of my *tio* Miguel and *tia* Marisa, whose family lived in Cherán at the time of the kidnapping, show that people did not have to personally experience a kidnapping or a disappearance to be impacted by them. My uncles' responses to the kidnapping highlight that the threat of violence made townspeople, particularly men, feel unable to act and organize to stop organized crime. Other men I interviewed described this feeling as *impotencia*. Finally, the story of my family demonstrates that families of the victims of kidnappings and disappearances continue to live with the emotional trauma these experiences brought them.

During this time, my parents and I stopped going to Mexico. Violence had erupted throughout different parts of the country. My family used to drive from Houston to Monterrey, Nuevo León and then to Cherán. My parents did not want to run the risk of encountering organized crime. One holiday season, my parents decided to go visit my uncles in Long Beach, California instead of going to Cherán. My uncles had also decided to stay in the United States instead of going to Cherán. One night after dinner, one of my uncles got a call from a family member in Cherán. All of the adults gathered in the kitchen and talked. At the time, they downplayed what was going on. I later found out that one of my uncles who lived in Cherán had been kidnapped. I vaguely remember this, but people in the town still remember that night. Many of my interviewees referenced my *tio* Patricio's kidnapping, and it would often become the topic of conversation among the people my mom and I would run into.

One night my mom and I decided to go to the plaza to get dinner. There was a light breeze that night, so we were craving something hot to warm up our bodies. Thankfully, the line for our favorite *atole de grano*, a thick green corn beverage, was short. I grabbed both bowls from the woman at the stand, and I gave one to my mother. We both added just enough green sauce to our *atole* to provide a kick, but not so much that our lips would be slightly burning after

every sip. Ofelia, a woman who sold pastries in the plaza, offered us chairs to sit on. We thanked her and bought her some *atole* as well. "*Comanselo ahora, porque allá no hay* (Eat it now because there's none over there)," she told us. She knew that we were going back to the United States at the end of the summer, and she encouraged us to eat the town's traditional food. She sold traditional breads like *campechanas* and *empanadas,* and she would often complain that these pastries were labor-intensive. "*Por eso ya nadie los quiere hacer*. (That's why no one wants to make them now)," she remarked. She constantly talked about how traditions were being lost.

The temperature dropped and strong winds started to rattle Ofelia's large, rainbow colored beach umbrella. I was sitting slightly outside of the umbrella. The sky lit up suddenly with a fantastic show of lighting which was followed by a clap of thunder that took us all off guard. This was our only warning. Suddenly, I felt cold raindrops falling on my brown boots. I squeezed under the umbrella to avoid getting completely soaked. Ofelia quickly grabbed two large plastic tarps and told me to tie them around the umbrella. Now we were protected from the heavy storm. Minutes passed by, and the rain had no end in sight. I looked out across the street, and I saw my *tio* Patricio's store. He owned the largest general store in the town. He had taken over after my grandfather had passed away. Now, all of the doors were closed, and the roof needed repair.

Ofelia was at her stand the night of my uncle's kidnaping. Every time that she talked about this event, she would lift her *rebozo* to cover her mouth. That night seemed like any other brisk December evening. People were in the plaza buying *atole, pozole,* fries, burgers, tacos, etc. Ofelia's niece, Jenifer, was selling with her that night. At some point, Ofelia saw the municipal police come by and clear the parking spaces besides my uncle's store. She did not think much of

it. Minutes later, black trucks parked in those spots. A group of men got out of the truck and walked into my uncle's store. Suddenly, the piercing sound of gunshots came out of the store. Ofelia immediately dropped to the floor, but Jenifer stayed in her seat and started screaming. Ofelia yanked her from her seat and told her to be quiet. She knew organized crime was behind this. Shopkeepers rushed to close their stores, and people in the plaza hurried to find a place of refuge. Ofelia did not see anyone try to stop my uncle's kidnapping.

My *tia* Marisa recounted this night several times with my mother and me. She is married to my *tio* Miguel. Miguel and Patricio's families were the only ones still living in Cherán. The night of the kidnapping, she was in her family's ice cream shop when she heard the gunshots. As soon as *tia* Marisa heard the shots, she felt a terrible feeling in her stomach. She thought they had taken her husband. She wanted to run to the other side of the plaza but knew she could not. It was too dangerous, and her family would not let her leave the ice cream shop. One day as she was recounting the story, her eyes got watery, and she looked shaken. She said, "*Nos tenían bien amenazados y asustados*. (They threatened us constantly, and we were scared.)"

I remember my family in California scrambling to find the money the kidnappers were asking for. A couple weeks later, I set up my first ever Skype video call, so my mom could talk to my uncle. We all gathered next to our large, gray desktop anxiously waiting to see my *tio* Patricio. Once he came up on the screen, the image was blurred, and the connection kept falling. Despite this, we could see the bruises in his face, and I remember that he seemed tired and exhausted. He told us that he had been left on the side of a road. Once he was able to take off the bandana that covered his face, he was completely blinded by the bright sunlight. Months before his kidnaping, organized crime had started to charge business owners a fee which was like a tax. If a business owner did not pay, organized crime would threatened them and their families. *Tio*

Patricio had refused to pay the fees that organized crime was imposing on his store. People working for organized crime would call him and threaten him, but he would not budge. After his kidnapping, my uncle no longer felt safe in Cherán, and he worried about his family. A couple months after his kidnapping, *tio* Patricio and his family moved to another state.

A couple of days after we spoke to my aunt, my *tio* Miguel also brought up Patricio's kidnapping. He was in the middle of telling us a story about a group of men that attempted to stop the allies of organized crime who were illicitly logging a section of the forests. He knew most of the men in the group and some his were close friends. As soon as these men came back from the forest, my uncle said that people working for the cartel were waiting for them. They kidnapped these men. "*Hasta la fecha siguen desaparecidos*. (To this day, they are still disappeared)," he said. Then, he paused. He started to tap his thighs, and overwhelmed with emotion he exclaimed:

> *Cuando afecta a la familia. Es cuando tú te sientes, o sea, con querer hacer algo, pero pues no, no, no puedes. No porque no había, pues, si denunciabas, estaba detrás de todo, estaba el crimen. La misma [policía] estaba [conectada] con el crimen y la misma autoridad también…Uno no podía hacer nada porque te amenazaban*
>
> When it affects the family. That's when you feel, like, you want to do something, but, well, no, no, you can't. You can't because there was no, well, if you reported, behind everything, there was organized crime. The police were [connected] with organized crime and the government was too…One could not do anything because they would threaten you

Multiple men told me they felt unable to act to try to stop organized crime and their allies. *Tio* Miguel told me he felt *impotencia* after his brother was kidnapped. In Cherán, a man is expected to provide and protect their family and community. Organized crime challenged this expectation. If a man tried to stop organized crime or their allies, he would also put his life and his family in danger. Men that tried to go against this group would receive threats, get assaulted,

kidnapped or killed. As *tio* Miguel notes, townspeople could not even go to institutions that were supposed to protect them, like the local government and police, because there were corrupt officials working with organized crime. This frustrated *tio* Miguel because he felt that he could not fulfill his obligations to his family. Another informant mentioned that *talamontes* would often drive in front of the plaza, but few people said anything to them. He said townspeople could not even look at *talamontes* in the eye because they feared retribution. This was a daily reminder that organized crime controlled the community.

For my *tio* Miguel and my *tia* Marisa, the trauma of the past continues to impact them. At the time of my interviews, ten years had passed since my *tio* Patricio's kidnapping. Miguel and Marisa were not directly subjected to the physical violence that my *tio* Patricio faced, yet Patricio's kidnapping has left emotional trauma in my family. The constant threats of violence made people feel like they were unable to act. As Miguel explains, families that had to deal with a kidnapping could not rely on law enforcement to punish and capture the perpetrators. He believed it was certain that if my family reported the kidnapping, organized crime would be tipped off by the police. Under these circumstances, there was little Patricio could do to ensure his family's safety other than leaving. My *tio* Miguel, who stayed behind, had to live with the *impotencia*, the inability to act, because he could not do anything to ensure justice without the possibility of receiving threats or violence. Organized crime used physical violence, kidnappings, and killings to take control over the town. As the stories of my uncles show, organized crime targeted people who did not follow their demands or who attempted to organize against them.

La tala/ Illicit Logging

As organized crime became more powerful, their allies started to go into the forests of the community to log thousands of pine trees. The "irrational abuse," as some of my interviewees called it, of these resources came on top of the physical and mental abuse that townspeople were already feeling because of the violence that had descended on their town. The illicit logging added insult to injury because the logging was highly visible. Townspeople would go out of their homes and see the forest on a certain hill depleted. *Talamontes* (illicit loggers), who worked with organized crime, drove large trucks full of tree trunks through the center of town. Townspeople depend on the forest for material and spiritual reasons, but they were unable to go to these sites because they were scared of encountering *talamontes*—as the story by tio Miguel of the disappeared men in the previous section vividly illustrated. Thus, most people stopped going to the forest, and those that went knew the gamble they were taking. These were daily reminders that Cherán was now controlled by organized crime.

By the time I arrived in Cherán ten years later, the vast majority of illicitly logged areas had been reforested. Tadeo, the retired schoolteacher, described the hills of Cherán around 2009 as lit up like Christmas trees because there were so many *talamontes* going up and down the dirt roads in their trucks, even at night. It was hard for me to imagine the amount of destruction that had occurred during this period. It was not until I was able to go through the personal archives of Dante Ivan Enríquez Robles that I was able to see the impact illicit logging had on the landscape of the town. Figure 1, which is below, is a picture of the *cerro* of San Miguel in Cherán around 2009. From this image, it is clear to see the number of trees that were cut and burned. The devastation illustrated in the picture happened in other forests of the town as well. *Talamontes* would work in highly organized and heavily armed groups. They would go up to the mountains and hills with their large trucks to cut pine trees and set the forest on fire. Tadeo estimated that at

its peak, more than fifty large trucks would do this on a daily basis. Some of the fires they set would go on for weeks because the majority of townspeople did not feel safe going to these areas.

Figure 1: "Preparación de terreno San Miguel (Preparing the land in San Miguel)," Archivo personal de Dante Ivan Enríquez Robles (Personal Archive of Dante Ivan Enríquez Robles), 2009.

Luisa, the clothing store owner and my mother's friend, never spoke to me about the loss of her husband, but she did recount what Cherán was like with the *talamontes*. She explained:

> *Los talamontes estaban con la delincuencia, por eso hacían y deshacían. Llevándose, pues, nuestras, nuestra naturaleza. Verdad. (pausa pronunciada) Entraron los talamontes, pero ya no nos tenían miedo ni nada. Ellos entraban con camiones [para] tumbar, este, los pinos. Diario, diario, eran como unos…. Yo creo que eran como unos cincuenta camiones que llevaban a diario*

> The *talamontes* were working with [organized crime,] that's why they [did whatever they wanted to do]. They would take, well, our, our nature. Right. (pronounced pause) The *talamontes* entered, but they did not fear us or anything. They would come in with their trucks [in order to] cut, the pine trees. Daily, daily, there like…. I think there were like fifty trucks that they would take daily.

Here, Luisa illustrates the power that the *talamontes* had. They could "*hacer y deshacer*" as they pleased without having to ask anyone for permission. In Cherán, land is communally owned. Although someone may claim a piece of land and it may be passed down from one generation to another, all of the community has access to this land.[19] More importantly, if a townsperson wanted to clear their land, they would need approval from the community. *Talamontes* did not care about these practices. Many of my informants said the *talamontes'* use of the forests was irrational. *Talamontes* and organized crime saw the forests as a source of revenue and transgressed the town's unwritten rules regarding land use.

Luisa said that during this time, people stopped going to the forests. She said townspeople were scared that they would be seen by the *talamontes* and that they would get in an altercation with them. Throughout my time in Cherán, I noticed how important the land and the forest were to the daily life of townspeople. I was there during the peak of mushroom season. Every day in the plaza, there were women that would bring large white buckets or large baskets filled with different kinds of mushrooms their family had searched for in the forests. As soon as they arrived at the market, people would gather in front of them ready to take some home. The mushrooms would sell out in a matter of hours.

[19] The Mexican's state definition of land has impacted how people interact with the forest in Cherán. Article 27 of the 1917 Constitution states, "Corresponde a la Nación el dominio directo de todos los minerales o substancias que en vetas, mantos, masas o yacimientos, constituyan depósitos cuya naturaleza sea distinta de los componentes de los terrenos, tales como los minerales de los que se extraigan metales y metaloides utilizados en la industria." This means that anything below and above the top soil is owned by the state. Indigenous communities in Mexico who seek autonomy want their communities to be except from Article 27 of the Constitution.

My *tia* Marisa cooked the mushrooms for dinner once. We all took turns getting hot, hand-made tortillas from my *tia*'s electric griddle to eat with our meal. The mushrooms she had prepared were called *trompas* and sold for $15-$20 pesos each. The mushroom's colors were those of a sunset, the orange and red blending into each other. I ate a spoonful of the mushrooms, and I was in awe of their taste. My taste buds were confused because the mushrooms tasted like *chorizo* but with a softer consistency. Like always, we eventually started telling stories while we ate dinner. My oldest cousin told us the story of when his mom had taken them up to the *monte* because she refused to pay for the mushrooms. She reasoned that they were likely not that hard to find. They spent hours in the nearest *monte* and came back home with only two small mushrooms to their names. They never did this again. I wondered what mushroom season was like when the *talamontes* had control of the forests. Townspeople depend on the forests for food, spiritual rituals, income, community, among other things. The *talamontes* took these things away because people were too scared to go to these sites.

Chavo, the owner of a *locheria* and a *tortilleria*, noted the impact that the *talamontes* and organized crime had on people's daily life. He asserted:

> *[Arturo] tiene bastante monte, y había ido a fijarse, y ya la gente comenzaron a meter camionetas. Y no bajaban dos o tres camionetas, bajaban treinta, cuarenta, cincuenta camionetas llenas de, de trozos. Y por aquí así pasaban. Y gente armada arriba de las camionetas. Gente armada así cuidando que nadie les dijera nada. Se burlaban. Había personas mayores aquí en nuestra comunidad que, que les querían reclamar, y se burlaban de ellos. Eh, a la gente que iba al cerro a tratar de reclamarles que no estuvieran tumbando sus pinos, los golpeaban. Ya eso del 2009 al 2010, estaba malísimo en Cherán. Ya nadie podía hacer nada.*
>
> Arturo has a lot of *monte,* and he went to go check it out, and the people had started to bring in trucks. And they did not bring down two or three trucks, they brought down thirty, forty, fifty trucks filled with, with tree trunks. And they passed right through here. And [there were] people that

> were armed on top on the trucks. People with arms to make sure that no one would tell them anything. They would mock them. There were older people in our community that, that wanted to complain, and they would laugh at them. Um, the people that would go up to the hill to try to complain that they should not cut their pine trees, they would beat them. Around 2009 to 2010, it was terrible here in Cherán. No one could do anything.

Chavo's description echoed the sentiments felt by other people I interviewed. Townspeople were used to seeing trucks go up to the forest because people needed firewood for the winter, to cook, or to build things. But the *talamontes* went far beyond that. Their use of the forest was seen as an abuse of the town's natural resources. Like other *comuneros,* he felt a sense of ownership over the forest. For him, the forest was a resource that was passed down from one generation to another, and its destruction carried an emotional toll. The community was already feeling the impacts of threats, violence, and deaths. Thus, the abuse of the forest came on top of the physical and mental abuse that many people already felt. To make matters worse, this was all happening in plain sight. Everyone in the town knew it was going on because they simply had to walk outside to see the *talamontes* driving in trucks full of tree trucks. But who exactly were the *talamontes* and what were they doing with the trees that they logged?

My interviewees were adamant that the *talamontes* were from the neighboring community of Capacuaro but gave me different theories on what the wood was used for. The town is known for their wooden furniture. Often, my interviewees would tell me that the townspeople in Capacuaro had depleted their own forest in order to supply raw materials for their furniture business. I drove through Capacuaro a couple of times during the summer of 2019. On the main road were shops after shops selling furniture, toys, and souvenirs all made out of wood. My interviewees who blamed the people from Capacuaro for the illicit logging reasoned that the wood from Cherán's forests would be sold to the furniture industry in Capacuaro since

their own forests had already been depleted. In this narrative, Cherán became the victim of the abuse done by another Purépecha community.

Every Sunday morning as the sun began to rise, my mom and I would go walking with Abril, an anthropologist who grew up in Cherán. During these walks, we would walk out to *el campo* or hike up a mountain, and I would interview her. One day, as I was wrapping up our interview, I asked her if she knew where all the wood was going. She believed that it was being exported. She argued that the way that the wood was cut pointed to a level of standardization. Although the people I interviewed generally told me the same story of the town before the uprising, they would often tell me different stories of what the *talamontes* were doing with the wood. Abril noted that there were no paper trails of the *talamontes'* activity, so it would be very difficult to piece together what they were doing.

Abril had a different story than Chavo when I asked her about the *tala*. She agreed that the *talamontes* had abused the forest through an "irrational" use of the forest. She also acknowledged that Ricardo, the mayor, and other members of the authority were working in collusion with organized crime. She was firm as she spoke:

> *Hubo un uso irracional del bosque. Efectivamente, en colusión, yo siempre he dicho, en alianza entre el crimen organizado y nuestras autoridades también. Y los mismos comuneros. Porque los comuneros fueron los que empezaron a abrirle el paso al narco. El narco no puede entrar así como, "ya llegamos y ya todo es nuestro." No. Tiene que haber complicidad. Y hubo complicidad con la gente de Cherán.*
>
> There was an irrational use of the forest. Indeed, in collusion, I have always said, in alliance between organized crime and our authorities too. And the townspeople as well. Because the townspeople were the ones that started to open the road to *el narco*. The *narco* can't enter saying, "We are here and everything is ours." No. There had to be complicity. And there was complicity with the people of Cherán.

Abril spoke about the central role some townspeople of Cherán played in the illegal cutting of their forests. She noted that it would have been impossible for the *talamontes* to come in and take all of the wood by themselves. They had to be assisted by certain people in Cherán who could show them the roads to the forests. Tadeo and Chavo did not mention this when they recounted their versions of what occurred. Abril's narrative went against the formal story that the majority of my interviewees told me. Although she did not provide evidence, she believed there were a number of townspeople who were active agents in the *tala*. She continued:

> *Se empezó la venta de la madera a esos grupos. Haz de cuenta que les enseñaste el camino y después se fueron. Solitos entraron y cuando [los comuneros] decían que ya no, "ah pues te voy a matar. Te golpeo en el cerro y haber si no me dejas."*
>
> [People] started to sell wood to these groups. Imagine that you showed them the way and then they went. They would enter by themselves, and when [the townspeople] would say to stop, "Ah well I'm going to kill you. I will hit you in el *cerro* and we'll see if you don't let me."

Abril wanted to make it clear that the *comuneros* who worked with the *talamontes* played a role in the destruction of their forest. They started selling to organized crime and showed them where to get the wood. Once organized crime had this information, they decided to do the work themselves. Then the townspeople had no way to stop them. This narrative contradicts the normative story. As I have highlighted, townspeople talk about the violence and abuse that suddenly appeared once organized crime became more prominent in the community. In particular, men talk about feeling *impotencia* because they could not stop the illegal cutting of their forest. These stories portray the community of Cherán with little agency as the world around them was drastically changing. Perhaps, it is easier for people to villainize townspeople from Capacuaro and the *talamontes*.

One of my informants marveled about why the *talamontes* and organized crime picked Cherán as the site to enact their destruction. He then started to piece together important details as he answered my questions. He noted:

> *Y cuando se vienen las situaciones críticas de los grupos poderosos, mafiosos, en todo el país. Pues, estos [avizoraron], y escogieron por una razón a Cherán. Eso sí, esa parte sí, ignoramos. Porque ellos hayan decidido [a Cherán]. [El lider del cartel] se mafio con la gente de Capacuaro que consume mucha madera y de algunas otras comunidades para que, de forma irracional, eh, tumbar, tumbar a la madera. Pero así en forma indiscriminada, eh, nada bien pensado…Aunque hay que decirlo también, y esta parte ojala no la aparezcas por ahí a la hora de escribirlo, también se contó con gente interna, eh. Unos por falta de trabajo. Incluida las autoridades, amenazadas, "Si nos haces algo, aguas con tu familia."*
>
> And when the critical situation came with the powerful and mafia-like groups, in all of the country. Well, they looked out attentively, and they chose Cherán for some reason. I will say, this part we ignore. Why they had chosen [Cherán]. [The leader of the cartel] allied himself with people of Capacuaro that consumes a lot of wood and some other communities so they would cut wood in an, um, irrational manner. But in an indiscriminate manner, um, not well thought out…Although I have to say it, and I hope this part does not appear once you are writing, they also worked with people [from the community], um. Some from lack of work. Including the authorities, that were threatened. "If you do something to us, watch out with your family."

For my informant, the arrival of organized crime to Cherán was tied to the War on Drugs that President Felipe Calderon, a member of the PAN (National Action Party), had launched in 2006. This war is still on going in many parts of Mexico. Thus, he believed the story of Cherán fit into a larger story of violence, death, and corruption that continues throughout Mexico.

Although this informant preferred I did not mention that a people from Cherán played a role in bringing organized crime to the community, I felt it was important to include this perspective. He did not elaborate on the reasons I should not include his comments in my

research. His comments reinforce the narrative that Abril recounted. He wanted to keep this fact under wraps, and perhaps, other people I talked to felt the same way. Townspeople might have decided to not talk about this issue because it might make the community look bad or they did not want to stir the pot in the community. Abril acknowledged that townspeople knew who was involved with organized crime.

> *Todos sabemos quiénes. Tienen nombre y apellido, pero tampoco decimos "por la culpa de fulano, por la culpa de perengano."*
>
> We all know who [they were]. They have a first name and a last name, but we also don't say "because of his fault, because of their fault."

In the accounts told by Abril and the other informant, the *comuneros* of Cherán who worked with organized crime were caught by surprise. They did not expect the amount violence and destruction that the *talamontes* and organized crime would enact. These townspeople also only sold small quantities of wood to organized crime. All in all, they cannot be completely faulted for the end result.

Conclusion

Organized crime entered Cherán because multiple pieces worked in their favor. The town had a hotly contested election where candidates did anything to secure their win. People were willing to sell their votes, and Ricardo, the candidate for the PRI, was willing to buy them. He allied himself with organized crime to obtain money. Ricardo's time in office was derailed because of a series of questionable deaths. This led to political turmoil and pushed some people in the community to no longer recognize him as the mayor. Amid all of this, townspeople were selling wood to organized crime. All of this in conjunction allowed organized crime to have the

power that it did. As Abril asserted, they could not come in and simply declare Cherán was theirs for the taking.

Once organized crime members established themselves in the community, life in Cherán drastically changed. The townspeople and the forests experienced violence on a daily basis. People would receive threats if they looked at the *talamontes* in the eye. If business owners did not pay the fees they imposed, someone would call them and threaten their family. People who tried to organize against the logging were beaten up, killed, or disappeared. Cherán became a violent landscape. In this context, people felt unable to act. If they did, their whole family would be in danger. This violence has taken a psychological toll on people. Some families have been able to mourn the loss of their family members, but others have not because their family members continue to be disappeared.

The actions of organized crime intentionally disregarded the beliefs and practices of people in the community. In Purépecha communities, respect is an important value. In a family, the elders are the people who are most deserving of respect. Chavo noted that *talamontes* mocked and laughed at some of the elders of the community. This illustrates that *talamontes* demonstrated a lack of respect even for the most respectable members of the community. They also did not respect the land or the forest that they used. People in Cherán use the forest for different activities. The forest is an essential part of their community and their livelihoods. Everyone I spoke to highlighted that the number of trees the *talamontes* were cutting was irrational. To make matters worse, they would often set the forest on fire which would further damage the forest. For the *talamontes*, the logging made sense because they would benefit from selling the wood, and few groups tried to stop them in Cherán. My interviewees disagreed with their logic because they felt the *talamontes* had devastated the forests. Finally, *talamontes*

ignored the communal beliefs that people in Cherán followed. The land is communally owned and can be accessed by anyone from the community. *Talamontes* took advantage of the fact that these lands were poorly policed, and they did not ask anyone for permission. In the following chapter, I will look at impact the illicit logging had in uniting the town and ultimately led to the uprising of Cherán.

Chapter 2: El levantamiento/ The Uprising

"En el nombre del Padre, del hijo, y del espíritu santo (In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit)," the priest with gray hair said as he made the sign of the holy cross on his body with his right hand and held a black microphone with his left hand. As he spoke, a baby boy, who was sitting on his mother's lap in the front row, was jingling and dropping his father's keys. "Amen," our reply echoed throughout the church. My mother and I were sitting in a pew to the left of the altar where the musicians usually sit during certain special masses. We arrived a couple of minutes before the mass started and had to settle for these seats. An altar boy was standing three feet away from us, and he was slowly swinging the incense burner forwards and backwards. The smell was so strong that my mom later mentioned that her throat hurt from the smell. "*Pueden ir en paz* (You can go in peace)," our priest said. "*Demos gracias a Dios* (We give thanks to God)," we said in unison. The priest turned off his microphone and walked off the altar. He usually did not linger after mass, but three people were waiting to talk to him at next to the steps of the altar. Although this priest was not as charming and amiable as the younger deacon who had arrived in the town during the summer of 2019, people still tried to ask him for advice or a blessing after church. The priest's words carry a lot of weight for the Catholics of the town. As soon as we walked out of the church, I saw tens of different pop-up canopy tents, large beach umbrellas, and plastic tarps all over the plaza. It was market day, and there were many vendors selling all kinds of things like food, clothes, pastries, CDs, and cosmetic products.

My mom and I decided to walk down a couple meters down from the plaza to my *tia* Marisa and *tio* Miguel's house to see if they were home. Their house was previously owned by my grandparents, and it is just behind my *tio* Patricio's deserted general store. Miguel is a respected member of the community, and he was a part of the first *Consejo Mayor*. My mother

and I were both shocked to find my *tio* Miguel in the house because he's usually busy doing something. He is a physical education teacher at a school in the neighboring town of Nahuatzen. Once school ended, he devoted most of his time to starting a business in the community which turned pine resin into cleaning products. As if this was not enough, he was nominated to be a commissioner for the *fiesta patronal* in October. It was a huge honor, but it was also a costly and time-consuming endeavor. Despite all of the things he had to do, he sat down with us in the chilly living room in the first floor of his house to talk to us. His youngest daughter ran down the stairs to welcome us and ran off again leaving the door to the living room slightly open. A slight breeze sneaked into the room though that open space. The sound of motorcycles and ATVs infiltrated the room, but not as harshly as the thundering sound of eighteen wheelers driving down the main road just outside of the house. My uncle and I were sitting on the same couch. He was wearing an aqua blue polo shirt and a dark blue sweater with a small Time Warner Cable logo, likely a gift from my *tio* Ernesto who lived in California.

For years, he had been in the eye of the storm while living in Cherán. For some time, he felt like he could not do anything to stop the *talamontes*, but after a while he felt something had to be done. He told me he found other friends and members of the community that felt the same ways as he did, and they tried to act to stop the *talamontes* and organized crime. He was part of groups that attempted to rally people together to fight against organized crime. Vocal members of the community, including himself, went to Morelia, the state capital, to try to get support from the state. He went with other men to build obstacles in the trails of the *montes* try to slow the destruction of the forest. *Talamontes* talked to him and his friends at gun point on several occasions. He went to pick up people who had been abducted and others who had been killed by organized crime. I asked him what pushed him to keep going through it all, and he started

shaking his legs. He talked about how it was difficult for him not to do a thing because he felt it was his responsibility to keep his family and community safe. He kept shaking his legs and drank gulp after gulp of his *torogil* tea. Every memory was just as difficult as the last. His eyes were watery and red. He described the impact of organized crime on Cherán:

> *Aquí había levantamientos, cobros de piso, secuestros exprés. Y pues ya para las síes, las síes de la tarde, ya todos en su casa. No podías salir porque, pues el crimen andaba aquí a la orden del día…[Uno] de los pilares del levantamiento fue el Padre Marco. El siempre en sus, siempre en sus, sermones y todo decía, "¿Que no hay hombres aquí en Cherán?" Porque duro más de un año quemándose el cerro de San Miguel. Y uno no podía ir, así a una carnita asada o algo así, a las orillas del pueblo porque pues iban y ahí te quitaban todo. Estaba muy difícil entonces.*
>
> There were sudden break-ins into homes, charges and fees for businesses, express kidnappings. And well around six, six in the afternoon, everyone was in their homes. You could not go out because, well organized crime was here doing their business…[One] of the pillars of the uprising was Father Marco. He always had in his, always in his, sermons and in everything would say, "Are there no men here in Cherán?" Because the cerro San Miguel was burning for over a year. And one could not go, to like a barbeque or something like that, at the edges of town because well they would go and they would take everything from you. It was very difficult back then."

Father Marco's harsh words resonated with people, but it was difficult for men to act to stop the *talamontes* and organized crime. My informants told me he was a personable priest who connected with his parishioners, so his call to action was not taken lightly. Padre Marco was stating that men had to play their role in the community. Men in the community, like my *tio* Miguel, had to face the pressures of masculinity. They were expected to protect and provide for their families and community. *Tio* Miguel mentioned that even though people in the community agreed that something needed to be done about the situation that had unfolded, few men were willing to act because of the risks they would be taking. The *talamontes* were getting dangerously close to damaging important ecological sites. One of my interviewees said he felt

that Cherán was at the brink of disaster because the forests were decimated, and men were getting kidnaped or losing their lives.

The town's uprising happened on the early Friday morning of April 15, 2011, and it was sudden and unexpected—and it was led not by men tired of feeling *impotente,* but by women. This group of middle-aged and elder women lived close to a *monte* that was being illegally logged. Before then, these women spent weeks organizing private meetings in their neighborhood with other like-minded and trustworthy neighbors. They felt it was their time to act to try to stop organized crime and the *talamontes*. After attempting and failing to get state and local government to help them, these women decided they were going to go up to the *monte* to talk to the *talamontes* and ask them why they were destroying the town's communal forests. The women had no intention to harm or attack them. Townspeople told me that a woman from this group decided to go up to the *talamontes* herself after she saw them headed toward the *monte* early in the morning. She wanted to talk to them, but the *talamontes* did not care. My interviewees noted that the *talamontes* tried to ram their truck against her body. This was the last straw. People in the neighborhood of the *Barrio Tercero* joined the women. Soon enough, the whole town knew what was going on, and more people came to the site. My informants told me the people of this neighborhood forced the *talamontes* out of their trucks, and some people beat them up and burned their trucks. The priest of *el Calvario,* a nearby church, and others who were present believed townspeople should not enact the same violence that had been enacted on the community. The crowd calmed down and decided to lockup the *talamontes* in *el Calvario*.

In this chapter, I will discuss the stories my interviewees told me about the uprising in Cherán. I ask the following questions: Why did the logging of this particular site create a greater push to stop the *talamontes*? Why were the women at the center of the uprising? How did their

organizing differ from previous actions taken by men? I analyze the conversations I had with residents of the *Barrio Tercero*, and the importance they placed on a spring near *el Calvario*. I look at the group of women from *el Calvario* and their efforts to keep their planning private which contrasted with the men's public actions. Finally, I assert that the townspeople's affective connection to the forest and communal understanding of landowning united the town in their fight to take back their community and land.

La agua es vida/ Water is Life

As noted in the first chapter, townspeople believed that *talamontes* were excessively abusing the forest by logging hundreds of acres of land. By 2011, townspeople, especially those living in the *Barrio Tercero*, started to worry because the *talamontes'* logging was starting to get dangerously close to an *ojo de agua* (a spring). When my mother would tell me stories about her childhood in Cherán, she would bring up the times there were water shortages. Back then, townspeople who lived in the center of the town relied on water taps that were placed in the corners of certain streets. These water taps were part of the network of potable water, but this network was often unreliable. It was an old system that had leaks and broken tubing. When the system would fail, people would have to go to the *ojos de agua* and other water collection areas in the *montes*.

Town elders mentioned to me that Cherán had suffered because of water many times in their lifetimes. In February of 1978, the municipal council of Cherán wrote to the state and local government about the needs of the community.[20] They said these needs "*requieren de atención*

[20] Presidencia Municipal Cherán, Michoacán, "Consideraciones programaticas para el municipio de Cherán, Michoacán," 1978. Box 3, Folder 5. Gobernación, Aguas, y Bosques, Archivo General e Historico del Poder Ejecutivo, Archivo General y Publico de Michoacán de Ocampo, Morelia, Michoacán. 5 August 2019

primordial (need the upmost attention.)" and would "*garantizar la tranquilidad de nuestro Municipio* (guarantee the tranquility of our municipality.)" The council wrote:

> *La antigua red de abastecimiento de agua y en sí el caudal que abastece para satisfacer las necesidades de nuestra población, a estas fechas resulta insuficiente; contamos con otro manantial con posibilidades de disponer de él para incrementar los volúmenes de agua requeridos.*
>
> The old network that supplies water and specifically the amount of water that it brings to supply the needs of our community is now insufficient; we have another spring which could be used to increase the amount of water we receive.

This letter illustrates that townspeople in Cherán have historically had struggles regarding water. When the outdated water system would stop working, long lines formed in the springs of the town. My mom told me people would bring buckets with them and walk several kilometers to their homes to ensure they had water. When the lines would get too long, the municipal council would have to ration water by only allowing certain neighborhoods to get water at the springs on certain days.

When I first began my research, I did not completely understand the meaning of the springs in Cherán. The last time I was in Cherán for a prolonged time was the summer after fifth grade. Back then, my mom, my sister, and I spent entire summers in Cherán. My memory from those summers is a little foggy, and I do not remember my mother taking us to the spring. Even during the summer, we did not have to face a water shortage. Other than the stories my mom told me, I did not know much about the springs in Cherán. After half-a-dozen interviews, I noticed that the people I interviewed seemed to have a special relationship to the spring in the *Cofradia*, an area close to *el Calvario*. My interviewees generally believed that I understood what the springs meant to them and the community. I decided to ask Tadeo, the retired schoolteacher, to explain why he believed these sources of water were so crucial to the community. He took off his

hat and looked at me bemused. He was taken aback by my question, as if he was shocked that I was even asking.

> *Nosotros que hemos estado en el campo, en el cerro, sabemos de la importancia hasta de una gota de agua. Entonces mucho más importante va ser un ojo de agua. Todos los ojos de agua aquí en Cherán se cuidan. Aunque sean muy pequeños, se protegen, porque pues, es la vida. Entonces llegar a pensar que se iba a perjudicar el ojo de agua que durante generaciones nos ha dado de beber…Durante muchos años estuvimos bebiendo de esa agua. Pues es nuestro, es nuestro, ojo de agua principal pues. [Dañar el ojo de agua] es cortarnos parte de nuestra vida*.
>
> People like me that have been in the fields, in the mountains, we know of the importance of even one drop of water. So, a spring would be even more important. All of the springs of Cherán are protected. Even if they are small, they are protected, because well, it's life. So, to think that the spring that for generations had given us water was [now] in danger…For a lot of years we were drinking from that water. It's our main spring. [To damage the spring] is to cut part of our lives.

Townspeople have relied on the water to survive, but they also have a generational and emotional connection to this resource. Tadeo's response highlights that townspeople felt an affective relationship to the spring in the *Cofradia*. He grew up his entire life in Cherán, and his time in the fields and in the mountains taught him that any amount of water was important. The spring had a symbolic meaning because it had been protected for generations. Tadeo's ancestors had taught him to protect this spring, and he had taught the same lesson to his children and grandchildren. Even though he eventually left the mountains and the fields to work in a classroom, he still had a respect for the spring and the water it provided. Like other indigenous communities throughout the world, people in Cherán understood water as a manifestation of life.[21] The area that the *talamontes* were logging was close to the spring, and Tadeo mentioned that people feared the logging would permanently damage it. In addition to the symbolic

[21] "Water is life" is a rallying cry that has been used by different groups of indigenous people to fight to protect their homelands and communities. For example, the Lakota people and countless supporters used this phrase during their protests in Standing Rock against the Dakota Access Pipeline in 2016.

meaning it had, the spring was essential given the community's struggle for water. Tadeo noted that harming the spring would also harm the community. This points to the emotional and functional value that the spring in the *Cofradia* had, but I still did not understand how the *tala* would impact the spring.

A couple days after the interview with Tadeo, my mom and I were walking to an interview with Doctor Lalo, a local physician. His clinic was next to the town's main church. We walked into the pharmacy which his daughter, Liz, owned and asked her if Dr. Lalo was in. Her face lit up as soon as she recognized it was us. "*Habia escuchado que andaba por acá, pero no los había visto*. (I heard you were here, but I had not seen you)" she said as she gave each us a warm hug. She could not remember the last time she had seen my mom. After recounting some memories with her, Liz told us that her father was busy, but he would back to his clinic come soon.

My mom and I left and went to the plaza. Below the blue and white stripped tent at the center of the plaza, a woman was selling *atole de tamarindo*. We rushed to the stand she had made out of a wheelbarrow to see if she had any left. It was filled with cups, napkins, a large pot, and a *banquito* she used to sit on. Fortunately for us, she still had some left. After we ordered, she uncovered the metal container that had the *atole*. She stirred the little that she had of the maroon drink with her large wooden spoon. She slowly picked up the spoon and filled up two Styrofoam cups. Her day was over, and she was heading back home to the neighborhood of Paricutin, affectionately called Paris by the locals. We walked with her two blocs down to the bridge that connected Paris to the center of town. She asked us where we were going, and my mother said, "*Lo voy a llevar allá abajo, donde nace la agua* (I'm going to take him down there,

where the water is born.)" Even though I was familiar with this part of town, I had never been to *Kumitzaru*, the area that my mother was taking me.

As we kept going down the wide and steep street, I remembered all the adventures my sister, my cousins, and I had on the same road. My aunt and her family lived about half a kilometer from *Kumitzaru*. My nostalgia was interrupted every time I saw a new house or a new small business. When I was younger, there were few shops, but now it was a sprawling neighborhood. We turned left and then left again, and we arrived at an area that looked like a theater. "*Aquí hacen nacatamales. Los hacen en estos comales y agarran la agua de allá* (Here they make the *nacatamales*. They make them in this area, and they get water from over there,)" my mom said as she pointed at the odd rock formation across from us.

As I got closer, I started hearing water droplets falling on a tub of water as if it was raining. We were at the bottom of a hill which was covered by an abundance of green leaves, trees, shrubs, fruit, and flowers. Chirping birds would fly in and out of the trees often zooming past each other. Their chirping was meshed with the loud buzzing of motorcycles driving nearby. I was immediately drawn to the water that was coming out of an exposed area with dark brown rock filled with moss. The rock was sharply layered likely due to years of weathering from the water. Long and skinny pieces of wood were placed along the rock formation to capture the water and guide it to the cement storage areas. I slightly cupped my hand and moved it below the end of one of the pieces of wood. The cool stream of freshwater puddled in my hand for a moment and then continued moving down. The concrete storage areas were painted in sections of purple, blue, yellow, and green. These are the colors of the Purépecha flag, and each color

represents the four regions occupied by Purépechas in Michoacán.[22] There were brief moments when the buzzing of the motorcycles stopped, and I could only hear the water falling and the birds chirping above. The city council placed a sign next to the *ojo de agua* that said "*El agua es el alma madre de la vida y matriz, no hay vida sin agua.* (Water is the mother spirit of life and place where life begins, there is no life without water.)" I had never seen anything like this, and I had no idea how it was possible for water to come out this way. I decided to ask my informants about the *ojos de agua* in the community.

Figure 2: Water capturing device at *Kumitzaru*

[22] The purple represents the area of Zacapu, the blue represents the *Lago de Pazcuaro* (Lake of Pazcuaro), the yellow represents the *Cañada de los Once Pueblos* (Cañada of the Eleven Towns), and the green represents the pine trees of the *Sierra Purépecha*.

People I interviewed understood that it was important to protect the vegetation around the springs in Cherán. My mom and I walked to the edge of the community to visit the *vivero* (pine nursery) that was built in 2012. The nursery was next to the winding highway that went toward Uruapan and Carapan. That morning a dense fog made it impossible to see the vehicles that were racing up and down the road. My mom and I decided to take the long route to ensure our safety. When we finally arrived at the *vivero*, the sun was just starting to rise above the pine trees across from us. We walked toward the gray office building, but the doors were locked, and there were no cars parked outside. We walked toward the nursery itself which had a green metal infrastructure covered in black netting.

A man wearing a maroon sweatshirt of the University of Southern Illinois and a matching black baseball cap approached us and asked if we wanted to enter the *vivero*. We said yes, and he opened the heavy gate. He introduced himself as Toño. In September of 2018, he was voted by his neighborhood to be a part of *Bienes Comunales*, the part of the Town Counsel that takes care of the natural resources of the community. As we were walking down the *vivero*, he drank Nescafé coffee from a silver thermos that would release steam every time he would take a sip. I asked him about springs of the Cofradia. He said:

> *El principal problema que unió a la gente aquí fue que empezaron a dañar el área de acá del ojo de agua de aquí, de, de, la Cofradia… Una señora que trabajaba en el campo vio que empezaron a cortar pinos cerca de la Cofradia y les comunico a otras…Si no fuera por [este peligro] al ojo de agua, seguiríamos igual.*
>
> The primary problem that united people here was that they started damaging the area around the spring from, from, the Cofradia…A woman that worked in the fields saw that they started to cut the trees close to the Cofradia and mentioned it to other women…If it weren't for the [danger] that the spring faced, we would still be in the same situation

As he said this, a woman turned on the irrigation arm and it slowly started moving closer to us as it sprayed water on the young pine trees below it. It moved several inches above the black reusable containers that the trees were in. Some of the pine trees were five to six inches tall while others were much smaller. For Toño, the destruction of the pine trees closest to the *Cofradia* threatened the spring. I asked him why he believed that, and he took out the young pine tree from a container in front of us. The soil attached to the tree's roots was dark and moist. He said that the pine trees absorb water and bring it into the soil. This water eventually goes to aquifers below the ground. My interviewees noted water is life. Since pine trees brought water to the ground, they were also they providers of life. Thus, the logging in the *Cofradia* posed a direct threat to a spring that had a symbolic value for the community.

Figure 3: Toño at the *vivero* holding a young pine tree

In Cherán, like in any community, water is an important resource. At the same time, the townspeople have a special relationship to the springs in their community. As Tadeo mentions, elders have taught younger generations to protect the springs and to value all sources of water. One of the reasons they stress this is because Cherán has struggled because of an unreliable water system. The water from the springs have helped members of the community during those difficult times. As the *talamontes* were getting increasingly closer to the *ojo de agua* in the *Cofradia*, people in the neighborhood began to fear that one of the most important sources of water would be lost. Despite this concern, townspeople were not able to effectively mobilize to stop the *talamontes*.

Las mujeres/ The Women

Padre Marco's questioning of men's masculinity highlighted that men were the ones that were expected to act to protect the community. The priest wanted the town to stop organized crime, but most men continued to feel *impotencia*. Even though women were feeling similar impacts from organized crime's actions, they were not expected to protect the community from the logging and their families from violence. Despite this, it was a group of older women from the *Barrio Tercero* that initiated the uprising of the community. Abril, an anthropologist who grew up in *Barrio Tercero*, told me she was approached by the group and asked to join them. She teaches at a university in Morelia and could not make all of the meetings. She still kept in touch and would talk to the group often. This section predominantly analyzes the story she told me of the role women have in the community and the day of the uprising. It was difficult for me to get an interview with *las mujeres del Calvario* (the women of the Calvario), as some townspeople

referred to this group of women. Abril told me these women were housewives, business owners, and merchants. I chose to use Abril's narrative because she knew the women who were a part of the group and was in the know about their plans at the time. *Las mujeres del Calvario* felt the need to take matters into their own hands, and their actions propelled the community to rise up.

A cold late July morning, I woke up, and I could hear the nearby roosters singing and a dog responding by barking. It was pitch black in our bedroom, and I was struggling to get back up. I slept in a blue sleeping bag we had owned since I was a teenager, and my mother insisted I wrap myself and place with two additional blankets on top. "*Como un burrito* (Like a burrito)," she told me on the night we arrived to Cherán. Back then, I would wake up sweating in bed, so I would have to take off one or both blankets in the middle of the night. By late July, those hot nights were less frequent, and I started to appreciate my mother's layering method. I was so warm and comfortable, and I could tell my mom, who was on a different bed to my left, was still asleep. I begrudgingly grabbed my phone which was on top of a makeshift night table made out of boxes next to my bed. I turned it on, and the screen blinded me for a brief moment. It was six in the morning, and Abril had messaged me late the previous night to tell me we were still on for our hike. I took a deep breath, and I took off the blankets and sleeping bag I was wrapped in. I stood up, put my slippers on, and started to get ready to meet Abril.

I opened the gates to our house and stepped onto the street. I was immediately met with a cold gust that I was not prepared for. The sun was slowly rising above the mountains to the east. I could only hear a distant buzzing of a motorcycle. At the corner of a typically busy intersection, a man had already set up his hot beverage station where he sold coffee and tea, and a woman was just starting to set up her stand where she sold *atole de leche* and *tamales verdes de pollo*. As my mom and I kept walking towards *El Calvario*, the main church in *Barrio Tercero*, we said good

morning to store owners starting to open the screens that protected their stores. The street progressively inclined which made us start to sweat by the time we arrived to *El Calvario*. I could hear people singing from inside the church which meant mass was in session. As we recovered our breaths and waited for Abril, I noticed how close the *Cerro de la Cruz* was to us. This was the route the *talamontes* would take every day at the beginning of 2011, and those were likely some of the same people they would encounter on their way to *El Calvario*.

Abril greeted us with a warm hug, and we started heading past the church. As we continued walking, the paved road ended, and the gravel and dirt road began. I did not know this side of town existed which is probably why it is called the *Cuidad Perdida* (the Lost City). After catching up, I began the interview. I tried to keep eye contact with Abril, but it was impossible to not look around me. There were few houses here, and some *milpas* stretched for kilometers. [23] The hills looked so close yet so far. It had only been a couple of hours since the sun had risen, but it was already hot. After a couple of minutes, my right arm started to ache from holding the recorder. Abril noted a majority of townspeople were dissatisfied with the state of their community leading up to the uprising:

> *Fíjate que ya había mucho descontento por todo lo que estaba pasando… La mayoría de los que secuestraron y desaparecieron, pues, fueron los que, de manera indirecta o directa, se oponían al corte de la madera… Lo hicieron público. En juntas o se lo dijeron al presidente municipal…Se volvió el caos. Fue una manera muy astuta del narco para silenciar [a la gente]… Y a mucha gente la golpearon en el cerro, a hombres sí, a mujeres no. Pero también las mujeres no decían nada. Si decían, pero no lo hacían público y eran las que más bien estaban como mirando nada más, solo observando.*
>
> There was a lot of dissatisfaction [from townspeople] because of all of the things that were happening… The majority of the people that were kidnaped and disappeared, well, they were the ones that directly or indirectly opposed the logging…They did it publicly, in meetings or they

[23] A *milpa* is an agricultural field common in Mexico and Central America. People usually grow maize, beans, and squash in these fields.

> told the mayor…Chaos ensued. It was a smart way for the narco to silence [the people] … And they beat up a lot of people in the *cerro*, men yes, women no. But the women also did not say anything. They would say things, but they would not do it publicly and they were the ones that were watching, just observing.

Women were not impacted by the actions of organized crime in the same way men were because they were not disappeared or killed by organized crime. There were groups of men that were outspoken about the injustices happening in the community, and organized crime would silence them through violence and threats. Abril believed that it was the public nature of these actions that made these men targets. The violence organized crime enacted was not random. They punished the men who went against them and used them as examples for others. Townspeople knew that if they followed organized crime's demands and/or did not oppose them, they were less likely to get into trouble with them. As Abril notes, women were aware of this dynamic and decided to voice their opinions privately to avoid retribution from *el crimen*.

> *Las mujeres empezaron a platicar. Siempre ha habido mujeres muy chingonas aquí. Siempre. Siempre. Solo que solo son visibles cuando es el asunto serio. Pero siempre han estado en todos los procesos. Aquí, las mujeres tienen una característica muy particular. Aquí, las mujeres son muy mandonas. Muy gritonas... No les da miedo.*
>
> The women started talking. There have always been tough women here. Always. Always. It's just that they are only visible when a situation is very serious. But they have always been in all of the processes. Here, women have a very particular characteristic. Here, the women are very demanding. Very demanding…They are not scared.

She explained that women's strong demanding quality often showcased when families had to settle inheritance disputes. Parents in Cherán are expected to leave behind inheritance for their daughters. Abril explained that sometimes women would be given the least fertile piece of land because parents did not expect them to work the field. Women who were in this situation

would voice their feelings and demand they get a better piece of land. As Abril noted, women would make their voices count when it mattered the most.

> *Los malosos no decían, "este terreno si, este terreno no. Este terreno es de mengano, este terreno es de zutano." No. Parejo se iban. Se iban parejo. Y pues las mujeres se encabronaron. Y empezaron a platicar.*
>
> The bad people did not say, "this piece of land yes, this piece of land no. This property belongs to him, this property belongs to her." No. They cleared everything. They would clear everything. And well the women got pissed. And they began to talk.

The cartel and its allies would predominantly beat up and abduct men and not women, but the illicit logging impacted men and women alike. The forest is communally owned, but townspeople have claimed parts of the forests. Some women in Cherán are landowners. Thus, the logging of the forest by the *talamontes* impacted their land as well. More people in the community needed to step up, and women that lived in *el Calvario* realized this.

> *Las mujeres empezaron a reunirse… [Ellas decían] 'Que ya no se puede vivir así. Que ya no se puede vivir bajo amenaza, ¿no? Ya no se puede vivir con que todo el tiempo te estén secuestrando, extorsionando. Que ya no seas libre de andar ni en tu propia casa. Ni en tus propios territorios.*
>
> The women started to gather… [They would say] 'We cannot continue living like this. We cannot live under threat, right? We can't live with kidnappings happening all the time, extorting us. We are not even free to roam in our own houses. No even in our own lands.

The women of the *Calvario* that Abril speaks of were tired of what their lives had become. As Chapter One illustrates, townspeople had to deal with widespread trauma. The women of the *Calvario* were tired of the threats and violence that the cartel had brought. For this group of women, that was no way to live. Many others had felt this way but feared acting against the *talamontes* and their allies. This group of women started to recruit other women to be a part of these discussions. They would meet in the house of one of the members of the group. They

would only invite women they knew they could trust and that were willing to act. As noted earlier, Abril was close to these women, and she would stay updated, as best she could, on what the women had discussed.

> *Los hombres ya habían ido a la presidencia, a las oficinas del gobierno del estado…a quejarse de lo que estaba pasando. ¡Y nada! No, no. Y entonces [unas mujeres del grupo] dijeron, 'Pues que ya fueron los señores.' Y [en esas juntas] se hablaba de, ahí no se hablaba de, de la presidencia municipal, de sacar [a Ricardo, el presidente municipal]. Ya no se hablaba de eso. Se hablaba de que ellas también ya habían ido [a las oficinas de Ricardo]. Y [unas de las mujeres] decían, "Ya fuimos y no nos hicieron caso." El presidente municipal decía, "No les digan nada porque esos andan armados y los van a matar. Se no es problema mío. Ese es problema de Bienes Comunales. Y no vayan. Déjenlos. No se arriesguen." Así decía. Así nos dijo... No quiere entrarle. El presidente no quiere.*
>
> The men had already gone to the town hall, to the offices of the state…to complain about what was going on. And nothing! No, no. And then [some of the women of the group] said, "Well the men already went." And [in those meetings] they would talk about, they would not talk about, about the town hall, of kicking out [Ricardo, the mayor]. They would not talk about that. They would say that they had also gone [to the mayor's office]. And [some of the women] would say, "We went and they did not pay attention to us." The mayor would say, "Do not tell them anything because they are armed and they are going to kill you. That's not my problem. That's the problem of *Bienes Comunales*. And don't go. Don't risk yourselves." That's what he would say. That's what he said… He did not want get involved. The mayor did not want [to get involved.]

The townspeople wanted to stop the logging of the forest and the violence in their community but did not feel supported by their state and local governments. Some men had tried to get the attention of the governor's office but made little headway in their discussions with them. Women and men went to their town hall to talk to Ricardo, the mayor of Cherán, but he dismissed them. He would argue that he was not in charge of the forests and that complaints about the logging would have to be directed to *Bienes Comunales*. By this point, the head of *Bienes Comunales* had fled the community because he was constantly threated by the *talamontes*

and one of his brothers was killed by organized crime. Thus, the community had no support from the state and local government which were the formal avenues of power that townspeople had access to.

The lack of support from the state and local government frustrated some of the women from the *Calvario*. These women would highlight the fact that people from the community had already tried to talk to people in power in the government, and things had not changed. Abril noted she felt that the government had abandoned them and left them to solve things on their own. The women had meetings try to find solutions to the problems that had unfolded in their community. Some of women of the group felt that everything that could be done had been done. Official avenues, like state and local governments, had already been exhausted. This group was going to have to change strategies. They could not depend on governments, so they had to take more aggressive action to stop the logging. It was time for them to talk directly to the source of the town's problems. Abril said:

> *Se había acordado que íbamos a subir al cerro, pero, después, no esa fecha, porque todos, la mayoría, trabajábamos. Y habíamos quedado que iba ser el domingo y que íbamos a invitar a compañeros para que nos, los que quisieran pues. Pero el domingo. Dijimos, "No pues sí, ya hay que subir a ver por dónde, hasta dónde [los talamontes] van ya." A riesgo de que hubiera el desmadre. Sabíamos que iba a ver bronca.*
>
> The group had agreed that we were going to go up to the *cerro*, but, after, not on that date, because everyone, the majority of us, worked. And we had agreed that it was going to be on Sunday and we were going to invite companions so that they, well the ones that wanted to join us. But on Sunday. We said, "Well yes, we have to go up to see up to where, to see up to where [the *talamontes*] have gone." There was a risk that there would be a big problem [with them.] We knew there was going to be chaos.

These women had to find their own avenue to try to stop the *talamontes*. The government was not supporting them, so they had to rely on themselves and the people they trusted. Although

they knew that violence or threats might ensue once they got up to the *cerro*, these women were still willing to act. They wanted to see the damage that had been done to the area near the *Cofradia*. These women also wanted people from their neighborhood to rise up, so they made leaflets telling their neighbors in the *Barrio Tercero* that it was time to rise up.

> *Y como antes de eso. Como el… martes o miércoles, se habían hecho unos volantitos. Y esos volantitos había que repartirlos. Pero había que, como fue como un movimiento secreto. No queríamos que se dieran cuenta la gente de quien [estaba involucrado]. Entonces se había acordado que alguien iba a pasar los volantitos, pero en la madrugada, y los iban a dejar en las esquinas… Los papelitos lo que decían es que había que levantarse pues. Que había que exigir que dejaran de cortar la madera. Que no dejáramos que se subieran los fueranos y que entraran los fueranos. Que esta invitación no lo hacia los partidos, sino la gente normal. Los comuneros que estaban preocupados porque ya parara el robo de la madera.*
>
> And before that. Like on Tuesday or Wednesday, we had made some leaflets. And we had to hand them out. But we had to, since it was like a secret movement. We did not want people to find out [who was involved.] We had agreed that someone would pass out the leaflets, but at the crack of dawn, and they were going to post them in the corners…The leaflets said that it was time to rise up. That we had to demand that they stop the logging. That we could not let foreigners to the community to go up [the *cerros*] and enter our community. That this invitation was not given by the political parties, instead it was normal people. It was the members of the community that were worried because they wanted to stop the stealing of wood.

These leaflets show that the destruction of the town's communal forest was a focal point for these women. It highlighted that this group wanted to unify the community by using the destruction of the forest as a wakeup call. Political parties and an election had divided the community, and these women were hoping the protection of the town's communal lands could bring the town together under the same cause. The actions of these women were increasingly more public, so they were taking more risks in attempting to defend their community. The *Cofradia* had a lot of symbolic meaning to them, and they were tired of the constant abuse they

were facing. Although these women had planned this out, they were still unsure if the greater community would support them. They would need the support from the majority of the community to put an end to the logging and the violence. The leaflets did not include a date for the day of action. In the end, even people that were a part of this group, like Abril, were taken by surprise on the early morning of April 15th, 2011.

K'eri Xareni/ Por la madrugada/ At the Crack of Dawn

Different groups of men had tried multiple times to stop organized crime members and their allies. Concerned *comuneros* tried to go through official avenues to get help, but they did not receive support. When organized crime would learn about these discussions, they would find out who was involved and threaten them. Public discourse soon shifted to become what James C. Scott calls "hidden transcripts."[24] Hidden transcripts are modes of resistance carried out by subalterns that are done out of sight of those in power. For instance, some men would cut trees and place them on the paths leading up the *cerros* to try to create obstacles for the *talamontes*. This was dangerous work, and some of the men who did this were killed or disappeared. On April 15th, 2011, the town's silence was broken, and people finally "stormed the stage."[25]

James C. Scott's *Domination and the Art of Resistance* has been influential for many scholars to rethink social dynamics between dominant and subordinate groups. Public transcripts are open interactions between subordinates and the dominant group which Scott also calls "being on stage."[26] We are familiar with these discourses because they are a part of public declarations, laws, and writing done by elites. These sources are easily found in archives and have formed the

[24] James C. Scott, *Domination and the Art of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), xxii.
[25] Ibid., 16.
[26] Ibid., 15.

histories that historians have written. On the other hand, a hidden transcript "represents a critique of power spoken behind the back of the dominant" and is a "discourse that takes place 'offstage,' beyond direct observation by powerholders."[27] These actions and discussions are much harder to find because they exist outside of the public discourse, but they are instrumental in negotiating power relationships between dominant and subaltern groups. Scott notes, "We are not able to tell easily under what precise circumstances the hidden transcript will storm the stage."[28] There are many levels and manifestations of the hidden and public transcripts. Those in power may have to perform in a certain way to legitimize their power, while the subordinates might have to follow the public transcript more closely if they are closer to the powerful. When subaltern groups storm the stage, they bring with them the actions, feelings, and discussions they had hidden or not as visible.

For Chavo, the owner of a *tortilleria* and *lonchería*, the start of his morning on April 15th felt somewhat strange. He was up at four in the morning to set up his coffee stand just outside of his house. By four thirty he was out in the street ready to start selling.

> *Ese día era como las cinco y media de la mañana cuando viene un amigo que vive por aquí abajo. Viene y me dice, "Dame un café." Y me dice, "Oye, no sé qué va a pasar hoy, pero va a pasar algo, algo muy grande." Le pregunte por qué. Y me dice, "Porque hay como treinta, cuarenta camionetas de Capacuaro estacionadas aquí por la carretera, por la gasolinera." Es muy raro porque nunca se estacionan ahí. Llegan y se suben al cerro.*
>
> That day it was like five thirty in the morning when one of my friends who lives nearby like down the road came by. He came and he told me, "Give me a coffee." And he said, "*Oye*, I don't know what is going to happen today, but something is going to happen, something very big." I asked him why. He said, "Because there is like thirty, forty trucks from Capacuaro parked along the highway, by the gasoline station." It's so weird because they never park there. They arrive and they go up the *cerro*.

[27] Ibid., 4.
[28] Ibid., 16.

Chavo lives in the *Barrio Segundo*, so he did not know what was going on closer to the *Calvario*. Despite this, there were signs that something was going on. Later he found out that at the same time in the *Barrio Tercero*, a woman, who was a part of the group of women demanding action, was on her way to the early morning mass at the *Calvario*. On her way there, she saw *talamontes* driving a truck on their way to start logging. She decided to have a word with them. She wanted to know why they were logging and damaging the community. She walked up to the truck and asked to talk to the men inside the truck. Instead of listening to her, the *talamontes* tried to ram their truck against her. People who saw this were indignant. They felt that these *talamontes* did not show any respect for the older woman. These people brought any tools they could find in their homes (machetes, fireworks, pans) to protect the woman. The *talamontes* likely informed their colleagues about the situation which forced them to park alongside the highway close to Chavo's coffee spot. He noted that he was surprised when he heard the fireworks:

> *Pues en lo que estábamos platicando ya se escuchaban muchos cuetes tronando por allá en el Calvario. Y dijimos, "Bueno, ¿porque tanto cuete? Que nos acordemos el día de hoy no es día de ningún santo." Porque cuando es un día de santo, pues comienzan los cuetes [temprano]…Y dijimos, "Bueno, ¿ahora que santo se celebra?" Y campanadas [de la iglesia] comienzan. Y que estará pasando. Bueno, resulta que, para esa hora, ya habían detenido, allá unas señoras [ya habían detenido] a unos talamontes.*
>
> Well in the time that we were taking we started to hear a lot of fireworks exploding close to the Calvario. And we said, "Well, why is there so many fireworks? From what we can remember, today is not a Saint's day." Because when it's a Saint's day, the fireworks start [early]…And we said, "Well, what saint are we celebrating today?" And the banging of the church bells began. And what is going on? Well, it turned out that at that time, they had already detained, over there women [had detained] some *talamontes*.

People that lived far from the *Calvario* did not know exactly what was going on. As Chavo comically explains, he and his friend thought that it was a Saint's day because of the fireworks. James C. Scott writes, "The sense of personal release, satisfaction, pride, and elation—despite the actual risks often run—is an unmistakable part of how this first open declaration is experienced."[29] It is hard to tell what exactly motivated the woman and her neighbors to act in that moment, but this open declaration against the *talamontes* pushed others to join. The feeling of personal release that Scott describes was contagious because so many townspeople felt personally affected by the actions of the *talamontes* and organized crime. Once the church bells started to ring, townspeople started to realize that something was going on. Rumors started to spread that people who lived close to the *Calvario* had detained *talamontes* in the church.

> *Toda la gente ese día medio trabajo. Muchos cerraron sus negocios y todos nos concentramos allá en el Calvario… No sabíamos mucho de lo que estaba pasando. Hasta que toda la gente iba al Calvario y ya te empezaban a informar. "Es que detuvieron a unos talamontes." Ya los [tenían listos para] lincharlos, los tenían todos golpeados.*
>
> People that day only worked for a bit. Many closed their businesses and we all concentrated in the *Calvario*… We did not know much about what was going on. It wasn't until the people went to the Calvario and people there started to inform you. "They detained some talamontes." They [prepared to] lynch them, they had them all beat up.

This public act of defiance against narco rule was a violent release of the dissatisfaction that townspeople had felt for a long time. The event was likely similar to Mikhail Bakhtin's description of a carnival. He states, "The primary carnivalistic act is the mock crowning and subsequent decrowning of the carnival king."[30] Some townspeople gathered near the *Calvario*

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[29] Ibid., 208.
[30] Mikhail M. Bakhtin and Caryl Emerson, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 124.

were enacting violence against the *talamontes*. In doing so, they were decrowning them and stripping them of their power. Bakhtin describes the decrowning as essential to a carnival because, "Carnival is the festival of all-annihilating and all-renewing time."[31] By beating the *talamontes* and burning their trucks, this particular group of townspeople was symbolically destroying their way of living under organized crime and starting anew. The priest of the *Cofradia* and other concerned townspeople were able to calm things down and prevented further violence against the *talamontes*. Scott argues that the harshest regimes are "the most liable to the most violent expressions of anger from below if only because they have so successfully eliminated any other form of expression."[32] Organized crime was successful in repressing any group or individual that attempted to stop the logging of the forest. They directed violence and threats at people they found out were working against them. At the same time, the local and state governments were indifferent and non-cooperative when townspeople from Cherán asked them for help. Concerned townspeople did not have official avenues they could use to kick-out the *talamontes* and organized crime. The last straw was that *talamontes* were logging close to the *Cofradia* which was an *ojo de agua* that had a lot of practical and symbolic value for the community. This pushed a group of women to coalesce and start planning in secrecy to stop the *talamontes*. On April 15th 2011, their private transcript stormed the stage.

[31] Ibid.
[32] James C. Scott, *Domination and the Art of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 217.

Conclusion

Townspeople in Cherán have a multilayered connection to the land and water that surrounds them. Many of my informants told me that water is life. They understood that they were ensuring their own survival by protecting the aquifers and springs present in their community. At the same time, townspeople showed anger and frustration when they talked about the destruction of the forest. Their ancestors have protected their ancestral land for generations. During my time in Cherán, I was able to go to some sacred sites in the *montes*. One of them was *El Torito*, the Little Bull, which is a large, long rock that looks like a bull. Abril told me that people came to this site to do ceremonies. I was not able to go to the ceremonies because I lacked connections with people that led them. By the end of my time in Cherán, I had a better sense of how townspeople understood their relationship to nature, but I would have benefitted from more time in the field.

In the end, townspeople's emotional connection to their communal land and water led the community to rise up. As detailed in Chapter One, organized crime and their allies were disrupting townspeoples' daily lives. The community could have rallied against organized crime to stop kidnappings, violence, and murders, but it was the illicit logging that brought people together. The *mujeres del Calvario* were very concerned about the talamontes damaging the spring in the *Cofradia*. Their actions demonstrate that there were hidden acts of resistance that organized crime could not see.

Conclusion

After over an hour, we were still stuck on the same question. Almost thirty men and women representing Purépechas from all over the state were in this dim conference room in Patzcuaro, Michoacán. The room was mostly lit from the natural light coming from the windows behind us. This was roundtable four, and we were all in this room to discuss the themes of "*Tierras, medio ambiente, y desarollo* (Lands, The Environment, and Development.)" We were all sitting in silver metal chairs with striped padding that made the chair a little more comfortable. At the front of the room, there were two state workers typing away every idea that was proposed, a man standing up who had volunteered to write things down on large pieces of paper, and a moderator. The conference room next to us had a similar set up. When there were moments of silence in our room, we could hear murmurs of what was being said next door. The administration of President Andres Manuel López Obrador conducted this consultation with members of the Purépecha community to see what ideas they had about instituting indigenous rights onto the Mexican Constitution. These consultations were planned for the rest of the summer throughout the country and parts of the United States. Indigenous communities and Afromexican populations were invited to attend. By early August, the federal government would have conducted 54 regional meetings similar to the one we were in. As an advertisement on our local state-sponsored radio station XEPUR stated, these meetings were meant to create "*Un México pluricultural, justo e incluyente* (A pluricultural, just and inclusive Mexico.)"

The moderator, a light skinned man with a raspy voice from Morelia, was starting to get frustrated. He tried to hide his frustration as best he could by being precise with his words. He had tried to synthesize people's ideas by providing suggestions. "*Lo que yo escucho es esto. ¿Que creen ustedes? Yo solo estoy diciendo cosas que ustedes ya dijieron* (What I am hearing is

this. What do people think? I am only saying the things that you have already said)," he said after he attempted to consolidate the different ideas people had. An older man with a sombrero and a maroon buttoned up shirt sitting at the front of the room asked us to move on to the second question. We all agreed. The moderator told us to think about the relationship between *tierra, territorio, y comunidad* (land, territory, and community.) After a couple contributions, a man with slick back hair and a full beard waved his pen up in the air. He was starting to get impatient, and he was frustrated with the question. Once it was his turn, he stood up and explained with a powerful voice that was most likely heard from the other rooms that there was no point in asking about the differences in these terms. All of these things were one and the same for him. Tierra is a part of the community, and the community was part of the *tierra*. This question made no sense to him because it was impossible to say where one started and the other one ended. Another man from the back of the room agreed, and he noted the spiritual value the land had to him. He reminded people:

> *Por eso se llama la madre tierra, de ahí somos. La tierra es vida. Soy yo, soy él. Dependo de él. Tengo que cuidar la, tengo que amar la.*
>
> That's why we call it mother earth, we all come from [the land.] The land is life. I am it, it is I. I depend on it. I have to take care of it, I have to love it.

This conversation was difficult because the moderator was trying to fit the demands of the indigenous people into the language of the state. The Mexican state created the difference between *tierra* and *territorio* in Article 27 of the Constitution. It stated anything below and above the topsoil was owned by the state. Thus, landowners only owned the topsoil in their properties, and they did not control the entire territory. This language was limiting, and it did not reflect the Purépechas' relationship to their lands. This is why several people at this roundtable

were frustrated with the conversations. In addition, this process was meant to give indigenous people a voice, but this consultation would only happen once in each region. Through these consultations, the state positioned itself as benevolent but implied that indigenous people needed it to have a voice. My mother and I had to wake up before dawn to get on a bus to drive us for two hours to Patzcuaro. This long journey was likely the reason we were the only community members from Cherán at the meeting.

Several officials representing the federal government were at the meeting, and they wanted to make it clear that they were there to listen. A man with dark thick black hair and a mustache introduced himself as a lawyer and the coordinator for indigenous rights at the *Instituto Nacional de los Pueblos* Indígenas (National Institute of Indigenous Peoples.) He wanted to give historical context to the consultation. He said that for most of the people in the room, this process was not new. He believed many of them had participated in similar meetings in the early 1990s in response to the uprising of the Zapatistas in Chiapas.[33] Most of the attendees were middle aged, and some of them nodded as he spoke. He praised the Zapatistas for demanding rights for all of the indigenous people of Mexico. Though he noted, *"[En ese tiempo,] se tuvieron que usar armas. Ahora, no se necesitaron usar las armas [para conseguir los derechos]* ([Back then,] they had to use arms. Now, arms were not needed to [obtain your rights.]" I grimaced as soon as he said that because he was forgetting communities like Cherán.

In reality, Purépecha communities throughout the state had fought to protect their lands and their rights. Cherán is a clear example of that. The town's battle only started when they rose up. Several of my informants told me after the uprising the town shut down the roads that entered into the community because they wanted to ensure organized crime and the *talamontes* would

[33] The Zapatista Army of National Liberation was militant group, of mostly indigenous members, that formed in Chiapas during the 1990s.

not come back. The townspeople of Cherán could not rely on elected officials, municipal police, or political parties to stop the destruction of their forest. My interviewees noted the community used practices that were ingrained in their past, such as *fogatas* (bonfires), a *ronda comunitaria* (a community watch), and *retenes* (checkpoints), to protect their themselves. The community opted to fight for their right to govern themselves based on *usos y costumbres* (uses and customs) due to the lack of support they received from the people and political organizations they felt should have helped them. By stating that indigenous people did not have to raise arms, the lawyer working at the INPI was erasing the struggles and sacrifices of indigenous people throughout the country.

The relationship between indigenous communities and the state is changing. Marisol de la Cadena describes the dangerous roads to the home of her Quechua informants as "a result of state policy that has abandoned areas deemed remote, and a biopolitics of neglect, buses and roads are precarious at best, and frequently fatal."[34] Cherán experienced a similar neglect during 2007 through 2011 when the town was overtaken by organized crime, and state and local governments ignored their problems. This neglect pushed them to fight for their right to govern themselves based on *usos y costumbres*. Throughout the state, an increasing number of Purépecha communities are also fighting for their right to govern themselves through a similar system. At the time of my research, the third *Consejo Mayor* was several months into their three-year administration. The *K'eris* I interviewed told me that the council was still trying to figure out what its relationship to the federal government will look like. If more indigenous communities continue to opt to govern themselves based on *usos y costumbres*, the state will have to redefine its relationships to these communities.

[34] Marisol de la Cadena. 2015. *Earth Beings: Ecologies of Practice Across Andean Worlds*. Vol. 2011. Durham: Duke University Press, xviii.

Finally, the success of the movement made townspeople gain an increased sense of pride in being from Cherán and being indigenous. At the neighborhood meetings in mid-June, parents of young children demanded that the *Consejo Mayor* sponsor classes of Purépecha. These parents wanted their children to learn their language because it would connect them to their culture. The *Consejos* have all prioritized cultural events and activities. In front of my house, there is a *Casa de la Cultura* (House of Culture) where children would learn to play traditional Purépecha music like *pirekuas*. Sometimes as the sun was coming down behind the rolling mountains to the west of us, my mother and I could hear the children strumming the town's unofficial anthem, "El Truinfo de Leco." The song serves as a reminder to townspeople of the value of their heritage and the valor in their history.

El Triunfo de Leco[35]
Interpreted by Profesor Ramiro Sánchez

Que viva Leco, sus voluntarios
Y que viva, y que viva
Que viva, que viva el pueblo de Cherán

Pueblo de heroica leyenda
Y de magnifica tradición
Álzate fuerte que ese es tú estirpe
Soberana, de la sierra
De tu pasado que vive en mi corazón

Arte, belleza, y valor
Raros prestigios te dan
Si tus pendones subliman a Michoacán

Que viva Leco, sus voluntarios
Y que viva, y que viva
Que viva, que viva el pueblo de Cherán

[35] Casimiro Leco López (Churhú) is a local hero in Cherán. Townspeople say that during the early 20th century, an American owned company sought to exploit the forests of Michoacán. Leco, along with his volunteers, rose up to protect the town's forest. This song commemorates that triumph.

Figure 4: Juchari Uinapekua (Nuestra Fuerza, Our Strength)