

GEOGRAPHICAL ORIGINS OF THE TARASCANS

VINCENT H. MALMSTRÖM

ABSTRACT. After the destruction of the Aztec empire, the Spanish learned that the Tarascans, or Purépecha, of Michoacán were culturally different from their neighbors. The origin of the Purépecha continues to intrigue. Clues include linguistic affinity and long-established trade links with the Andean region and overseas contact to the south. The evidence indicates a South American background for the Purépecha. *Key words: cultural origins, metallurgy, Michoacán, migration, Tarascans.*

Shortly after Tenochtitlán, the Aztec capital, fell to the Spanish in 1521 the conquistadores turned their attention westward to Michoacán, which was reputed to be rich in gold and silver. At that time the inhabitants of the region received the name by which they are generally known today, Tarascan, although this misnomer perpetuates a misuse by the Spanish. On the demand of their conquerors, the hapless natives proffered their daughters to the Spanish with the word *tarháskua* (father-in-law) to legitimize the relationship. However, when the Spanish at best insensitively and at worst derisively used the word to identify the natives, they quickly came to regard it as a term of derogation and a cause of embarrassment.

Perhaps only after the conquest of Michoacán was completed did the Spanish begin to perceive how different the people were from their neighbors to the east. In some ways the former were far more primitive than the Aztecs. They depended on hunting and fishing to the degree that the Aztec term for the region, Michoacán, meant "place of the fishermen." Their religion centered on the worship of fire and of the moon, and they had a rudimentary counting system based on five. Their calendar was a simplistic copy of that used by their neighbors. The temples they constructed looked like nothing else in Mesoamerica; their language was unrelated to that of any people in the region; and their manner of dress differed markedly from all other indigenous peoples in Mexico. Yet in one impressive way they were more advanced than any of their neighbors. They were skilled workers of gold, silver, and copper who possessed weapons and tools of metal, in contrast with all other Mesoamerican peoples who employed obsidian and flint for those purposes. Already perplexed by attempts to reconcile the presence of people in the New World with Biblical accounts of the lost tribes of Israel, the Spanish realized that the Tarascan question added an entirely new dimension to the debate about human origins in the western hemisphere.

DR. MALMSTRÖM is a professor of geography at Dartmouth College, Hanover, New Hampshire 03755.

THE MIGRATION LEGEND

Soon after the initial excesses of the conquest, certain Spanish clerics began to inquire into the background of the Tarascans. Notable among them was Don Vasco de Quiroga, known to the Indians as Tatá Vasco, or Father Vasco, who as their champion and protector literally became their patron saint. At that time the Spanish learned that the Tarascans called themselves Purépecha, which in their tongue meant "the latecomers" or "the recent arrivals." The term piqued the Spaniards' curiosity, and they immediately set about questioning the elders of the tribe as to where they had come from and when. As a preliterate people totally dependent on oral tradition, the Purépecha had no way to record their history in written form, except by drawing pictures. Consequently the Spanish had them summarize the legend of their migration on a piece of linen called the *Lienzo de Jucutácato*, which was not rediscovered until the 1870s (Craine and Reindorp 1970, x). It purports to explain how the Purépecha journeyed from a homeland far to the south to their current abode in Michoacán. Though historically the Lienzo is considered a priceless document, geographically it has to be one of the most farfetched reconstructions.

Identifying Cuzco, Peru, as the point of origin—largely, it seems, at the suggestion of the Spanish interrogators—the Purépecha elders asserted that their forbears had wandered for many moons before reaching the mouth of a great river. The Spanish concluded that it must have been the Orinoco, whence the journey continued by sea, reputedly on the backs of turtles. The Spanish dismissed that naive explanation as poetic license, and their next question sought to pinpoint the location of the landfall. In turn, the Purépecha quickly identified it as Veracruz on the Gulf of Mexico. When asked how they passed through the territory of their mortal enemies, the Aztecs, on the way westward to Michoacán, the Purépecha responded that the Aztecs had come with them, a suggestion that the two groups had once been friendly. Other sources suggest that the wanderings of the Purépecha started instead in the legendary Seven Caves of Chicomoztoc in the northern desert of Mexico, which in effect identifies the group as Chichimec cousins of the Aztecs.

If the fanciful Lienzo lacks credibility as a reliable geographical source, it can probably be ascribed to a combination of the Spaniards' own limited knowledge of geography, the manner in which they suggestively posed their questions, and the natives' apparent eagerness to please. In this light the fact that the maritime part of the venture was supposedly accomplished on the backs of turtles is scarcely less strange than is the route reputedly taken by the migrants!

GEOGRAPHY OF MICHOACÁN

That the origins of the Purépecha remained shrouded in doubt after the recounting of the legend is not surprising. On the other hand, the

Spanish soon became familiar with the geography of the Purépecha region as they probed ever more deeply into Michoacán to ferret out its mineral wealth. They discovered that the territory the Purépecha occupied could be divided into three different areas (Fig. 1). In the north, stretching across part of the Mexican plateau, was a low, subhumid zone fronting on lakes Chapala and Cuitzeo and on the basin of Jalisco. Through the middle ran a higher, moister band of cool forestlands, a part of the Transverse Volcanic Axis, dotted with hundreds of cinder cones and punctuated by several sizable lakes. Draining toward the south was the Río Balsas depression, a virtual hell that constituted the hottest and driest place in all Mexico, an area largely separated from the ocean by the ridges of the Sierra Madre del Sur. Not surprisingly, the Spanish found that the cooler, moister upland forest region was the preferred residence of the Purépecha, who had all but avoided settling in the Balsas depression, a pattern still reflected in the distributions of population and native languages in Michoacán as well as their principal religious centers and political capitals (Fig. 2) (Brand 1943; Stanislawski 1947).

On the basis of the distribution of Purépecha place-names, the area they inhabited at the height of their political expansion embraced the bulk of the present-day state of Michoacán and adjacent portions of the states of Guanajuato, Querétaro, and Guerrero (Fig. 3). Although some sources suggest that a part of eastern Jalisco had also been ruled by the Purépecha, the total absence of their place-names in that region today would mean that their presence had been wholly expunged by the time of the Spanish conquest. However, the conclusion is unacceptable because of their continued presence in other areas that were far more subject to the pressure of other peoples. On the other hand, place-names are not infallible evidence, and they are thoroughly confused in the southwestern coastal area of Michoacán (Brand 1960, 185–202). Probably the single natural region that coincides most closely with the Purépecha heartland is the drainage basin of the Balsas river system. The Río Balsas has a drainage area of 112,320 square kilometers, the second-largest watershed of any Pacific-draining river in Mexico. The annual discharge is more than 2 billion cubic meters, which definitely qualifies the Río Balsas as the largest west-coast river in Mexico (Tamayo 1976, 135–140).

Initially, the most generally accepted scenario for the presence of the Purépecha in Michoacán and their admittedly late arrival there is that they were Chichimecs, nomadic hunters and gathers who pushed southward from the American Southwest or the Mexican plateau, together with waves of Toltec and Aztec migrants (Craine and Reindorp 1970, xiii). The fact that the Purépecha do not speak Nahuatl, as do most of the other central Mexican peoples who are undoubtedly descendants of the Chichimecs, was a source of concern to most scholars who otherwise could find no cultural antecedents with whom to link them. The absence

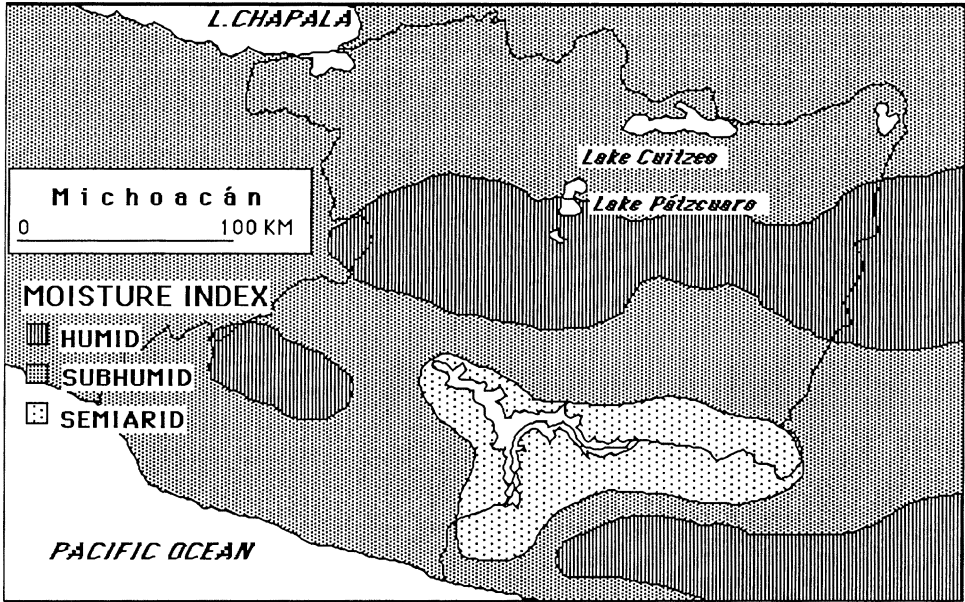


FIG. 1—Moisture-regime zones in the Tarascan area.

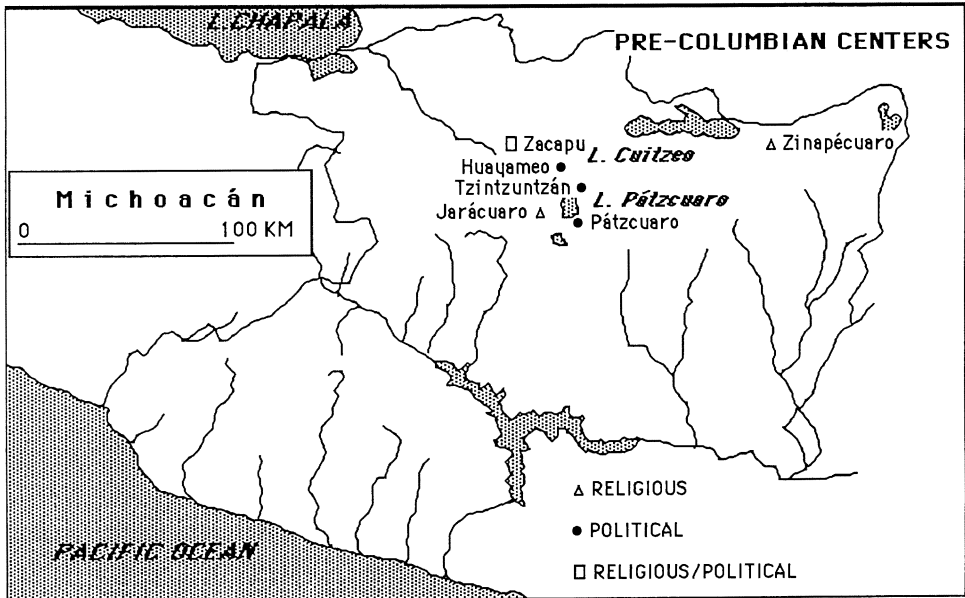


FIG. 2—Pre-Columbian centers of the Tarascans.

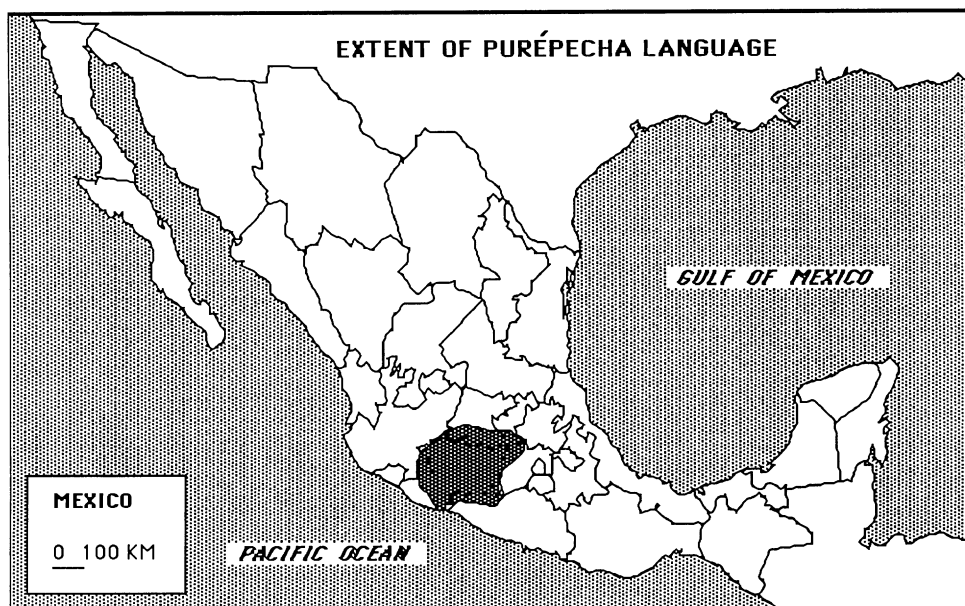


FIG. 3—Extent of the Purépecha language circa 1500.

of metallurgy among the Chichimecs, in contrast with the proficiency of the Purépecha, posed another dilemma. The only substantiation that anyone could find in a scenario of Chichimec origin was the candid assertion of the Purépecha that they were ruled by the Chichimecs. Although an externally imposed political system might well have been the product of Chichimec conquest during the Toltec period, the premise does not mean that the entire Purépecha people and culture had that origin.

AN ALTERNATIVE SCENARIO

The geographical evidence at hand is sufficient to favor a very different explanation of the origins of the Purépecha people and culture. A primary assumption is that the Purépecha language is related to Quechua, the native tongue of the Incas (Adams 1991, 324). The obvious implication is that the Purépecha did come from South America, though not necessarily from Cuzco and certainly not by way of the Orinoco delta and Veracruz. Although a recent classification of Mesoamerican languages relates Purépecha to Chibcha in Colombia rather than to Quechua (Greenberg 1987), the point remains the same—the closest antecedents of the Purépecha language are found in South America. That they arrived by sea seems quite likely, and if they had ventured to sail close to a great circle route, they could have completed the voyage in something under 2,000 statute miles. Such a practice may have been fairly standard on the basis of evidence that the Indian navigators who took Pedro de Alvarado

from Guatemala to Ecuador followed a direct course (Coe 1960, 386). If the Purépecha had made their landfall anywhere north of the Isthmus of Tehuántepec, they would have been confronted with rugged headlands punctuated by small mountain-backed coves and isolated sandy beaches. Few places except the mouth of the Río Balsas would have tempted them to land, and none other would have beckoned them into the interior. On the other hand, if they lacked a suitable craft for open-ocean sailing or if their provisions were inadequate for the journey, they may have chosen to skirt the coast, which would have added more distance to their voyage but would have reduced the risks. Even so, the first river of any size along the Mesoamerican coast, and thus the first gateway that promised them access into the interior, would have been the Río Balsas.

For Purépecha settlement to have so completely filled the Balsas drainage basin the original inhabitants would have had to move upstream into headwater areas rather than downstream from a point of entry somewhere on the interior water divide. Once in so hot, dry, and inhospitable a region as the Balsas depression, the Purépecha would have been quick to recognize that the river they followed upstream clearly emanated from the moist interior uplands, knowledge that would have urged them to move into the interior as rapidly as possible. Nevertheless, during their advance into the uplands, they could not have failed to become familiar with the resources of the Balsas region, because mere survival on the transit through the niggardly environment would have posed a challenge, as it does today for the small number of people who reside there. If they had been acquainted with metallic ores of various kinds, as many Andean cultures were as early as 800 B.C., they would have recognized them during their northward push and, once settled, would have found adequate cause to exploit them. Because metal-deficient volcanic formations extend virtually down to the banks of the river itself, exploitation of the gold, silver, and copper ores necessarily entailed a protracted journey to the very heart of the depression, an onerous effort that would have been undertaken only with an extremely compelling motivation. On the other hand, if the Purépecha moved into Michoacán from any other direction, they would not have been tempted to go down into the *tierra caliente* in a search for ores, especially when they could not have been expected to recognize them in the first place.

The argument for the Andean origin rests on evidence in addition to that of language affinity, settlement pattern, and knowledge of metallurgy. Other South American elements were in the Purépecha cultural baggage. Their stirrup-handle teapots have a "distinct flavor of Peru or Ecuador" (Craine and Reindorp 1970, xiii). A low structure with a trapezoidal doorway in Arcelia, Guerrero, duplicates features found among the Incas, but the site might be outside the Purépecha settlement area (Adams 1991, 324). The site is 20 kilometers southeast of Tlalchapa, near

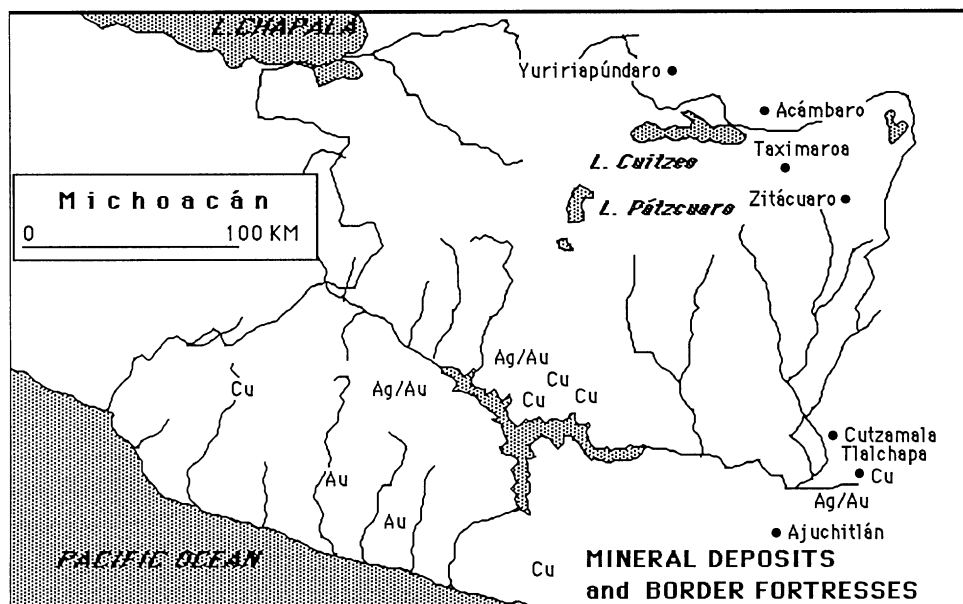


FIG. 4—Mineral deposits and border fortresses of the Tarascan region.

the border of the Aztec sphere of interest, and is well within the fortified perimeter of Purépecha settlement. Three of the seven main Purépecha border fortresses guarded the approaches to the Río Balsas depression (Fig. 4). Even though the depression was not the religious and political core of the Purépecha, the mineral endowment gave it strategic importance that warranted protection from Aztec incursion.

Another possible clue is the interlocking stonework used to face the temples at Tzintzuntzán, the last Purépecha capital, overlooking Lake Pátzcuaro. The manner in which the individual stones are custom cut and fitted to the adjacent stones, sometimes with as many as eight distinct facets, is strongly reminiscent of the building techniques employed in the Andes not only by the Incas but also by the preceding Tiahuanaco civilization. The presence of this kind of stonework both on Easter Island and the island of Kauai in Hawaii suggests a widespread diffusion of the trait in the eastern Pacific region. In Michoacán these specially cut stones, called *xanamu*, are recognized as hallmarks of the Purépecha culture (Schöndube 1981, 18).

Yet another clue is recognition and worship of the Southern Cross constellation by the Purépecha. Because of its configuration, the Purépecha visualized it as a fire drill and called it *Paráhtacuqua*. However, because of its declination, this asterism appears at a very low angle as seen from Michoacán. Even in A.D. 800, which is a good approximation for the time of the Purépecha migration from South America, because the first evidence of metallurgy in Mesoamerica appears then (Hosler 1988),

it would have been seen at an altitude of between 14° and 20° above the southern horizon in western Mexico. Due to precession, the Southern Cross has subsequently shifted 6 more degrees to the south and now stands between 8° and 14° above the horizon as seen from Pátzcuaro. Even 1,200 years ago the Southern Cross was not an especially noteworthy phenomenon on which to fix sights at the latitude of Michoacán, yet it would have made quite a dramatic spectacle when viewed from the southern hemisphere at an altitude between 40° and 50°. On the other hand, because its maximum visibility occurs during March, whatever seasonal significance it might have had originally, such as the onset of the low-sun dry season, would have been totally lost when its worshippers changed hemispheres.

PURÉPECHA MIGRATION

How realistic is it to postulate that the Purépecha are a group of late arrivals from South America? In terms of accepted interpretations of earlier contacts between the cultural hearths of the Andean and Mesoamerican regions, the premise is not only very possible but also extremely likely. As early as 1500 B.C. ceramic complexes started to appear on the Pacific coast of Mexico whose stylistic antecedents strongly point to Ecuador and Peru (Coe 1960; Adams 1991, 114). Around 1300 B.C. chamber tombs patterned on South American prototypes appeared in the lower reaches of the Santiago drainage basin in the present-day states of Nayarit and Jalisco and adjacent parts of Colima. However, some of the most elaborate and best preserved of these shaft tombs have been located as far inland as El Opeño in northwestern Michoacán, where the burial customs seemingly continued at least to A.D. 500 (Adams 1991, 115). In these same areas numerous clay figurines similar to those produced by the Chimu and Mochica cultures of northern Peru, as well as star-shaped maceheads reminiscent of the same region, have been discovered (Krickeberg 1982, 354). Many of the cultural traits of western Mexico have closer parallels with Andean areas such as Colombia and Peru than they do with the rest of Mesoamerica, and the cultural evolution of the Pacific region must be considered as principally the product of outside influences (Krickeberg 1982, 359).

In addition to the archaeological evidence is the ethnographic evidence provided by Rodrigo de Albornoz, the royal accountant of Cortés, who in a letter to the king of Spain in 1525 wrote (Warren 1985, 8):

According to the Indians of Zacatula, at the mouth of the Río Balsas, their fathers and grandfathers had told them that from time to time Indians had come to that coast from certain islands on the south in large dugout canoes, bringing excellent things to trade and taking other things from the land. Sometimes, when the sea was running high, those who came

stayed for five or six months until good weather returned, the seas became calm, and they could go back.

That contact between Mesoamerica and Andean South America began early and continued late obviously means that the intervening journey was completed successfully numerous times, with people, goods, and ideas being exchanged on repeated occasions. Of course, it would be impossible to gauge either the volume or the frequency of movement that passed along the Pacific coast in pre-Columbian times, but at the time of Spanish conquest canoes capable of accommodating seventy persons were being used (Coe 1960, 384). To hypothesize a migration between Ecuador and Michoacán it becomes necessary to determine the number of people required to form a credible nucleus for subsequent expansion of Purépecha settlement into western Mexico and the number reasonably expected to undertake such a seaborne relocation in terms of available craft.

There are so many unknowns that answers can only be theoretical. On the assumption that the preconquest population of Purépecha speakers approximated that currently in the region, the total population would have been more than 80,000. If the annual growth rate of a subsistence-level farming-hunting-gathering people can be averaged as .75 percent, then about seven or eight canoe loads of migrants arriving in A.D. 800 would have been sufficient to generate the population that existed in 1500. In other words, the scale of migration could easily have been sufficient to generate a pre-Columbian population the size of the current Purépecha-language group in Michoacán, and it could have been small enough to have been accommodated on a flotilla of very reasonable size.

For nearly 3,000 years before the Spanish conquest of Mexico there seems to have a lively, continuing contact between Andean South America and the western coast of Mesoamerica. The migration of the Purépecha, who brought knowledge of metallurgy and a dialect of Quechua, was a belated part of that exchange, dramatic and lasting, but hardly an unexplained or surprising episode.

CITATIONS

- Adams, R. E. W. 1991. Prehistoric Mesoamerica. 2d ed. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.
- Brand, D. D. 1943. An historical sketch of geography and anthropology in the Tarascan region. *New Mexico Anthropologist* 6-7:37-108.
- . 1960. Coalcomán and Motines del Oro: an ex-distrito of Michoacán. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff.
- Coe, M. D. 1960. Archaeological linkages with North and South America at La Victoria, Guatemala. *American Anthropologist* 62:363-393.
- Craine, E. R., and R. C. Reindorp, trans. and eds. 1970. The chronicles of Michoacán. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.
- Greenberg, J. H. 1987. Language in the Americas. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press.
- Hosler, D. 1988. Ancient west Mexican metallurgy: South and Central American origins and west Mexican transformations. *American Anthropologist* 90:832-855.
- Krickeberg, W. 1982. Las antiguas culturas mexicanas. Mexico City: Fondo de Cultura Económica.

- Schöndube, O. 1981. Las exploraciones arqueológicas en el área tarasca. La cultura purhé, ed. F. Miranda, 16–27. II Coloquio de Antropología e Historia Regionales, Colegio de Michoacán.
- Stanislawski, D. 1947. Tarascan political geography. *American Anthropologist* 49:46–55.
- Tamayo, J. L. 1976. Geografía moderna de México. Mexico City: Editorial Trillas.
- Warren, J. B. 1985. The conquest of Michoacán: the Spanish domination of the Tarascan kingdom in western Mexico, 1521–1530. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press.