

## Organization, Customs, and Social Activities: The Case of Holy Week



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**ABSTRACT:** Holy Week in Los Fresnos, La Perla, Veracruz, Mexico, goes beyond the religious aspect. This small town with fewer than a thousand inhabitants exhibit exemplary organization as it has collaborated with another town for over two decades. These traditions are passed down from generation to generation, adapting and improving over time. The study is based on participant observation, photographs, and notes, as well as data provided by the elderly members of the community. This demonstrates that Holy Week involves social, economic, and individual practices within a specific context, not limited solely to the religious aspect.

**KEYWORDS-**Cultural activity, organization, customs, collective economy, religious practice.

### I. INTRODUCTION

For some people, it represents an Easter holiday, while for others, it is a period devoted to upholding religious traditions that have been perpetuated across numerous years and generations, particularly within the Catholic faith. In Mexico, as reported by the National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI), 77.7% of the population identifies as Catholic [1]. This statistic is particularly relevant in the high mountain regions, where each community engages in activities related to Holy Week. These activities involve the participation and organization of community members who dedicate several weeks to preparing for the annual traditional customs. These customs see the involvement of people across all age groups, including adults, children, and youth.

Los Fresnos is a community situated in the high mountain region of Veracruz, within the municipality of La Perla. Its location near Pico de Orizaba, Mexico's tallest volcano, is of notable significance to the surrounding areas, a fact underscored by Morales et al. (2023)[2]. A key aspect of Los Fresnos is its economic structure, which primarily revolves around remittances and the production and marketing of foliage. The latter plays a crucial role in regional markets and extends its influence to cities such as Puebla, State of Mexico, and Mexico City, as elaborated in the studies by Morales and Fabre (2021)[3]. These economic activities are not merely financial drivers; they also significantly influence the social and cultural fabric of the community.

In the municipality of La Perla, numerous communities engage in Holy Week activities. However, this specific study focuses on the community of Los Fresnos. Observations and participations were conducted here, beginning from Ash Wednesday, which marked the commencement of Lent in 2022 on March 2. On this day, individuals received ashes on their foreheads or heads, a practice consistently observed each year in accordance with the dates set by the Catholic Church, headquartered in Vatican City, Italy. Following this, a group of community members initiated the planning of the events, also inviting others to contribute in various capacities. Leading up to Holy Week, every Friday, a small Via Crucis (Way of the Cross) was conducted. Depending on the weather, this ritual was held either in the church or started from the main street and culminated at the church.

While the essence of these events is rooted in religious observance, they also encompass significant economic and social dimensions. Beyond the purely religious activities, some individuals seize the opportunity to engage in commerce, selling items such as snacks, drinks, fruits, ice creams, and various other refreshments. Additionally, these events serve as a social catalyst, drawing individuals who, despite no longer residing in the area, return to participate in these activities with their families. This

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aspect underscores the social relevance of these gatherings. The research presented in this article will delve into the multifaceted nature of Holy Week activities, exploring them within diverse contexts.

Beginning with the work of Ponciano-Castellanos (2019)[4], a distinction is drawn between the roles of men and women in these activities. This research, while primarily concentrated on the Stations of the Cross, reveals that most tasks associated with Holy Week are traditionally undertaken by men, who also predominantly serve as organizers. Women, though typically involved in roles deemed exclusively for them, are gradually making inroads into these activities. Their increasing participation is notably evident in roles such as runners, a topic that will be further explored in this study. Additionally, while Ponciano-Castellanos' (2019)[4] research is centered on Guatemala, it presents certain parallels with the current study, highlighting similarities in the observance of Holy Week despite the geographical and national differences between the two regions.

Aguilera Calderón (2015)[5] suggests the exploration of activities in Santa María Acapulco, a community within the municipality of Santa Catarina, situated in the southern part of San Luis Potosí. This area shares demographic similarities with Los Fresnos and parallels in terms of geographical space and the nature of its activities. The author highlights the various practices undertaken by the residents to observe Holy Week, also referred to as *Semana Santa*. Mirroring the focus of this study, the activities in Santa María Acapulco commence on Ash Wednesday. Subsequently, every Friday leading up to Good Friday, the last of these days, the community engages in the Stations of the Cross. Furthermore, the research reveals that each region or town has its unique set of activities, underscoring the distinctiveness inherent to each locality.

Incorporating insights from additional research on Holy Week activities, Mancha-Castro (2019)[6] delves into the significance of the practices observed by the inhabitants of Huelva. Echoing earlier studies, Mancha-Castro emphasizes that Holy Week represents a "festive religious ritual where the connection of people with the Christian-Catholic divinity is manifested through iconic rites and acts" (Mancha-Castro, 2019, p. 3) [6]. Concurrently, during these religious events, both the church and the town hall of Huelva collaborate to facilitate the procession through the city's streets. Moreover, the observance of Holy Week transcends the religious domain, intertwining with economic and political aspects. As examined in the reviewed studies, the residents who commemorate the passion of Jesus do so in a manner that reflects the customs and traditions specific to their own context.

Byba (2018) [7] offers an analytical perspective on the term "Holy Week" and its connotations in the Spanish language. The study delineates key aspects, noting that "the imagery of the Easter festival is embedded in its cognitive structure, encompassing a range of cognitive markers based on possessive, attributive, comparative, objective, subjective patterns, as well as those of interiority and process." Furthermore, the manuscript highlights alternative expressions such as "week major," "week big," and "week of passion," treating them as synonymous with Holy Week.

In the specific context of this research, the terminology used by people is understood and recognized, although the conceptualization of Holy Week varies. The term's meaning is contingent on the context in which it is employed, yet there are commonalities, such as the alignment of activities with the dates prescribed by the Catholic Church. This research acknowledges that while the term "Holy Week" may vary in its usage, the underlying themes and observances maintain a degree of uniformity across different contexts.

Sánchez Guzmán and Fernández Paradas (2020) [8] conducted a comprehensive analysis of Holy Week in 18th-century Valladolid, Spain, utilizing resources such as historical newspapers and existing paintings related to the event. Their study aimed to depict how this religious activity was observed, considering the higher prevalence of Catholicism 400 years ago, both in Spain and in other countries influenced by the Catholic faith. In a related vein, Rivera Krakowska (2005)[9] focuses on the significance of Holy Week in Santa María Tonantzintla, located in the state of Puebla. Her research underscores the community's deep involvement in the Holy Week festivities, particularly in the dramatic representations that span from the prayer in the olive garden to the crucifixion. This study highlights the community's commitment to perpetuating these annual religious activities, showcasing the integral role of communal participation in maintaining these longstanding traditions.

In conclusion, it is essential to examine how the residents of Mexico City, particularly in the Iztapalapa delegation, observe Holy Week. The representation of the Passion of Christ in this region involves extensive organization, engaging thousands of participants in various roles and necessitating elaborate stage setups for key events, notably Palm Sunday and the period from Thursday to Sunday. Notably, Friday stands out as the day with the most intensive activities and work, a characteristic shared with the studies previously discussed and this research. Partida Tayzán (2005)[10] delves into the origins of the Iztapalapa staging, tracing its inception to 1833, marking 189 years of continuous observance. Initially, this ritual was conceived by the local population as a means to stabilize the world amidst a cholera epidemic. This historical perspective provides a deeper understanding of the cultural and societal significance of Holy Week in Iztapalapa, illustrating how these traditions have evolved and been sustained over nearly two centuries.

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### II. DEVELOPMENT

Participant observation was employed as a key component of the research methodology, encompassing not just the observation of activities performed by each participant but also active involvement in these activities. As articulated by Pellicer et al. (2013)[11], the approach necessitates a dual role: "On one hand, you must look and act as a participant; and on the other, as an observer. To achieve this dual experience, the participant observer in the city must engage simultaneously as a member of it and as a 'stranger' to it" (p. 128). To fulfill this dual role effectively, participation extended beyond the specific days of Holy Week. It began from the initial meeting where the organizing committee convened community members to draft a work plan. This plan involved soliciting support and compiling a list of requirements ranging from flowers for decoration to labor for setting up crosses and ensuring their proper installation. This immersive approach provided a comprehensive perspective, allowing for a deeper understanding of the community's involvement and the intricate details of organizing such significant events.

This year, the initial meeting took place in January, providing a three-month lead time for preparations. Subsequently, both observation and participation commenced on Ash Wednesday and continued every Friday, leading up to the detailed events of Holy Week, which are elaborated upon later in the study. Sánchez Serrano (2013)[12] underscores the value of participant observation, stating that it "allows the collection of the most numerous, most direct, richest, most profound, and complex information" (p. 96). This method offers insights that surpass those obtained through interviews, where certain details might be overlooked or omitted. Moreover, participant observation provides a unique vantage point for understanding the organizational structure and the historical inheritance of roles over the years. Unlike mere observation, this method enables a deeper engagement with the community, allowing the researcher to experience firsthand the nuances of communication, decision-making, and tradition that shape these events. This approach is instrumental in capturing the essence of the community's practices and the intricate dynamics involved in the preparation and execution of Holy Week activities.

S.J. Taylor and R. Bogdan (1984)[13], Martínez (2007) [14], and Ardèvol et al. (2003)[15] also highlight the effectiveness of participant observation in revealing intricate details. For this particular research, the use of photographs and notes taken during the observation process greatly facilitated the documentation and understanding of the activities' significance for the community.

Some tasks required extensive late-night work to ensure that the final preparations for the next day's events, such as the Friday procession, were completed without any issues. This was particularly evident in the case of a group of florists who worked on the floral arrangements. When there was ample space and fewer people in the church, their task was made more manageable. A similar situation was observed in the preparation of the monument for Thursday and the placement of palms in the church and the starting point of the procession on Palm Sunday. These observations provided a deeper insight into the community's dedication and the meticulous efforts behind the scenes. Understanding the significance of these activities and the commitment of the community members was crucial in capturing the essence of the Holy Week celebrations and the cultural and religious importance they hold for the population.

The contribution of the older adult population was invaluable in this research, as these individuals, having lived in the community for over 60 years, provided a historical perspective on the changes and developments over time. People who possessed photographs or had served as event organizers offered crucial insights. Key information, such as the inauguration of the church and the identities of the main event organizers, is widely known within the community.

To further understand the activities from the participants' viewpoints, the approach of this research was deemed highly relevant. It recognizes that the involvement in these activities extends beyond mere religious obligation. The organization and execution of tasks represent a collective effort, fostering community unity to meet specific criteria within the given context. Additionally, these events present an opportunity for economic benefit for some families, while also emphasizing the importance of shared experiences and the active participation of youth and children. This multifaceted approach underscores that the observance of Holy Week is not only a religious practice but also a cultural and social phenomenon, deeply embedded in the community's fabric. It highlights the interplay of tradition, community bonding, economic aspects, and intergenerational participation, painting a comprehensive picture of the significance of these events in the lives of the community members.

#### Palm Sunday

The commencement of Holy Week activities begins on Palm Sunday, where community members congregate at a location known as the hermitage. This site serves as the setting for the blessing of palms, which are adorned with various flowers. The size of each palm varies according to individual or family preference. Additionally, other plants like bougainvillea (*Bougainvillea*), chamomile (*Chamaemelum nobile*), laurel (*Laurus nobilis*), rue (*Ruta*), rosemary (*Salvia rosmarinus*), and olive tree (*Olea europaea*) are also brought for blessing, all of which are cultivated within the community.

The timing of this gathering is typically dependent on the priest, usually scheduled around noon. Consequently, attendees are advised to arrive about half an hour earlier. The ceremony begins with the blessing of the palms and plants, followed by a

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procession to the church. This procession, covering a distance of approximately 600 meters, is led by an image carried in front, accompanied by the priest. Throughout the journey, participants sing hymns until they reach the church, where a mass is celebrated, marking the conclusion of the day's activities. This ritual not only signifies the start of Holy Week but also embodies the community's deep-rooted religious and cultural traditions.

Prior to delving into the events of the subsequent days, it is important to highlight the formation of lines by individuals embarking on the pilgrimage. These participants, carrying decorated palms in their arms, represent a diverse cross-section of the community, encompassing men, women, young people, and children, transcending age and social status. On this occasion, the formation is segregated by gender, with separate lines for females and males. In instances where one gender outnumbers the other, the lines are organized by height, from tallest to shortest. The individuals in these lines are distinguished not only by their participation in the procession but also by their attire and specific roles. They don traditional purple dresses and are adorned with a golden cord tied around their waist. Notably, these participants undertake the pilgrimage barefoot. This attire and the act of walking barefoot are symbolic, reflecting a deeper spiritual or ritualistic significance. The procession is led by these individuals, who precede both the religious image and the priest. This practice, beginning on Palm Sunday, sets the tone for the solemnity and reverence that characterize the Holy Week observances, highlighting the community's commitment to upholding these traditions.

From an economic perspective, starting on Palm Sunday, vendors selling food and drinks set up their stalls approximately 80 meters from the church. This arrangement also includes designated areas for vehicle parking to avoid any traffic disruptions, especially during processions and other activities that attract large crowds. These temporary establishments not only cater to the immediate needs of the participants post-procession or activity but also offer a more varied menu on the subsequent days of Holy Week. This provision is particularly beneficial for those who are unable to dine at home during the festivities. While food stalls and snack vendors are a common sight on regular Sundays, the scale and variety during Holy Week are notably more extensive. This period sees a significant increase in such temporary establishments, reflecting the heightened activity and the influx of participants in the area. This aspect of Holy Week not only adds to the festive atmosphere but also contributes to the local economy, providing an opportunity for vendors to cater to the increased demand.



**Figure 1. Palm Sunday procession.**

**Own elaboration**

### **Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday**

During these days leading up to the main events of Holy Week - Thursday, Friday, Saturday, and Sunday - the community engages in meticulous preparations. One key aspect of this preparation involves the residents sweeping the streets. This task is particularly important to ensure the safety of those who participate in the barefoot runs, covering a distance of about 5 kilometers across two communities, with Los Fresnos hosting the most significant activities. In addition to street cleaning, families contribute to the festive atmosphere by placing purple and white decorations along both sides of the street. These arrangements, either handmade or purchased, are not only decorative but also hold symbolic value, representing offerings for the festivities. This practice is deeply ingrained in the community's tradition and is seen as a significant contribution to preserving these customs for future generations. Furthermore, a collective effort is made to clear any foliage and remove obstacles that might impede the processions. In cases where construction materials or other obstructions are found along the pilgrimage routes, residents are

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requested to relocate these materials to ensure smooth and unobstructed passage. These communal activities underscore the residents' commitment to maintaining the sanctity and order of the Holy Week celebrations, reflecting a shared sense of responsibility and reverence for these time-honored traditions.



Figure 2. Preparation for Friday.

Own elaboration

### Holy Thursday

On the afternoon of this day, community members gather at the church in Los Fresnos to partake in the "Foot Washing" mass, a significant ritual in the Holy Week observances. During this ceremony, children aged between 7 and 12 years enact the roles of the apostles. In the Catholic tradition, there are 12 apostles, and these children, representing them, are attired in purple dresses with golden cords, and like the apostles, they approach the altar barefoot. In a parallel display, the individuals who will participate in the run the following day dress similarly to the children portraying the apostles. They form lines along the sides of the church, with both genders represented equally in these lines. This inclusivity marks a significant shift from the tradition of the past five years, where only men participated in the run. The recent involvement of women in this activity is a notable development, suggesting a trend towards greater gender parity in future observances. This evolution in the participation of women highlights the dynamic nature of cultural and religious practices within the community. It reflects a growing recognition of the importance of inclusivity and the changing roles and representations within these deeply rooted traditions. The adaptation of these practices over time illustrates the community's ability to balance respect for tradition with contemporary social progress.

On this particular day, the solemnity of the occasion is accentuated by the visual elements within the church. A long purple cloth drapes the main altar, and as the "Gloria" hymn is sung, the organizers simultaneously cover the other church images with purple cloths. This act may coincide with the ringing of the church bells, creating a profound auditory experience. However, as the hymn concludes, a noticeable silence ensues, and the subsequent hymns are performed a cappella. The atmosphere is further enriched by the sound of the rattle, accompanying a modest procession within the church. Additionally, a small altar adorned in yellow and white, embellished with flowers of the same colors, is set up exclusively for this day. This altar serves as a focal point for a representation akin to the prayer in the olive garden. Following the mass, the apostles, runners, and members of religious groups engage in prayer, enveloping the space in a reverent silence. This quietude persists even as a group of people, tasked with arranging the religious images, gathers in the courtyard. The meticulous attention to ritual and symbolism on this day reflects the deep spiritual connection of the community to these observances. The use of colors, sounds, and silence, along with the specific arrangements within the church, all contribute to creating a reflective and solemn atmosphere, befitting the significance of the events being commemorated.

Another event of great significance to the residents of the community is the blessing of bread, a ritual that commemorates the Last Supper. At the conclusion of the mass, the priest performs a blessing over the bread, which is then distributed among the community members. This ritual, like the previously mentioned activities, involves a dedicated group of organizers. These organizers approach certain residents to donate bread for the blessing, a custom that has become increasingly ingrained in the community's practices in recent years. However, it is noteworthy that in 2020, this and other activities were not conducted due to the outbreak of the SARS-CoV-2 virus. The pandemic led to the closure of numerous businesses and the cancellation of events involving gatherings, as a measure to prevent the spread of the virus. This interruption raises the question: What activities are typically carried out for Easter in this community? The cessation of these traditions in 2020 underscores the impact of global events on local practices and highlights the adaptability and resilience of communities in the face of



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unprecedented challenges. The pandemic not only disrupted economic and social life but also deeply affected cultural and religious observances, prompting communities to reconsider and adapt their traditional practices.

In 2021, the Holy Week activities in Los Fresnos resumed, adhering to the traditional format observed in the years prior to the pandemic, while incorporating the safety measures recommended by the Ministry of Health. This approach marked a return to the community's cherished practices, albeit with necessary adjustments for public health. In 2022, this trend continued, with even greater participation from the residents, indicating a gradual return to the community's usual vibrancy and involvement in these events. Focusing on the specific activities of Holy Week in Los Fresnos, a notable aspect is the preparation that takes place in the church. On the eve of the procession, community members dedicate themselves to organizing and creating floral arrangements for the religious images that will be featured in the next day's procession, scheduled for 10 in the morning. This preparation process is meticulous, with attention paid to every detail, from the attire to the positioning of the figures of Mary and Jesus. Such care ensures that these representations can be carried smoothly during the procession. This painstaking effort in preparing the images for the procession is a testament to the community's profound reverence for these sacred symbols. It also highlights the significance of these traditions in maintaining the cultural and spiritual identity of Los Fresnos. The community's commitment to these practices, evident in their dedication to both the aesthetic and logistical aspects of the procession, reflects a deep connection to their heritage and a collective desire to preserve these rituals for future generations.



**Figure 3. Thursday's activities.**  
Own elaboration

### Holy Friday

The eagerly anticipated day for which the community has been preparing has finally arrived. From the early hours, the organizers are busy ensuring that everything is set for the procession. They oversee the arrangement of the religious images, the lineup of runners and apostles, and the young candle bearers who carry candles and a cross draped with a piece of purple cloth for the person in the middle. One of the key tasks of the day involves positioning the 15 crosses that represent the Stations of the Cross, each marked with its respective name and station number. The placement of these crosses, spaced at intervals that have become customary over time, is a responsibility of the families associated with each station. These families not only decorate their designated areas but also provide water for the runners, a thoughtful gesture considering the day's typically high temperatures. Although a temperature of around 30 degrees Celsius might seem moderate, it is notably warmer than the usual 18 to 20 degrees Celsius experienced in the community. This temperature difference adds an extra layer of challenge to the day's activities, highlighting the dedication and resilience of the participants in upholding this cherished tradition.

Moreover, the physical conditions of the community present significant challenges for those running or walking barefoot. The roads are surfaced with a material known as chapopote, which becomes particularly problematic in the heat, especially in the middle of the road. The rest of the road is characterized by horizontal cracks, posing a risk of stumbling and causing injuries such as lost toenails to the runners. Despite these harsh conditions, participants engage in this ritual year after year, motivated by a sense of tradition and continuity with their parents' and grandparents' participation. This activity necessitates the runners' presence at 9 in the morning, even though the Stations of the Cross procession does not commence until 10 in the morning. This early gathering is crucial for preparing the incense used in the ceremony. A bonfire, fueled by charcoal, is lit, and once the coals have absorbed sufficient heat, they are transferred to a censer. This censer is then used to incense the images and crosses at each station. This aspect of the ritual, though physically demanding, is imbued with deep symbolic significance and is a testament to the community's enduring commitment to preserving their cultural and religious heritage.

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Upon completing the preparation of the censer, participants proceed to change into their ceremonial attire, donning the purple dress and golden cord, and importantly, they remove their shoes. They then line up, ready to lead the procession, continuously swinging the censer to ensure it remains lit, as its flame is crucial for achieving their objective. The formation of the line is based on height, from tallest to shortest, with individuals positioning themselves accordingly, irrespective of gender. Once the line is properly organized and all the runners are in place, the procession awaits the arrival of the porters, additional runners, those carrying candles, and the general public. Following the runners are the ciriales, a group of three individuals, who are distinguished by their white dresses and cords. Unlike the runners, the ciriales wear shoes. Next in the procession are the 12 apostles, six on each side of the street. Their attire mirrors that of the runners, including the small cross they carry, and they too participate barefoot. This meticulous organization and adherence to traditional dress codes and procession order reflect the deep-rooted cultural and religious significance of the event. The participation of community members in various roles, each with its unique symbolism and significance, illustrates the collective effort and dedication involved in preserving these longstanding traditions.

It is important to note that while children are eager to participate in the representation, they are never forced to do so by their guardians or the organizer. However, the person responsible for them during the Via Crucis and processions is always vigilant, equipped with bandages for any incidents that might occur along the way and ensuring the children stay hydrated throughout the event. Having a designated caretaker is crucial, even though the parents also keep a close watch on their children. Following the children in the procession is the representative image of Jesus, adorned in a purple dress with intricate purple details. This image is also decorated with flowers and foliage, reflecting the community's dedication to this activity. The effort and commitment to this aspect of the procession are paramount, as the design of the adornment is unique each year, never repeating, showcasing the florists' creativity and skill. Beside the image of Jesus, community members who wish to help carry it during the procession take their place. Following them, the general public joins in, and from this point, two lines are formed to allow a path in the center. This organization not only facilitates the smooth movement of the procession but also symbolizes the collective involvement and unity of the community in this deeply significant religious event.

Regarding the procession's organization, the central space of the route is specifically reserved for the runners. This arrangement allows them to break away from the crowd and run with their censers, ensuring their unimpeded movement. Additionally, about halfway through the procession, some participants start singing, while others use horns to ensure that their voices are heard by all. Prior to the commencement of the procession, certain individuals don red flannels. This is a signal to drivers, indicating the approach of the procession and advising them to either pull over or, if necessary, to proceed with caution. This is particularly important in case of emergencies where drivers might need to pass through quickly. To further manage traffic and ensure safety, drivers are informed about the procession's location along the route, allowing them to opt for alternate paths if needed. These logistical considerations are crucial for maintaining order and safety during the procession. They reflect the community's awareness and responsiveness to potential challenges, ensuring that the religious observance proceeds smoothly without disrupting the local traffic flow. This balance between tradition and practicality is a testament to the community's ability to adapt and organize large-scale events effectively.

Once some aspects of the Stations of the Cross have been detailed, and everything is in order. The procession of the image representing the Virgin Mary leaves, said image wears a black dress with some details, it is necessary to mention that year after year her dress changes just like the image represented by Jesus. The respective people who carry are found, 4 people are used, changed depending on whether there are more people who want to carry or tiredness of the participants. This procession begins the journey first and goes towards an opposite path, here people emphasize that women are the ones who accompany this journey. Although it is not mandatory, however, you can see how the majority of women choose to go with this procession, there is also the participation of some ladies who sing while they make the journey until they meet the representative image of Jesus, and There are also people who indicate the pertinent signs to drivers. They begin the journey first because the distance they will walk is greater than that of the other procession, with the exception that it does not make stops at the Stations of the Cross, at least not until the 4th station. Once they are at the point known as the hermitage, the organizers notify each other for the other procession to leave.

In relation to said procession, it has greater participation, although people are gradually integrating into it. Since some usually wait for it at home while others prefer to be there from the exit to the entrance. Before the meeting of both processions, the one that integrates the representative image of Jesus and the other participants previously mentioned. At the beginning of this procession, the runners are given the start, starting with the smallest ones with little difference in start time. This factor depends on the number of participants. If there is greater participation, the start time is smaller. But if there is less participation, the starting time between the runners is longer. Likewise, a person from one row leaves when the organizer gives the indication and then a person from the other row. The runners also have a person who gives them directions.

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Before initiating their role in the procession, the runners place a small amount of incense, approximately less than a tablespoon, into the censer. This action produces a distinctive aroma and smoke, which is a key element of the ritual. This process of incensing is repeated each time the runners encounter a significant gathering of people along the procession route. The first to be incensed are the Christ figure covered in the purple canvas, followed by the representative image of Jesus and the wooden cross. During this act of incensing, the runners demonstrate reverence by kneeling, bowing their heads, and making the sign of the cross before continuing their journey. This solemn gesture is an expression of devotion and respect for the religious symbols. The same ritual is performed when the runners reach the procession carrying the representative image of Mary. Upon reaching this point, they proceed to incense the image before moving ahead to continue their participation in the procession. Additionally, this act of incensing and showing reverence is replicated at each of the 15 stations along the route. This repeated action of incensing at various points and stations throughout the procession not only adds a sensory dimension to the observance but also symbolizes the runners' continuous homage and veneration as they navigate the procession route. It reflects the deep spiritual significance of these rituals within the community's Holy Week celebrations.

In addition to the previously mentioned elements of the procession, the role of the wooden cross, carried by a group of men from the community, warrants special mention. This cross is crafted by the residents themselves, who select a suitable tree for its construction. In keeping with the community's commitment to environmental sustainability, particularly given their focus on planting foliage, a new tree is planted to replace the one used for the cross. This practice ensures the replenishment of trees, vital for the local ecosystem. The cross, weighing approximately 90 kilograms, presents a significant physical challenge to those who bear it. The carriers rotate shifts frequently, and while they are accustomed to the weight, it does not diminish the inherent discomfort and strain of carrying such a heavy object. This shared burden is emblematic of the community's spirit of cooperation and mutual support. The carriers of the cross, along with those who carry the images and those who sing, all contribute to the collective effort required to sustain these activities over several hours. This aspect of the procession – the communal carrying of the cross – is not only a physical manifestation of devotion but also a powerful symbol of the community's unity and strength. It reflects the deep sense of solidarity and shared purpose that underpins these religious observances, as the community comes together to honor their traditions and beliefs.

The organization of the procession involves a meticulous system of coordination, where participants are given badges to identify their roles within the team, particularly those responsible for overseeing the runners. These runners, due to the physical demands of their participation, are prone to mishaps, necessitating close monitoring. To ensure safety and smooth operation, supervisory rounds are conducted on motorcycles, and there is active involvement from civil protection services and municipal police. As the procession progresses, it makes stops at three stations, pausing for approximately 10 minutes at each. These breaks also provide opportunities for changing the carriers of the cross. A pivotal moment in the procession occurs when the two separate processions converge. This juncture holds significant meaning for the community, as it marks a point of increased participation. The procession of women, which includes the candles, apostles, the image of Jesus, and the cross, waits for the right moment to merge with the main procession. Once joined, they continue together, though they are not at the end of the line; the general public follows behind them. From this point, the combined procession makes stops at the remaining stations before ultimately arriving at the church. This collective journey, marked by shared rituals and moments of pause, embodies the communal spirit and devotion of the inhabitants. The procession, in its entirety, is not just a religious observance but also a profound expression of community solidarity and cultural identity.

To mark the conclusion of the day's first tour, the organizers express their gratitude to the community for facilitating the Via Crucis, a tradition that has been upheld since the beginning of Lent. Typically, this day's celebration includes a ritual where people kiss the cross. However, in light of COVID-19 precautions, modifications were made to this practice. Instead of kissing the cross, participants were encouraged to simply make a reverential gesture towards it, thereby minimizing the risk of virus transmission. To expedite the process and prevent crowding within the church, three crosses are strategically placed: two on the sides and one in the center. This arrangement allows the activity to be completed more efficiently and safely. Following this event, the congregation disperses, with the general public expected to return at 8 pm for the next significant event of the day. For the runners and other collaborators involved in preparing for the upcoming procession, known as the Procession of Silence, their presence is required an hour earlier. This additional time is necessary to ensure that all preparations are in place for the solemn and reflective nature of this particular procession. The adaptation of traditional practices in response to health concerns, and the continued commitment to these observances, underscores the community's resilience and dedication to maintaining their cultural and religious heritage, even in challenging times.

The final event of the day is the Procession of Silence, as previously mentioned. This solemn procession involves carrying a representation of Jesus' coffin, with a strong emphasis on maintaining silence throughout. The organization of this nocturnal procession is carefully planned, considering the unique challenges it presents. The procession is led by the runners, who pair up



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for safety reasons, given the lack of public lighting at night. The distance between each pair is kept minimal, and overall participation in this procession tends to be lower than during the day. The risks are heightened during the night, as poor visibility increases the likelihood of accidents, and there is also the potential danger of attacks from canines. In anticipation of these risks, residents are requested to secure their pets for the duration of the procession, estimated to be at least 3 hours. Once the runners have their censers lit, individuals carrying candles begin to integrate into the procession. The Procession of Silence, with its unique challenges and solemnity, stands as a poignant representation of the community's devotion and respect for the traditions of Holy Week. The adaptation of the procession to ensure safety in the nighttime setting reflects the community's commitment to preserving these practices while being mindful of practical considerations.

As the Procession of Silence continues, a participant dressed similarly to the candle bearers carries a tray bearing three nails and a crown of thorns, symbolizing the crucifixion of Jesus. Following this individual, the apostles join the procession. Once everything is in place, the central image of the procession, carried by eight men due to its considerable weight, makes its appearance. Accompanying this image are individuals positioned along the sides, ready to assist in carrying it throughout the journey. Adding to the solemn atmosphere, a participant with a noisemaker plays it continuously along the route. The general population follows, participating in the procession with reverence and silence. To ensure safety and order, two loops are formed along the sides of the procession, creating a central space. This space is crucial as it allows the runners, with their lit censers, to pass through the procession without causing any harm to the other participants. This careful organization of the Procession of Silence, with its symbolic elements and thoughtful arrangement, reflects the community's deep respect for the tradition. The inclusion of various roles and the strategic formation of the procession demonstrate the community's commitment to maintaining the solemnity and safety of this significant religious observance.

In addition to the image of Jesus, the Procession of Silence also features the image of Mary, with community members volunteering to help carry it. To enhance safety and visibility during the procession, especially in poorly lit areas, participants are encouraged to bring lamps or candles. This precaution helps prevent accidents such as slipping or tripping in the dark.

Historically, there was a practice of burning tires along certain sections of the procession route that were particularly dark and devoid of houses. However, this practice has been discontinued due to growing environmental awareness. This change was influenced by the church, schools, and other organizations that highlighted the environmental damage caused by tire burning. It's noteworthy that this practice was not unique to this community but was also common in other areas lacking public lighting and observing Holy Week activities. In the present day, to ensure safety in these darker sections of the route, some individuals are assigned to guard these areas. Additionally, the organizers conduct patrols on motorcycles to ensure everything proceeds smoothly and safely. This evolution in the community's approach to managing the procession reflects a growing consciousness about environmental stewardship and a commitment to adapting traditions in a responsible manner. The community's ability to balance the reverence of their religious observances with practical and environmental considerations exemplifies a dynamic and thoughtful approach to cultural and religious celebrations.

Upon reaching the church at the end of the Procession of Silence, the runners play a crucial role in ensuring that all participants are accounted for, notifying the organizers of anyone who may be missing so that they can be safely retrieved. Meanwhile, the gathered congregation engages in prayers, marking the conclusion of the evening's activities. After the prayers, the general population disperses and heads home. However, the organizers remain at the church for a while longer, as their responsibilities for the day are not yet complete, and they need to prepare for the upcoming activities scheduled for the next day. Despite the relatively small population of the communities involved in these religious activities, there is a notable level of participation from the residents. Additionally, the presence of people from outside the community contributes to a larger turnout, as observed by the locals. Holy Week in these communities is more than just a series of religious observances; it is a time for social interaction and community bonding. Unlike regular Sunday masses, Holy Week activities offer a unique space for communal engagement, as evidenced by the active participation of entire families. This period serves not only as a religious observance but also as a vital cultural and social event, fostering a sense of unity and togetherness among the community members.

Concluding with the description of the activities according to Friday below, some images are shown in Figure 4 that represent the routes that were previously mentioned.

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Figure 4. Viacrucis. Own elaboration

### Saturday of Glory

On this particular day, the community congregates at the church at 10 in the morning to participate in the procession dedicated to Mary. The runners, apostles, and ciriales, however, arrive an hour earlier to prepare. This preparation includes changing into their respective attire and, for the runners, lighting their censers. Once ready, the runners form two lines, followed by the candles and apostles. Notably, in this procession, the apostles do not carry their crosses, and only 11 members of this group participate, with the possibility of the remaining member joining as a runner. The image of Mary, carried by women and accompanied by other female volunteers, is then integrated into the procession. With the formation complete, the procession commences, with the threads released to create a space for the runners to pass through. The route is the same as the previous day, but this procession differs in that it does not include stops, and the runners' reverence is directed solely towards the image of the Virgin Mary. As a result, this procession is completed in a shorter time compared to the one held the day before. This day's activities highlight the community's devotion to different aspects of the Holy Week narrative, with specific reverence given to the figure of Mary. The organization and participation in this procession, much like the others, reflect the community's deep-rooted religious traditions and the collective effort to uphold these practices year after year.

Following the procession, the community begins preparations for the Easter Vigil Mass. This preparation phase is marked by a collective effort in creating floral arrangements, where a group of community members, skilled in working with flowers and foliage, come together to foster an atmosphere of joy and celebration. This activity is inclusive, with children also participating alongside their parents, contributing to the communal spirit of the occasion. The tasks for preparing the church for the Easter Vigil are diverse and involve various members of the community. Some devote their time to cleaning the church, ensuring it is pristine for the important service. Others assist in procuring candles and carrying out other necessary preparations for the Easter celebration. These efforts are coordinated to align with the priest's schedule for the Mass. The timing of the Easter Vigil Mass, typically scheduled from 7 to 8:30 in the evening, is considerate of the community's daily routines. This scheduling allows community members to manage their day-to-day responsibilities, whether at home or in the fields, before gathering for the Easter celebration. The chosen time frame demonstrates the community's ability to balance religious observances with everyday life, ensuring broad participation in this significant event. The Easter Vigil Mass, with its themes of renewal and joy, serves as a culmination of the Holy Week observances, bringing the community together in a shared expression of their faith and cultural heritage.

As the designated time for the Easter Vigil approaches, the community congregates in the church, accompanied by the continuous sound of the rattle. This sound has been a substitute for the church bells since they were last rung on Thursday in Glory. The use of the noisemaker, a large instrument located at the top of the church bell tower, is a significant aspect of the Holy Week observances. Operating this noisemaker requires considerable effort, as it is played for extended periods and during various key moments of the week. The noisemaker is sounded to signal the beginning of the Stations of the Cross, throughout the Stations, for the call to the Friday afternoon celebration, and during the Procession of Silence. It is also used on Saturday morning during the procession with the Virgin Mary and finally to announce the celebration of Easter. Due to the demanding nature of this task, it typically involves the participation of several people, usually men, both adults and youths. Some of these participants have been involved in this activity since the first time Holy Week was observed in the community. This tradition of using the noisemaker,

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particularly in the absence of church bells, is not just a practical measure but also holds symbolic significance. It reflects the community's adaptability and commitment to maintaining the solemnity and continuity of their Holy Week traditions. The collective effort in operating the noisemaker underscores the communal spirit and the shared responsibility in upholding these cultural and religious practices.

As the community gathers for the Easter celebration, attendees are initially asked to remain in the atrium, except for those involved in a specific ritual involving a bonfire. Participants in this ritual bring buckets of various sizes filled with water and flowers to be blessed. After placing these buckets in a designated area, they are instructed to return to the atrium to partake in the initial activity of the celebration. This first activity involves lighting candles and tapers from the bonfire's flame. Each family participates in this ritual, symbolizing the spread of light and renewal. Following this, a small procession is formed, with the fire leading the way as the congregation moves into the church. If it is already dark, the church lights remain off, creating an atmosphere of solemnity and reflection. Those who have readings to perform do so with the aid of lamps, adding to the ambiance. During this service, the children who portrayed the apostles, dressed in purple, take their place in the first rows on the left side, each holding a candle. The ciriales, dressed in white, also participate, maintaining their role as they have throughout the Holy Week observances. This part of the Easter celebration, with its focus on light and renewal, is a poignant conclusion to the Holy Week observances. The use of light, both from the bonfire and the candles, in the darkness of the church, serves as a powerful symbol of hope and rebirth, central themes of the Easter celebration. The involvement of the entire community, from the youngest to the oldest, in these rituals, underscores the deep-rooted cultural and spiritual significance of these traditions in the community's life.

As the Easter Vigil unfolds, the runners carry only their candles. At the moment the priest proclaims the word of glory, a cascade of celebratory sounds and sights envelops the congregation: bells ring, rockets burst in the air, and rose petals – or petals of other flowers prepared by the community – begin to fall gracefully from the dome. Concurrently, the purple cloth veiling the altar images is slowly removed, all set against the backdrop of the resonant song of glory. The children who portrayed the apostles participate in this transformative moment by heading to the bell tower to change their garments to white, symbolizing a shift from solemnity to celebration. This change is mirrored in the atmosphere of the church, now adorned with an abundance of white flowers and various floral arrangements, creating a sense of joy and renewal. The ceremony continues with the blessing of the water, accompanied by hymns that resonate with the theme of the activity. As the celebration concludes, a sense of community fellowship is palpable. Some congregants gather at the stalls near the church to socialize, while others opt for gatherings in their homes. This concluding part of the Easter Vigil is a vivid testament to the joy and communal spirit that characterizes the celebration. The transformation of the church's ambiance, the change in the apostles' attire, and the communal activities reflect the themes of rebirth and renewal central to Easter. The congregation's participation in these rituals and their subsequent socializing underscore the importance of these traditions in fostering community bonds and cultural continuity.

### **Easter Sunday**

The day following the Easter Vigil marks the Resurrection Procession, another significant event in the community's Holy Week observances. This procession typically takes place either at 10 in the morning or at noon. A notable change in this day's procession is the absence of the children who played the role of the apostles in the previous activities. Their essential participation in earlier events transitions to a different role on this day. Many of these children choose to participate as runners, already equipped with the necessary attire. The only additional requirement is a censer, which they obtain from others who participated in the earlier processions. For some previous participants, continuing in their role as runners is not feasible due to cuts or blisters on their feet, or because they need to return to work, especially if their employment is in a city. On the day of the Resurrection Procession, the runners don white dresses and cords and continue to participate barefoot. They arrive early, around 9 in the morning, to prepare the bonfire, an integral part of the procession's setup. This change in attire from purple to white symbolizes the transition from mourning to celebration, reflecting the joyous nature of the Resurrection Procession. The continued involvement of community members, adapting their roles to suit their circumstances, demonstrates the flexibility and commitment within the community to uphold these cherished traditions.

On the day of the Resurrection Procession, the route remains the same as in previous days, but there is a noticeable decrease in participation from the community, organizers, porters, and runners. The duration of this procession is notably shorter, lasting about one and a half hours, compared to the lengthier processions of Friday and Saturday. While the activities of the Resurrection Procession are similar across the region, each community has its unique aspects that set its observance apart from others. These particularities are a source of pride and distinction. The involvement of children and young people is especially noteworthy, as their enthusiasm and willingness to participate in the Holy Week activities suggest that these traditions will be sustained for many years to come. According to the residents, and as evidenced by a date inscribed on one of the church walls,

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the building has been in use since June 2001. However, the first recorded instance of religious activities being held there dates back to 2002. This marks 20 years of the inhabitants faithfully conducting these activities, aligning with the guidelines of the Catholic Church. The community's approach to organizing and involving everyone in various capacities is a testament to their commitment to these traditions. This collective effort ensures that each year's observance is a reflection of their shared faith and cultural heritage, fostering a strong sense of community and continuity.



**Figure 5. Runners on Easter Sunday. Own elaboration**

The historical context of the Holy Week observances reveals a significant evolution in the participation patterns of the residents of Los Fresnos and Tejocote. In the past, these communities participated in the Holy Week activities primarily in the municipality of La Perla. This participation required traveling distances ranging from 3 to 5 kilometers, a considerable effort considering the lack of transportation options and challenging road conditions at the time. However, in more recent years, improvements in infrastructure and accessibility have made it more viable for residents to travel between these communities. The reduced distance and enhanced transportation options, irrespective of the mode of transport used, have facilitated easier participation in the Holy Week activities. Additionally, the demographic changes over the decades have also played a role. In the 1980s and 1990s, the population of these communities was smaller than it is today. With the growth in population, there has been a corresponding increase in local participation in the Holy Week events. This shift has reduced the reliance on traveling to La Perla for observances, allowing for a more localized and community-centric celebration. These developments reflect not only the changing logistical and demographic dynamics but also the adaptability of the communities in maintaining and nurturing their religious and cultural practices. The evolution in participation underscores a deeper commitment to preserving these traditions within the local context, ensuring their continuity and relevance for future generations.

### Second Sunday of Easter

Concluding the discussion of the activities in Los Fresnos, it's evident that the religious observances are not only a matter of faith but also require significant organization, manpower, and financial resources. The preparation for these events is an extensive process that demands foresight and coordination. Moreover, these activities have an economic dimension. The gathering of numerous people in a common area during Holy Week creates opportunities for local families engaged in food and beverage businesses, thereby generating income and supporting the local economy. The final event in the Holy Week calendar is the procession of the Lord of Mercy. For this procession, the community assembles at the church at 7:00 a.m. Consequently, the runners are asked to be present by 6:00 a.m. According to their feedback, this early morning schedule is preferable. The cooler temperatures and the optimal condition of the roads at this time make participation more comfortable. Additionally, after a week of rest, any injuries or discomfort in their feet from running in the previous processions have had time to heal, allowing them to participate more effectively. This blend of religious devotion, community organization, and economic activity highlights the multifaceted nature of Holy Week in Los Fresnos. It's a time that not only reinforces spiritual beliefs but also strengthens community bonds, supports local businesses, and showcases the resilience and adaptability of the community members.

The organization of the procession for the Lord of Mercy is meticulously planned, with the runners positioned at the forefront. They are arranged by height and dressed in white garments with a white cord, each carrying a lit censer. While the participation of the runners is significant, it is notably less extensive than that observed on Good Friday. Following the runners are the candle bearers, and then comes the incensed image, revered by the runners as they pass. Bringing up the rear of the procession is the general public, who join in as the procession advances. As the procession reaches the church, more people join, drawn by the commencement of the mass at 9:30 in the morning, a customary practice in the community and a point of convergence for both communities. Upon completion of the procession, the organizers express their gratitude for the collaboration of each participant. They also look forward to making improvements in the next Holy Week, optimistic about the future of these traditions. This optimism is fueled by the involvement of children and young people, who are increasingly participating in these customs.

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Their engagement is a promising sign that these practices will be sustained and cherished for decades to come, ensuring the continuity of these deeply rooted cultural and religious observances.

### **III. DISCUSSION**

The religious events in this community, while centered around spiritual observances, encompass a broader spectrum that includes economic and social dimensions. A key economic aspect is the cultivation of flowers used in the floral arrangements for the church and religious images on various days. This cultivation not only supports the local economy but also plays a crucial role in the beautification of the religious ceremonies. Additionally, individuals skilled in creating floral arrangements often share their knowledge with the younger generation and others interested in contributing. This transfer of skills not only ensures the continuity of this important aspect of the celebrations but also fosters a sense of community and shared heritage. The food and beverage vendors also benefit economically from these events. The influx of participants and visitors during Holy Week provides them with a significant source of income, contributing to the overall economic health of the community. Above all, the social aspect of these events is paramount. The community's organization of these activities promotes not just coexistence but also collaborative work towards a common goal: maintaining and enhancing the community's well-being. The active participation of children and young people is particularly noteworthy. Their involvement not only allows them to showcase and develop their skills but also ensures that these cherished traditions will be passed down to future generations, preserving the community's cultural and religious identity.

### **IV. CONCLUSIONS**

The method of participant observation was instrumental in capturing the essence of the Holy Week activities conducted by members of the two participating communities, as well as individuals from other cities or communities with family ties to the town. This approach enabled a detailed and immersive documentation of the events, beginning from the initial organizational meetings. While the observational work commenced with these preliminary gatherings, the focus of the documentation intensified during the Holy Week itself, a period marked by a higher density of activities and community involvement. The schedule of events was typically outlined on a card, detailing the timings and nature of each activity. However, it was observed that people often arrived earlier than the scheduled times. This early arrival was particularly notable in the case of the processions, where runners were advised to be present an hour in advance. Being there before the official start allowed for a comprehensive observation of the runners and their preparations, adding depth to the overall understanding of the community's practices. This method of participant observation not only provided a chronological account of the events but also offered insights into the community's dedication and the meticulous preparations that underpin these significant cultural and religious observances. The involvement of the observer in the community's rhythm of life during this period was crucial in capturing the nuances and the spirit of the Holy Week celebrations.

While the Holy Week celebrations in the community are a collective effort, it was observed that the more demanding tasks often fell to a select few. After the conclusion of each day's activities, most people returned home, leaving behind those with specific responsibilities or those who chose to stay voluntarily. This often resulted in a small group, typically around 10 people and mostly men, working to complete the necessary tasks. Looking to the future, there is an expectation that the community's population will grow over the next 5 to 10 years. This projection is supported by the active involvement of young people and children in the events. Their participation is a promising indicator that these traditions will be sustained for many decades to come, despite the community having only recently established a dedicated space for these observances. The significance of these events extends beyond the performance of religious rituals. They represent a way for the community to organize and unite around a shared purpose, drawing on practices and knowledge passed down from relatives or learned from other contexts sharing the same faith. This aspect of the celebrations highlights the role of Holy Week as a means of preserving cultural heritage and fostering a sense of community identity and continuity. The involvement of younger generations ensures that these traditions will not only endure but also evolve, reflecting the changing dynamics of the community.

In concluding this study, it's important to acknowledge the inherent limitations of the participant-observation method employed, particularly given the diversity of groups and activities involved in the Holy Week celebrations. While participant observation offers a comprehensive view of the events, it is not always feasible to actively participate in every aspect due to the specific knowledge and skills required for certain tasks. For instance, playing the noisemaker, a task that necessitates the ability to climb the tower and the physical strength to operate the instrument, was beyond the scope of direct participation. Similarly, the creation of floral arrangements, which requires artistic talent and expertise to craft unique designs that differ from previous years, was another area where observation was more appropriate than participation. Additionally, the simultaneous occurrence of various activities in different locations posed a challenge. It was not possible to witness all events from a single vantage point.



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However, this limitation was somewhat mitigated by engaging in discussions with community members. These conversations provided valuable insights into the events, their significance, and the reasons behind the specific ways in which they were conducted. This research, therefore, relied on a combination of direct observation, participation where feasible, and discussions with participants to gain a holistic understanding of the Holy Week observances. While certain aspects could only be observed, these observations, complemented by interactions with the community, offered a rich and nuanced perspective of the cultural and religious practices of the community.

This work took several years to carry out, as it was observed in 2019, in 2020 there were no events because the pandemic forced people to stay in their homes. Without carrying out activities that will lead to the conglomeration of people. For 2021 the activities were only with the participation of some people, in 2022 the activities were carried out as usual. It was considered that the 2019 observations were not sufficient, since some activities are carried out at the same time and it was not possible to be in all places or at all times, such as processions that separate, while some people play the noisemaker, for example. However, it was important to carry out participant observation in the three years mentioned. Which allowed us to know some details that would not be possible to see in a single year.

### DECLARATION OF INTERESTS STATEMENT

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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