

# Expressions of popular religiosity: religious rituals of the Mayan youth

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**ABSTRACT:** *This text describes the participation of young Mayans belonging to the town of Tetiz, Yucatan, in the religious rituals which are carried out in honor of the local virgin. In addition, this text shows how believers have a multiplicity of ways to manifest and express devotion to deities, saints, virgins and christ. This, with the purpose of emphasizing the relevance of popular religiosity as a bearer of a host of symbols, all of which can externalize the belief in a certain religion and, simultaneously, strengthening the various cultural, identity and social processes that in them converge.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Religiosity, religious rituals, youth.*

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Date of Submission: 04-06-2023

Date of Acceptance: 17-06-2023

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Religion is an extremely fertile field of study that is undoubtedly in constant change and construction. Each person expresses, manifests and practices religion in a different way, since the experience with "the sacred" and "the divine" is personal. Popular religiosity has been investigated by various authors such as Gilberto Giménez Montiel (2013), Cristian Parker (1993), Enrique Dussel (2016), Félix Báez-Jorge (2011), Angela Renée de la Torre Castellanos (2021), to mention some.

It is also important to note that different studies from past decades referred to popular Catholicism in a pejorative sense, due to the association with the linguistic context that disqualified the popular and was linked to an inferior religion, because it was not orthodox. In the 1970s, popular religiosity was still understood as that devotion practiced by the masses or, called by others as "subaltern classes", and separated from the "official" Catholic Church. As time has passed, it has been possible to overcome the negative adjectives of popular religiosity and separate its study from antagonistic connotations to the formal dogmas of the Catholic Church.

If the above is considered, it is essential to also refer to the fact that the concept of "popular religiosity" has generated academic discussions, since some accept it and others reject it. Through the analysis carried out, we can see how the way in which it is conceived, studied, and understood has evolved.

Having mentioned the above, I will begin by addressing the focal theme of the text. The participation of young people in the system of popular religiosity in the context of study has represented the protection, continuity and respect of a host of family, social and cultural worldviews, closely related to pilgrimages, processions, patron saint festivals, annual visits, public rituals and ancestral practices.

## II. METHODOLOGY

The research was carried out during the period from October 2020 to January 2023. The study was guided by the qualitative paradigm. The hermeneutic and ethnographic method was used. Therefore, with the purpose of establishing a freer conversation, I selected the in-depth interview and direct observation as data collection techniques. This, because my intention was to capture by voice, that is, from the young people of Tetiz, their world, the symbols and meanings attributed to popular religiosity. Thus, with the use of the in-depth interview, throughout the meetings, I developed the topics of the study.

## III. DISCUSSION

### Popular religiosity

I begin this passage with Cristian Parker and his work, *Another Logic in Latin America*. Popular religion and capitalist modernization. In it he refers that the mere mention of "popular religiosity" requires prior clarification of what is to be understood by popular culture, because, for him, religion is an extremely important component of "cultural reality" (p. 56). In addition to this, he understands by religiosity "the average of the religious "feeling" of a determined population" (1993, p. 60) and follows Lanternari when he affirms that all popular religion "is developed in a dialectic with the official religion and culture" (1993, p. 61).

Among other things, Parker refers to these popular religions as those collective manifestations that express in their own way, in a particular and spontaneous way, the needs, anxieties, hopes and desires that find no adequate response in the official religion or in the religious expressions of the elites and ruling classes (p. 61). Together, it puts on the table what concerns the structure of popular religiosity, which for Parker is supported by a solid base made up of "sanctuaries, pilgrimages, promises, devotions, ex-votes, celebrations" (1993, p. 175).

According to Manuel Delgado, who in 1993 stated, after a substantial analysis, the background to the various definitions given to what is now known as "popular religiosity", points out that

Whatever its development, any theory on popular religion feeds on a dichotomy that opposes it to another that is usually called official religion. The relationship between these two modalities can be established in different ways. One of the most publicized trends around popular religion, or better in this case, religiosity, Christianity or popular Catholicism, starts from the premise that there is only the Catholic religion and that pious practices called popular are the way it has to occur among the "low" places of the system of social stratification, incapable of accessing the sophistication of the accepted theological discourse (1993, p. 4).

In this regard, Félix Báez-Jorge, in *Debates around the sacred. Popular religion and clerical hegemony in indigenous Mexico*, enunciates his position related to popular religiosity, in which he points out that,

It is absurd [...] to consider popular religiosity as something always opposed to the religion of the hierarchy. Between the two there has existed, throughout Christian history, a complex and fluid relationship that goes from coincidence to contradiction, passing through various intermediate degrees. The hierarchy has sometimes proposed, other times it has tolerated, other times it has prescribed and others, finally, it has outlawed certain realities of the people [who], for their part, have responded with attitudes that have oscillated between voluntary acceptance, forced submission, remodeling (syncretization) and rejection (2011, p. 69).

The anthropologist delves not only into the study of popular religiosity, but specifically in indigenous popular religiosity, which, as the author explains, sustains loyalties, identifies alterities, and unites from the functional dimension of the past that it is expressed in the dynamics of the present.

Enrique Dussel in *Popular Catholicism in Argentina* distinguishes "popular religiosity" from "popular Catholicism". The author refers that the first notion is broader than the second and includes it, likewise, he affirms that a religious phenomenon is part of "popular Catholicism" as long as it originates from the liturgical action lived in the Christian world -in the Hispanic or the colonial context- (2016).

Additionally, Dussel mentions that popular Catholicism "are the gestures historically originated not only within Christianity, but from properly Christian structures, although detached from the central trunk of the "official" ritual by the fixism of the same Christian liturgy" (2016, p. 80).

In this way, we can observe the existence of different points of view, ranging from those that use other concepts permeated with specific practices, spaces and times, to those that contemplate the historically conceived dichotomy of the pagan and the profane, which is inverted in Catholicism.

For his part, Gilberto Giménez Montiel, who is considered a pioneer in cultural and social studies on the subject of religion in Mexico, based on his field work in Malinalco, State of Mexico, points out that the popular way of manifesting religion appears as a "religious expression of the marginalized popular layers, relatively deviated from the ecclesiastical-institutional norm, and resulting, historically speaking, from the confluence between popular Spanish Catholicism and pre-Columbian indigenous religions" (2013, p. 25).

Giménez Montiel affirms that popular religiosity is characterized and permeated by the predominance of the devotional and/or protective constellation. Thus, he points out in the same way that popular Catholicism has two main characteristics, which, I consider, also apply to popular religiosity in general:

- a) scarce liturgical and sacramental content of their practices, in comparison with the parameters of official religiosity.
- b) the weighting of devotional and/or protective constellation, which would imply the emphasis on certain practices such as orders, processions, pilgrimages, etc., all of them with a view to obtaining benefits of an empirical and utilitarian nature (Giménez Montiel, 2013, pp. 26 -27).

Finally, it is important to point out that popular religiosity includes acts articulated around devotion and veneration towards the divine and the sacred, which are shared among people with a sense of identity linked to specific social, cultural, and geographical spaces and are expressed through rituals and symbols.

#### IV. FINDINGS

##### The space

The state of Yucatán, until the year 2020, had 2,320,898 inhabitants distributed in the 106 municipalities that make it up (National Institute of Statistics and Geography and Population and Housing Council, 2020). The INEGI revealed that the percentage of people who have a complete or partial indigenous self-identification in the federal entity is 68%, likewise, Yucatán is ranked as the number one state in which its population is considered indigenous (Planning and Evaluation Council of the State of Yucatán, 2019, p. 176).

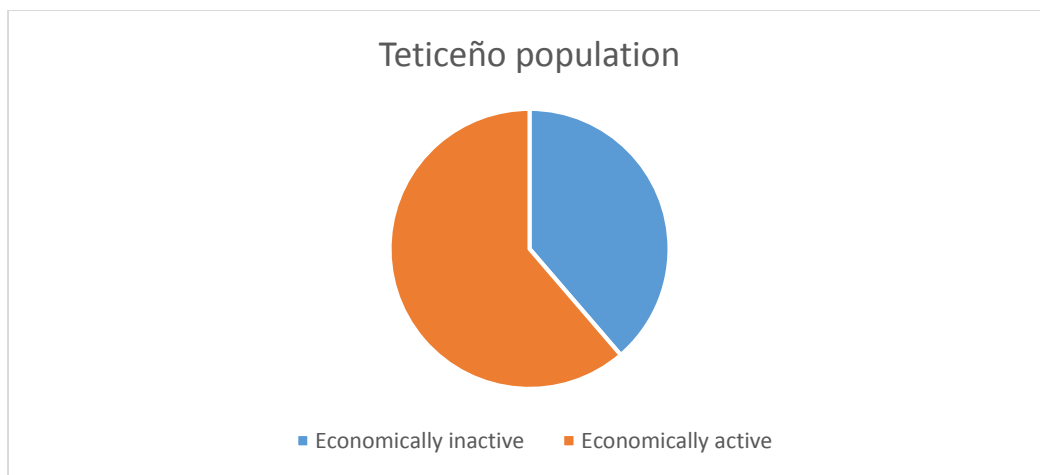
The space where I carried out the investigation is the head of the municipality of Tetiz. According to its place names, Tetiz means to choose or select sweet potato, derived from the words *Tet* to choose, and *iz* sweet potato (Government of the state of Yucatán, s.f.). According to INEGI, this municipality is considered indigenous.

As of 2020, 31.21% of the population of Tetiz spoke an indigenous language, of which 99.9% was Mayan and only 0.1% spoke Ch'ol. When considering the above, it is essential to recognize the relevance of the use of the Yucatec Mayan mother tongue, since it is a vital element for the construction of their identity and, in addition, for the social construction of their reality (Vázquez Pasos, 1999, p.223).

It is necessary to point out that, as Báez-Jorge alludes, “the indigenous rural environment, more attached to traditions, continues to be considered Catholic in general. This explains the new tolerance of the ecclesiastical hierarchy regarding “popular religion”, even in its most openly shamanistic manifestations” (Báez-Jorge, 2011, p. 18).

Regarding the current economic characteristics in the town, INEGI established that of the total population of the town, 61.3% belongs to the economically active population, of which 64.7% are men and 35.3% are women (INEGI, Sociodemographic Outlook of Yucatan 2020, 2020, p. 188).

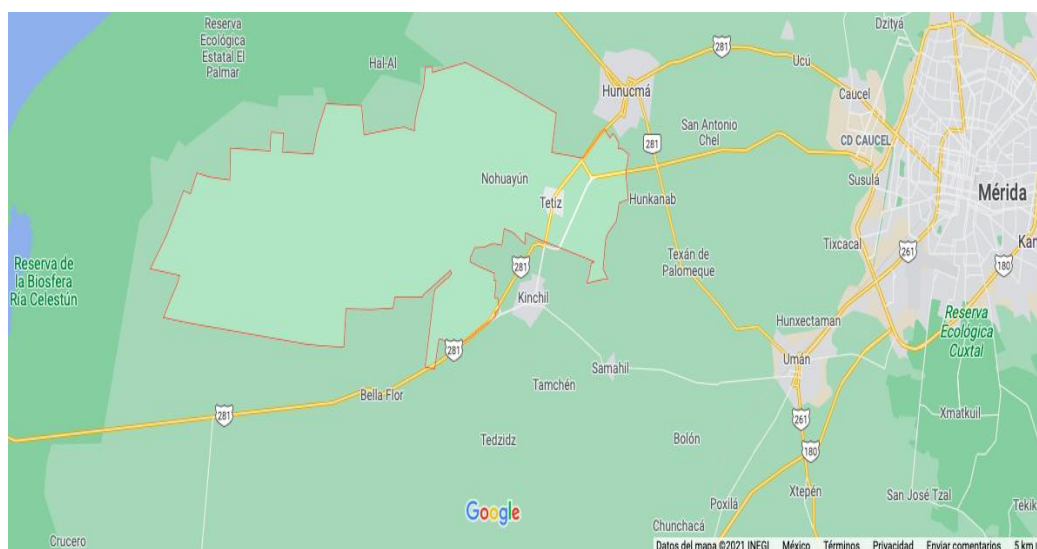
**Figure 1**  
*Economically active population*



*Note:* Own elaboration with data from INEGI, 2020.

Regarding the municipality of Tetiz, it is located to the northwest of Mérida, occupies an area of 318.87 km<sup>2</sup>, limits to the north with Hunucmá, to the south with the municipality of Kinchil, to the east with Samahil and to the west with Celestún (see Figure 2). It has 5,464 inhabitants, of which 51.0% are men and 49.0% are women (National Institute of Statistics and Geography and Population and Housing Council, 2020a, p.188). Of the total number of men in the municipality of Tetiz, until 2020, there were 2,583 who considered themselves Catholics; of these, young people between the ages of 18 and 34 were 764 and the other 1,819 were Catholic men of other ages (National Institute of Statistics and Geography, 2020c).

**Figure 2**  
Map of Tetiz, Yucatán



Note: Google, 2022. [Adjacent municipalities of Tetiz, Yucatán]. Retrieved February 17, 2022.

### Participation of young people from Tetiz in the main religious rituals

As a starting point for this section, it is convenient to point out that popular religiosity in Tetiz is built and developed mostly around the Virgin of Tetiz, an image that I consider to be the core of the religiosity of young people from Tetiz. As Ortner (1993) mentions, the symbols are the operators in the social process and for the case study, the Virgin of Tetiz, by being together with certain subjects and rituals, produces social transformations that, in isolation, could not be generated the same result.

Popular religiosity in this work is defined as the collective manifestations in which believers express in their own way, in a particular and spontaneous way, the needs, anxieties, hopes and desires that do not find an adequate response in the official religion, in other words, it is one that is gestated in a dialectic with religion and the official culture.

When considering the context where the research was developed, the devotion and veneration is towards the Virgin of Tetiz, an image that is considered sacred, and to which the origin of multiple festivities celebrated in Tetiz and in neighboring towns is due. It is important to highlight that Díaz Cruz points out certain properties that the rituals share, which are present in the Teticheño context.

Among the properties that Díaz Cruz mentions are repetition, non-spontaneous action, special behavior, order, the collective dimension, the multiplicity of ways of expressing oneself (dances, songs, clothing, food and drinks, and singular time and space) (1998, pp. 225-227). In this sense, it is essential to point out that the religious rituals celebrated in Tetiz give voice, a prolix voice, to the forms of thought, to the collective conscience, to the social axioms and to the codes underlying. As Díaz Cruz mentions, rituals reproduce tradition, but without becoming enslaved to it. They also "encourage its transformation: it is gestated in it the diverse" (1998, p. 320).

The virgin is an elemental part of the identity as Teticheños people and is rooted in the history of the town, the sanctuary and the apostolic groups belonging to the church, that is, it is a symbol that revitalizes identity. Here it is worth noting what Rappaport refers to regarding the ritual manifestation. This, with the purpose of not losing sight of the relevance of the essence of any ritual and, especially, of those religious rituals that are of interest to my research.

In every ritual manifestation there is a maintenance of the form and information of the substance, and for this reason I fully agree that it would be a mistake to ignore the form or the substance in the analysis of any ritual (2001, p. 63).

Consequently, the author relates and expresses the validation of the link between the form and the substance of any performance of the ritual and, at the same time, refers that "the form of the ritual refers to the content of the ritual as a «framework»" (Goffman, 1967 cited in Rappaport, 2001, p. 65), "or «context creator»" (Bateson, 1973, cited in Rappaport, 2001, p. 65). In this way I can point out that, in the Teticheño scenario, the form of each religious ritual adds to the background, different elements thanks to which one can be distinguished from the other. Proof of this are the Catholic rituals of the month of May and August, in which the background is devotion to the Virgin of Tetiz, however, the forms of both differ.

Another of the important aspects that I would like to highlight are, first, the characteristics of the rituals and, consequently, the activities carried out by the young people of Tetiz during the celebration of the rituals in the month of August. The shape, the regularity, the execution and the repetitiveness are some of the characteristics. Regarding the second point, the intervention of the young people from Tetiz that I was able to notice during my field work stands out, since they are the ones who oversee the fireworks games, ringing the bells of the sanctuary, carrying and guarding the virgin and her belongings in the processions.

In other words, the execution of the August ritual is not like the December ritual, likewise, the rituals on specific dates that almost always follow the liturgical calendar and their execution are distinctive from each one, since they the way of organizing and participating of the Teticenses people is varied. Some prefer to participate during the Marian month, others in the August fiesta or in the receptions of the patron saints or the Virgin of Tetiz when they return from their visits to neighboring towns. There are cases where believers participate in all religious rituals.

After what has been indicated, I highlight what Rappaport (2001) mentions regarding ritual as communication, since he visualizes the importance of designating special times and places for the execution of rituals and understands that both time and place meet senders and receivers of messages (p.93). He also alludes that,

To say that ritual is a mode of communication is hardly to suggest that it is interchangeable with other modes of communication. It is a particularly suitable medium, perhaps even unique, for the transmission of certain messages and certain types of information (Rappaport, 2001, p.95).

Considering the above, I can point out that regardless of the message that the participants of the Teticense religious rituals can transmit to themselves, there are other messages transmitted to the spectators.

### **August festival in honor of the Virgin of Tetiz**

In Latin America, the religious represents a solid space for the constitution of the symbolic field of society and, in Tetiz, during the month of August, the rituals carried out around the local virgin reveal this space. In this way, in this section I will develop everything related to the most important religious ritual for the Teticense society.

It is relevant to point out that, as Poupard refers (1997), the cultural history of each space is distinguished by rituals, which are present in popular religion, especially in the mixture of acts marked by the institutionalized Church and the rituals of ancestral reminiscences of the population, in which the jurisdiction of the Church is outside.

Before entering fully into the subject of the section, I point out that I will equate the Virgin of Tetiz with the dominant symbol of ritual symbols to which Turner (1967) refers. This, because it complies with the properties indicated by the author. In other words, the sacred image represents a set of "many things and actions represented in a single formation", and, at the same time, it is "a unification of disparate significate, interconnected because they have similar qualities" (p. 30). The young Catholics from Tetiz who participated in the study attribute similar meanings to the Virgin and jointly associate themselves with acts that they carry out as a form of expression of their popular religiosity.

Continuing with the analysis of the symbols, it should be noted that there is not only the previously described dominant symbol, but also the instrumental symbols, which, in the case of the August festivities, are those that, together with the symbol dominant, in each space and time, serve to give meaning and order to certain acts, in this case to the celebration itself. Day after day, during the month of August, the entrance of the people, the floral arrangements, the banners, the colored confetti, the music, the songs and the flyers, act as instrumental symbols of the rituals, thanks to which complements the vitality of the religiosity of the Teticense people.

On the first day of August of each year the entrance of the members of the guilds begins (Guild of the August Festivities, Guild in Honor of the Blessed Virgin of the Assumption, Guild of Peace and Harmony, Guild of Hunters, Guild of Children of Mary La Pobre de Dios, Farmers Guild, Beekeepers Guild, Farmers Guild, Ladies and Young Ladies Guild, Farmers, and Immigrants Guild) to the sanctuary with their banners.

The custodians and carriers of the Virgin take the sacred image down from its place and visit the different streets of the town. This is when the distinction raised by Varela can be identified, that is, it is a procession for the "exit" of the virgin from the sacred space (the sanctuary). In addition, during the tour you can notice the division of social categories (men, women) that remains constant throughout the tour (Varela, 1994, p. 226).

Another aspect that can be noted during the rituals held in August is the expressive nature of the processions, in which the stellar participants -to name them in a special way- reaffirm their self-identification as Catholics and, together, it is possible to understand as a recognition mechanism as part of the Teticense community.

Thus, it can be noted that a deeper level of religious participation is generated in the ritual, in which converge the hopes, the miracles attributed to the Virgin of Tetiz, the requests, the faith instilled from an early age and, in general, observes a symbolism of integration, communion and belonging, expressed in the concept of *communitas*, developed by Turner. In this sense, it seems essential to point out that "the procession is a sacred

space that becomes the *axis mundi*, where the playful *communitas* acquires corporeality by producing the conjunction/dissolution of structured social relations" (Turner, 1978).

It should be noted that in Tetiz the elderly are the ones who emphasize the distinction between the sacred and the profane in the rituals celebrated in August. They keep in mind that the musical groups that perform simultaneously at the entrance of the parishioners during the night of August 14 are not part of the religious acts, however, they have already become customary to celebrate the birthday of the Virgin of the location.

For this reason, it is unavoidable to mention that the scenario generated during the month of August in which one of the religious rituals is celebrated, makes sense when all the symbols, both dominant and instrumental, are found in a specific space and time, only in this way do they fulfill their expressive character and carry a symbolic dimension.

In the same vein, it would be necessary to bring up what was pointed out by Díaz Cruz, who emphasizes that "every party, even when it is purely secular due to its origins, has the effect of bringing individuals closer together, setting the masses in motion" (1998, p. 93). This situation is generated not only during the processions that take place during the month of August through the streets of Tetiz, but also on August 14 throughout the day.

In this sense, Segalen observes that some authors limit the rite/ritual to the exclusively religious field and exclude the profane from the festive field: "the party confronts the rite to the extent that it includes a fun component. [...] In reality, rite and party interpenetrate, without being fully assumed" (Segalen, p. 102). That is to say, the line that divides them is tenuous, and in some cases, it is not desirable to draw it sharply and definitively.

In this regard, Díaz Cruz points out that "rituals have a recreational and playful function; the force that they generate is of such magnitude that there is always a surplus for play and exuberance" (1998, p. 107). It is there where, simultaneously with what happens inside the sanctuary of the Virgin of Tetiz, I find the relationship between the playful and recreational space originated in the Teticeno ritual.

## V. CONCLUSION

Popular religiosity is currently understood as a way of expressing and manifesting with cultural force in everyday life ecclesiastical dogmas with traditional overtones based on customs, religious beliefs, participation in ecclesiastical groups, the conception of sacred images and the attribution of meanings, and not as a translation of forced maintenance. In plain and simple words, it is translated as the space in which ancient and traditional rituals converge, with the specific ways of devotion and veneration towards sacred images.

Considering the above, it can be noted that the primary socialization generated during their first stage of life, as well as the family example, the generational teachings and the tradition of positions held by a member of the family are key components in the immersion in popular religiosity manifested in public rituals.

Consequently, the ways of manifesting, feeling and living popular Catholic religiosity, by not being tied to ecclesial precepts, leaves the door open for its resignification and reinterpretation, with which, in specific cases, public rituals carried out around some Image can be a distinctive element as belonging to a locality, that is, they set the tone as a feature of the believers' own identity and this allows them to move freely both in their traditional constructs, as well as in their customs and worldview.

In this sense, it is worth pointing out the experiences that young people from Tetiz have had with their incorporation into popular religiosity. Most of them have a bond marked by family inheritance, that is, someone in their family was an active member of some apostolic group or, in his case, he was part of a certain guild, according to his occupation. In this way, the primary socialization of young people plays an indispensable role in the reproduction of family religiosity.

In this way, it can be affirmed that it is impractical to try to study popular religiosity from either of the two angles: the sacred and the profane, since the activities are so intertwined that, in contexts such as Teticeno, the explanation and transformation of the dynamics that are currently in force require one of the other.

Finally, it is important to place special emphasis on the fact that young people, despite being a sector that tends to move away from religion, especially from the official religion, this distancing does not happen on the contrary, young people from Tetiz usually join voluntarily. both to the apostolic groups, and to the organization of different activities related to the sanctuary and the virgin. This circumstance fosters a sense of solidarity and camaraderie and in turn generates the reproduction of popular religiosity among young people from Tetiz who manage to share the same goal that represents and characterizes them.

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Lillian Ivonne Hernández Zeind. "Expressions of popular religiosity: religious rituals of the Mayan youth". *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science Invention (IJHSSI)*, vol. 12, no. 6, 2023, pp. 101-107. Journal DOI- 10.35629/7722