

Tourism, fiction and soft power in Pueblos Mágicos of Mexico

Carlos Ríos-Llamas¹, Samuel Hernández Vázquez², Pablo Jacob Morales Tapia³, Rocío Ramírez Villalpando⁴

Abstract

This paper examines power structures, asymmetries in civic participation, and the public legitimization of politicians through tourism and religious practices, as well as whether religious festivals and brotherhoods are linked to power transfers via tourism in the region of Nombre de Dios in Durango, México. Since the 16th century, power relations have been shaped by cultural syncretism between Spaniards and indigenous peoples through festivals, with modes of domination based on religious structures known as brotherhoods and sisterhoods. The study's methodology is qualitative and consists of a review of historical archives, direct observation, and open interviews with key stakeholders during the 2023 Holy Week festivities, which were organized by municipal political authorities and led by the brotherhoods and sisterhoods. An analysis is presented along three lines: 1) the origins and power structures of the festival in the 16th century, 2) the brotherhoods and sisterhoods and the transfer of power from the 16th century to the 21st century, and 3) the public legitimization of politicians through tourism. According to the results, religious festivals play a substantial role in shaping the power structures of Nombre de Dios by serving as tourist attractions and validating authoritarian political regimes.

Keywords: cultural heritage, magical town, power regimes, religious festival, Durango

¹ Universidad Autónoma de Baja California, Mexico, llamas [at] uabc.edu.mx

² Universidad Autónoma de Baja California, Mexico, samuel.hernandez23 [at] uabc.edu.mx

³ Universidad Autónoma de Aguascalientes, Mexico, job195 [at] hotmail.com

⁴ Universidad Autónoma de Aguascalientes, Mexico, rocio.ramirez [at] edu.uaa.mx

1. Introduction

The tourism industry has direct implications for the territory in terms of economic dynamics and political order. It is widely accepted that tourism contributes to economic growth, sustainability, and cultural diversity (Enriquez and Vargas, 2021). The majority of studies, however, fail to consider the political order underlying national and international recognition or strategies for developing and promoting tourism in accordance with stakeholder expectations.

Beritelli and Laesser (2009) studied the factors that shape power in an Austrian tourist destination. They reported that product knowledge and process power were more important than coercive, persuasive, or resource-based power for tourism governance. Later, researchers analysed power networks during a music festival and reported that resource-based power mattered more than network-based power did, with leadership tied to stakeholders' resources (Tiew *et al.*, 2015). A more recent study looked at how stakeholders supported traditional food attractions. This study emphasized the impact of power and privilege on authentic food experiences and revealed that restaurateurs and tourism providers had more influence, while food producers had less power, due to limited knowledge and market access (Cheng *et al.*, 2025). All these studies reveal how internal political structures influence tourism by enabling key stakeholders to leverage their knowledge, power, and economic positions to preserve and transfer their status and political influence within government structures.

In addition to market influences, a recent study in Romania analysed how tourism-related fantasies shape reality, showing differences in the role of political economies and tourism (Popuescu, 2025). The fiction framework provides new insights into tourism policies, their purpose, and values, fostering interdisciplinary dialogue and practical use while helping countries such as Mexico generate foreign currency through tourism.

A geopolitical analysis of tourism also faces challenges in understanding how various identities are represented in terms of class, race, sexuality, gender, age, nationality, and other factors (Minca, 2025). As tourist destinations become more segregated, customer care takes on a biopolitical dimension; these spaces serve as sites of experiments in biopolitical control, influenced by intersectional factors related to bodies and identities.

Soft power refers to experts who use their knowledge to solve complex problems or meet stakeholders' needs. In tourism, there are three types of power: coercive (forcing actions), legitimate (prescribing actions), and induced (using rewards such as financial incentives). The resource dependency perspective highlights that stakeholders need access to power sources, such as expertise, reputation, or financial capital, to exercise their influence. These sources can be mobilized at different times to achieve goals, and the type of power used depends on the available resources.

The Pueblos Magicos program in Mexico, established by the Ministry of Tourism in 2001, has recognized 132 locations. A "Pueblo Mágico" is a place with unique features, symbols, authentic stories, significant events, and everyday life, offering great opportunities for tourism that cater to travellers' motivations and needs (SECTUR, 2018). This national tourism policy aims to strengthen and enhance cultural, natural, and social heritage, contributing to the growth of the tourism market. Such interventions transform places and redesign heritage, culture, and landscapes to align with market interests in a capitalist context. The Pueblos Mágicos program seeks to support municipal, state, and regional tourism development with a sustainable vision, promoting tourism offerings and providing support for tourism. Its main objectives include diversifying tourism offerings, leveraging the uniqueness of localities, using tourism as a tool for sustainable development, and fostering profitable business opportunities (Rodríguez, 2017). Pueblos Magicos often fails in regard to preserving and sharing heritage because it functions more like a tourism quality seal than a balanced approach does. It is therefore necessary to develop initiatives centred on community needs in this model where local elites and external investors dominate tourism and restrict residents' access to public spaces (Baez, 2021).

In 2018, Nombre de Dios was named a Pueblo Mágico, highlighting its historical and cultural features, including four colonial-era churches: San Pedro Apóstol, San Francisco monastery, Ermita de la Natividad, and Jesús de Nazareno. Religious groups and traditions played a key role in preserving these buildings, rituals, and the power of local elites. This paper explores the cultural and physical

importance of heritage, such as festivals. A magical town such as Nombre de Dios faces challenges in involving different social groups in tourism and development. The research question is as follows: How does Nombre de Dios' political system use tourism to support the hereditary transfer of power and legitimize government roles by promoting its religious traditions, history, and ordinary life? How do community actors, especially religious brotherhoods and local leaders, negotiate, resist, or accommodate these power dynamics?

2. Materials and methods

Qualitative research was conducted. The study involved reviewing historiographical documents, collecting onsite data, and conducting open interviews. Nombre de Dios's archival review focused on cultural and natural heritage, social identity, and political development since the 16th century. Field observations from August 2022 to June 2024 revealed festival organization methods and recognized key community leaders. Open interviews explored power transfer patterns, rituals, and legitimacy in religious festivals and tourism. The interviewees included Jorge Manuel Luna, Chairperson of the "Dulce Nombre de Jesus" Brotherhood; Gerardo Hernández Andrade, the town's unofficial chronicler; and Flor Leticia Escobedo Reyes, custodian of the community museum "Contalpa". The study also analysed the ritual and symbolic elements of Holy Week celebrations organized by the men's brotherhood of the Dulce Nombre de Jesus and the women's sisterhood of Nuestra Señora de la Soledad.

Participants' dignity, autonomy, and privacy were prioritized throughout the research process. Transparency and objectivity were maintained, particularly in politically or religiously sensitive contexts, as were confidentiality, informed consent, and appropriate dissemination of findings. Every step of the study was guided by ethical principles, including conflicts of interest and obligations to participants. To ensure that the research contributed positively, guidelines for a community tourism agenda were developed.

3. Results

The most important religious sites and objects in Nombre de Dios include 1) Señor del Sagrario, 2) Santo Santiago, and 3) Nazareno Painting, all of which are found in the Temple of Jesus Nazareno. The main celebrations are the Holy Week, organized by local brotherhoods with deep meanings, and the feast of Saints Peter and Paul, the town's patron saints, celebrated on July 29 by the parish priest. The analysis considered both festivals and focused on three areas: origins of the festivals and 16th-century power structures, brotherhoods and rituals carried into the 21st century, tourism, and how the dramatization of rites in tourism influences soft power in politics.

3.1 The origins of the festivals and 16th-century power structures

Nombre de Dios has transformed its historical landmarks into immersive tourist attractions designed to illustrate the region's critical role in New Spain's history. Despite their origins as defensive bastions and sanctuaries for conquistadors during indigenous uprisings, the convents today serve as architectural marvels, providing visitors with a tangible connection to both the military and the spiritual conquests of the area. Intricate stonework in these structures, which were originally designed to withstand sieges, now serves as a silent testament to the strength of the colonial expansion. In addition, prehispanic communities and religious brotherhoods have been meticulously relocated within the tourism framework to combine heritage, collective memory, and economic development. In exploring these sites, visitors will be able to hear the echoes of ancient rituals as well as colonial ambitions, creating a vivid picture of the region's rich history.

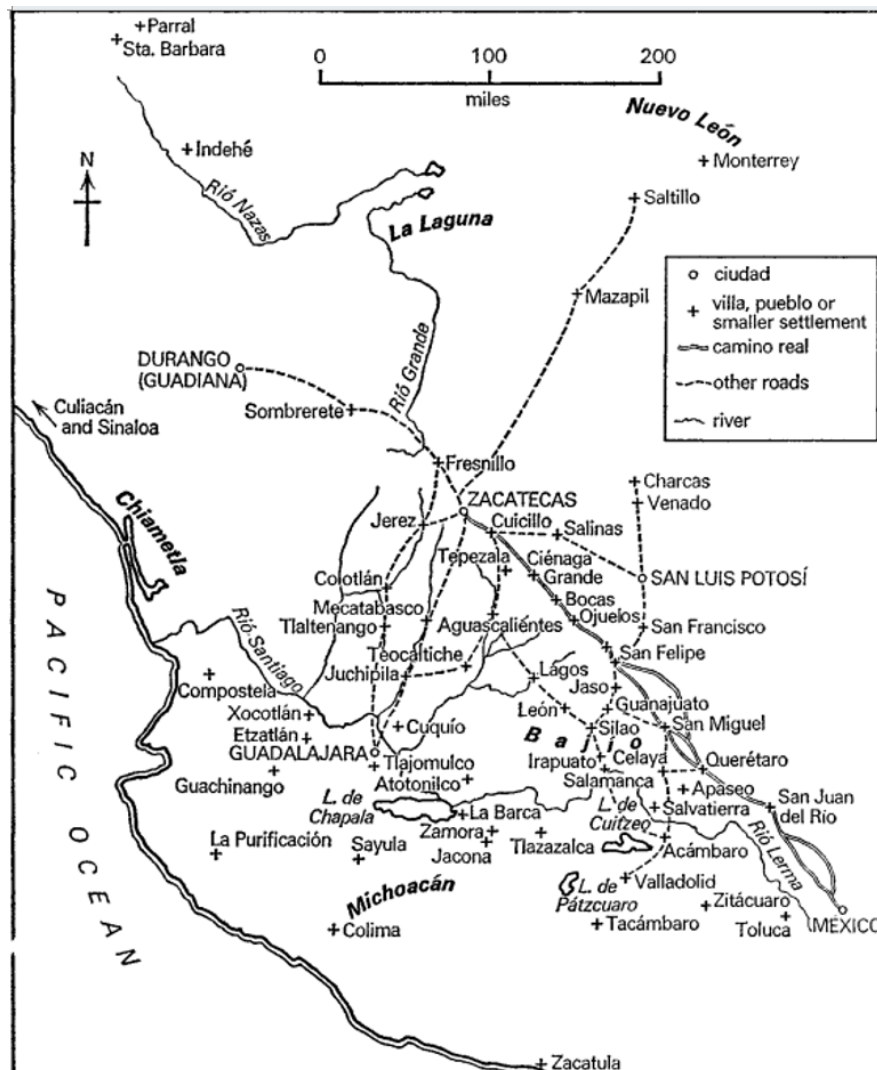
Between 1531 and 1572, there was a period of expansion of monastic foundations, primarily in the central kingdom of New México, the western kingdom of Nueva Galicia, and the northern provinces of Nueva Vizcaya. Missionaries acted as spiritual explorers or, more accurately, as chaplains of the army, traversing vast regions deemed unknown at the time. As foundations were established,

convents or modest houses with adjacent chapels were built, serving as outposts visited by the main convents. These convents also functioned as organizational hubs for the army, consolidating their positions.

The latent origin of each town in Nueva España was rooted in its convent and church. The convents served two primary purposes: first, as refuges for Spanish conquistadors and fortresses against indigenous attacks; second, as centres for education, care, and evangelization. In this way, the dual conquest – military and spiritual – was realized. The Spanish monarchies relied on the resources of America's nations to maintain global Christianity (Ruiz Medrano, 2001). Owing to this, missionaries destroyed many indigenous religious sites while exploring the area.

Religious architecture simultaneously provided sites for worship and political control, with new constructions (convents, churches, and houses) erected atop the ruins of destroyed elements, replacing one cult with another and fostering a new way of life (Meli, 2011). Robert Ricard, in his study of “the spiritual conquest,” asserts that “the advance towards the north, towards the mining regions and the lands of the Chichimecas, towards Zacatecas and Durango (...), represents an inevitable continuation of the spiritual occupation of Nueva Galicia” (1995, p. 115). By 1535, Fray Francisco Lorenzo founded Etzatlán, resulting in Nayarit, Durango, and Zacatecas, and by 1558, the Spanish viceroyalty took possession of the territories of Nombre de Dios and Guadiana as a result of the sustained efforts of Catholic missionaries in this region (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Towns and roads in New Galicia and parts of New Spain, New Biscay and New León



Source: P. J. Bakewell (1971). *Silver mining and society in Colonial Mexico: Zacatecas 1546-1700*. Cambridge University Press.

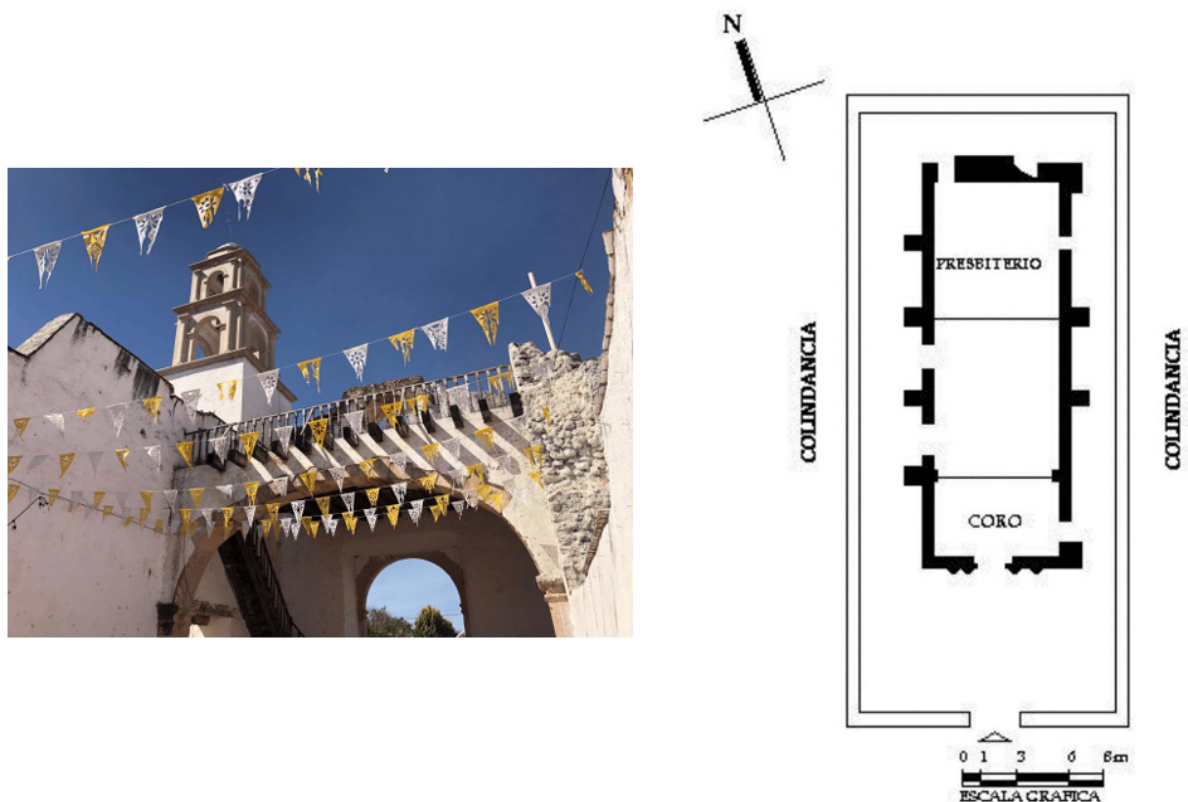
As part of the Spanish Kingdom's initiative to convert indigenous populations to Catholicism, Franciscan and Jesuit missionaries were tasked with "saving souls" in the state of Durango. Throughout this period, widespread epidemics decimated the indigenous population, causing them to perceive death as an integral part of evangelization. In addition to disrupting their cultural identity and rituals, an alien religion was brutally imposed on them. The use of rituals, processions, and the veneration of sacred images contributed significantly to the propagation of Catholic doctrine (Ricard, 1986).

Throughout the history of the Christian Church, brotherhoods created by Franciscan missionaries have been considered among the most important means of establishing Christianity among indigenous people. While New Spain was evangelizing and playing a central role in the colonial social structure, brotherhoods served a variety of purposes, ranging from religious to social, such as welfare and community care.

Through Durango, also known as Nueva Vizcaya, indigenous communities such as the Tepehuanes, Acaxeas, Xiximes, and Tarahumaras were able to integrate Spanish cultural influences. As early as 1556, Friar Juan de Tapia spent months in the valley, converting many to Christianity before founding Franciscan communities in Canatlán, San Juan del Río, Cuencamé, and Nombre de Dios. However, Nombre de Dios is often recognized as the site of the first Franciscan settlement. The influence of this foundation extended beyond mere settlements in San Juan del Río, Cuencamé, and Canatlán. Franciscans built their architectural structures not only to symbolize their presence but also to reflect the gradual change in population beliefs and paradigms, which had a direct effect on their political structures.

Furthermore, these missions played an integral role in the development of the Camino Real Tierra Adentro, a historical route that connected the capital city to the far north of New Mexico. The convent of San Francisco in Nombre de Dios, founded in 1563 as part of a Franciscan mission, was a strategic landmark along this route (Figure 2). Spanning more than 2,600 km from Mexico City to Santa Fe, the Camino Real facilitated colonization, evangelization, commerce, and mining.

Figure 2. Convent of San Francisco



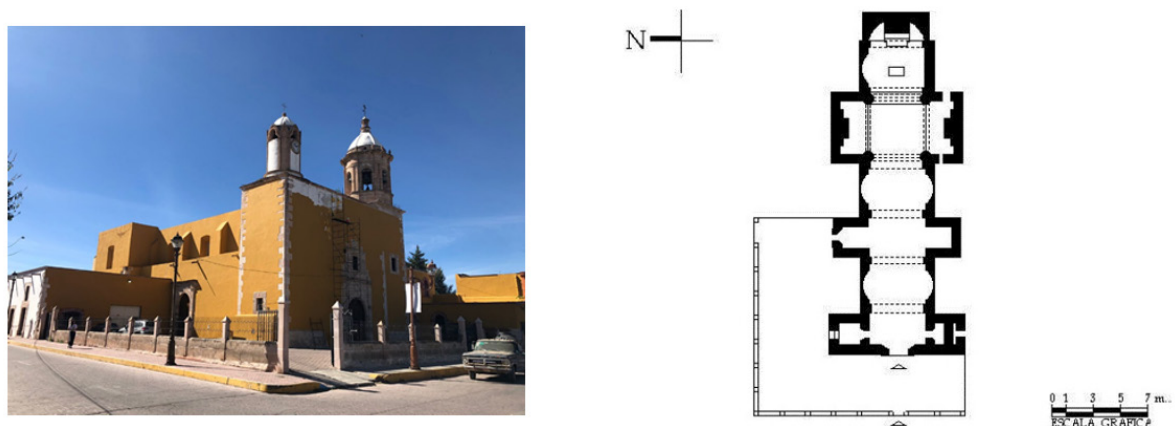
Note: (left) Ruins of the San Francisco temple seen from the interior; the lack of a roof highlights the reconstruction of the bell tower and shows the construction systems based on lime and stone on the walls, 2023; (right) Architectural sketch of the former temple of San Francisco derived from the National Catalogue of Historical Monuments (INAH). It frames the atrium; the temple is arranged with the presbytery and the choir and has a rectangular floor plan with a quadrangular apse.

The Franciscans promoted brotherhoods modelled after medieval European organizations. These groups fostered piety, organized burials, aided the sick, and celebrated religious festivals honoring saints. Missionaries such as Fray Toribio de Benavente and Fray Pedro de Gante incorporated indigenous populations by adapting pre-Hispanic practices to Christian worship. During their travels, missionaries sought to dismantle major pagan centres, replacing them with religious architecture such as churches and convents and establishing a new way of life.

From a Franciscan and Augustinian perspective, it strengthened Spanish control and converted nomadic peoples such as the Chichimecas through missions and Indian towns. Economically, it enabled the transport of silver from Zacatecas and Guanajuato, fuelling the growth of agricultural and livestock habitats that supported mining.

During the early stages of evangelization in northern New Spain, Nombre de Dios came home to a rich historical legacy rooted in the initial phases of this transformative process. The ruins of the San Francisco temple, of Franciscan origin, are situated along the ancient Camino Real and represent the oldest of the five colonial temples in the municipality. Despite its modest architecture – comprising a single nave and a simple façade – the temple embodies the beginnings of the spiritual colonization of the region. In the heart of the town, the parish of San Pedro Apóstol showcases the urban organization of the Spanish settlement; having undergone numerous reconstructions, it stands as a testament to its enduring religious and social significance (Figure 3).

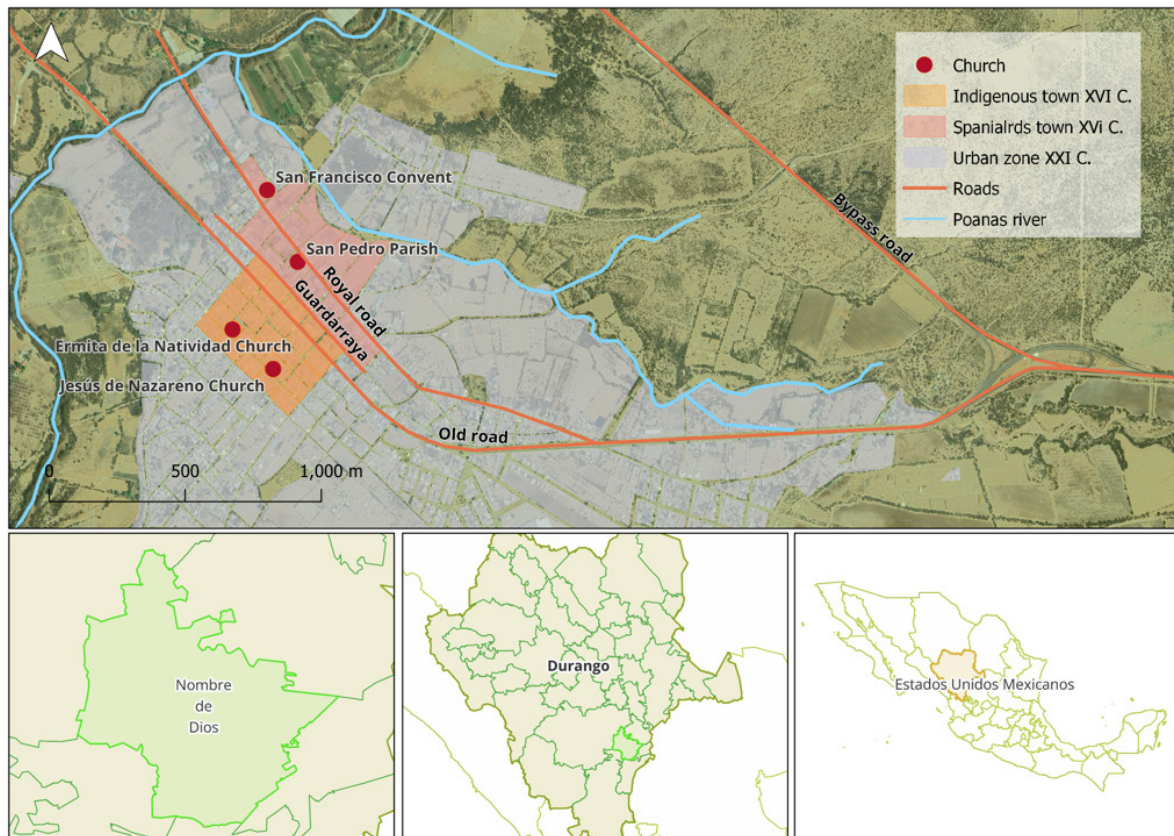
Figure 3. Parish of San Pedro Apóstol



Note: (left) View from the northwest of the Parish of San Pedro Apóstol, identifying the temple, the atrium, and the annexes serving as administrative areas, 2023; (right) Architectural sketch of the parish of San Pedro Apóstol derived from the INAH with a plan of six bodies and a single nave.

The former indigenous settlement preserves temples that encapsulate the collective memory and the colonial tensions between native populations and viceregal authorities. Within each province of New Spain, the class system determined the spatial and urban organization, including the hierarchy of ecclesiastical and civil powers, so that the two sides of a town separated indigenous people from their own religious institutions (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Churches of Nombre de Dios, Durango, México, in both indigenous and Spanish towns



Source: Authors

The importance of the four churches of Nombre de Dios can be attributed to several factors. First, they are sacred places where religious ceremonies and acts of worship are held and thus have high hierarchical significance in the Catholic community. In the state of Durango, 83% of the population is Catholic, while in the municipality of Nombre de Dios, this figure increases to 89%. Six percent of the population is Protestant, while 4% is atheistic, maintaining Catholicism's hegemony. Additionally, these buildings serve as tangible reminders of religious history and tradition, which are fundamental to the expression of cultural identity.

The architectural and religious heritage of Nombre de Dios, known as "the Village of the Four Churches", dates back to 1563. Churches in this town play important roles not only as spiritual centres but also as cultural landmarks with longstanding connections to community identity. Since being designated as a Pueblo Mágico in 2018, tourism has grown, highlighting the intricate facades, bell towers, and sacred interiors of these structures. However, this increased attention has also revealed some challenges, including the deterioration of the churches as a result of limited resources and inconsistent planning. In addition to serving as a venue for festivals, processions, and community gatherings, churches are an integral part of the cultural life and spiritual life of the town. Their architecture reflects a blend of indigenous and European influences, illustrating the syncretism of Mexican religious traditions. Despite their importance, fragmented preservation efforts and uncoordinated tourism strategies threaten the sustainability of these sites. By aligning heritage preservation with tourism, Nombre de Dios can maintain its spiritual and cultural vitality.

3.2 Brotherhoods, sisterhoods and rituals carried into the 21st century

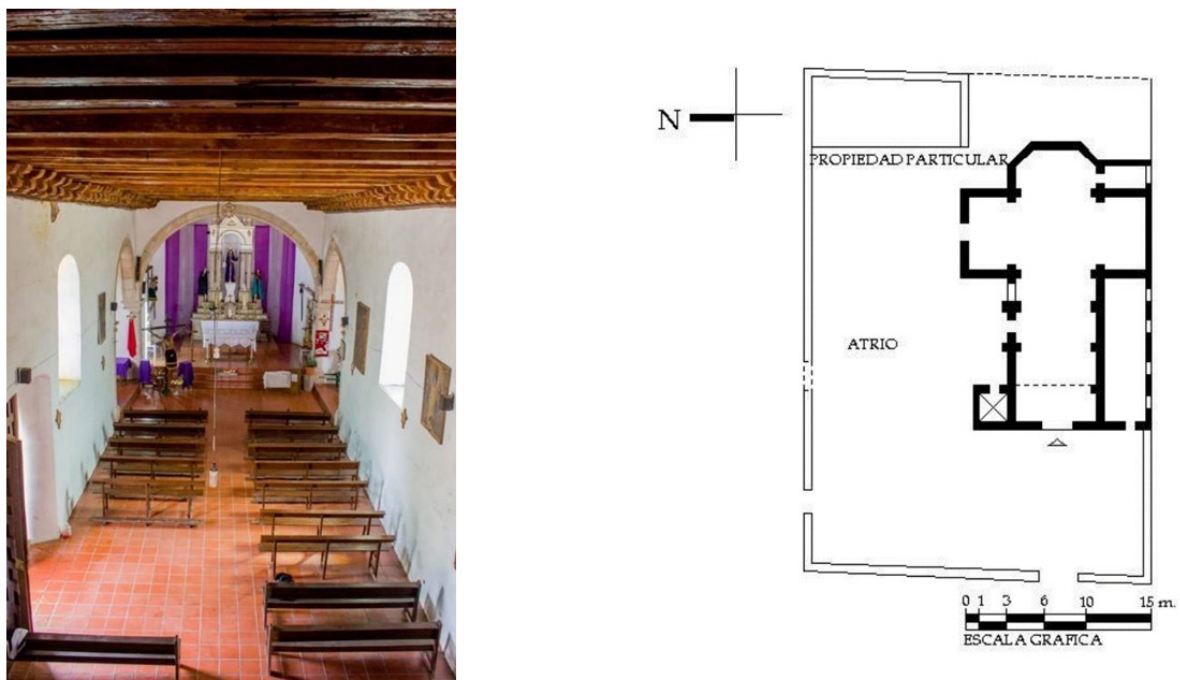
Although primarily formed by religious communities, brotherhoods have also emerged from the efforts of priests, friars, and nuns. These groups address various societal needs. While the lack of primary sources complicates their study – especially from the 16th and 17th centuries – it is clear that

they played a dual role: unifying populations fragmented by conquest and serving as tools for the colonization and integration of indigenous identities, territories, and communal property.

Popular religion in Nombre de Dios is manifested through brotherhoods and sisterhoods, which, despite originating in the 16th century, are preserved and transmitted in forms reworked and reinterpreted from their original context. These groups are not merely religious organizations; they represent emotional, symbolic, and social ties that articulate community life, particularly during the Holy Week processions. In contemporary Catholicism, there are various ways to practice faith. However, the predominant model emphasizes the extreme centrality of clerical power and strong territorial ties to community identity (Fortuny et al., 1999). Parish priests, as territorial representatives of the Church, oversee religious practices and often influence the acceptance or promotion of devotional practices that diverge from orthodox norms. Despite this institutional framework, the brotherhoods and sisterhoods of Nombre de Dios maintain their autonomy and self-determination.

Brotherhood of the Sweet Name of Jesus, an organization of men charged with guarding and transporting religious images during processions, is affiliated with the Church of Jesus of Nazareth (Figure 5). Structurally, the Brotherhood includes a president and a board of directors responsible for decision-making and organizational management. However, their authority is not autonomous; they must secure the parish priest's approval, as the priest holds institutional responsibility for overseeing and legitimizing Catholic practices within the parish jurisdiction. Additionally, the National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH) collaborates with groups such as the Brotherhood to preserve the material culture of local religious traditions.

Figure 5. Jesús Nazareno Church



Note: (left) View from the choir towards the presbytery. The wooden beams are arranged in groups of one by two, providing greater support to the terrace and the clay roof finish. This construction system is known as the Catalan slab; (right) Architectural sketch of the former church of Jesús Nazareno derived from the INAH. The floor plan is a Latin cross with a polygonal apse, and it has a bell tower that sets off the façade.

These rituals are characterized by physical strength, rhythmic sounds of drums and bugles, and a liturgical drama of processions that transform urban spaces into stages for embodied faith. It was also driven by its educational and catechizing mission, which aimed at strengthening and deepening devotion among indigenous people, and it functions as a remembrance of heritage and identity today. The establishment of brotherhood brought greater organization to festivals and processions, enhanced the theatricality of rituals, and ensured more consistent worship practices (Figure 6).

Figure 6. The Brotherhood of Jesús Nazareno performing the Holy Week rituals in Nombre de Dios, Mexico, 2023



Source: Authors.

Jorge Luna, a member of the Brotherhood of the Church of Jesús Nazareno in Nombre de Dios, Durango, recounts his lifelong connection to the chapel, shaped by familial and cultural traditions. By 2006, he had assumed the presidency, continuing a legacy of leadership that traces back to his great-grandfather, Baltasar Luna. Throughout his life, Jorge witnessed the intergenerational transmission of leadership within his family, with his aunt and cousins also participating in the *cofradía*.

Despite being the sole active representative of his family today, Jorge emphasizes the profound commitment required to uphold traditions and maintain the chapel. He notes changes in practices, such as the introduction of street processions during Semana Santa, which were not part of earlier traditions. Jorge reflects on the responsibilities of his role and the importance of ensuring continuity within the *cofradía*. He discusses his collaboration with other members, including Francisco, a childhood friend and the current treasurer. While the community acknowledges his contributions to the chapel, Jorge prefers directing specific matters to the priest, underscoring the collective nature of their shared religious and cultural mission. The theft and subsequent recovery of a temple door, as recounted by Jorge, underscore the critical role of preserving historical artefacts in safeguarding the cultural heritage of a community. This event highlights the broader significance of historical documentation in maintaining a connection to the past.

The Sisterhood of Nuestra Señora de la Soledad, an all-female religious confraternity, is entrusted with the care of sacred images, including those of the Nativity, the Candelaria, and the Virgin of Soledad. Established in 1581 according to municipal records – although a plaque inside the temple suggested an earlier origin in 1570 – this confraternity embodies a longstanding tradition of female devotion. This *cofradía* is responsible for the Ermita de la Natividad and is distinguished by its female leadership, with a president who oversees the group's activities and decision-making processes. In addition to other members, the president coordinates religious festivities such as processions, masses, novenas, and other community events.

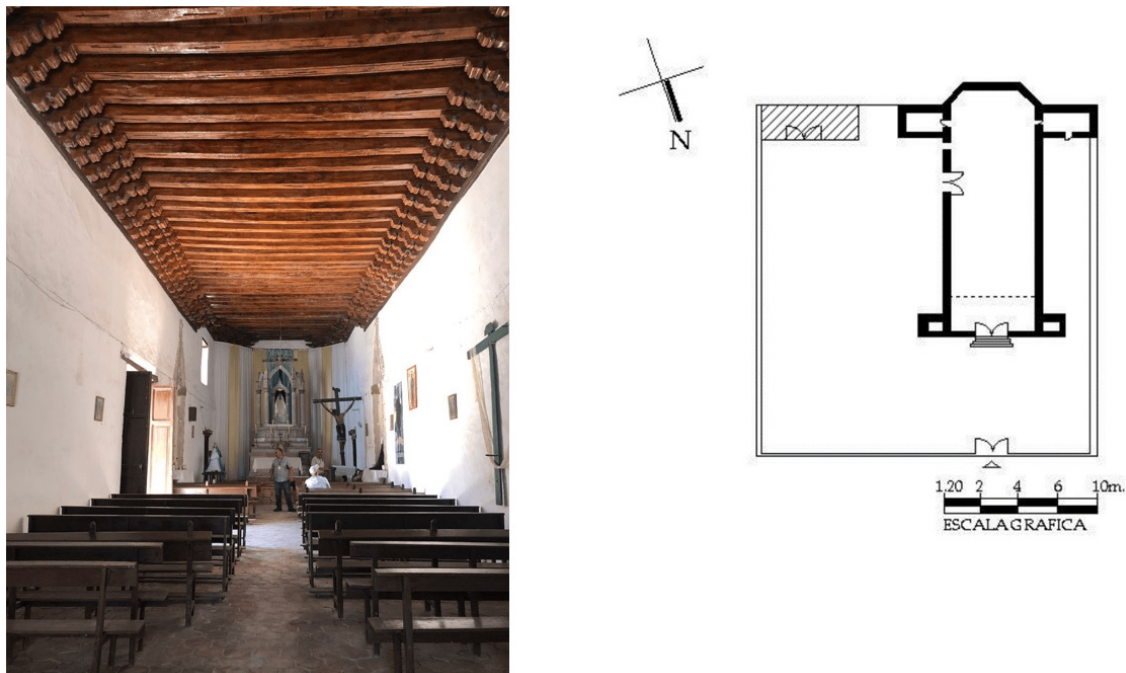
Figure 7. The Sisterhood of Nuestra Señora de la Soledad and their church, Ermita de la Natividad, performing the Holy Week rituals in Nombre de Dios, Mexico, 2023



Source: Authors.

The Ermita de la Natividad and the Jesús de Nazareno churches, located in the old indigenous quarter separate from the Spanish core, highlight this historical divide. The Jesús de Nazareno church also safeguards patrimonial goods and the legacy of Don Uraján de Luna, a 16th-century indigenous leader who championed his community's rights to water and land. This temple houses a striking skull relic and a large-format painting. Through the *cofradías* (religious brotherhoods), these spaces continue to foster devotional practices, serving as central pillars of both community life and local tourism in Nombre de Dios (Figure 8).

Figure 8. Ermita de la Natividad



Note: (left) Viewed from the interior corridor towards the presbytery, the wooden beam ceiling can be seen with its respective brackets, which serve as support and give space due to the height, which characterizes the space; (right) Architectural sketch of the former temple of San Francisco derived from the CNMHI. The floor plan is rectangular with a single nave and a polygonal apse and has two annexes that function as a sacristy and a cellar.

Influenced from childhood by his grandmother, Belén Muñoz, who belonged to a sisterhood and became actively involved around the age of 12. According to Belén, the activities of sisterhood are centred in the Ermita de la Natividad, where they hold vigils on Good Friday, honoring Christ and the Dolorosa through prayer, song, and dance, which include the traditional performance of “El alabado” in the commemoration of Christ’s passion and death. Furthermore, they organize the processions, carrying the images, taking care of them, and dressing the Virgin in black.

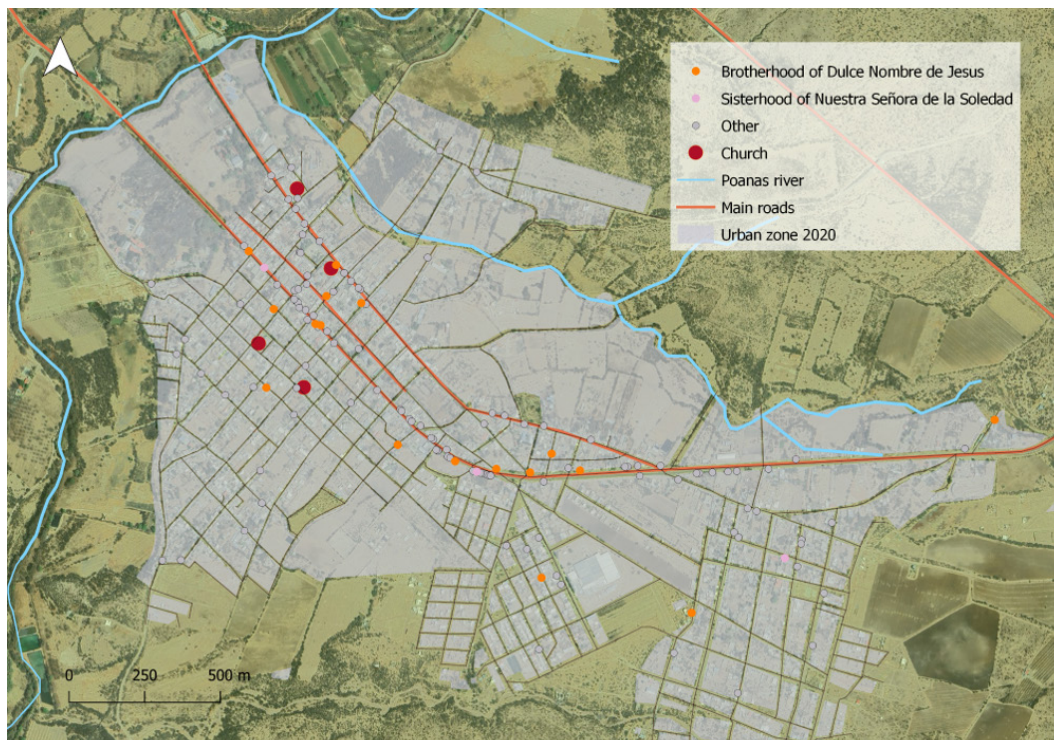
3. Tourism shapes political soft power

Tourism legitimizes political structures by promoting initiatives such as the Pueblos Mágicos program, which selects towns based on economic, cultural, historical, and heritage criteria. Nombre de Dios, designated Pueblo Mágico on October 11, 2018, is the second municipality in Durango to receive this distinction. Its main attractions include religious festivities, particularly Holy Week, which draws thousands of visitors, along with unique natural landscapes and the production of artisanal mezcal. However, the Pueblo Mágico brand does not necessarily signify sustainable development for the adopting communities; instead, it primarily benefits local elites and external investors, who monopolize tourism offerings, often at the expense of the local population. Services are frequently controlled by outsiders, while residents are marginalized from public spaces. This dynamic has produced unintended negative effects, highlighting the need to transition towards a more horizontal, community-centred model that addresses genuine local needs.

As spaces of resistance and power, adaptation and redefinition, Nombre de Dios brotherhoods operate as spaces of memory and heritage, preserving and articulating memory with historical and architectural heritage. The practices of devotion, such as processions, pilgrimages, and patron saint festivals, have become exaggerated, and theatrical expressions are intended to attract tourists.

Residents face limitations in terms of the quality of tourist services. The amount of accommodations and restaurants available during the high and low seasons is not sufficient to meet visitors’ needs. A lack of unified tourist image also undermines the coherence and quality of the offering within the tourism sector, resulting in confusion among tourists. However, some of the most established tourist attractions, such as hotels, restaurants, and agave producers, are becoming concentrated in the hands of local elites (Figure 9).

Figure 9. Services for tourists in the Pueblo Mágico Nombre de Dios, Durango, 2023



Note: The attention provided by members of the brotherhood and sisterhood to tourists has a significant effect on the general tourist market.

A number of actors holding positions in the state and municipal governments are involved in the internal organization of the brotherhood. As Jorge says, “The *cofradía* [brotherhood] handles all the organization, while the municipality determines the form of assistance; it would not be ideal for them to intervene, as they sometimes politicize or try to manage the celebration differently. The event is entirely nonpolitical, organized by the community and its residents” (Jorge Luna, June 19, 2023).

The brotherhood, an assembly of 25 to 30 members, is responsible for electing a president and an alternate, both of whom can serve three-year terms with the possibility of re-election. This governing body includes key roles such as the secretary, treasurer, and president of maintenance and conservation works for the temple’s assets. According to Jorge, the *cofradía* [brotherhood] operates independently of political influence, reflecting its community-driven ethos. Nevertheless, he underscores the importance of financial contributions from governmental entities, such as the municipality or state government, which play a significant role in supporting various events and initiatives.

Religious structures in Nombre de Dios, such as the Franciscan mission, exemplify how cultural landmarks can attract tourism by combining history, tradition, and memory. These sites not only preserve the town’s heritage but also serve as focal points for cultural exploration, drawing visitors who are interested in its rich past and diverse offerings.

As tourism has grown, Holy Week traditions have changed from being held in the atriums of the Nativity and Sweet Names of Jesus churches to now being held on the streets. There was nothing happening in the streets, as all the activities were performed in the temple until recently. A few years ago, Father Humberto began taking the Stations of the Cross to the parish (Flor Escobedo, 19-04-2023).

The organizers of the Silent Procession in the town of Nombre de Dios expressed concern regarding the need to provide participants with robes appropriate to the penitential nature of the ritual, as in the processions of San Luis Potosi and Zacatecas. However, a lack of resources, coordination, and time has made this difficult. For now, participants wear simple attire: white shirts and black pants for men and white blouses with black skirts or pants for women. Francisco, the director of the Durango State Institute of Culture, helps organize the feast of San Pedro Apostol with the parish priest, bringing in artists, mariachi, and folkloric groups. He also supports Nancy, the current president of Nombre de Dios (Belén Muñoz, 19-04-2023).

The parish priest values traditions and is passionate about popular piety. He supports the community’s efforts, including patronal feasts, pilgrimages, and other activities. Thus far, the collaboration has been positive (Communication with Jorge Luna, 19-04-2023). Towns’ tourism offerings include religious traditions, natural landscapes, and historical architecture. To enhance the visitor experience, the culture department has organized weekend and holiday activities in the main square. These include mezcal tastings, mariachi and band music festivals, and performances by regional folkloric dance groups.

4. Discussion and conclusion

Several approaches have been utilized to explain the background of tourism and the power structures that shape it. There are two types of soft power in tourism practice: the ability of tourism to recreate political agora in contemporary contexts and the soft power that comes from the revaluation of cultural elements that are offered to mass audiences as part of tourism practices. The theoretical framework of this study is discussed in two subsequent sections.

Tourism stakeholders’ relationships with the government offer many options for studying power structures and power assertions within those structures. However, how local businesses and community groups leverage their influence to achieve shared tourism goals in Pueblos Magicos is poorly understood. The lack of clarity in these destinations highlights the need for further research into power dynamics. A lack of consensus on the types of power involved in stakeholder collaborations with government complicates effective tourism management. Power structures in Pueblos Magicos, for instance, may make it difficult to coordinate efforts to meet tourism management challenges. In this context, very little attention has been given to understanding how a group of stakeholders uses

its influence to achieve the common objectives of a tourism destination (Marzano & Scott, 2009). Furthermore, there is a lack of consensus and empirical evidence regarding what types of power are involved in collaborations between tourism destination stakeholders and who is in possession of these powers.

Tourism, as an economic activity, is capable of generating a wide range of economic and social benefits. Destinations such as cultural heritage sites can attract visitors by offering unique services such as ecotourism packages or guided tours of historical landmarks. The destination, however, must address challenges related to providing reliable public services and establishing formal representation for sectors such as hospitality and transportation, which are unfortunately underdeveloped in magical towns such as Nombre de Dios. Effective marketing strategies, backed up by data on visitor profiles and sales trends, can further enhance competitiveness and sustainability in these towns (Ramírez *et al.*, 2025).

In Mexico, Franciscan churches and missions symbolize mestizo culture, reflecting the arrival of mendicant orders and temple construction. Residents of Nombre de Dios value their cultural and natural heritage, showing an emotional connection to traditions, customs, history, and landscapes. In historical societies, political and religious orders often interact within a system of symbols that connect people to the world and to one another. These symbols are interpreted on the basis of experience and context (Geertz, 1988). Cultural transmission perpetuates social structures, defines groups, and reflects interactions with the outside world. However, culture is historically oriented, shaped by agency and power, and subject to contestation and change (Grimson and Semán, 2015). It reveals conflicts and power dynamics.

Religion, memory, and material heritage, as well as their relationships with power and the economy, must be considered within the context of culture. The role of religion in communities transcends its role as merely a symbol; it regulates social relations, regulates the economy, strengthens identities, and preserves collective memories within communities. Popular religiosity operates as a mechanism of power, cultural resistance, and spatial appropriation, manifested in devotional practices embedded in everyday life (Hernández Vazquez, 2021). The region's heritage, including traditions and expressions reflecting its history, attests to its past. Beyond veneration, the architecture, sacred art, and spiritual atmosphere of these sites hold historical and artistic value and are essential for preserving the area's memory and identity. Recognizing these festivities as cultural heritage has enabled their continuation in Nombre de Dios, with community participation in planning and development fostering belonging and tradition continuity.

Architectural and religious organizations reflect the power dynamics between locals and elites, shaping social roles, ideologies, and access to religious benefits. These structures create a pendular dynamic among stakeholders, serving as a strategy for resistance, accommodation, and relationship building. The traditions of Nombre de Dios are deeply rooted in the community, blending pre-Hispanic and Christian elements to form unique celebrations that preserve cultural identity. These festivals foster community bonds and express popular religiosity, adapting to contemporary influences such as tourism and heritage preservation under the "Pueblo Mágico" designation.

Tourism can create positive expectations in areas facing development challenges. For decades, it has played a key role in regional economic development, contributing to public and private infrastructure for regional, national, and foreign tourists. In rural areas that are underdeveloped and rich in natural beauty, tourism often emerges as a redemption activity; however, not all rural areas may benefit from tourism development (Pelc, 2018). Patrimonialization can also have negative consequences, such as gentrification and the excessive commercialization of cultural and natural resources. By creating tourism "fiction", the government can portray itself in a more favourable light. Emotional recognition advances cultural diplomacy rather than coercive political narratives.

Among the most important functions of culture is to bring together opponents through agreements and negotiations, no matter how transient or lasting they may be (Grimson & Semán, 2015). In social groups, rituals serve as a means of bringing people together, expressing their religious beliefs in sacred symbolic forms (Durkheim, 2008). The celebrations and rituals associated with communal life, such as religious festivals, allow social positions and asymmetrical relationships to be kept in tension and under constant negotiation to maintain harmony in the community. At the regional, national, and international levels, autonomously constructed festivals represent diverse actors and social groups.

While tourism is a major source of income for many magical towns and rural communities, it can have adverse effects. Power groups and leaders often polarize resources, hindering the growth of small businesses and commodifying the 'tourist experience.' Despite these challenges, the patrimonialization of the festival and the leadership of the brotherhoods in Nombre de Dios have positively affected the community. They have strengthened local identities, preserved the social structure, and promoted cultural and natural heritage. This has fostered a collective identity and preserved historical memory among families and brotherhoods across generations. Ultimately, the festival's strength lies in its ability to unite the community, preserve cultural identity, transmit values, and express religious devotion.

References

- Báez, J. (2021). Una mirada crítica sobre el patrimonio mundial de la UNESCO. Márgenes. *Espacio, arte y sociedad*, 21 (14), 55-62. <https://doi.org/10.22370/margenes.2021.14.21.3095>
- Bakewell, P. J. (1971). *Silver Mining and Society in Colonial Mexico: Zacatecas, 1546-1700*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511572692>
- Beritelli, P. & Laesser, C. (2011). Power dimensions and influence reputation in tourist destinations: Empirical evidence from a network of actors and stakeholders, *Tourism Management*, 32 (6), 1299-1309. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tourman.2010.12.010>
- Cheng, D., Fountain, J., Rosin, C., & Lucock X. (2025). The process and politics of heritage-based authentication of food experiences, *Tourism Management Perspectives*, 56, 101345. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tmp.2025.101345>
- Deeds, S. M. (2013) Las guerras indígenas: colisiones catastróficas, conflagraciones milenarias y culturas en flujo. In M. Vallanuevo Garcinava, *Historia de Durango* (pp. 126-161). Universidad Juárez del Estado de Durango.
- Durkheim, E. (2008). *Las formas elementales de la vida religiosa*, Alianza.
- Enríquez Acosta, J. Á. & Vargas Ochoa, R. Y. (2021). El estudio de los Pueblos Mágicos. Una revisión a casi 20 años de la implementación del programa. *Dimensiones turísticas*, 5(8), 9-38. <https://doi.org/10.47557/SYWY9441>
- García Amilburu, M. (1998). Reseña: Clifford Geertz. La interpretación de las culturas, *Nueva Revista de Política, Cultura y Arte*, [Online] <https://www.nuevarevista.net/clifford-geertz-la-interpretacion-de-las-culturas/>
- García Ayuardo, C. (2008). Para escribir una historia del cristianismo en México. Las *cofradías novohispanas* y sus fuentes. In D. Bieñko Peralta & B. Bravo Rubio (Coord.), *De sendas brechas y atajos: contexto y crítica de las fuentes eclesíásticas, siglos XVI- XVII* (pp. 125-146). ENAH – INAH - CONACULTA.
- Gaventa, J. (1980). *Power and powerlessness: Quiescence and rebellion in an Appalachian valley*. Clarendon Press.
- Geertz, C. (1988). *La interpretación de las culturas*. Gedisa.
- Grimson, A. & Semán, P. (2005). Presentación: la cuestión cultural. *Etnografías contemporáneas* 1(1), 1-11.
- Hardy, C. (1985). The nature of unobtrusive power. *Journal of Management Studies*, 22 (4), 384-399. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-6486.1985.tb00004.x>
- Hennessey, A. (1981). The frontier in Latin American history. In Centre de recherche et de documentation sur l'Amérique latine (éd.), *Les phénomènes de frontière dans les pays tropicaux* (1). Éditions de l'IHEAL. <https://doi.org/10.4000/books.iheal.1387>

- INEGI, (2010). *Compendio de información geográfica municipal 2010*, Nombre de Dios, Durango.
- León-Portilla, M. (1974). Testimonios nahuas sobre la conquista espiritual, *Estudios de Cultura Náhuatl*, 11, 11-35. <https://nahuatl.historicas.unam.mx/index.php/ecn/article/view/78485>
- Long, N. (2007). *Sociología del desarrollo: una perspectiva centrada en el actor*. COLSAN - CIESAS.
- Marzano, G. & Scott, N. (2009). Power in Destination Branding, *Annals of Tourism Research*, 36(2), 247-267. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.annals.2009.01.004>
- Meli, R. (2011). *Los Conventos mexicanos del siglo XVI, construcción, ingeniería estructural y conservación*, Porrúa.
- Minca, C. (2025). On tourism, geography and the biopolitical. *Tourism Geographies*, 1-11. <https://libcon.rec.uabc.mx:2281/10.1080/14616688.2025.2457766>
- Pelc, S. (2018). Drivers of Marginalization from Different Perspectives. In P. Stanko & M. Koderman, *Nature, Tourism and Ethnicity as Drivers of (De)Marginalization*, Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-59002-8_1
- Popescu, C. (2025). The politics of fantasy and tourism development in Romania, *Current Issues in Tourism*, 1-19. <https://libcon.rec.uabc.mx:2281/10.1080/13683500.2025.2490614>
- Ramírez Saldaña, G., Hernández Vázquez, S., y Ríos-Llamas, C. (2025). Innovación social y productos de valor turístico de Nombre de Dios, México. *Rehuso*, 10(1), 48-59. <https://doi.org/10.33936/rehuso.v10i1.5864>
- Ricard, R. (1995). *La conquista espiritual de México*, FCE
- Rodríguez Bautista, J. (2017). Programa de Pueblos Mágicos en localidades turísticas de México, *Estudios Jaliscienses*, 110, 52-75
- Rostas, S. & Droogers, A. (1995). El uso popular de la religión popular en América Latina: una introducción, *Alteridades*, 9, 81-91.
- Ruiz Medrano, E. (2001) Las instituciones del poder: la encomienda y el corregimiento. En B. García Martínez (Coord.), *Nueva España de 1521 a 1750* (pp. 41-60), Planeta, Conaculta, INAH.
- Secretaría del Bienestar (2022). Informe anual sobre la situación de pobreza y rezago social 2022, Unidad de planeación y evaluación de programas para el Desarrollo, Durango.
- SECTUR, (2018). Memoria Documental. Pueblos Mágicos (Incorporación y permanencia). <https://www.sectur.gob.mx/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/Memoria-Documental-Pueblos-M%2E%80%A0gicos-Incorporaci%C2%A2n-y-Permanenecia.pdf>
- Tiew, F., Holmes, K. & de Bussy, N. (2015). Tourism events and the nature of stakeholder power, *Event Management*, 19 (4), 525-541. <https://doi.org/10.3727/152599515X14465748512768>
- Turner, V. W. (2007). *La selva de los símbolos*, SXXI Editores.
- UNESCO, (1972). Convención sobre la protección del patrimonio mundial, cultural y natural.
- UNESCO, (2003). Conservación para la Salvaguardia del Patrimonio Cultural Inmaterial.

How to cite this article:

Ríos-Llamas, C. et al. (2026). Tourism, fiction and soft power in Pueblos Mágicos of Mexico. *CIDADES, Comunidades e Territórios*, 52, e20261141710. <https://doi.org/10.15847/cct.41710>

Carlos Ríos-Llamas, Universidad Autónoma de Baja California, Mexico

E-mail: llamas [at] uabc.edu.mx

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5274-6558>

Contributions to the article: conceptualization, data curation, methodology, supervision, visualization, original writing, revision and editing.

Samuel Hernández Vázquez, Universidad Autónoma de Baja California, Mexico.

E-mail: samuel.hernandez23 [at] uabc.edu.mx

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7758-5922>

Contributions to the article: conceptualization, data curation, research, methodology, formal analysis, visualization, original writing, revision and editing.

Pablo Jacob Morales Tapia, Universidad Autónoma de Aguascalientes, Mexico.

E-mail: job195 [at] hotmail.com

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0003-4390-5088>

Contributions to the article: conceptualization, methodology, review and editing.

Rocío Ramírez Villalpando, Universidad Autónoma de Aguascalientes, Mexico.

E-mail: rocio.ramirez [at] edu.uaa.mx

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7964-7058>

Contributions to the article: conceptualization, methodology, review and editing.