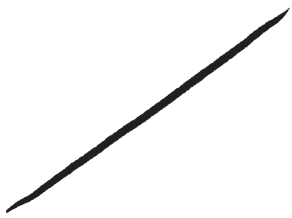


**THE DANCE-DRAMA
OF THE TECUANES OF TETELPA,
MORELOS:
FESTIVE COMMUNITY RESISTANCE
AGAINST THE HACIENDAS**

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Abstract: This work will focus on the development of the town of Tetelipa, in the state of Morelos. The appearance of the Haciendas of San Nicolás Obispo and Santiago Zacatepec in the 17th century, and the social tensions over water, land, and agricultural work that persisted for 300 years in the region. Likewise, we will describe the relationships between the Hacienda and the town's hunters, as reflected in the community's festive dance of the tecuanes. The dance ends with the sacrifice of the tecuan or jaguar, to achieve a more equitable life and mutual respect between the power of the Hacienda and the indigenous people.

Keywords: Danza de tecuanes, Haciendas de Morelos, tecuán, jaguar, Tetelipa.

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Introduction

The aim of this research is to make known the history of the indigenous town of Tetelipa, Morelos, as well as the histories of the haciendas of San Nicolás Obispo and Santiago Zacatepec, established in the 17th century, and the social tensions over water, land, and agricultural labor throughout three centuries in the region. We will then analyze the dance-drama of the tecuanes of Tetelipa as a manifestation of indigenous resistance and community balance in the face of the authoritarian system of the New Spanish haciendas and the company stores (tiendas de raya).

Likewise, we value the dance-drama and the Sorela family for safeguarding, organizing, and presenting the tecuanes down to our own day. For this research we will draw on the information set out in a larger study of my own authorship titled: *Semillas de identidad: la danza drama de los tecuanes de Tetelipa, Morelos*, published by the Faculty of Philosophy and Letters in 2025, and other books, articles, and interviews included in the bibliography.

1. Tetelipa, Morelos

The state of Morelos is located in the center of the central highlands, near the Valley of México, and it formed part of a great Mesoamerican sociocultural dynamic. The town of Tetelipa sits on the banks of the Apatlaco River, 2.4 kilometers from the town of Zacatepec, the present-day municipal seat. Its borders are: to the North and North-East, with the municipality of Tlaltizapán; to the East, with Tlaquiltenango; to the South, with Jojutla; and to the West, with Puente de Ixtla. Zacatepec lies 42 kilometers from Cuernavaca, the state capital, and 125 kilometers from México City.

According to the ethnohistorian Druzo Maldonado, in the book *Cuauhnáhuac y Huaxtepec, tlahuicas y xochimilcas en el Morelos prehispánico*, during the Middle Preclassic (1000–500 BC) the site of Chalcatzingo was founded, in the South-East of Morelos, some 70 km from Cuernavaca. The archaeological site features monumental stones carved in a style similar to that of the bas-reliefs of La Venta, in Tabasco. The settlement became the most important center of commercial and cultural exchange in the highlands before 500 BC. During this period, Chalcatzingo maintained long-distance commercial contacts with regions of the Gulf and Pacific coasts and the Central Highlands (Maldonado, 1990, p. 23).

Edgar Nebot García, in his article “Cuando los jaguares devoraron a nuestros antepasados, el primer mito de creación en el México antiguo, teriantropía y el culto a la masculinidad,” recounts that the ancient carved rocks of Chalcatzingo are the echoes of an immemorial tale of such significance in pre-Columbian history that it reached the time of the Mexica. In the Olmec or tenocelome worldview and in the sculptural evidence, monuments 4 and 31 show anthropomorphic beings who preceded the tenocelomes subdued by felines. For their part, Piña Chán and Covarrubias believe that the jaguar was, according to tenocelome ideology, the ancestor of what later manifested itself in the religion of pre-Hispanic México, being the forerunner of the gods of rain—Tláloc—, of spring—Xipe—, and of darkness—Tezcatlipoca— (Maldonado, 1990, p. 24).

The same rain motif appears in monument 41; however, beneath the three seated jaguars there are probably clouds, which may indicate that they are about to descend in procession to the earth. The “cloud” motif represents the very skin of the jaguar, a motif that covers practically its entire body. The tenocelomes, knowing themselves to be heirs of the jaguar, carved their ancestors into the rocks with human iconography, wearing a mouth mask of the same type as that of the felines. Likewise, descending from powerful animals turns them into an ethnic group with a high degree of valor, power, and legitimacy before their peers and foreigners.

The origin myth is very ancient, going back to tenocelome art, which serves as a root race resulting from the union between the jaguar and the human being. The ethnic pride of these cultures would be preserved, in addition to having the jaguar as their “grandfather.” In the social mind of the Morelos region, the jaguar was transformed into the strength and valor of warriors. It also represents knowledge and the transformation of man into animal, characteristics of magic, the shamanic, and the totemic.

As Chalcatzingo declined in the Upper Preclassic, according to Maldonado (1990, p. 25), new centers arose, such as Xochicalco, some 40 km from Cuernavaca. These territories were occupied from the Preclassic until the early Postclassic. However, their greatest development and splendor must have occurred between

the end of the Classic and the beginning of the Postclassic; that is, between the years 600 and 900 AD, constituting a kind of transition between Teotihuacán and Tula. It was in that same Postclassic period that the greatest migrations toward the basin of México and its surroundings took place (Martínez Marín, 1968, pp. 18-19). This occurred after the year 1156 and the fall of the Toltec Empire. Among the migrating Nahua groups is included “the arrival around 1200–1220 AD of the Nahua groups: Xochimilcas and Tlahuicas” (Maldonado, 1990, p. 17).

For his part, Michael Smith points out that the introduction of Nahuatl into Morelos may have occurred between the years 1000 and 1300 AD, because in the literature it is accepted that the Toltecs (950–1175 AD) were the first Nahuatl speakers in central México; this was due to the North-to-South migrations of that period (Smith in Maldonado, 1990, p. 26).

Thus the Tlaluica culture developed in the territory of Morelos. These agricultural peoples formed the settlements of Yacapichtlán, Huaxtepec, Yauhtepec, Tepoztlán, Cuauhtémoc, Tlayacapan, and Totolapan, with Cuauhnáhuac and Huaxtepec being the main ceremonial centers. We are speaking of the existence of various agricultural peoples in the territory of Morelos, each with its own organization and particular gods, as in the case of the town of Tetelpan, which had an irrigation system fed by the Apatlaco River and became an important producer of cotton for the manufacture of textiles.

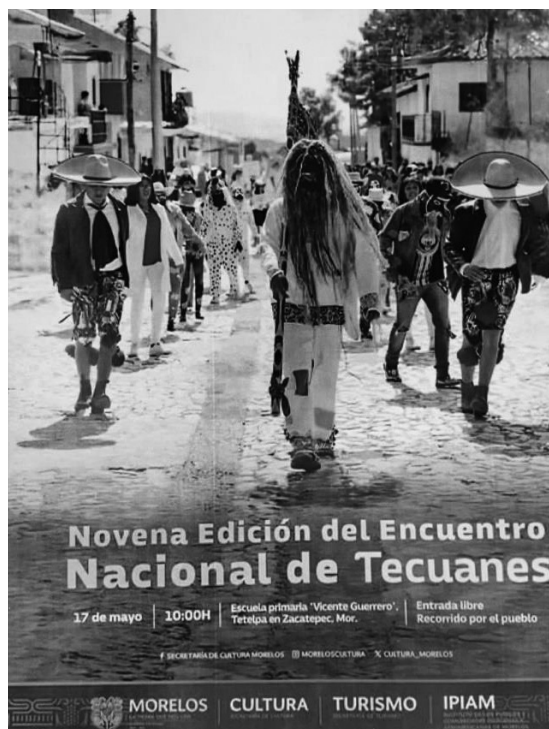
According to the interview conducted with Lic. Sergio Mañón de la Rosa, the person in charge of the San Esteban Tetelpan Community Museum,

Tetelpan is in the Nahuatl language; it means “on top of the stones,” tecpatl-stone, pan on top of... Tetelpan was a place of interest in Morelos, because they are lands with much water, due to underground rivers disputed by different peoples. One of these were the Xochicalcas, of Xochitepec, although there were already inhabitants, small tribes along the Apatlaco River. They were fishermen and farmers. (In García, 2025: 251)

Around the year 900, the Xochicalcas conquered the Tlahuicas of Tetelpan. Of this we have traces at the summit of the Cerro de la Tortuga (Turtle Hill), located to the West of the town of Tetelpan, where there was a natural vent. The archaeologist Raúl González Quezada states that when the Xochicalcas arrived, they placed a temple, a stone terrace near the vent, and made a stone circle. There are also a road and a causeway that reach all the way to Xochicalco, passing through the ravine. With the fall of Xochicalco, the constructions on the hill were abandoned; however, the rituals for requesting water continued to be performed at the vent.

In 1431, the Texcoco-Tenochtitlán alliance conquered Cuauhnáhuac and all the surrounding towns. Now, because it lies at the far South-East of the dominion of Cuauhnáhuac, the tributes of Tetelpan would not pass through Cuernavaca, but would instead join what was collected in the dominions of the Pacific coast on their way to Tenochtitlán. The town of Tetelpan, being near the Cerro de la Tortuga, must have been a strategic place on the trade route, so that the Mexica established a calpixque, a special tax collector for the region, and built a temple and placed stone sculptures (Canto y Sánchez, 1993, p. 134). The place where a calpixque lives is a calpixazgo (Smith, 1983). In other words, in the middle of the town of Tetelpan a teocalli was built, from teo-god and calli-house (“house of a god”), apparently a three-level pyramid in the Mexica style.

Near the site where the pyramid stood, three standing male monolithic sculptures were found buried: the tax collector or calpixque, the standard-bearer or personal guard of the tax collector, and the lord of Tetelpan or local ruler. The pieces are in the care of the Morelos Regional Center of INAH and are exhibited in the Community Museum of Tetelpan.



Photograph of the poster for the 9th *Encuentro de Tecuanes* in Tetelpan, May 17, 2025.
Mixed group of the dance of tecuanes. Photo © Ricardo García.

After the defeat of Tenochtitlán in 1521, Hernán Cortés decided to live in Cuernavaca, which became the administrative center of his Marquisate of Oaxaca. The marquisate was granted by Charles V in 1529 to Hernán Cortés in recognition of his services to the Crown. The territory comprised 22 towns distributed across northern Veracruz, México City, the State of México, Morelos, and Oaxaca, in addition to 23 thousand vassals.

The Franciscans arrived in Morelos between 1525 and 1529 and, together with the principal chiefs of the numerous subject sites, began the construction of the Franciscan monastery of the Asunción of Cuernavaca, with its atrium, the open chapel for Indians of San José, and the temples of Nuestra Señora de Dolores. Later, small monasteries were built in Yecapixtla, Guaxtepec, Cohuisco, and Taxco. In accordance with the first evangelizing provisions for the region, from the Cuernavaca monastery the friars attended to the following visitas: Acatlipac, Panchimalco, Xochitepec, Alpuyeca, Coatetelco, Miacatlán, Mazatepec, San Francisco Amacuzac, Tlatenchi, Xoxotla, Huitzilac, Tlaltenango, and Tetelpa.

In Tetelpa, the Franciscans arrived around 1540; they respected the inhabitants, learned Nahuatl, and evangelized them. The Franciscans and the indigenous people built the temple on top of the Mexica pyramid and began the patron-saint feast of San Esteban to bring joy to the townspeople. Later the Dominicans arrived and built the church tower and the belfry. The town was officially recognized as a town of Indians, and the mother tongue was Nahuatl until the mid-20th century, when its use was lost owing to education in Spanish, migration, and marginalization. Don Florentino Sorela, flute player (*pitero*) and dance master (*ensayador*) of the tecuanes, relates that “Tetelpa is an indigenous town, as one might say, of Indian towns, because my grandparents and all my family were indigenous; everyone spoke Mexicano [Nahuatl], even me” (García, 2025, p. 185).

At the beginning of the 17th century, Pedro Cortés, fourth Marquis of Oaxaca, decided to lease the entire territory, which is why we can consider that, in Tetelpa, with the founding of the haciendas of Santiago Zacatepec and San Nicolás, the conflicts over water and land began.

2. The Haciendas of Santiago Zacatepec and San Nicolás Obispo

According to Pedro Bahena Mena, in his *Breve monografía de Zacatepec*, the lands are first leased to Juan Fernández Moradillo:

The Comptroller General of the State, don Félix Lince, states: That in the year 1619 the Most Illustrious lord Don Pedro Cortés, Marquis

del Valle, granted to Juan Fernández Moradillo, public notary of the town of Cuernavaca, five caballerías of land (one caballería was equivalent to 42.7953 hectares), more or less, in the district and bounds of Zacatepeque and Santa Cruz of that jurisdiction, with the water necessary for its irrigation from the river of Tetelpa. (Bahena, *Monografía*)

Given the non-payment by Fernández Moradillo of the rents of fifty pesos of common gold, in 1649 the lands were awarded to Diego de Mendoza, who in 1690 would found the sugar mill of Santiago Zacatepeque:

In the year 1649, Mr. Don Martín de Rivera, Chief Comptroller of the land tribunal, Judge of land composition of the marquisate of the valley by commission of His Majesty, auctioned them off to Diego de Mendoza, with the same encumbrance, who undertook to pay the said levy in favor of His Majesty; on which lands the same Diego de Mendoza founded the sugar mill named Santiago Zacatepeque in the year 1690 by virtue of a license he obtained for it from the Royal Audiencia governing this kingdom [...] the said Diego de Mendoza having died, the said sugar mill passed into the possession of don Mateo de Lizama, his son-in-law [...] this estate was auctioned off, by the general court of intestate estates of this kingdom, to the bachiller don Manuel Francisco de Veráztegui, a presbyter who was a resident of this town of Cuernavaca, in the year 1715: from the goods of the said bachiller and at the request of his executors and heirs, the aforementioned sugar mill was auctioned off in this court to Sergeant Major Blas Andrés de Olivan, in the year 1741. (Bahena, *Monografía*)

Upon the death of Diego de Mendoza, the mill passed to don Mateo de Lizama, his son-in-law, who died intestate, and the mill was bought by don Manuel Francisco de Veráztegui, a presbyter of Cuernavaca, in 1715. It was likewise sold to Sergeant Major Blas Andrés de Olivan in 1741. In other words, in 1690 the production of sugarcane was approved at the mill, which took away part of the land and water from the town of Tetelpa. Even though the inhabitants of the region were the mill's principal workers, the lands of Zacatepec continued to belong to the convent of Santo Domingo de Tlaquiltenango. It is important to note, in this regard, that the mill owners turned to the Church and to merchants to raise funds. "Since in those times there was no capital market, the sugar entrepreneurs turned to the Church and to small or medium merchants to ask for credit, which was generally based on mortgages" (Toussaint, 2010, p. 88).

For its part, the hacienda of San Nicolás Obispo began operating in 1621 when the 4th Marquis del Valle granted Don Gaspar de Contreras a site to plant cane in the vicinity of Jojutla. Mexico City had opened its doors to the international trade in tropical agricultural products such as sugar, which prompted the wealthy merchants of the capital to take an interest in acquiring agricultural properties. “Within this group we have don Domingo Coloma, who acquires San Nicolás Obispo in the year 1790 and holds it until his death, in the midst of the war of independence” (Toussaint, 2010, p. 88). Don Florentino comments:

Tetelpa had always been Tetelpa, Tetelpatzin, it had always been. There was no town; San Nicolás became a town, both because of the hacienda and later because of the mill. Zacatepec, there was nothing. Everywhere they live, it was Tetelpa’s. Because Tetelpa had a lot of land; they didn’t want it, but there was a lot of land. (García, 2025, p. 186)

There is a court document of November 12, 1804, concerning a lawsuit by the natives of Tetelpa against Domingo Coloma, owner of the San Nicolás hacienda, in connection with his expansion of lands. This document is important because it informs us about the way of life of the inhabitants, their natural resources, and their plantations and crops. It is worth mentioning that the resentments on the part of the inhabitants of Tetelpa against the hacienda owners probably began when the latter sought to take over greater territories, arguing that the indigenous people “earn more than they need.”

Mr. Coloma, owner of the hacienda of San Nicolás (now Galeana), argued in his pleadings in defense of the land “that the people of Tetelpa [...] «earn more than they need, occupied in diverse activities such as the fishing of catfish, trout, roncal, and corvina,» working as muleteers and couriers.” That no town in New Spain has the satisfaction of finding nearly all its citizens provided with mules, horses, mares, oxen, sheep, and cows, and that, “far from being short of lands, they have leased them out,” and that “at present one sees publicly and notoriously several parcels that their tenants planted with indigo.” Furthermore, that “the lands on which they sow their abundant maize have more than enough water and access to as much as they want, with which they not only make use of the maize but also sow sesame, and other things and seeds such as melon, watermelon, chili, peanut, and tomato, harvesting various fruits such as banana, guacamote, anona, black sapote, avocado, mamey, cassia fistula, tomato, lemon, and orange” (Bahena, *Monografía*).

This document records that in 1805 the owner of the Hacienda of Zacatepec was Antonio Valdovinos and that Domingo Coloma recommended

that he expand toward Chisco or toward Xoxocotla. Valdovinos's lands were closer to Tetelpa, which is why Coloma recommended that "if they are to be expanded, let it be by way of the estate of Chisco, the hacienda of Zacatepec, the rancho of Zuapilco, or the surplus lands of Xoxocotla" (Bahena, *Monografía*). It is worth, by the way, highlighting Mr. Coloma's questioning of the legal possession of the lands by the indigenous people of Tetelpa. The town of Tetelpa—says Coloma—, with unknown permission and authority, moved from the lands of Zacatepec to those it holds today. Its citizens and the current governor (re-elected five times against the Supreme Law) always knew it by the name of Zacatepec and not by that of Tetelpa.

On the other hand, it is important to recall that, during the Colonial period, the indigenous people were forbidden to dress like Spaniards, ride horses, bullfight, slaughter cattle, and bear arms, a circumstance that undoubtedly contributed to the custom of mocking, in their dances and carnivals, the dominant class, its garments, its dances, and its habits.

We agree with Blanca Estela Suárez when she comments that, after the War of Independence (1810–1821), the model of development imposed by the liberals held that the inferiority of the Indian during the Colonial period had been due to the legal inequality in which they lived. The liberals thought that the differences between the Indian population and the rest of society would disappear once equality of all before the law was achieved, and that this would form a single nation under a single State, which did not turn out as they predicted, since, owing to their communal economic organization, their idiosyncrasy, and their illiteracy, the Indians could not integrate naturally on equal terms. Thus, without any socioeconomic change to support it, the legislation was not enough to incorporate the indigenous people, who remained just as poor or more so. Moreover, backed by liberal legislation, the exploitation of the lands of the indigenous communities translated into greater privileges for the bourgeoisie (Suárez in García Mora, 1987: 20), so that, in the nascent republic, the landowners continued to accumulate land for cultivation and mining and to displace the original populations from the communal territories. This promoted a great concentration of capital in the hands of a few families and the disconnection of indigenous people and peasants from the means of production.

Alfonso Toussaint points out that in 1869 the production of the hacienda of San Nicolás was good. "It reaches 375 tons of sugar and 540 of molasses, which result in a fiscal value of the hacienda of 150,944 pesos" (2010, p. 89). And by 1909 it reaches 1,500 tons of molasses and 3,600 of sugar, with a market price of 625,000 pesos. An extraordinary result, especially given that the fiscal value of the estate was 700,000 pesos, perhaps because of the strange fact that it did not

have a large extension of land, since by the time the revolutionary struggle arrived it covered 1,748 hectares, which compared to those of other great mills were very few. Likewise, by 1886, the production of the Zacatepec mill ranked among the top ten in the region, while in 1909 it occupied first place with the prodigious quantity of 5,400 tons of sugar to 1,700 of molasses, whose market price exceeded 900,000 pesos, even though the hacienda was valued at only 690,000 pesos. In 1913, the hacienda of Zacatepec was bought by don Juan Pagaza, at the time the owner of the neighboring hacienda of San Nicolás, so that, in the midst of the Revolution, both mills had the same owner.

After the Revolution (1910–1921), the distribution of ejido lands began throughout the country. In their article “Conflictos por la tenencia de la tierra en Morelos,” Dionisio Piña and Nohora Guzmán comment that the agrarian distribution took shape during the armed struggle and that its legal framework, built to the rhythm of the armed conflict and the subsequent process of pacification, combined the Zapatista ideals (restoring the lands to the communities dispossessed of them) with the Carrancista ones (the granting of ejidos). From its inception, that framework left great gaps and legal irregularities which, with the constitutional reform of 1992, the loss of the ejido’s management capacity, and the increase in the value of land, sharpened the conflicts over it (2019, p. 5).

At the conclusion of the Revolution, the 1,684 hectares of the Hacienda of Zacatepec were distributed “to the ejidatarios of Jojutla, Tetelpa, Zacatepec, and Xoxocotla, with 127 hectares remaining for the main estate (*casco*)” (Toussaint, 2010, p. 87). The *casco* was the property of the Pagaza family until 1938, when the Banco Nacional Obrero y de Fomento Industrial acquired it on the instructions of President Lázaro Cárdenas. That same bank established a trust for the construction, with the most modern technology, of the Emiliano Zapata sugar mill, which remained in the hands of the cooperative of workers and peasants until, decades later, it was sold to private enterprise. For their part, the 1,748 hectares of San Nicolás were distributed to the ejidatarios of Jojutla, Tlatenchi, and el Jicarero, with two hectares remaining as the *casco*, in the charge of the Pagazas, which in 1939 were acquired by the Banco Obrero and later became the property of the Ministry of Water Resources (Secretaría de Recursos Hidráulicos).

The Emiliano Zapata sugar mill was inaugurated on February 5, 1938. That same year the Emiliano Zapata Cooperative Society of Ejidatarios was founded with the aim of improving the conditions of the region’s ejidatarios. Additionally, on December 25 the then governor of the state, Elpidio Perdomo, promulgated the decree by which “The free municipality of Zacatepec, Morelos, is created, which will be formed by the extent comprising the wards of Tetelpa,

Galeana [*la antigua hacienda de San Nicolás*] and Zacatepec, the latter being the seat of the said municipality.” The renovated Zacatepec mill generated many new jobs, so many people began to immigrate from municipalities of the state of Morelos itself, as well as from the states of México, Puebla, Veracruz, and Guerrero. Florentino himself worked at the mill:

I worked at the mill. How do you say it? Thank God! The mill gave me work, to provide for all this. I worked in a position... I was a cachero, the metal vats, the last process in which the white or brown sugar comes out. There were three: mascabado, brown, and refined; I went through them all. Except that, luckily, we got ISSSTE [social-security coverage] and I have been retired for 25 years now. (García, 2025, p. 194)

And, just like him, today his son Roberto Sorela does it, his successor in the dance of the tecuanes:

I work at the mill, as a worker. We have our land to cultivate; right now we have cane. And it has been raining and raining, you can't get through... I am a worker. My department is the mills, where the cane arrives and is ground, crushed. I am at the controls, where almost everything is automatic now, just with the buttons and the screen. I have worked since I was 22 years old. (García, 2025, p. 194)

Between 1941 and 1946, President Ávila Camacho granted the first certificates of agrarian rights for the ejido of Tetelipa. Likewise, public deeds were drawn up for the houses, almost all at the same time.

3. The dance of the tecuanes in Tetelipa

The researcher Alejandro Ortiz suggests that there exists a set of festive dances about the hunt of the tiger or jaguar:

The dance of Tecuanes, of Tigres, or of Tlacololeros is one of the scenic expressions with the greatest number of Mesoamerican elements that we know of and that remains alive. It possesses surprising peculiarities, such as its theatrical sense, the humor, and the festive spirit with which the plot—quite simple, by the way—unfolds: it is the representation of the efforts of some hunters to capture a tiger. (Ortiz in Aracil, 2006, p. 93)

Similar dances exist in places such as Acatlán and Zitlala, in Guerrero, where the jaguars are related to petitions for rain and pre-Hispanic fertility rituals. We will focus on the studies carried out on the dance of the tecuanes, and especially on the dance of tecuanes in Tetelpa.

The first Morelos anthropologist to study the dance of the tecuanes was Elfego Adán. His article “Las danzas de Coatepec” was published in the *Anales del Museo Nacional* in 1910. We consider that, since Coatepec is 25 kilometers from Tetelpa, they have similar customs, being descendants of the Tlahuicas, Nahuatl speakers and heirs of the tenocelome, Xochicalca, and Texcoco-Tenochtitlán cultures. The researcher does not specify the origin of the text of the tecuanes or when it arrived in Coatepec. In two pages, he presents 51 dialogues of the text in hybrid Nahuatl, as well as the same text translated into “correct” Nahuatl, according to Professor Mariano Rojas, and the latter translated into Spanish. The edition offers neither an extensive version of the text nor a description of the performance of the dance, which lasts around three hours.

Another study of this dance is found in the article “La danza de tecuanes,” written by the anthropologist Fernando Horcasitas, published in 1980. There he presents a complete text in Nahuatl and its translation into Spanish. The original document belonged to the U.S. collector of indigenous masks and costumes from Cuernavaca, Donald Cordry, and came from an unknown town in Morelos, accompanied only by the following reference: “AMON. FRAL DEL TIMBRE EN EL ESTADO DE MORELOS-CUERNAVACA.” It is the variant of the tecuanes best known in Morelos, Guerrero, and Puebla, the one that Horcasitas calls “of Coatepec” in honor of Adán. Below is the summary of the text:

Salvadorche, the owner of a cattle ranch, calls his assistant Mayeso to inform him that a tiger or jaguar has been eating the animals of the estate and that someone needs to go out and hunt it. Mayeso fails to kill it and calls, one by one, four old men to attempt the feat. The old men are: the Viejo Flechero (Old Archer), the Viejo Lancero (Old Lancer), the Viejo Cacachi, and the Viejo Xohuaxclero. These having failed, Mayeso calls the Viejo Rastro (Old Tracker, with his good hounds) and Juan Tirador (Juan the Shooter, with his good weapons), and these manage to kill the animal. Salvadorche pays them all and they divide up the tiger’s skin. (Horcasitas, 1980, p. 239)

The most recent studies are due to the historian Óscar Cortés Palma. In *Danza de tecuanes* (2015), in addition to the one from Coatepec previously cataloged by Horcasitas, Cortés identifies variants of the dance in Acatlán de Osorio, the

State of México, and other localities. In the Introduction to *Tecuán. Danza comedia teatro del siglo XIX*, of 2022, the author tells us of the possible existence of a lost original text written by a nahuatlato in the 19th century, from which the various dance-dramas, dances, and rain rituals would have drawn and which, together with the mandas (votive offerings), each town adapted in its own way to offer to its patron saints.

For the purpose of this work, we chose the Coatetelco-type dance recorded in the “Libreto de los tecuanes de Tetelipa” and the staging by don Florentino Sorela. The text was transcribed by Cortés after several interviews with don Florentino, and it was published in *Tecuanes, tlacoleros, lobitos y tlaminques* (2018, pp. 105-127). The libreto contains the words in Nahuatl (a mixture of Nahuatl and Spanish), as well as their translation into Spanish, and it is presented in the manner of a dramatic work, with a title, a list of the fifteen characters and the props, and 24 titled scenes in which each speech is preceded by the name of the speaker.

The plot deals with the hunt for a tecuán or jaguar that threatens to eat the livestock of a ranch or hacienda, and it is resolved by means of a subplot in which El Risueño makes a pact with the jaguar so that it sacrifices itself in exchange for water and land being shared between the hacienda and the indigenous inhabitants. According to Horcasitas, in the *Vocabulario* of fray Alonso de Molina (1571), “tecuaui” comes from Nahuatl *te-*: people, *cua-*: to eat, and *-ni*: agent. The tecuán is a “eater of people” (Horcasitas, 1980, p. 252), which is why in modern dialects the word is used to designate any animal that stings, bites, or does harm.

The work begins with a tense situation: the threat of the jaguar and the need for its death, and then it introduces the characters through dialogue and the repetition of comic actions. When, for example, each old man counts the money that Mayeso offers him, he slaps himself on the shoulders in a funny way and counts from one to eight in Nahuatl. The same with the cures that the doctors perform on them; they amuse us, even though in essence they are the same and are repeated. Finally, the work concludes with a new order after another tense situation in which they kill the jaguar.

The work emphasizes the ideology of the hacienda and the power it exercises over an agricultural and ranching territory and over its inhabitants. At the same time, it employs the figure of the jaguar as the force that threatens that power. However, it shows a fearful hacienda owner, incapable of killing the jaguar, giving money and asking for help, without success, from one set of hunters and another, until, finally, El Risueño shows them where the jaguar is hiding.

There are various interpretations of why El Risueño shows them the jaguar so that they may kill it. The first is that El Tirador and El Rastrero persuade him with money. The second is that El Risueño accepts the money, releases the

tecuan, which he feeds and therefore has at his service, and then hands it over to the hunters. Our interpretation is that, belonging, like the jaguar, to the natural and magical worlds, El Risueño accepts the money but neither needs it nor knows what to do with it. In a dance he reaches an agreement with the jaguar, which gives itself up in sacrifice to the hunters. These actions translate into a pact between the hacienda owner and the town, since both benefit from the death of the jaguar by sharing the water and the use of the land.

It is important to point out that the libretto transcribes an oral text that has been passed down from generation to generation and that it is not dramatic literature to be performed by actors before an audience. It is an oral text to be danced and performed by the town's inhabitants for their patron saints: San Esteban, on December 26, and the Virgen de la Inmaculada Concepción, on December 7 and 8, and which, like the dances of aztecas and vaqueritos, is performed in the atrium of the church. In this sense, Florentino assures us that he has the text in his mind and that he dictates it for the rehearsals, and he likewise emphasizes that the dance is done out of the commitment he himself has with the saint and with the Virgen:

That is indispensable. One wants to fulfill the devotion, the commitment we have. Not so much with the young men, but also with the one who is protecting us, the one who is judging me. On the first day, I prepare myself to follow through on the commitment. Already at the feast, during the procession up, the bands are there. I bring my little candle. I give it to one of my sons. At the rest stop I leave a candle for each one, for both. The patron is San Esteban. When the Virgin appeared here, we went with her. The two have the same opportunity to be venerated, you see... Always. Every day, I give thanks. Always, in one's mind, one must fulfill it until the very last day. (In García, 2025, pp. 206-207)

Roberto Sorela also informs us about the reasons for the dance:

Here in Tetelpa we have the custom that the dance is almost exclusively for San Esteban and for the Virgen de la Concepción. The promises that the participants make are for them. An example: if this year I drank too much, I am going to try not to do it. I won't do it anymore! They are promises. In those days that is how it was done. Now we tell them that we owe it before our town's patron, to do it for the little Virgen; when you are dancing, this is a matter of faith and of joy. You are not going to dance for the people. You are not going to dance for the people! This is

not a contest, son; it is not to gain so-and-so's favor. I am going to dance because I have a promise to so-and-so, I have faith in so-and-so—that is what we tell them. (In García, 2025, pp. 197-198)

Florentino Sorela with tecuán and deer.
Photo © Óscar Cortés.



Tecuán before being killed by the hunter.
Foto © Ricardo García.

To the rhythm of the music, the dancers enter the atrium divided into two columns that soon separate from one another by two or three meters, opening the space for the movements of the dance and the dialogues, while the audience, seated or standing, positions itself behind and to the sides of the columns. With respect to gesture and facial mime, it is striking that the characters of Salvadorchi, Mayeso, the doctors, the deer, and the buzzards do not wear masks. The first two make gestures of power and command, although without great changes or nuances. The doctors do not make particular gestures either, nor do the animals, which are represented by boys and girls who keep their faces neutral, without expressions. All the other characters use masks very similar to one another, hiding their faces perhaps so that the person representing each character is not recognized.



Group of girls and boys with Roberto and Florentino Sorela at the 7th *Encuentro de Tecuanes* in Tetepala, April 15, 2023. Photo © Luis Artagnan.

Nowadays, when they are invited to other patron-saint feasts or to other stages to perform in twenty or thirty minutes, Florentino and Roberto organize the most spectacular parts of the dance, which are the entrance, the dance of the deer, the dance of El Risueño with the jaguar, and the killing of the tecuán. Occasionally, Virginio, another of don Florentino's sons and, like him, a promoter of the dance, narrates what is happening on stage.

With these ideas in mind, we propose that the dance of tecuanes was collectively coined during the second half of the 19th century, the product of a symbiosis between the history of the indigenous people of Morelos, the tenocelome culture, the Tlahuicas, and the Nahuas—with their language and their dances to the rhythm of the drum and the reed flute—the oppressive ideology of the hacienda and its concentration of wealth, the dance of Moors and Christians, the stories of the jaguar, and the struggles over territory and water.

4. The dance's relations with the haciendas

Florentino Sorela describes the dance's relations with the hacienda, with the water and the lands of Tetelipa. His grandfather Ramón Sorela worked at San Nicolás (today Galeana) and organized the dance between 1895 and 1924, which is why his grandson decided to commemorate the centenary of the dance in 1995. However, Florentino himself acknowledges that it probably began earlier, around 1860:

This little dance already has its history. This comes from my grandfather Ramón Sorela, many years ago... So he was the promoter of this dance. He worked at the hacienda of San Nicolás. My grandfather was young; he worked in the cane, as a boy. So, they kept growing, kept growing, and my grandfather did not like how the people were treated there, at a company store (tienda de raya), where they got everything they needed on credit—food, clothing, tools, everything... Look, uncle, I am thinking of doing the one-hundred-year anniversary of the dance; I am dating it from 1895. So... No, look, it was further back. But I can no longer change it because it was already being announced—more or less in 1860–67, my grandfather was young. (In García, 2025, pp. 184–185)

He also points out that, at the time, “many ox-drivers went to work with the Spaniards at the hacienda of Galeana” (in García, 2025, p. 256), which speaks to the Hispanic origin of the hacienda owners, and that the workers were paid with vouchers for the company store: “But it turns out they wanted to pay them with vouchers, not with money. Why did they do it? That way they could cheat them. They earned ten, fifteen reales” (in García, 2025, p. 256).

So... when my grandfather began to feel what those people were feeling, how they were treated, because he says that when they went to collect their pay, they were given the amount they earned, but on top of this they added the rations they were given, which is why they could never

pay it off. And they already had them like, as one might say, like slaves. Neither here nor there. (In García, 2025, p. 186)

The workers of Tetelpa were very discontented with the situation of the company stores and organized themselves not to go to work:

And it was the anger, of everyone; they organized and stopped going. So those people felt pressured too, because they came and wanted to force them, and they in their language said “amo,” “amo,” and “no” and “no,” and the others said “you’ll regret it, you’ll regret it.” Because Tetelpa was a town that supplied fruit, everything that had a market; here there was coffee, mamey, sapodilla, banana, maize, beans, cane. (In García, 2025, p. 186)

Failing to convince the workers to return to work, the hacienda owner requested authorization to cut off the water to their orchards, alleging that he had built the sluice gates: “They go to Tlaltizapán or to Yautepec so that they would help the haciendas. The authority gave way and gave its approval to the hacienda; they shut off the water and all the trees dried up, over time” (Interview, 16/09/22). With the orchards dried up, many people emigrated to found Xoxocotla, six kilometers from Tetelpa.

We have, then, on the one hand, the discontent with the hacienda and the company stores, which treated the workers like slaves, as well as the cutting off of the water and the death of their orchards. On the other hand, we have the local history of an animal that began to eat the livestock of the hacienda and that would have contributed to the peasants becoming familiar with the use of weapons, which would grant them the political strength necessary to take charge of their communities. All of this, under the protection of the Juárez Reform, which had begun to replace, in the foundation of national identity, religion with patriotism. Within this framework begins the history of the dance of the tecuán, as a mockery of the hacienda owner who, being unable to get rid of the jaguar, asks the town’s inhabitants for help, and at the same time as a ritual sacrifice that was to guarantee the just distribution of the water and the lands of the region:

And, there, they began with this matter of the dance. So, the little animals, since they no longer had any guardians over there, began to eat their little animals over there. And so that is why my grandfather gave it the title of the hunt of the tiger. That is how we are handling it [...] it was born here, as I tell you, because of my grandfather. Here

was the first time it was performed. Here he presented it, in Tetelipa.
(In García, 2025, p. 187)

The oral text was organized in its beginnings in Nahuatl because the townspeople spoke it. Later, words in Castilian and in Nahuatl were added, just as they were spoken in the town. The second-to-last among Florentino's ten children and heir to the care of the dance, a musician and dance master, Roberto Sorela points out in this regard:

From when it started with my grandfather, around 1867, it was pure Nahuatl. The language here, in Tetelipa, was Nahuatl. The problem is that here there are no longer many elderly people who speak Nahuatl. Here there are no elderly people—where children are instilled with the language and gradually learn it. But here it is because we were left without elderly people. He [*Florentino*] is the last of the elders; for that same reason, he gradually lost it, because here only Nahuatl was used, more than anything for rehearsing. (In García, 2025, p. 190)

In 2022, having already organized it for 76 years, don Florentino was still building in his workshop everything needed for the dance: the masks and regalia, the two-meter staff for *El Risueño*, with its iguana that goes up and down and its little figure, a replica of its owner, at the tip. As for the music, Florentino's shows a greater development than that of other places, with more variety, more elaborate compositions, and a clearer sound on the flute, for which he himself gathers the reeds from the Apatlaco River, cuts them to 21 cm, cleans them, and arranges them like his father's three-hole flute, a tradition in which his son Roberto will succeed him:

The history here in Morelos—that it was born here in Tetelipa, and from here my grandfather went to teach in Xoxocotla. The very flute player of Xoxocotla tells us “my uncle Leonardo Cepeda taught me, don Pablo Carpio taught him, and don Ramón Sorela taught him.” These people accept that the town was founded with people from Tetelipa. From there the history says it went to Alpuyeca, the people liked it, and it reached Coatetelco. I don't say it; the history says it. I have tried to research it. Why? Here the music is seen to be more developed; the music is very defined, very crisp. (In García, 2025, p. 188)

Final reflections

These pages offer a brief tour through the history of Tetelpa, from when it was a Tlalhuica settlement to its present situation as a locality ascribed to the municipality of Zacatepec and subsidiary to the Emiliano Zapata sugar mill. It is a very rich history that passes through the Mexica occupation, with its temple and its calpixque and, later, through the Franciscan evangelization, the establishment of the patron-saint feasts of San Esteban and the Virgen de la Concepción, and the founding of the haciendas of Santiago and San Nicolás, which from the 17th century onward came to complicate labor relations and the tenure of water and land. In the course of this history, about a century and a half ago, the town's inhabitants invented the dance of the tecuanes, which has been safeguarded by four generations of dance masters and flute players of the Sorela family: Ramón, Lidio, Florentino, and Roberto.

Even though its precise origin is unknown, the truth is that this dance takes up the ancestral motif of the jaguar or tecuán as a symbol of the power of the land and of indigenous wisdom and, by means of the—probably real—history of a predator that stalks the livestock, incorporates it into the conflictive web of labor and territorial relations between the hacienda owners and the original population. It constitutes an oral tradition in Nahuatl, to which bilingual and trilingual translations were later added, which sets forth a mockery of the hacienda owner and suggests the need for mutual sacrifice with a view to building—with water and land at the center—new relations of coexistence.

In this way, drawing on a living memory anchored in the everyday, the community of Tetelpa offers resistance to the authoritarian power of the haciendas and sugar mills of Morelos, a festive resistance celebrated in communion with the hills, the clouds, and the protective force of San Esteban and the Virgen de la Concepción. With its promises and petitions, each year the feast and the dance set out to ensure the material and spiritual balance of the community. Uniting the past with the present, the propitiatory gaze of the dance of the tecuanes safeguards the identity of a living territory, something appreciated at the Encuentro Nacional de Tecuanes that Virginio Sorela organizes annually and in which the local dances dialogue with one another.

Finally, we acknowledge the limits of this work, which leaves unaddressed possible lines of study such as the relations of the dance of tecuanes with the jaguars that in other places figure in petitions for rain, as well as the participation of women in the dance and the evolution of the costumes and masks, of the music and the choreography.

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