

## The Tree of Life



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How deep are the roots of a tree's history? How much can it really witness and play a part in location history? Down in Santa Maria Del Tule, a small valley town in Oaxaca, a state of Mexico, there lives the tree of legends. The tree takes 50 people to wrap around the trunk, a tree that has grown and survived over two thousands years of history. El Arbol del Tule is one of the oldest and the widest trunk in the world. The width of the trunk is an extraordinary display of the tree's lifespan. The tree has become a natural wonder to the world as it has survived many changes. The story of El Arbol del Tule journey starts from the Zapotec civilization to when it was transformed by the conquest of the Spaniards to still stand in the 21st century of modern society. How many stories and events has the tree outlived? El Arbol del Tule represents a legacy of survival as it continues to thrive while everything around it changes from the people it's surrounded to the lands it grew on. It has multiple names but the same spirit, and a lifetime of stories that take a deeper root.

The tree of many names although it is one organism. The tree is classified as a Montezuma Cypress or *Taxodium mucronatum* species. This species is native to Mexico and Guatemala; they are very adaptable between dry and wet regions. A classified Evergreen that has had different names by the different people who are associated with it. The indigenous call it El Ahuehuete which means "old man of the water" from the colonizers calling it Sabino the "Cypress of the marshes" or Tule which means "Tree of illumination" (*Taxodium mucronatum / Montezuma cypress / Conifer Species*, n.d.). The tree is also famous for the whimsical branches that often appear in figures to visitors such as elephants, lions, three kings, deer, fish, and others (*Oaxaca - Santa María del Tule*, n.d.). Attracting an audience over the mystery of how the tree had been able to grow and its origins. A journal article by Dorado et al. focuses on the experiments to doubt if the tree is truly one genetic individual. The authors state

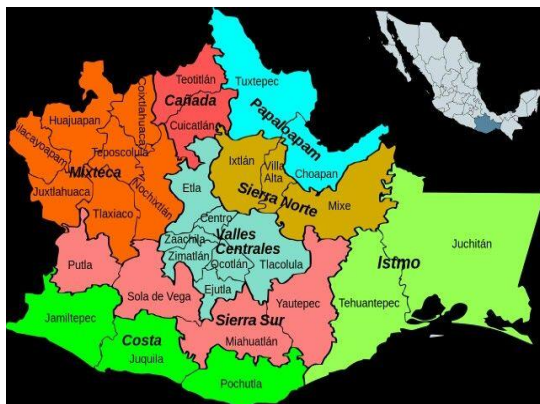
that there have been other cases, “the Tule Tree may, in fact, represent the fusion of multiple individuals “ (Dorado et al., 1996,p. 446). The article analyzed various studies the tree went through to discover its secret. Through testing genetic variations of the tree branches, to examine any mutations. The result concluded how the tree is one genetic individual that scientists classified as a wonder as it is the largest living organism. A remarkable discovery as the tree survived the historic events that created the Mexican Nation.

The tree is proudly celebrated for how the Tule came to be. Due to its age, it is determined to be planted during the Zapotec Civilization at Monte Alban as it was prospering. Legends surround the Tule tree to be more than a seed growing in the environment cycle or for the Zapotec citizens to plant them as ornamental trees in their cities. El Tule was believed to be planted by a Zapotec priest Pechocha, a worshiper to the Wind god Ehecatl (*Leyendas y curiosidades sobre el milenario Árbol del Tule*, 2021). Other legends of the Tule growth came from the Ayuuk people. They were a group of indigenous that were not conquered by the Zapotec civilization (González & Thiemer-Sachse, 2005, p.152). There are two legends that differ of how the Tule was planted to be one of the cardinal points for 4 leaders to separate into (*Leyendas y curiosidades sobre el milenario Árbol del Tule*, 2021). The last legend is based on a folktale of King Condoy from the Ayuuk people. The story of a king, the protector of the Ayuuk people who stopped to rest while walking through the region. He dug his walking stick which took root and grew into El Arbol del Tule (*Leyendas y curiosidades sobre el milenario Árbol del Tule*, 2021). Although there are many theories and stories of how the tree was planted it survived many changes in its environment.

The environment of the area had changed over time. From when the tree was planted the Santa Maria del Tule used to be a lake filled with marshes and cypress trees. The tree grew up in

an area filled with bulrushes and irrigated by the Atoyac River (*Oaxaca - Santa María del Tule*, n.d.). The El Arbol del Tule area has a mild climate with seasonal variations with different temperatures. From Cortez colonizing the area in deforestation and urbanization, the tree observed the evolutions of its environment. Mader’s article on a tourist website highlight’s the tree survival at risk due to the growing use of groundwater supplies. There needs to be action taken, “If only two of the underground aquifers were restored, there would be sufficient recharge of groundwater supplies to ensure the survival of these trees” (Mader, n.d.). El Arbol del Tule has survived an entire ecosystem changing as the swamplands to a modern colonial town. Increasing the lowered water supply due to irrigated farming and urbanization. The transformation of the land started from the conquest with El Tule as the eyewitness.

The tree grew while the Zapotec civilization was flourishing in 700 BC–1521 AD.



Schmal (2019), a historian described the topography of over 2,000 years ago and how the mountain terrain allowed, “individual towns and tribal groups lived in isolation for long periods of time, historian María de Los Angeles Romero Frizzi believes that this isolation allowed sixteen individual

**Figure 1. A map that shows the different ethnic groups and tribes that exist in Oaxaca pre-columbian (Schmal, 2019)** observe the interaction within these communities. It witnessed prosperity, and peace for several years.

Figure 1 shows the different indigenous districts that existed before the conquistador arrived in 1519 A.D. El Arbol del Tule lies in the center of los Valles Centrales (The Central Valley). The central area of the Zapotec civilization. The center of many historical events and stories the tree

witnessed. The tree saw the circle of life between human and nature. As a sacred totem to the indigenous it has seen travelers passing by, animals seeking shelter, priests worshiping, and many more interactions. It lived its peaceful way of life for hundreds of years with the Zapotec civilization until the 1520s.

Hernan Cortes arrived to begin the Spanish conquest to make history and change the land forever. The tree witnessed the conquest unleash it's forces against the natives' way of life and Aztec empire forever. The tree was a spectator to the arrivals of the Spanish conquistador as they came into the land. An enemy to the inhabitants claiming the land as their own, wearing armor on their bodies, and with weapons unlike the natives have ever seen. During the conquest, Cortez had broken the trust of the civilization that welcomed them as Gods. He held King Montezuma hostage to have control over the civilization under Spaniard rule. Upset, the natives went against the hostage king to go against him and the Spaniards (Brinkerhoff, 2016, p. 172). They were no longer welcomed in the city, the natives battled with the Spaniards until they fled. Cortes and his men were now only battling to escape as the natives did not want them to leave alive. It was counted a loss for Cortes as he lost most of the men, horses, and gold. Legend states that to account for the losses Cortes cried at the base of the El Arbol del Tule (Dorado et al., 1996, p. 446). The loss was later known in history as La Noche Triste, the turning point of the Spanish conquest in 1520. Within the next year, Cortes returned to conquer the city and take control away from the indigenous culture. It was the end of the Aztec civilization and a new era for Spanish power.

In 1521, Cortes began to transform and change the land in desire for riches. Schmal (2019) describes in his article the events that took place as with Cortes's new control in the central Valley where El Arbol Del Tule was located. The tree saw the events take place as a

central witness. Cortez sent a force of 400 Aztec to take possession of the native population of 350,000 and the historians recorded this event as, "Peaceful conquest spared the Valley of Oaxaca the loss of life and the grave social and psychological dislocations experienced by the Aztecs in the Valley of Mexico" (Schmal, 2019). The author compared the conquest peacefully in comparison to how the Spaniards had destroyed the temples, pyramids, and lands in Tenochtitlan. The peaceful conquest even allows the tribal group to maintain their customs and ancestral traditions later on. Dramatic changes were still going to take place to transform the valley. The Natives' ways and land were transformed after the Spanish conquest during the colonial period.

The tree witnessed the dramatic changes that took place in the valley. From when Cortes arrived in the New World and conquered civilization the population declined from, "1.5 million in 1520 to 150,000 people in 1650" (Schmal, 2019). While Spaniards came in several ships to follow Cortes footsteps of conquering new land for its riches. While they hurt the Natives in destroying their ways and caused an epidemic on their population to decimate. Cortes was able to control the Natives through, "Slavery, forced, labor, wars, and large-scale resettlements all worked together to make indigenous communities more vulnerable" (Brinkerhoff, 2016, p.170). Although the natives were capable to fight as warriors the disadvantage affected them from fighting back. Catholic priests and friars came over to the New World and were able to eradicate the native's pagan religion (Schmal, 2019). Most remote natives were able to avoid this change but as the ideals of capitalism grew. So did the influence to convert. With more churches and towns being built there was a lot of need for a change in the land. The lake surrounded by marshes began to dry up from the Spaniard takeover with the cypress tree still standing.

The tree experienced the transformation of the topography as more settlers moved onto the land. The El Arbol Del Tule ecosystem has transformed from wetlands into farmlands. There were now new species on the land, domestic livestock roaming within the ecosystem. Artisans grouped by the Spanish rule focused on manufacturing limestone in ovens in the areas (*Oaxaca - Santa María del Tule*, n.d.). After the tropical environment had dried up for irrigation systems around the tree. The land became ejido, a communal land for agriculture for the town in 1926 (*Oaxaca - Santa María del Tule*, n.d.). Instead of swamps, the area now was growing corn, chickpeas, alfalfa, and beans. The tree's tendency to be a sacred location led the Spaniard to build a church next to it El Templo de Santa Maria de la Asunción. The church itself was built over an ancient Native religious shrine (Gasper Diaz, 2014, p. 2). A shrine that was used for religious sacrifices by the natives which the Spaniards adapted into their religion. The rest of the town was built around the tree creating the town of Santa Maria del Tule. It receives the name after the patron saint, the Virgin Mary to honor the saint in the Catholic religion. While the tree's environment continued to change, it has also witnessed other events that lead to the presence of Mexico.

The tree has seen Mexico evolve to what it is today since the conquest. The tree spectated all the changes within the communities and the relationship between Spaniards and indigenous. After a 300 year colonial period, the region was completely Europeanized with schools and churches erected (History.com Editors, 2018). During this time there was a movement for Mexico to separate from Spanish rule. Oaxaca and many southern states joined together during the Mexican Revolution. Fighting that the land that was exploited by the large landowner and that the land belonged to the workers (History.com Editors, 2018). The revolution ended the dictatorship over Mexico by 1920 and constituted a republic. The tree lived through these several

changes of authority power in its time. With its age, it's proven to be older than modern Mexico with more legends and stories surrounding it.

The tree legends prospered throughout their lifetime. When the conquistadors arrived a myth was told that lightning struck the tree and gouged a hole large enough for a man to ride through on a horse (*Leyendas y curiosidades sobre el milenario Árbol del Tule*, 2021). The legends are told to show the strength of the tree and how it can never die. Another legend states how 100 years ago, "water mysteriously started to flow like a fountain from a branch several feet off the ground"(Depalama,1995). Older folklore discusses how men came from the cypress trees. Even prophecies state that"El Tule Tree would burst into billions of tiny sparks of green fire through the leaves sending out a new Cosmic Christ Consciousness energy around the planet to implant within every individual's hearts a vision of peace, love, and harmony" (*Church of the Divine Spirit - Legend of the El Tulle Tree*, 2017). An actual event that occurred in 1987 was fulfilled by Robert Coon. The event was conducted to place a gems and stones device into the root of the tree so during sunrise it would give the same illusion. Many more stories exist which capture the attention of so many visitors to come all over the world. The tree was a symbol of immortality. With so many stories and myths surrounding it, it is something extraordinary to keep alive.

Currently the tree stands in the center of the town struggling to survive. Modernization has put a risk to the life of the tree and the livelihood of the town. The survival of the tree is now at the hands of the town. From 1900 the health of El Arbol del Tule began to decline due to the pressure of industrial development. Depalma reported how much tree life is at risk as the roots are being damaged by water shortage and pollution (Depalma, 1995). The reporter investigated to find what most impacted the roots and discovered, "Industrial development has lowered the



water table, threatening the tree's survival and presenting the local government with the kind of quandary that all of Mexico faces as it steers between progress and preservation” (Depalma, 1995). Plastic factories and gas storage draw water from the same underground wells which the water diverted to when it dried up. The same aquifers provide tree sustainability. Depalma interviewed Jorge Augusto Velasco Jimenez, an engineer and founder of a committee to help protect the Tule who states, “What we're doing is not just trying to save a tree, no matter how big or old it is. We've got to find a whole different way of supporting a society” (Depalma,1995). Protecting the tree goes beyond preserving the last remains of the natural environment of the area. The tree has provided life and stability to the residents of the town.

The survival of the tree now depends on the heart of Santa Maria del Tule people. The country of Mexico is rich in history but not in economic resources. The tourism of the tree employs 75% of the town (*Oaxaca - Santa María del Tule*, n.d.). The residents rely directly on the tree for their livelihoods. Depalma reported that the state government has taken action and approved, “a \$35,000 grant to dig a well for the tree, clean off parasites and build a system to protect against lightning. The government of Oaxaca State has also agreed to study alternative forms of sustainable development here” (Depalma,1995). The tree has more value than the town as it is a historic monument of value. The tree is even celebrated by the people on the 2nd Monday in October and the 12th of August in honor of the assumption of Mary, a religious event. The tree encompasses a life unlike any other. It now sees humanity in all aspects and is treated with great respect.

The Tree is part of a lifeline to the country's history. El Arbol del Tule has survived many changes along with the country. The tree has lived through the Spanish conquest, revolutions, and the rise of modern Mexico. A tree of legends and myth that stood high and mighty

throughout time. The tree has seen and baffled millions of inhabitants and travelers for two thousand years. Which leads to many movements from the people and government to protect the tree as it represents a glorious testament of life. It's a living piece of history that must be protected if it's not, how can one know how much more it can outlive? How many more events can it witness?

#### Revision:

Some revisions focused on the feedback to add some dates to deepen the context. I also focused on rewriting the introduction paragraph to create a roadmap so readers can know more context before reading. I tried to reframe the history so it has more context to be more storytelling and rewriting topic sentences to follow an outline format. I also was suggested to expand my conclusion of expanding the future.

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