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The Original Villages of Mexico City: New ways describe History and Agriculture

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Abstract

The original villages of the Valley of Mexico are elements associated with cultural and agricultural traditions of the pre-Hispanic, colonial and subsequent eras up to the present, strength which has enabled them to preserve their identity and traditions for five centuries. Their inhabitants are descendants of a complex and continuous historical process involving the people who lived in the Valley before the conquest and who now form part of the population of Mexico City. Despite urbanization, they have found new spaces and substrates conducive to maintaining strong links with their indigenous origins, ancestral worldview, social organization and kinship. The production systems have survived from pre-Hispanic and colonial times influenced by the topology of the city. Urban agriculture maintains the original goals of promoting the economic development an urban-cultural center as the city of Mexico. Understanding these indigenous peoples is essential to understanding the historical culture of the city itself.

Key words: Urban agriculture, tradition, identity, Mexican Valley, indigenous origins

1. Introduction

The original or indigenous peoples are the descendants of the Mesoamerican population that existed before the arrival of the Spaniards. Due to a policy of congregating these peoples together implemented by the Spanish Crown, Tanck de Estrada (2000) defines them as legally recognized, corporative entities, of which 80 paid tribute and where there is a consecrated church, annually elected indigenous governors and an inalienable endowment of property. A detailed study by González Aparicio (1973) estimates that in 152 there were more than three hundred population centers in the basin of Mexico. Today, the total number of original villages in the Mexico City (CDMX) is not known and even in the important publication '*Los pueblos originarios de la Ciudad de México, Atlas etnográfico*' original villages and barrios are not included. According to the '*Censo General de Población y Vivienda*' (INEGI, 2010), there are 117 villages and 174 barrios that conserve their identity as such. These original villages cover a total of 148 square km distributed across the city's 16 delegations and represent 17% of the population. In the original villages community interaction is vigorous and their intercultural relations reflect the changes they have undergone, but at the same time they are testimony to the fact that these cultures are immersed in a process of constant creation and innovation. Their indigenous origins are reflected in their worldview, patterns of social organization, forms of kinship, religious-ceremonial system, ancestral technologies and their relationships with the forces of nature and the environment. The most important activities are religious in character permitting community cohesion and the systems of public office. The celebrations in honor of the patron saints are one of the mechanisms that have permitted the survival of commercial relations and exchange between villages as well as important forms of artistic expression and social organization. The consciousness of these social groups with respect to their own history is important and has been transmitted from generation to generation.

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They identify the Pre-Hispanic past as the point of origin of their community traditions, proof of which for them is to be found in the presence of archeological remains that range from ceremonial temples to ceramic shards or carved images of the ancient Mesoamerican gods. These remains and objects are carefully guarded and in recent years have formed part of the strategies of interaction with the government to achieve recognition as original villages, as they are presented as objects of community interest on the basis of which the inhabitants apply for funding and other forms of support to build community museums under their own control.

2. Mexico City and its Metropolitan Area

At the start of the 21st century, the great CDMX and its metropolitan area with its 24 million inhabitants, occupies a space that can be characterized by the continuity of processes steeped in history and at the same time with cultural phenomena in which diversity has been a constant. Independently of the historical account, today we can find in CDMX a large migrant population (national and international) making it a cosmopolitan city which is considered the center and the spearhead of modernity in the country. Mexico City is organized politically and territiorially in 16 political-administrative units or "delegations, is populated by 8.6 million inhabitants and its territorial jurisdiction has an extension of 60,203 hectares defined as an "urban network" and a zone considered as "rural" covering another 88,442 hectares, which is entirely located in the south westerly corner. It is important to emphasize that Mexico City is only a part of the "real city", that is to say, of the Metropolitan Zone of Mexico City (ZMCM) which includes as well as the 16 delegations of the CDMX, 37 built-up municipalities in Mexico State and one in the state of Hidalgo all of which are functionally articulated through productive relations and a variety of services. In this zone, economic, social, environmental and territorial processes occur which extend beyond the limits and which influence their functioning; the housing, buildings, businesses, factories, thousands of kilometers of streets, avenues and railway lines, infrastructure for water, electricity and transport show that there are no physical, social, economic or environmental frontiers between the CDMX and the built-up municipalities.

2.1 Geographical context

Two great mountain ranges, the Sierra Madre Oriental and the Sierra Madre Occidental, join together in the central region of the Mexican Republic to form a high plain closed to the south by the Neo-volcanic mountain range. The Basin of Mexico is located in the middle of this plain, and within the basin, we find the ZMCM. The states of Mexico, Puebla, Tlaxcala and Hidalgo also fall within the basin's geographical scope. The basin is in the middle of the great formation known as the Trans-Mexican Volcanic Belt which is still in the process of emersion. This periodically undergoes intense quakes which in turn create complex systems of trenches and pillars expressed, from a geomorphological point of view, in the development of many valleys which run in ridges towards the centre of the Volcanic Belt (Vázquez and Palomera, 1989). After the formation of the lake system of the basin (prior to the geological events which created the present day Sierra del Ajusco o *Chichinautzin* to the south which led to the formation of a truly endorreic basin) two rivers flowed between the western and eastern ranges, one towards Cuautla and the other towards Cuernavaca and finally into the River Balsas. When the *Chichinautzin* range was formed, the waters no longer had an outlet and it was then that the system of lakes was formed (Díaz-Rodríguez, 2006). The basin of Mexico had a lake system composed of lakes and lagoons, some of which that can be considered as small, were localized in the north-east of the basin. Before the arrival of the Spaniards, the valley was composed of five lakes; Zumpango, and Xaltocan in the North, Texcoco in the centre and Xochimilco-Chalco in the South. A group of smaller lagoons formed another region, and between the two regions to the north-east, were other lakes such as Atochac, Tecocomulco and Apan. In the most distant past they were connected to the rest of the lake system. Gabriel Espinosa believes that the part of the basin made up of small lagoons, in what is now Mexico State, although not usually taken into account on historical maps because from a historical point of view it is of lesser importance, in other periods was probably a zone of equal importance to the largest lakes and that the success of Teotihuacan was in part related to its orientation towards this zone that communicated the important regions of Mesoamerica (Espinosa, 1996: 51).

Today there are three regions known as "charcas" (large trapped bodies of water) and which function as 3 sub-basins: to the north is Zumpango, in the centre, Texcoco and in the south, Xochimilco. The lake of Xochimilco-Chalco is located in the south of the Valley of Mexico bounded by the Santa Catarina Sierra in the west, the Sierra Nevada in the north and to the east by the Sierra of Ajusco.

During the Aztec period the lakes were flooded to a depth of 3 m in some parts and there was a constant flow of water towards the lower zones of the valley. In the south of the valley the water was always drinkable and suitable for agriculture. The supply of water was made possible by a complex hydraulic system of permanent rivers, springs and seasonal rainfall (Serra, 1997). Maps give us a clearer idea of the way in which the lakes developed and evolved until they became "charcas". It is interesting to observe that as they evolved, the lakes tended to disappear and be substituted by swamps, meadows and woodlands, that is to say, by other systems (Sanders *et al*., 1979).

With respect to the behavior of the lake, Gabriel Espinosa in book '*El Embrujo del Lago, El sistema lacustre de la cuenca de México en la cosmovisión mexica*', suggests that there were three long stages during which there was 1) a deep lake to the south, 2) which become shallower and 3) was on average shallow later. These stages were related to the geological changes caused by eruptions, glaciations and the climate. The water that was trapped in the basin with no outlet formed lakes and lagoons. What is very clear in the overall [lake] system is that the relief, the wet-dry rhythms, the volcanic factors, etcetera, had combined to establish not a simple, deep body of water, with a stable volume and form, but a complex system of vessels, at times communicated, at times stagnant, sometimes flowing one into another, at others the latter into the former; at times an extended and shallow body, at others with scarce liquid in process of evaporation. This system which flows back and forth would manifest itself in this way not only on geological and secular scales, but also over decades and even years.

2.2 People in the past

It is possible that humans have inhabited the basin of Mexico for more than 25 thousand years since the Pleistocenic period when subsistence depended on hunting and gathering. According to Armillas (1991) and Palerm (1973) the first known settlements in the basin were established in Tlatilco, Zacatenco and Copilco 11,000 thousand years ago. Their inhabitants were hunter-gathers. Palerm and Wolf (1957) and Carmack (1996) argue that sedentary populations had been established by 9,000 BC and that these settlements coincided with the beginnings of agriculture in what is now Mexico. People settled in permanent villages and started to cultivate the land as a permanent activity making their agricultural implements and tools from wood, stones, bone and clay. The level of development ranged from a relatively primitive hunting and/or farming society, to more elaborate social and technical systems. Archeological evidence suggests that between 5000 and 2500 B.C. ways of life changed, mainly as the result of the domestication of maize, squash, amaranth, chayote and other edible plants. Dating from this period there are remains of villages and important settlements such as those of Zohapilco-Tlapacoya, which were permanently occupied from 5500 A.D. onwards.

In the period known as the late Pre-Classic, between 1200 and 200 A.D., there is evidence of important agricultural activity, which probably went hand in hand with the generation of surpluses and with an important increase in the population. This is the period in which a number of villages began to change into urban centers which in turn articulated and organized the social and economic life of smaller and more dispersed villages, and it is in this epoch that the ceremonial centers appeared. By the end of the Pre-Classic period there were two important ceremonial centers, Cuicuilco and Teotihuacan. The former fell into decline a little before the start of the Classic phase and was virtually abandoned. In contrast, Teotihuacan became the most important human settlement in the Basin of Mexico. Some researchers have suggested that it had a population of 200 thousand inhabitants between 400 and 650 A.D. It is possible that it was there that a new cultural complexity had emerged of the sort mentioned by the archeologist Colin Renfrew, that is to say, the development of social structures such as political institutions, specialized systems of communication in rituals, conventional patterns of non-verbal language and even processes of development of ethnic groups and perhaps languages (Renfrew and Cherry, 2009: 114).

Within the cultural zone known as Mesoamerica, the basin of Mexico is considered to be the cradle of the great civilisations which gave rise to what is now known as CDMX. The foundation of the city by the Aztecs occurred after the groups previously settled in the basin had created complex systems of agricultural engineering, such as aquaducts to transport water permitting the irrigation of large areas of land, construction of terraces to make mountain slopes productive, and chinampas (floating gardens or raised plots) which permitted intensive food production in lacustrine zones (Figure 1).

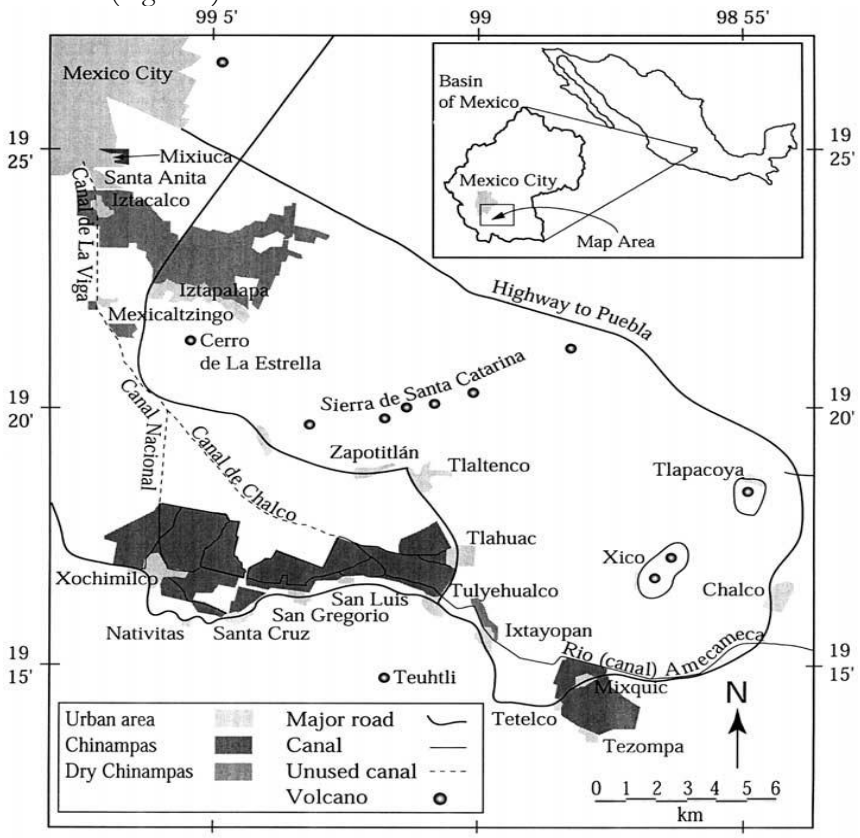

Figure 1: Historic and contemporary chinampa zones of the basin of Mexico (adapted from West 1998).

The Aztecs also known as *Tenochca* (a name derived from a legendary patriarch called *Tenoch*. *Tenoch*, or the *Tenochca)*, gave their name to *Tenochtitlán* ("Stone Rising in the Water") the Aztec capital and the site of the center of present day Mexico City. The Aztecs were also known as *Mexicas*, from which the name of the country has been derived (Calnek, 1972; Dahlgren *et al.,* 2009). From the beginning of the 12th century to the beginning of the 13th, the Aztecs wandered in search of a new place to settle. Aztec religion was centered around the god *Huitzilopochtli* ("Hummingbird-on-the-Left"), sun worship, and human sacrifice. Aztec tradition has it that *Huitzilopochtli* ordered them cease their nomadic wanderings and set off in search of a permanent home. Their long pilgrimage ended in AD 1325, when they found the land spoken of in their prophecies. On a small island in Lake Texcoco, the elders of the tribe spotted an eagle, symbol of the sun and of *Huitzilopochtli*, who had told them to settle in a place where they found an eagle standing on a *nopal* plant and devouring a serpent. There they built the temple to their god and, around it, the first dwellings of what was to become the Aztec capital, *Tenochtitlán*. As Aztec power grew, the number of human sacrifices increased and prisoners from all parts of the country were put to death in *Tenochtitlán*. They believed that only with human sacrifices could the universe be maintained in constant movement and so ensure human survival (Gillespie, 1993; Estrada-Lugo, 1991).

Tenochtitlán was thus located at the edge of the lands occupied by the valley's three powers: the *Chichimecas* of Texcoco, the *Toltecas* of Culhuacán, and the *Tepanecos* of Azcapotzalco. It was not long before the Aztecs used their strategic position to advantage, placing their military forces at the service of the *Tepanecos*, who were waging war against the other two powers. Under a succession of ambitious kings they established a dominion that eventually stretched over most of present-day Mexico (DDF, 1988). The task of attempting to organize the empire along lines other than mere military strength was left to Moctezuma II, the ninth Aztec king (1502–20). It was *Moctezuma's* reign that produced the codices in which Aztec officials recorded the organization of the empire into provinces and the payment of tribute according to the production of each region.

A gigantic political, military, and religious bureaucracy was built up, with governors, tax collectors, courts of justice, military garrisons, mail and messenger services, and other civil offices, which are evidence of a high degree of social stratification (Moreno, 1981; Calnek, 1972). According to Rojas (1989) the economic underpinning of Aztec hegemony was based on agricultural practices characterized by chinampas, terraces, kitchen gardens and forest products. Goods that were not cultivated or produced were obtained from tribute. The great productivity of these agricultural systems permitted a high population density in the valley, which led to the development of a large urban-cultural centre. In the early 16th century the population of the valley was about 2,000,000, with some centers approaching or even exceeding 100,000 (Calnek, 1972; DDF, 1988). Because of the concentration of its population and economic resources, the Valley of Mexico became the axis of power in the centre of the country (Palerm, 1973). From very early times, one of the factors that contributed to the rapid development of agriculture in the Valley of Mexico was the complex construction of artificial canals. Extensive water transportation on the lakes compensated for the lack of the wheel and domesticated draught animals (Calnek, 1972; Gibson, 1978). In ancient tradition, the merchants (*pochteca*) of Aztec society were organized in powerful guilds that even started wars on their own and sent trading expeditions to remote places. On the basis of the geographical knowledge acquired during such expeditions, they drew up maps not only of what is now Mexico but also of Central America (Palerm, 1973; Gibson, 1978).

The Spanish conquest brought with it a strong technological impulse through the introduction of domesticated animals, new seeds and agricultural tools, which widened the range of production within the basin. The occupation of the basin by the Spanish contributed greatly to the modification of the natural evolution of the lake system. It is not at all easy to know what would have happened to this ecosystem due to the actions of Pre-Hispanic civilization which had already channeled all the rivers in order to use the water for irrigated agriculture by the time of the conquest (Palerm, 1973, p.2, cited by Espinosa, 1996, p.54). But what we do know is that the Spaniards opened the way to livestock production by burning woodlands and overexploiting timber production to build their architectural spaces. It is well known that the conquest brought with it the devastation of the plant life in many regions. Then, as if that were not enough, the *conquistadores* who were accustomed to a form of economic organization based on *haciendas*, diverted the natural course of the water and built dams in order to control the currents which fed the lakes with water and also to prevent possible flooding. The city grew steadily over the subsequent centuries, until a rupture occurred around the end of the 1940's, when investment in industrial growth brought rapid changes in land use, soon accompanied by the country's leading role in the 'green revolution' experiment. Early successes encouraged later governments to continue supporting the industrial economy, and the uncontrolled urban sprawl eventually covered an area of 1400 km^2, spreading over the former lake beds of the basin. Although urban expansion occurred at the expense of the surrounding agricultural lands, the strong cultural ties with the agricultural past allowed many of the inhabitants of the city to adapt the older production systems, as well as to create new ones which incorporated the technologies provided by the urban environment.

3. Agricultural production systems

Agriculture in Mexico has been evolving for at least 9,000 years. The variation in altitude, latitude and topography throughout the country has provided ideal conditions for the formation of microenvironments, and as a consequence, a great diversity of cultures and agricultural practices (Palerm and Wolf, 1957). The Aztec civilization is renowned for its military supremacy. However, the Aztecs also had highly developed agricultural systems. The history of their development demonstrated the Aztecs' ability to make efficient use of the variety of natural resources in and around the valley. Technical management strategies and knowledge of how to cultivate the land were developed through trial and error, and have since been passed on verbally from many generations to another.

Aztec social structure was also important, since it allowed the division of activities within their society and produced specialists in agricultural production who developed detailed knowledge concerning the use of natural resources (Palerm and Wolf, 1972; Rojas, 1990).

3.1 The chinampa system

The lakes permitted the development of the agricultural system known as chinampas, unique to this large geographical region. According to Rojas, the chinampas made their appearance in a specific region, the Mexico basin between 1300 and 1800 B.C. during the Early Horizon period in a number of communities on the lake shores.

But it was later (Late Horizon, 1325-1521) that the system expanded to occupy large areas of the basin's swampy and lake covered zones (Rojas, 1995). This expansion was directly related with demographic growth in the basin and the imperial expansion of the Triple Alliance (Tenochtitlán, Texcoco and Tlacopan). The chinampa zone is located towards the south (Xochimilco-Chalco) and the east (Iztapalapa) (Figure 1). Prior to the conquest of Mexico, it supplied food largely to the population living in the basin. However, the most important part of the chinampas was the lacustrine zone of the Xochimilco-Chalco lake that formed part of the system of lakes located in the center of the valley of Mexico (González, 1992). The Xochimilco-Chalco in the south of the basin and its outer limits were the Sierra de Santa Catarina to the north, the Sierra Nevada to the east and the Sierra del Ajusco to the south and west (Armillas, 1971). Due to the fact that it was higher (3m) in relation to the center of the system of lakes, there was a constant flow of water into the lower parts, thus avoiding the deposit of salt materials and sediments, thus providing fresh water apt for agriculture and consumption (Santamaría, 1993). The sources of this water supply were permanent and seasonal rivers, springs and pools. The first human settlements in the lacustrine zone date from the late Pre-Classic period, 650-300 A.D., when important population centers such as Tlapacoya, were to be found around the lake. During the early Post-Classic period (750-900 A.D.) the lakeside population increased resulting in the establishment of important regional centers like *Xico*.

Later (1200-1300 A.D.), the *Xochimilcas*, one of the *Nahualteca* tribes, were given a large area of territory that could be characterized as the cultural region of Xochimilco and their influence extended around south-southwesterly shore of the Xochimilco-Chalco lake. The political, social, economic and cultural unit of the different cultures in the valley of Mexico was *Tlahtocayotl*, the smaller sub-units of which were the *Teocalli*. The figure corresponding to this sub-unit in the lacustrine zone of the Xochimilco-Chalco lake was *Olac* (where the water surround it) which included the settlements and groups of houses that had made encroachments on the water. *Teocalli Olac* settlements during the Pre-Hispanic period were Xochitepec, Tepepan Tlaltepetlalpan, Atemoayan, Acalpixca, Atlapulco, Tlaxialtemalco, Ixtayopan, Tecómitl, Tetelco, Mixquic and Tláhuac. In view of the fact that the lake maintained a supply of shallow, fresh water, the Xochimilcas were able to establish an agricultural production system like the chinampa that allowed them to gain space from the lake and use the resources it provided: water, vegetation and soil rich in organic matter. A precedent for this was the *tlatel* made by the accumulation of wood and soil to build houses on the shores of the lake. This system was later improved making it an effective way to sustain an intensive production of vegetables, fruits, flowers and insects. The chinampa was built using broad layers of mud, acuatic vegetation and soil. In order to avoid them floating, the chinampas were fixed in place using a local tree, the *ahuejote*. The height of the chinampa above the water was 20 to 40 cm, the average size being 6 to 10 m wide and 100 m long. The sowing method still used today was the *chapin*, which is a seed bed was made of mud dredged from the botton of the lake. The mud is later formed into squares and the seed deposited in the midle of each square. When the new plants have reached the right, they are removed from the seed bed and planted manually in the chinampa. This situation means that the system is based on manual work. With the fall of Mexico to the Spaniards, the chinampa system underwent a number of modifications as the colonists were accustomed to land-based field agriculture. The complexity of the lacustrine area, formed by land surrounded by water made cattle rearing awkward. Nevertheless, the diversity of crops increased with the incorporation of radish, carrot, letuce, cauliflower, cabbage, fava beans, cucumber and carnations among others, and European agricultural tools were absorbed into the productive regime.

3.2 The terrace system of agricultural production

The oldest system of agricultural terracing is found in the valley of Mexico at Teotihuacan, and in the central and southern Andes.

The cultural practice of terrace farming is now almost abandoned, possibly because of problems of physical engineering and water. According to Pérez-Zevallos the Aztec land use classification distinguished between types of use depending on the environmental and topographic conditions, with terrace production and kitchen gardens in the transitional zone and slash and burn located in the forested area (*tepetenchi*) (Pérez-Zevallos, 1990).

A terrace is an outdoor, usable extension of land built above ground level. Although its physical characteristics may vary greatly, a terrace will generally be larger than a balcony and will have a surface facing up to the sky. The work to create such agricultural terraces however is always the same. Heavy work that needs to be done by hand; centuries of ongoing work resulting in agriculture harvests for thousands of years to come.

Terraces are great ways to increase usefulness of steep slopes. As the demand for agricultural use of slopes increases we will probably need to increase our knowledge of terracing techniques. Fortunately, there are cultures that have used terraces for generations. It is important to promote the use of these agricultural methods in order to reduce erosion and also increase field fertility. There are three types of terraces built by the people from this region. The first is comprised of fields supported by walls constructed across a narrow valley, which was originally occupied by a seasonal stream. The agricultural areas created by these terraces are usually flat, allowing water to drain into the reservoirs from the surrounding slopes. The terrace's effectiveness, durability and design suggest that this was the earliest form of terracing in the New World. The second type of terracing is known as lateral or contour terracing. There are many variations of this type of terrace. At one end, a natural slope is modified, while at the other end substantial walls are built to support irrigation channels. This is a more advanced type of terrace because it requires a better understanding of technology and engineering. The third type of terracing is the rarest. It is referred to as a valley floor terrace. This terrace has walls or mounds which lie at a 90 degree angle toward the direction of the drainage. The wide planting areas are level, allowing irrigation to be drawn from a higher point.

The construction of agricultural terraces, supported by stone retaining walls, permitted an increase in the cultivated surface on mountainous land at the same time as reducing the effects of erosion, preventing the organic matter in the soil from being washed away and maintaining the humidity provided by rainfall. The irrigation system is also compatible with the use of more primitive implements than those needed for seasonal agriculture. In ancient Mexico it was possible to use this system without having the plough, the wheel or draught animals although the work involved required a high degree of cooperation and centralized social organization. According to research done by Palerm (1973), 382 different settlements using irrigation agriculture in ancient Mexico have been found. Terraces were built up originally thorough the gradual addition of land sections with sediments from colluvial deposition. The inhabitants would initially start using small sections then gradually expand their productive surfaces. These small plants facilitated the cultivation of their main crops such as maize (*Zea mays* L.,) beans (*Phaseolus vulgaris* L), chilli (*Capsicum spp)*, pumpkin (*Cucurbita spp*), amaranth (*Amaranthus spp)* and *nopal* (*Opuntia ficus-indica)* amongst other important traditional crops (DDF, 2000).

3.3 The people today

The peoples and traditions that have shared the space of the Basin Mexico, despite their similarities and differences, have all had to recreate their living conditions in order to endure over time. Their common root, the Mesoamerican past, is still a relevant cultural underpinning which links a wide range of conceptions of life, simultaneously supporting and elaborating on them, in such a way that the tradition seems to prosper and constantly keep itself open to new ways of thriving rather than being a mere survival of the past in danger of extinction or simply a marginal remnant. Various attempts to understand what has happened as a result of the overwhelming growth of CDMX use the "acculturation" model which takes for granted something which would have to be verified and which our research would seem to suggest is false. In short, this type of analysis considers that the "development" of "backward" societies involves their approximation to the present condition of "urbanized society" and that this occurs slowly or fast, depending on the speed with which patterns of "urban culture" are disseminated. In our view, not only are there certain doubts about whether this convergence of cultural patterns is actually occurring, but I would also suggest that the model itself is not an adequate conceptual tool for understanding the contribution of the "receiver culture" to the process of change if this is not assumed to be purely passive.

The societies which inhabited the Mexico basin were *campesino* (peasant) societies. Maize, the central element of this story, is still today one of the main underpinnings of the millenary culture of this region, and not only its economy. With the conquest, the Christianity imposed by the colonizers had to adjust and be flexible enough to accept the dual identity of deities in the form of the patron saints of the barrios and villages, as well as the elaborate rituals in the religious festivities which reveal the Mesoamerican calendar infiltrating the Christian calendar and vice versa. Andrés Medina describes CDMX as being "built around the ancient villages" of Milpa Alta, Xochimilco, Tlalpan, Cuajimalpa, Santa Rosa, San Barstool and San Nicolás; the besieged villages: Coyoacán, Iztapalapa, Culhuacán, el Peñon de los Baños, Iztacalco, Tacuba; Mixhuca and Azcapotzalco; the transfomed villages: Tatelolco, Tepito and Tacubaya, and finally the villages on the perifery: Texcoco, Amecameca, Chalco, Ecatepec and Teotihuacán (Medina, 1995).

The "metropolis" is, for the ethnologist, the meeting place of languages and cultures that originate from their own ancient inhabitants and the new presence of the migrants from the countryside – the "*Marias*" and the "*Oaxacos*" -, farm hands looking for seasonal work, for example in the cultivation of nopal in Milpa Alta, domestic and service sector workers, bricklayers, informal traders, porters, and sexual service providers, and the settlements created by these immigrants.

Mexico City conserves a plurality of cultural spaces that coexist in the *tianguis* (from the *náhuatl*: *tianquiztli*, referring to a market on a fixed day**)** and permanent markets, in the multitude of religious festivals celebrated in its *barrios* and villages, and its centers of pilgrimage like the Villa de Guadalupe, the dancers, the bands of musicians, food and the systems of agricultural and livestock production. These are spaces which allow us to observe the connection between past and present, the importance of the great Mexica civilization as a cultural and mythical reference on the basis of which life is still interpreted and which is inescapable in the face of attempts at modernization which have tried to ignore or underestimate it by reducing it to the field of folklore. The cult of the Virgin of Guadalupe is not a passive syncretic cult, but rather a relation between time and myths that keep alive the idea of an "origin"; *Tonanzin* is simultaneously the image of the "other", the Christian *Guadalupe*, depending on the civilization being referred to. In the villages and *barrios* of the valley of Mexico, on the second of February, Candlemas, the child God is raised from the crib, dressed and presented at church. As an equivalent to the Word, seeds such as maize, beans, fava beans, oats, chayote, peas and *nopal* leaves for example are taken for blessing to propitiate good harvests. In May, the day of bricklayers is celebrated along with the "exaltation of the Holy Cross", and this is done in accordance with one of the most important ceremonies of the agricultural cycle, the arrival of water, the start of the rains, the festival of *Tlaloc* and the *tlalocan*, with offerings at the crosses we can see on the mountains and hills which surround the valley. Later, the fourteenth of May, the day of San Isidro Labrador, marks the beginning of the agricultural cycle.

3.4 People and agriculture.

Traditional agriculture in CDMX accumulates the experience provided by local farming practices over thousands of years. Adaptation and selection seem to be the major mechanisms for eventually obtaining the best results in the management of natural resources (Flannery, 1968). In the zone south of CDMX urban growth has been less dramatic allowing these spaces to retain their rural character, and consequently act as "reservoirs" for local tourism. The systems of food production have maintained a form conventional to the rural sector of the rest of the country with arable production representing the dominant activity, while livestock and forestry are secondary activities with long-standing relationships with arable production. As mentioned above, the region incorporates two models of production dating from the Pre-Hispanic era and one other brought by the Spanish colonizers; both influenced by the topography of the city. The first of these can be found in the lowland areas and includes the zone of chinampas (floating gardens) where horticultural production (ornamental plants, flowers, maize, beans, squash etc.) predominates, along with other production processes associated with the culture of the area (such as backyard livestock, kitchen gardens and cattle rearing for milk and meat). The second of the aforementioned models is situated in the upland zone dominated by terraces, where seasonal crops adapted to the area are produced (maize, oats, cut fodder and of particular interest, *nopal*).

This same region is also important for its forestry products (firewood, wild mushrooms, resins and timber for the construction of houses and furniture).

Other farming systems important in the terraced model of production include natural pastures and cultivated meadows used in the rearing of sheep, for which there is a regional demand (being used in the preparation of *barbacoa* or steam-cooked meat, stimulated by the increasing importance of tourism in the city). Also included within the upland model are family kitchen gardens and backyard livestock which constitute a form of production associated with the local culture in which the population live alongside the animals that are used for agricultural activities on the terraces. The *nopal* (*Opuntia ficus indica*) of Milpa Alta is a plant native to Mexico which was first domesticated by the early populations of Mexico, selected for its production of edible leaves and is the main crop for the terrace systems. In fact, it is possible to consider this perennial crop as the most important in the zone, with an area of approximately 6000 hectares and a production in excess of 200,000 tons (per year), 75% of which is consumed within CDMX, the rest being consumed in the neighboring states and a small quantity being exported to the United States and Japan. In all the *nopal* plantations the use of cattle manure as a source of organic matter and fertilizer is intensive, permitting a weekly harvest of leaves for sale.

4. Behind the mood of disenchantment

One of the openings that research on these villages in the basin offers us is related to the critical revision of some of the postulates that still survive as political, cultural and judicial foundations of the nation state in Mexico, particularly in relation to the problem of "unity" as the articulating principal of the nation and foundational for this form of state. This notion of "unity", based on the principal of equality before the law, somehow presupposed moving theoretically and politically towards a perspective which overvalued the whole in detriment of the parts, the nation and "national identity" above the nations and the cultures, Spanish as the national language to "integrate the nation" and the other languages reduced to the condition of the dialect of "marginal" cultures. Behind a disenchanted and melancholy state of mind, are the "realities" of Mexican social life. Today there is an overt desire and restlessness which requires us to reconsider the "national question" from the field of local politics and the study of the pluri-ethnic regional systems. The panorama widens and becomes more complex as we become aware of the flow of processes which "rethink" the problem of the national from the perspective (from my point of view inevitable) of globalization.

Bonfil (1990) developed the hypothesis of the confrontation of the "profound Mexico", the "real" Mexico rooted in the social and as its counterpart, the world that from the optic of the State conceives the nation as an "imaginary Mexico", built on the discourse of power, divorced from the social. Villoro (1993), in his essay "Approaches to an ethic of culture" speaks of a confusion of terms resulting in "so-called dilemmas" between universality and peculiarity. According to the author we are dealing with a "false dilemma" which poses questions about which cultural forms are "preferable and more valuable". For this philosopher, "a culture satisfies needs, fulfills desires and permits the realization of Man's purposes" as it expresses emotions, desires, ways of seeing and feeling the world, it gives meaning to attitudes and behavior, indicates values as well as permitting preferences and the election of goals and by giving meaning, integrates individuals into a "collective whole" (Villoro, 1993). For Villoro, this "false dilemma" between peculiarity and universality, should be transformed into something else: "autonomy and authenticity, as opposed to sense and efficacy" in which respect for these principles would mean that any "progress in rationality and meaning would be achieved through persuasion, without violence towards the other" (Villoro, 1993: 150).

It is clear that the *Zapatista* rising in Chiapas in January 1994 has inspired much contemporary debate with regard to the cultures of indigenous peoples, their ways of life and the over-riding necessity to recognize the autonomy of these peoples, of the different cultures that are a vital part of the variegated world of modern Mexico. Mexican political life is understood now from a perspective which obliges us to take into account the complex systems of relations and symbols that give meaning to what people do in relation to politics. Disenchantment with politics, with the work of the "people's representatives" in Congress, with the huge bureaucracy, with the "new type" of public servants, with the great social inequality expressed through so many contrasts, with the ideological eagerness to homogenize, with the ancestral abandoning of territories inhabited by indigenous communities, with the expulsion of the communities from their lands, with corruption and perhaps also because of having to accept that things tend to be more complicated than they appear and that social, economic and political problems (which previously were thought to be a reflection of bad government and which would disappear when the old government disappeared)

generally have much deeper roots than was thought. Mysteriously, behind the mood of disenchantment, are the "realities" of Mexican social life at the beginning of the 21st century.

5. The challenge to find new ways to understand history

The study of the significations above mentioned consists of exposing the conceptual structures that individuals use to interpret their experience. The challenge is to take into consideration their specificity and at the same time attempt to give them theoretical status. The elaboration will permit the discussion to centre on the concepts of cultural plurality, culture and political culture, while the reference at the level of the concrete, through field work, will address the study of the forms of social organization and of the myths and rituals as narrated by the inhabitants of the villages We consider that for studies of oral tradition the relation between language and culture is of great importance. Edward Sapir (1921) formulated a hypothesis in which language makes thought, structures it and builds on it in socio-historical contexts (cultures) and specific situations.

"Any cultural model and any act of social behavior supposes communication, either in the explicit sense or in an implicit sense ..... society appears like a very elaborate network of partial or total comprehensions between the members of more or less extensive and more or less complex organized groups and is reaffirmed by individual creative acts which fall in the field of communication" (Sapir, 2014: 104).

Or ...."*The world of our experiences must be enormously simplified and generalized before it is possible to make a symbolic inventory of all our experiences of things and relations; and this inventory is imperative before we can convey ideas. The elements of language the symbols that ticket off experience, must therefore be associated with whole groups, delimited classes, of experience rather than with the single experiences themselves. Only so is communication possible, for the single experience lodges in an individual consciousness and is, strictly speaking, incommunicable"* (Sapir, 2014: 11).

The levels of communication recognize and assign a fundamental role to language. In the first place, because they imply the preexistence of language from both the ontogenetic and the filogenetic points of view. Secondly, because all the forms of communication are accompanied by certain verbal utterances or other semiotic manifestations or both at the same time. Thirdly, because as Sapir indicates, if they are not verbalized, they can be verbalized, that is to say, translatable into uttered verbal or interior messages. For Sapir, language has its setting and different languages do not exist independently of culture, that is to say, "from the socially inherited assemblage of practices and beliefs that determine the texture of our lives" (Sapir, 2014: 235). The content of language itself is intimately related to culture. "A society that has no knowledge of theosophy need have no name for it; aborigines that have never seen or heard of a horse were compelled to invent or borrow a word for the animal when they made his acquaintance. In the sense that the vocabulary of a language more or less reflects the culture whose purposes it serves, it is perfectly true that the history of language and the history of culture move along parallel lines" (Sapir, 1921: 236). For Wittgenstein "...the limits of language are the limits of the world" (Wittgenstein, 2007) and for Hans Georg Gadamer "the self is manifested in language" (Gadamer, 1993). From a philosophical stand point and in particular from that of hermeneutical philosophy, language is not primarily or above all a system of signs or representations which somehow "stand in for" objects, but rather one expression of a way of being human in the world. In his essays and courses on Philosophical Grammar, the "later" Wittgenstein launched an attack on the Positivists, his former allies in the period of his Tractatus Logico–Philosphicus.

His approach to the subject of language is more cautious and somehow more empirical. He states that if we want to know what words mean and how our words acquire meaning, we should begin by seeing how the words are used in "ordinary discourse". From his point of view one cannot start by assuming that all words have an aim and that they only have a single meaning, a meaning that can be established by means of logical calculation. What appears to be the meaning of a word in one context is not necessarily its meaning in another. The meaning of a word is precisely its use. The sentence acquires meaning from the system of signs to which it belongs. There is no single definition of a word which covers all the uses we give it in ordinary discourse. Wittgenstein posits the existence of "specific contexts" for the use of words in which one has to uncover the grammar assigned to the words in their non-social interaction. "Don't think" he recommends, "Look" His concept of "language game" (flexible and various meanings) replaces the ideal of a universal grammar. It presupposes that language acquires its primary forms on the basis of how it is used by people in social interaction and that it facilitates actions and expectations of actions.

In this sense, the rules of a particular language game are the rules of a way of life. Learning a language means being capable of participating, that is to say, knowing how to use the rules is the knowing how to use the rules in this particular way of life on which the language depends and is instrumental in perpetuating.

This summary allows us to state a position from which we can undertake a journey through a culture, a language and a way of life in the case the study of Milpa Alta, a delegation in the south of Mexico City. A culture connected with its natural surroundings, with the Mesoamerican worldview, of different textures and characteristics, from the heart of which issue numerous vegetable and animal beings, deities that unfold to become other deities. "These mountain people enjoyed the benefit of two natural landscape systems, the lake system (Xochimilco-Chalco) and the high forest and transitional system, in such a way that their traditions are based on both. They enjoyed, for example, a diet of products from the lake and on the other hand had a profound knowledge of the products of the forest" (Chavira, 1992).

In his beautiful book on the influence of nature on Mesoamerican worlview, in which the Lake, with capital L, is a complex set of natural, cultural and social processes, Espinosa provides us with the following description,: "Below the snows (doubtless more majestic, as the glaciers of the volcanoes are also disappearing) there was a zone of alpine grasslands which we can still observe today, lower down space and low pine forest formed a transition zone towards the forest of oyamel pine with their straight trucks and dense foliage which often only let light through in the in the form of rays highlighted by the mist. Lower down these forests transformed themselves into pine and oak woods and mixed woodlands. Until recently the oak woods rich in accompanying species must have been extraordinarily abundant, forming an almost continuous swathe which surrounded the whole basin covering enormous extensions of hillside, including enormous sectors of the Sierra de Pachuca and of course all the mountain chains, embracing almost the whole basin, and transforming itself as it descended towards the lake plane," (Espinosa, 1996).

The names of streets, birds, barrios, hills, caves, rituals and objects in *náhuatl* are evidence of the importance of this language in the daily life of the people of Milpa Alta. With respect to the divine, it is difficult to accept that it is not endowed with plasticity. We are faced with a shared symbolic language, probably the result of a prolonged process of gradual transmission and an almost silent process of cultural dialogue in Mexica territory, in which many other intermediary figures certainly intervened. The myth of Guadalupe is probably only a visible part of the formation process of a new mystical discourse which, to a certain extent, ended up being held in common in Mesoamerica and also in "*mesoamericanized*" Christianity. The religious festival dovetails various rituals which set in motion the calendar, the agricultural cycles, the rain, the *canícula* (the hot days when the Dog Star rises and sets with the sun), the cosmos, the "long time", the place of Man over long stretches of history. The rituals are carried out in wide open spaces, outside the churches in the barrios, although people also come to the parish churches from the barrios with banners, music, fireworks, flowers and fruit, with the natural elements which give them life and name like the sand, the cave and the promontory.

The search for the "original" or the "foundational elements", as some call the history related to origins, can end up being a pointless exercise, not only because it is obvious that elements recently introduced to a culture can up to a point be seen as "foreign", although with time they are accepted and elaborated on until they are totally integrated into the life and culture of the community that receives them, but also because such a position would draw us away from the line of understanding which consists of establishing connections between worldview, ritual and the system of *cargos*. A search for the "quality of origin" could distract us from our own conception of life, in the sense that the past updates and recreates itself and exists in a broader present. But there is something more. These positions end up favoring the *indigenismo* which constitutes the indigenous subject and formulates a concept of ethnicity as an explanation and reference of ways of life which are marginal, aboriginal, original and thus in danger of extinction. This is in fact an interpretation very much in agreement with the liberal myth of progress founded on the principle of equality, interpreted as the creation, a homogeneity which even functions as an argument to deny autonomy and a wider recognition of the customs and rights of indigenous peoples with respect to their religious, social, political and cultural organization, and of course also in relation to a different worldview. We do not believe in the existence of western style "original" cultures or western style "founding histories" which, looking back to Greece and Rome narrate the origin of their civilization.

Understanding means retrieving past life, repeating, and it is the possibility of reiterating which triumphs over time. Human beings move in time and they use it as a medium. But they also express time when they manage their lives, possess initiative and spontaneity. In this sense Man is a being that does in fact produce origins.

When we breathe the perfume of these gardens we no longer wish for Paradise.

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