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Demographic Changes in the Purépecha Region of Michoacán, Mexico: 1970-2000

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Abstract

This study provides an overview of demographic changes that occurred in the Purépecha (Tarascan) region of Michoacán, Mexico between 1970 and 2000. The region, defined primarily by the distribution of Purépecha speakers, is examined with respect to overall population changes, migration, language, urbanization and employment as measured at the municipal level. Results showed that the pattern of cultural contraction of the region has stabilized and may actually be reversing. Additionally, this study defines three types of municipios: core area, urbanizing, and transitional, each of which has a different role in the functioning of the region as a whole.

Keywords: *Purépecha, Tarascan, Michoacán, Mexico, demographics, population*

Resumen

Esta investigación provee una visión global en cuanto a los cambios demográficos que han ocurrido en la región purépecha (tarasca) de Michoacán, México, entre los años 1970 y 2000. La región, fundamentalmente definida por la distribución de la población purépecha-hablante, es investigada con respecto a los cambios globales de población, migración, lengua, urbanización y empleo a nivel municipal. Los resultados muestran que el patrón cultural, que antes mostró una tendencia a la reducción, se ha estabilizado y actualmente pudiera estar moviéndose al revés. Este estudio define, además, tres tipos de municipio: municipios del área focal, municipios urbanizándose y municipios de transición, donde cada uno ocupa un papel distinto en la dinámica de la región en su conjunto.

Palabras claves: *Purépecha, tarasca, Michoacán, México, demografía, población*

Introduction

Mexico's Purépecha (Tarascan) region is a mountainous area west of Lake Pátzcuaro in northwestern Michoacán. An area of rather intensive cultural and economic study during the 1940s and 1950s (e.g. Brand 1943, Beals 1946, Foster 1948, West 1948), little basic demographic work on the region has been carried out since that time. Yet it was during the period after the 1950s that the region experienced several important demographic and economic changes (Belshaw 1967, Foster 1979, Kemper 1981) including the quadrupling of the state's population between 1950 and 2000 (INEGI 2001) and increases that Mexico experienced in terms of internal communication, employment, and income. Since the 1950s, surface transportation improvements in Michoacán have lessened its physical isolation, resulting in increased integration into the broader Mexican and international economies. However, while the social and economic linkages between



Figure 1. The areas with Purépecha speakers are shaded in grey

Michoacán and its neighboring states have researchers working in the Purépecha region are keenly aware of the linkage between rural places and urban processes, and development initiatives have, at least on paper, attempted to incorporate this understanding into their objectives. Yet regional development initiatives in the region have had mixed results (Kemper 1981). Analysis of demographic changes, particularly those related to persistent use of indigenous language, can serve as a useful first step in a greater understanding of the region. Such an understanding is critical as the region continues to be the focus of economic and social planning.

State Demographic Characteristics

In 2000, Michoacán was home to more than 3.9 million people, or approximately 4.1% of the national population. The urban population was just over 2.6 million, an increase of 16.13% from 1990. The rural population showed a much more modest increase to 1.37 million or approximately 1.24% since 1990. The state population has continued to age, with people under the age of fifteen accounting for 36.7% of the total population in 2000 as compared to 41.6% in 1990. The natural increase rate for Michoacán in 2000 was 1.9%, with a general fertility rate of 2.5 and an average life expectancy of 70.7 years (INEGI, 2002).

Michoacán's population is unevenly distributed with the five largest municipios (Morelia, 620,532; Uruapan, 265,699; Lázaro Cárdenas, 171,100; Zamora, 161,918; and Zitácuaro, 138,050) accounting for over one-third of the total population of the state. Of the five most populous municipios Uruapan is within the Tarascan region, while Morelia, Jacona, and Zamora are contiguous to the region. These large population centers have played, and continue to play, an important part in the demographic dynamics of the region.

Tarascan Region Demographic Characteristics

Population

Within the Tarascan region, the total population grew from 477,314 in 1970 to 812,993 in 2000, or an average annual growth rate of 2.34% (Table 1). Most of this growth occurred prior to 1990, as growth rates from 1990 to 2000 averaged 1.0% per year. Twelve municipios had growth rates that were lower for 2000 as compared to the 1970s. Two municipios, Coeneo and Tangancícuaro, experienced negative annual growth rates of 1.61 and 0.30% respectively, while Uruapan, Tingambato, and Tangamandapio had growth rates of over two percent (Figure 2). Kemper (1981) contrasted the Tarascan region with the neighboring municipios of Apatzingán, Zamora, Jacona, and Morelia—urban areas that received substantial private and governmental investment prior to the 1970s. These neighboring municipios saw an average annual growth rate of 7.4% between 1960 and 1970, and 2.2% between 1990 and 2000, compared to Tarascan region's rates of 2.9 and 1.0 for the same periods. The high rates of growth prior to the 1970s just outside the region acted as attractors, draining most of the natural increase in population away. Since that time most of the municipios in the region, especially the less urbanized, have had very modest population growth, while the three most urbanized municipios (Uruapan, Pátzcuaro, and Los Reyes) accounted for nearly 70% of the population growth since 1970.

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Table 1. Population change in Michoacán

⁴The number of times larger the dominant city is than its nearest competitor in terms of total population.

⁵Percentage of the population that did not reside in the municipio in 1995.

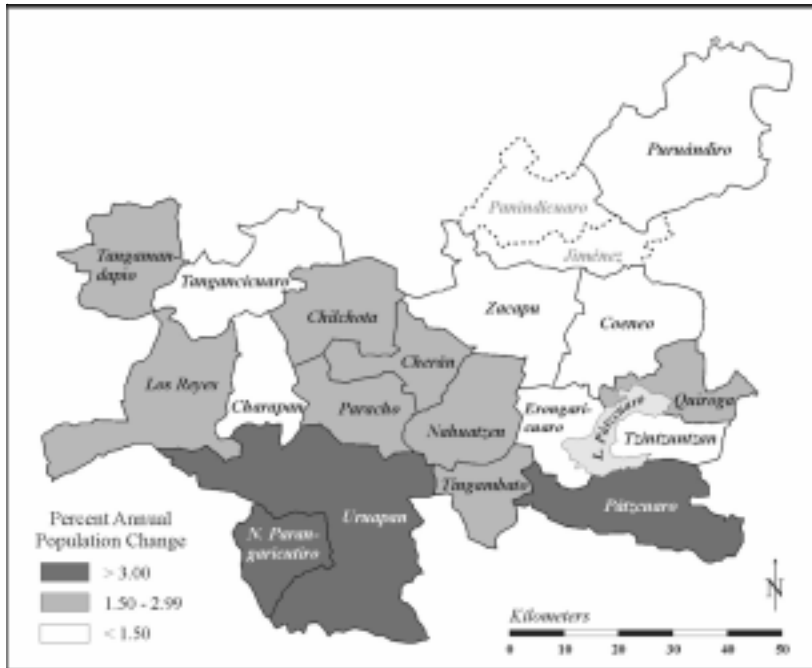


Figure 2. Population growth rates: 1970 – 2000.

Indigenous Language

In 2000, approximately 7% of the Mexican population over the age of five spoke an indigenous language, while indigenous language speakers accounted for 3.5% of the population of Michoacán. The number of indigenous language speakers in Michoacán increased from 62,851 in 1970 to 121,849 in 2000. Purépecha accounts for nearly 85 percent of indigenous speakers, with far fewer Náhuatl and Mazahua speakers. In 1940, eleven municipios in northwestern Michoacán had 30% or greater Purépecha speakers (both monolingual and bilingual). Paracho, Cherán, and Charapan had over 50% Purépecha speakers, with Paracho having the largest number in absolute terms (5,389). The two municipios that had less than 10% Purépecha speakers were also the largest in terms of total population, Uruapan and Parícutin.

By 1970, all municipios had experienced a relative decline in Purépecha speakers, although the absolute number of Purépecha speakers within the region was relatively unchanged. Chilchota, Uruapan, and Quiroga had the largest absolute number of Purépecha speakers, accounting for one-third of all speakers in the region. Uruapan's dramatic increase in Purépecha speakers was due to population displacement from the area around Volcán Parícutin after 1940 (Nolan 1972). Charapan (40.11%), Cherán (39.96%), and Chilchota (39.32%), three relatively isolated municipios, had the largest relative number of Purépecha speakers.

By 2000, for many municipios the long term trend in the decline in the number of Purépecha speakers had reversed. Eleven municipios experienced an increase in total number of Purépecha speakers, and while a few of these increases were inconsequential, others were quite substantial.

Four municipios experienced an annual increase in Purépecha speakers from 1970 to 2000 in excess of 5%; at the same time they experienced an average annual growth rate of 3.2% for the same period (Figure 3). A fifth municipio, Puruándiro, experienced a 26.67% increase, but this is an artifact of the municipio's low indigenous speaker population. In 1970 there were only 15 persons identified as indigenous language speakers. In 2000 this number had risen to 135. In absolute terms, the number of Purépecha speakers increased from 51,491 to 99,231 from 1970 to 2000. Of these Purépecha speakers, 15.3% were monolingual and 84.7% were bilingual (Purépecha and Spanish) representing a 55.3 and 101.5% increase from 1970 respectively. Four municipios—Nuevo Parangaricutiro, Tangancicuaro, Tzintzuntzan, and Zacapu—saw declines in the number of Purépecha speakers since 1970, having an average annual decrease of -0.69%. Large annual percentage increases were also noted for the four neighboring municipios, but as with Puruándiro, these increases were the result of low numbers.



Figure 3. Annual change in indigenous language speakers: 1970 - 2000.

Urbanization and Settlement Size

In 1970, there were sixteen municipios that were dominated by very small settlements, with 65% of the settlements having fewer than 500 people and 94% having fewer than 2,500 people. By 2000 there had been a significant shift in population distribution within the Tarascan region. In 1970 the largest city in the region, Uruapan, contained approximately 20% of the regional population, while by 2000 this figure had increased to nearly 30%. Perhaps more importantly, the percentage of people living in the smaller settlements (1-499 and 500-2,500 persons) had decreased. Approximately 6% of the regional population lived in settlements of fewer than 500 people, while 20% lived in towns of between 500 and 2,500 people. This shift away from smaller settlements has led to several municipios being dominated by a single town. The city of Uruapan contains

85% of its municipio population, Nuevo Parangaricutiro and Cherán contain about 78%, and Zacapu contains 70%. Half of the 18 municipios have 50% or more of their population living in a single town, while only two municipios (Erongarícuaro and Coeneo) have less than 20% living in a single town.

Another means of examining the dominant position of a town within its municipio is based on town size relative to its nearest competitor. Of the 18 municipios in the Tarascan region, four towns were over ten times the size of their nearest competitor within their municipio and these corresponded to three of the four most populous municipios. The exception is Nuevo Parangaricutiro which, while twenty times the size of its nearest competitor, is in a municipio that has a relatively low total population. Its close proximity to Uruapan is the most likely explanation for the absence of smaller towns. Six towns were at least three times the size of their nearest competitor within their municipio (Figure 4). Only eight of the 18 municipios had no dominant settlement and these municipios tended to have lower total populations, but there were exceptions. For example, Chilchota was ranked eighth in terms of total population but was not dominated by a single town. Conversely, Cherán and Nuevo Parangaricutiro were ranked thirteenth and fourteenth in population yet both were dominated by a single town.

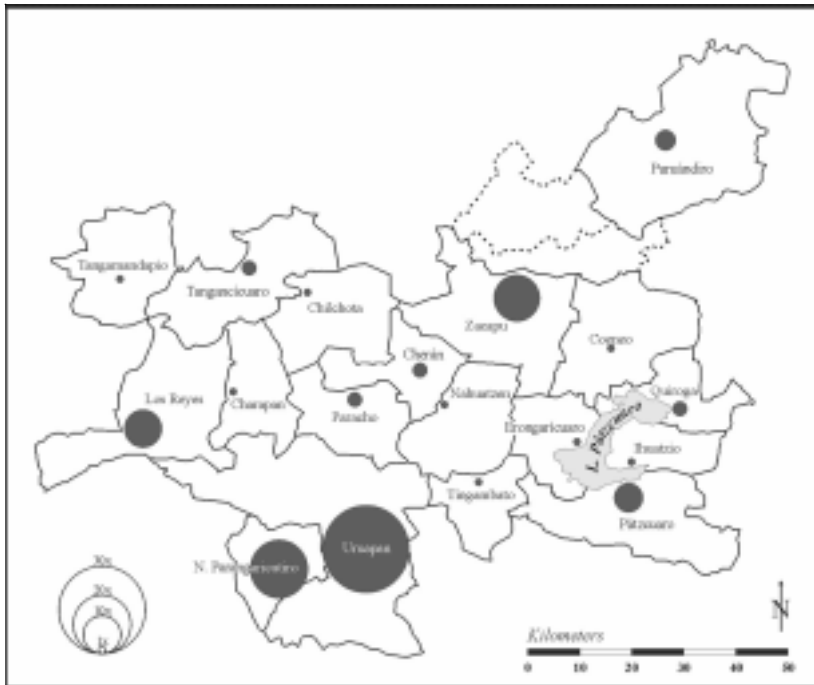


Figure 4. Principal city dominance based on 2000 population.

Migration

The municipios with the largest urban centers have tended to experience the highest levels of immigration, but there are a few exceptions. In 1995, Uruapan, Los Reyes, and Nuevo Parangaricutiro had greater than 2% of their population as migrants from other municipios in the state² (Figure 5). Tangancícuaro, Pátzcuaro, Tingambato, and Erongarícuaro had between one and two percent of their population as migrants

from other municipios in the state. The rest of the municipios had less than 1% of their population as immigrants. These migration figures are not extraordinary; the percentage of Morelia's population who are immigrants was about the same as Uruapan's (2.97 and 2.95 respectively). Nationally, internal migration had been declining during the 1980s as the government tried to ease immigration pressures on Mexico City. Michoacán was one of eleven states targeted for emigration under the Plan of National and Regional Demographic Policy (Cabrera 1982), and given the large numbers of Michoacanos immigrating to the United States (Dagodag 1975, Reichert and Massey 1979, Cornelius 1989, 1990), it is not surprising that immigration from other parts of Mexico to the region has been relatively small. From the available data, it appears that migration into the region from other municipios with Michoacán is relatively light, accounting for just over 1.5% of the region's total population. What little migration occurs is generally from the less urban to the more urban municipios.



Figure 5. Percent immigrants over 5 years old: 1995.

Employment

The average employment rate for the Tarascan region fell below the state's average employment rates for both 1990 (38.84% versus 39.12%) and 2000 (43.73% versus 44.53%), but not significantly so. Total employment for both men and women over the age of 12 years ranged from a low of 30.32% in Charapan to a high of 53.17% in Quiroga. Coeneo, Charapan, Nahuatzen, and Cherán saw declines in their percent employment between 1970 and 2000, while Tingambato, Uruapan, Zacapu, Los Reyes, and Quiroga saw increases of greater than 7% during the same period. The percent change in employment (male and female combined) was highest among the southern municipios, while the municipios west of the lake tended to experience employment decline (Figure 6).

By comparison, the four neighboring municipios witnessed an increase in the economically active population from 3.36 to 14.82% between 1970 and 2000.



Figure 6. Percent employment change: 1970 – 2000.

As expected, employment rates for males and females were quite different. The percentage of males over the age of 12 years who were employed ranged from a low of 51.60% in Charapan to a high of 76.48% in Nuevo Parangaricutiro, with an average among the 18 municipios of 66.86%. Female employment rates were much lower throughout the region, ranging from a low of 12.33% in Charapan to a high of 35.28% in Quiroga, and an average rate of 23.40%. The highest female employment rates are found in Uruapan, and in the municipios on the western edge of Lake Pátzcuaro. The higher levels of female employment in Uruapan and Pátzcuaro are due in large part to the urban character of these municipios. However, this is also an area of intense permanent cultivation (especially avocados and coffee) and increased female employment here may be related to new opportunities in the agricultural processing sector (see Arias and Mummert 1987).

Redefining the Purépecha Region

Indigenous language has been key in defining the spatial extent of the Tarascan region. As is common, minority languages die out due to immigration of non-indigenous speakers, regional integration into the larger society, and the absence of home and formal schooling in the language (Hasler 1977). West (1948), Kemper (1981), and others have traced the decline of Purépecha through the 1970s. Therefore, finding that the percentage of the population that speaks Purépecha—the single best characteristic for defining the Tarascan region—saw modest, but important increases from 1970 to 2000, was quite unexpected. While mono-lingual Purépecha speakers continue to decline,

bilingualism has been increasing. Purépecha is currently being taught in bilingual elementary schools scattered throughout the region. Perhaps the best example of this can be found in the village of Arantepacua, where the newly constructed bilingual school has attracted over 500 elementary students from neighboring settlements.

In 1970 five municipios had approximately 30% of their population Purépecha speakers; by 2000 this number had risen to seven. The highest percentage of Purépecha speakers are found in the five municipios of the mountainous areas west of Lake Pátzcuaro and the two outlying municipios of Quiroga and Tangamandapio. When we include with this group those municipios that have indigenous language populations that are increasing, then the spatial contraction of the Purépecha language region appears to have stabilized. The decades-long absence of Purépecha speakers in Puruándiro suggest that continued inclusion of this municipio in Tarascan regional studies should be reexamined. Other municipios which could now be considered marginal to the Purépecha linguistic region include Tangancícuaro, Zacapu, Nuevo Parangaricutiro, and Tzintzuntzan.

Given that in all municipios Purépecha is a minority language, other demographic characteristics need to be incorporated into our definition of the Purépecha region. There is no subset of characteristics that mark certain municipios as sufficiently different from others, let alone are able to capture what is really happening "on the ground". Yet without some formalized set of criteria for inclusion, it would be impossible to examine and compare the processes that influence this area to other areas. Since examining these processes as they apply to a specific area is important in understanding that area's place in the broader context (e. g., national and international), some means of delineating a "Purépecha region" must be developed.

Based on the demographic data examined here three groups of municipios can be delineated. All three groups need to be considered when examining demographic changes in this area since, in most respects, these groups of municipios operate as a functional region. Group 1 are those municipios that make up the *Purépecha core area*, and include Charapan, Chilchota, Nahuatzen, Paracho, and Tangamandapio (Figure 7). This core area can be characterized as having the majority of Purépecha speakers (46,808 or 47.2%), yet accounts for only 15% of the region's total population. The average annual increase in the number of Purépecha speakers is generally higher here. These municipios tend to have a single town of moderate size in which approximately one-third of the municipio's population lives. Population density in the core area is low, as are employment rates and immigration.

Group 2 municipios are those that are best described as *urbanizing municipios*, and include Los Reyes, Nuevo Parangaricutiro, Pátzcuaro, Quiroga, Uruapan, and Zacapu. Approximately 66% of the region's population lives in these eight municipios, as do 44% of the Purépecha speakers. In most cases (six of these eight municipios) there has been either no change or a decrease in the percent of the population that speaks Purépecha. The two instances where Purépecha speakers are increasing (Uruapan and Los Reyes) also have some of the highest immigration rates. Although immigration into this region is generally fairly low, the municipios of this group have the highest immigration rates. These municipios are dominated by a single town or city which on average is twelve times as large as its nearest competitor. Nearly three-quarters of the population of these municipios live in the dominant city. Population density is high, as are employment rates.

Group 3 are the *transitional municipios*, and include Cherán, Coeneo, Erongarícuaro, Puruándiro, Tangancícuaro, Tingambato, and Tzintzuntzan. Population growth for these municipios is the lowest of all three groups. There tend to be fewer Purépecha speakers, moderate immigration and employment rates, and low population density. In general, these municipios are not dominated by a single city or town, however, there is an

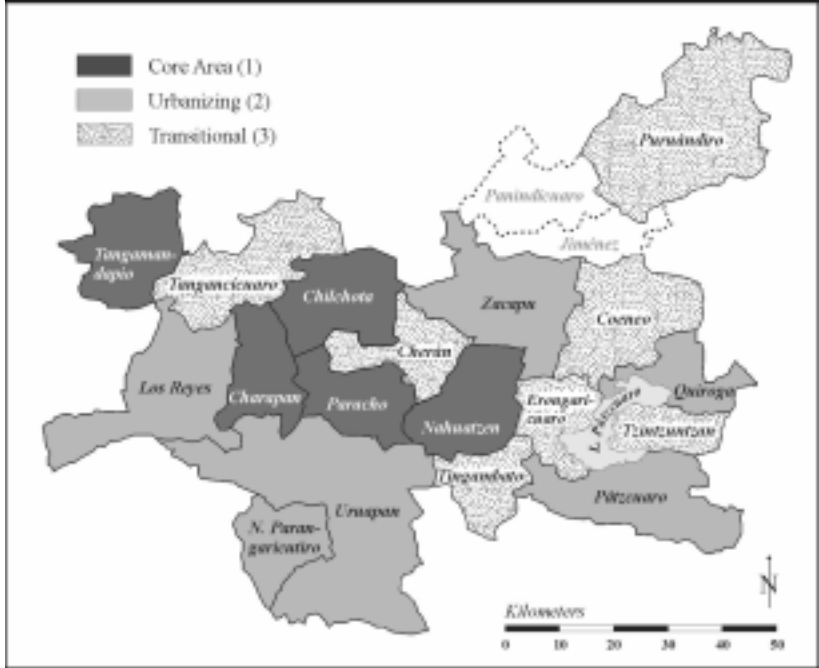


Figure 7. Municipio groupings based on current demographic characteristics.

imbalance in the distribution of the population relative to settlement size. Within each municipio there typically is a town which is larger than its nearest competitor, but the difference between the two is not nearly as great as in the urbanizing municipios. This signals the growing importance of these towns (e.g., Puruándiro, Tangancicuaro, and Cherán) and suggests that these municipios are becoming more urbanized.

Demographic Dynamics in the Region

The demographic processes that have created these three broad categories of municipios have been persisted for decades. During the 1950s many of the larger towns with reasonably high levels of accessibility were experiencing an influx of mestizos (Stanislawski 1950). And while some municipios in the region experienced population growth between 1990 and 2000, none experienced growth rates matching those of the 1950s through the 1970s. The highest rates of population growth occurred in the southern section of the Tarascan region, due in large measure to the combined influences of Uruapan and Patzcuaro. Another municipio experiencing moderate population growth, Tangamandapio, is influenced by its proximity to the Zamora/Jacona urban complex. The Purépecha core municipios have grown at an average annual rate of 2.34% over the last 30 years, which is similar to the rest of the state. Two municipios have experienced population decline. Tangancicuaro has seen a modest decrease in population in recent years, while Coeneo has seen its population decline since the 1970s.

The fact that only two municipios have seen actual population decline is surprising given the attractive forces operating on the region due to the proximity of Morelia,

Apatzingán, Uruapan, and Zamora. The Purépecha core area's population has been growing modestly over the past few decades, suggesting that natural increase more than compensates for emigration, given that this area experiences little in the way of immigration.

The Purépecha core area is bounded on both the north and south by increasing urbanization. The spatial extent of the urban influences appear limited, to a large measure, by transportation infrastructure, and therefore indirectly by topography. Urbanization is most concentrated along the two east-west highways (MX-15 to the north and MX-14 to the south). These two highways converge just east of Lake Pátzcuaro, another area of increasing urbanization (Pátzcuaro, Quiroga, Santa Fe de Laguna). Only to the mountainous west has urbanization been relatively slow to progress, confined primarily to a few cities (e.g., Los Reyes, Paracho, Cherán). It would be inaccurate to describe the urbanization along these highways as continuous; rather it is limited to a fairly confined area in and around the cities along these highways, whose influence is also limited. For example, the city of Zamora is having a much greater impact on the contiguous municipio of Tangancícuaro than on somewhat more distant municipios of Tangamandapio and Chilchota.³ Cherán and Paracho, located along MX-37—a bridge road linking the Sierra to the Tierra Caliente, as well as MX-15 and MX-14—have also been experiencing limited urbanization. This is more apparent in Cherán, since the municipio has few settlements outside of the town of Cherán.

While the largest of the region's towns are certainly urban in both character and morphology, it is the profusion of tiny hamlets on the outskirts of the larger cities that may hold the key to future regional urbanization. A good example of this is found around Pátzcuaro, although Uruapan, and to a lesser extent Los Reyes and Zacapu, are experiencing similar patterns. Within 10 km of Pátzcuaro there are nearly 30 villages of less than 1000 people and several dozen more hamlets of only 50 people or less. These hamlets are especially prevalent along the major regional roadways leading out of the city and form a kind of diffuse suburb encircling Pátzcuaro. Housing construction here is a nearly continuous process, and the concurrent proliferation of mini-businesses gives this area its urban character.

The three groups of municipios interact in a typical urban-rural manner. Lack of economic opportunities in the more remote villages of the transitional municipios leads to relatively high levels of urban migration. The migration is most often to the larger urban centers, but smaller urban places such as Paracho and Cherán also experience a certain level of growth. Not all transitional municipios are experiencing the same processes. While Cherán is becoming the dominant city within its municipio, the overall level of population growth within the municipio is small, suggesting rural to urban migration both into Cherán, as well as out of the municipio. Coeneo has been losing population for three decades, while Tingambato has been growing for three decades. The common characteristic of these transitional municipios is their proximity to the urban centers. This proximity links the two groups together, but individual municipio response to this urban linkage varies.

Transportation infrastructure plays an important role in the rural-urban linkage, and may be largely responsible for the continued fracturing of the Purépecha core area. The Sierra Tarasca west of Lake Pátzcuaro has only two significant of lower elevations, and it is through these passes that north-south connecting roads have been built. To the east MX-37 runs through the municipios of Cherán and Paracho, connecting to Uruapan. Although considered part of the core area, Paracho has some characteristics of a transitional municipio, especially near the highway. All of the towns along this route have expe-

rienced increased population growth, much of it from the outlying smaller communities. To the west MX-50 and the train line connect Zamora with Los Reyes, again with predictable consequences. These north-south oriented bridge routes appear to be fracturing the Purépecha core area into three smaller remnants: Tangamandapio, Chilchota-Charapan, and Nahuatzen.

Although the most visible changes to the character of the region have been occurring in and around the larger urban centers, important changes have also been occurring in the more remote towns and villages. Historically, craft production in the region had been geared more towards the regional market (Dinerman 1972), where the rural indigenous villages of the hinterlands occupy a subordinate production role to market role of the larger mestizo towns (Aguirre Beltrán 1967, Dinerman 1978). As Uruapan, Los Reyes, Pátzcuaro and the other larger cities have become more integrated with the national and international economies, craft production in the rural areas has increasingly become tied to the export economy (Harner 2002). One of the more important rural home-based industries has been furniture production, which has supplanted traditional crafts in many rural towns. While urbanization in the region has certainly diluted the traditional Tarascan culture, it has also provided some heretofore unavailable opportunities.

Conclusions

As with previous research (West 1948), here the extent of the Purépecha (Tarascan) region was defined by the distribution of Purépecha language speakers. Between 1970 and 2000, while the population of the region increased by 350,000 (a 70% increase), largely the result of in-migration, the number of Purépecha speakers also increased, (by nearly 93%), a pattern especially noteworthy given the decline in the number of Purépecha speakers during the 1970s (Kemper 1981). Demographic patterns within the Tarascan region revealed that the increase in the number of Purépecha speakers was not uniform. In fact, the Tarascan region can be further defined by three types of municipios. First, the Purépecha core area municipios, include (Charapan, Chilchota, Nahuatzen, Paracho, and Tangamandapio) containing the majority of Purépecha speakers. Second, the urbanizing municipios, are large municipios where the number, but not the percentage, of Purépecha speakers is increasing. Third, the linguistically peripheral transitional municipios have had modest population growth and contain relatively few Purépecha speakers.

Factors that influenced regional demographic patterns since 1970 may be linked to peripheral urban development. The highways that connect the peripheral urban centers appear to be fracturing the core area. Settlement within the core municipios remains diffuse, while the municipios on the periphery tend to be dominated by a single urban center. These peripheral urban centers are each surrounded by dozens of tiny hamlets, especially near the major regional highways. These hamlets act as focal points of in-migration, both from inside and outside the region. As these small settlements are incorporated into the larger urban complex, the distinction between the periphery and the Purépecha core region grows larger.

While this study details selected demographic trends of the Purépecha, further research is needed into the role of internal and external influences, particularly the role of changes in their material and non-material culture.

Notes

¹Two other municipios, Panindícuaro and Jiménez, had fewer than 20 Purépecha speakers in 1970 and fewer than 75 in 2000. No towns in these municipios are listed in West's (1948) Table 1- *Distribution of Tarascan-speaking folk by locality, 1940*. These municipios are depicted on the maps for cartographic clarity, but were not part of this study.

²Migration data are for persons over 5 years and who were not immigrants from another state or country.

³Chilchota may be a special case in as much as the La Cañada valley, which has a particularly strong Tarascan presence, is located here.

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