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ESSAY

Chinampas, Flowers and Struggles

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Abstract

This personal narrative reflects on the memories of Xochimilco, in the south of Mexico City, and how they intertwine with the region's long history of resilience and struggle. The smell of flowers and the taste of herbs bring back memories of my childhood, my family, my village, and the historical forces that have shaped the identity of the people of this region of Mexico over the last 500 years. Corruption, impunity, the exploitation of Indigenous populations, the overexploitation of natural resources, social inequality, and poverty still affect the Xochimilcas, following the subjugation of the Aztec Empire, the effects of which continue to resonate today.

Keywords

Mexico; *Xochimilco*; *Chinampas*; Family; Memory

Sunflowers, roses or marigolds were covering the *chinampas*[1]—floating gardens—completely, the smell of the roses enveloped the fields, and the rain infused the fragrance of the earth. The sunset was always marked by the expectation of new discoveries. Each day was a life journey in my entire world. Learning how to sow and plant cuttings of roses, collect sunflower seeds, prepare flower bouquets, or simply play on the canals with my brother Noel and the other children.

1 *Chinampa* means "in the fence of reeds." It is a long, floating field built up by layering soil, sediment, and vegetation. It is a technique developed by the Aztecs, particularly by the Xochimilcas—an Indigenous group belonging to the Nahuatl peoples. Xochimilco is located in the south of Mexico City and is surrounded by *chinampas*. The Aztecs built a complex hydrological infrastructure to separate saline water from drinking water. The chinampas became an essential part of the Aztec Empire due to their role in provisioning food and flowers, and they were the basis of the empire's economic development (Eakin et al. 2019: 4). The United Nations designated the *chinampas* as a Globally Important Agricultural Heritage System in 2018.

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In the afternoons after attending primary school, the kids of the village, including my brother and me, played on the streets with dogs, donkeys, cats, rabbits and horses. The streets of San Luis Tlaxialtemalco and San Gregorio Atlapulco—neighbouring villages located in the south of Mexico City and belonging to the district of Xochimilco—were the centre of our community life, while our parents were busy preparing the plants, herbs and flowers to be sold in the market. The smell of jasmine, lavender and roses was part of the everyday perfume of our streets.

Some girls used to make chains of flowers to sell in the market, while the boys helped their dads arrange the flowers neatly inside the trucks. It was a form of collaborative work with our parents on a daily basis, to earn a living for the rest of the family. Play and work were often mixed for peasant children. Leisure time with family and friends was a natural extension of our work activities, such as selecting the most beautiful roses, dahlias or tulips.

My mum used to sing the song 'Xochimilco'[2] that means 'the place where flowers grow' by the singer Lucha Reyes:

Xochimilco, my little village,
with its flowers of colour,
my chalupa—boat—
decorated with the name of your love.

Xochimilco, you have something
that I'll never forget.
Everybody says you are beautiful,
and I love you so much.

When I go to your chinampas
and I tell you my love,
everything will become a melody
in your beautiful sunset.

From your plants and carnations,
a river of trees will give flowers
to Lupita, the Virgin of the altar.
I really miss my little land,
and I want to remember it.

I swear by heaven, you make me cry,
when I go to your chinampas
and I tell you my love.
Everything will become a melody
in your beautiful sunset.

I used to admire my mum, since she was a beautiful woman, however I didn't want to be a beautiful woman, because I used to associate beauty with suffering. So I made myself appear an ugly girl with masculine behaviour. The boys never offered me flowers like they did to the other girls; they made me fight

2 Original Spanishlyric: '*Xochimilco* mi pueblito. Con sus flores de color y chalupas adornadas con los nombres de tu amor. *Xochimilco* tienes algo que no olvidare jamás. Todos dicen que eres bello y yo te amo "muncho" más. Cuando valla a tu chinampa y te digan mi querer. Todo se hará melodía en tu lindo atardecer. De tus plantas y claveles. Un arrollo de palmar. A llevarle a mi lupita virgencita del altar. Yo ya extraño mi tierrita. Y si "quero" recordar. Lo que juro por el cielo. Tú me pones a llorar. Cuando valla a tu chinampa. Y te diga mi querer. Todo se hará melodía en tu lindo atardecer.'

like them or play boys' games. Friday afternoons were always quite intense since Noel and I had to help my parents prepare all the plants and flowers to be ready for the market. Some roses were just amazing. The intensity of the colours—yellow, white, red and pink—contrasted beautifully with the deep green of the *ahuejotes* (Salix bonplandiana), unique trees that grow around the chinampas and surround the lakes.

When I close my eyes, the image of the Xochimilco market comes to my mind, a place adorned with all kind of exotic flowers, plants and herbs. The customers were delighted to walk through its corridors, even the street dogs that were happy to see more people around, since more customers meant more food for them and their puppies. Selling many flowers did not always translate into good money, as my father often had to pay bribes to the 'inspectors.' They used to invent any excuse to extort him and other flower growers, small farmers and peasants of Xochimilco.

My father was a *chinampero*—a worker of the *chinampa*—and also an *ejidatario*[3] representative. He was well known by the villagers and to local authorities, since he frequently visited us, and not in a friendly manner, particularly after my father refused to endorse political initiatives aimed at destroying the community property of the *ejidos. Chinamperos*—owners of *chinampas*—and *ejidatarios*—workers *of ejidos*—often held protests not only in Xochimilco, but also at the Zocalo—the ancient capital of *Tenochtitlan* and the centre of Mexico City—particularly at the beginning of each new government's tenure. One of the main issues, again and again, was the appropriation of *ejidos*[4] and the destruction of *chinampas*. Conflicts for protecting our lands were common among all the children of the village.

Many conflicts were caused by local authorities who sought to profit from their public positions for private gain. Demanding bribes to access the flower market, to sell plants and herbs on the streets, or threatening peasants to take away their land due to bureaucratic procedures were also common issues in the community. I remember once when the peasants of Xochimilco refused to pay the *delegado*or *alcalde* (mayor of the district) of Xochimilco. Then the police arrived and violently repressed the protesters, who were demonstrating against unfair initiatives such as blocking access to the market and increasing the fees for peasants who wanted to sell their products in the Xochimilco market.

The battle to preserve the *chinampas* and *ejidos* in Xochimilco has been a long-standing struggle. The parents of my grandmother, Juana Valentina, fought during the Mexican Revolution (1910–1920), and so did my grandmother, during her early childhood. She used to tell me many of her memories from this period, and the difficulties they faced in finding food, since the Carrancista soldiers—the army of Venustiano Carranza, Mexican president (1917– 1920)—used to arrive in San Gregorio Atlapulco and take their maize, beans, firewood and young women from the peasants' families. Therefore, the girls were hidden in the household wells to prevent the revolutionaries from taking them away from their families.

The conflicts over the land have accompanied the life of my grandmother and me. She was always ready to fight for her *chinampas* and *ejidos* even when she was 90 years old. My grandmother used to say, when there was a confrontation with the police or army[5]:

> **I am already old, I can no longer fight with the strength of a young person, but my body can be used to waste bullets, but my last breath will be to defend our dignity and our lands that have belonged to my parents and grandparents, and you must do the same.**

3 *Ejidos* are communal lands held by indigenous communities. These lands cannot be sold, they can only be transferred to members of the same family or community (Torres-Mazuera 2012)

4 Currently, the *ejidos* of Xochimilco, including those of San Gregorio Atlapulco, cover a surface of 2,657.08 hectares, making up the protected natural polygon area (Gaceta Oficial de la Ciudad de México 2018).

5 In Spanish: 'Yo ya soy vieja, yo ya no puedo luchar con la fuerza de un joven, pero mi cuerpo puede servir para gastar balas y mi último respiro será por defender nuestra dignidad y nuestras tierras que han pertenecido a mis padres y abuelos.'

The struggle to preserve the *chinampas*, *ejidos* and *cerros* (mountains) in Xochimilco has been a historic battle dating back to colonial times in Mexico (1521–1810) and the subjugation of the Aztec Empire.[6] In fact, one of the main drivers of the Mexican Revolution was the fight to redistribute land to peasants. The slogan '*Tierra y libertad*' (land and freedom) coined by Emiliano Zapata (1879–1919), revolutionary peasant leader, still echoes today in San Gregorio Atlapulco. He continues to be highly respected among villagers. In fact, my grandmother used to bring flowers to his statue, located in the plaza of San Gregorio Atlapulco every year to celebrate his birthday.

The challenges of keeping the *chinampas* alive have been a constant battle for the last 500 years. The villages of Xochimilco, particularly San Gregorio Atlapulco and San Luis Tlaxialtemalco, have contributed since pre-Hispanic times to the supply of food to the capital, producing: maize, beans, avocados, courgettes, tomatoes, lettuces, mint, coriander, rosemary, as well as exotic flowers such as orchids, daisies, carnations, bougainvilleas, and providing drinking water for the whole Mexico City. Xochimilco also hosts more than 140 species of water birds, unique in their kind worldwide—*ajolotes* (a kind of salamander found only in Xochimilco), *acociles*, *charales*, fish and flamingos (Pérez 2017), which makes this place a remarkable landmark in Mexico.

As the history of the world shows, regions with natural resources are always targeted by criminals, corrupt politicians and greedy businessmen, and Xochimilco and its villages are not the exception. Local inhabitants have faced many struggles from different sources: population growth and urban expansion, causing slums and irregular settlements in the *chinampas*. According to the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM), there are 1,373 illegal structures along the canals, which stretch for 116 km (Saliba, 2015). Lack of ecological awareness: some inhabitants refill the canals with concrete or construction waste to expand their property. Pollution: using *chinampas* and lakes as garbage dumps, as well as using the canals to discharge of sewage with heavy metals, pesticides and human waste. Crime: in recent years, *chinampas* have been to dispose corpses or parts of mutilated bodies. Irresponsible tourism management: tourists are allowed to throw away plastic bottles, food, clothes, shoes and other objects into the canals. Destruction of the natural environment: endangering species such as *ajolotes*, *carpas* (carp fish) and other water birds.

The lack of water in Mexico City and the excessive extraction of groundwater from Xochimilco have caused severe subsidence in most of the villages that make up Xochimilco's district. As noted: 'more than two-thirds of the *chinampas* have been abandoned. Without upkeep the plots tend to subside into the water or dry out completely" (Saliba, 2015), a situation worsened by the effects of climate change. The struggle of *chinamperos* thus never ends. The threats range from corrupt local representatives to the impacts of climate change: heat waves, water shortages, unpredictable weather, frequent droughts, wildfires, erosion and the loss of flora and fauna.

However, the resilience of the *chinamperos* remains strong as my grandmother used to say: 'while there is life, there is hope.' My elder brother Noel continues to work in the *chinampas* in San Luis Tlaxialtemalco. He and his wife continue to produce beautiful vegetables, flowers and herbs. The markets of San Luis Tlaxialtemalco and Xochimilcoare still adorned with vivid colours that remind me of the intensity of our roots that accompany me wherever I go. My grandmother, Juana Valentina used to say: 'Where there is light, there is or there has been a lot of darkness.' She was right. The locals of Xochimilco, San Luis Tlaxialtemalco and San Gregorio Atlapulco, have struggled—and continue to struggle—to keep alive their traditions, values and environment.

The villages of Xochimilco never rest from being harassed by the corrupt authorities and unscrupulous criminals. One of the most recent conflicts occurred when peasants from San Gregorio Atlapulco were

6 During the colonial era, the wetlands were urbanized and drained and the remaining waters became contaminated with urban waste. By the 20th century, the *chinampas* were one of the last remnants of the pre-Hispanic world. Due to water scarcity in the city, Mexico's presidents ordered the extraction of water from *Xochimilco* (Eakin et al. 2019: 4).

threatened with imprisonment by the former mayor of Xochimilco, Jose Carlos Acosta Ruiz,[7] after the inhabitants demanded the return of public properties taken by Mr. Acosta Ruiz. To add to the sense of impunity, he has since been promoted by his own political party Morena (*Movimiento de Regeneración Nacional*/ National Regeneration Movement) to the position of federal deputy.

Every time that I return to Xochimilco, San Luis Tlaxialtemalco and San Gregorio Atlapulco, I see children playing in the *chinampas* just as I used to with my brother and the other kids of the village. Some mothers continue cooking and working as my mum used to, and some grandmothers still tell stories and legends to the little ones, while their parents work.

The last time that I visited San Luis Tlaxialtemalco, while I was sitting in front of the church, I listened to a grandmother telling stories to her grandchildren, just as my grandma used to. The echo of the Llorona, *los nahuales* or the dolls that chase the soul of Don Julian, continue to be told by parents and grandparents in the hope that the little ones will one day pass down the same stories to their own children. Myths, legends and community struggles will continue to mark the lives of the inhabitants of Xochimilco.

Dedication

In memory of my late father: Francisco Nieto González

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7 Mr José Carlos Acosta Ruiz has been linked in media reports to several alleged corruption cases (Zepeda, 2023), including nepotism, bribery, influence peddling, connections with organised crime, the alleged misuse of public resources, and irregularities in public contracting. Reports have also mentioned allegations of ethnic tension and repression against indigenous communities and women activists (Eje Central 2023). His leadership style has been described as authoritarian, allegedly hindering the implementation of a ruling by the Electoral Court of Mexico City (Law 013/2017), which affirms the right of communities to self-determination. According to media sources, Acosta Ruiz is currently on leave of absence as a Federal Deputy (2024–2027), having been appointed in 2024 by Mexico City Head of Government Clara Brugada Molina as General Coordinator of Human Capital at the Secretariat of Administration and Finance, where he oversees payroll management (Santiago 2025). He has also been accused of embezzling approximately 128 million Mexican pesos (about 8.5 million USD) during his tenure as Mayor of Xochimilco (2018–2024) (Santiago, 2025). Further reports allege that Acosta Ruiz and Francisco Pastrana Basurto, former Director of Legal Affairs in Xochimilco, were involved in incidents of violent repression against residents of San Gregorio on 5 September 2024, during protests related to the alleged appropriation of a community library. Several people were reportedly injured, and activists were detained (Reto Diario 2024; Nuñez 2025).

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