



La Milpa, the Origin of the Communal Flower

My name is Parménidez Rodríguez, also known as The Shadow, and I am a migrant. I just returned to my community approximately four months ago, when COVID-19 accelerated the transition after living in the city for fifteen years. To return to my community has been pleasant—I find myself learning how to plant *milpa*¹, learning the process it requires to maintain and take care of it. I want to clarify that my knowledge about *la milpa* is truncated, meaning my father and grandparents never taught me to plant through practice, but they did pass on this knowledge orally. Nevertheless, this was not my motivation to plant. **I am farming to provoke the young people of my community to reconsider the urgent necessity to plant food**

in these difficult times for all. Since rejoining my community, I have had unconditional help from my mother and my sister's father-in-law. I am also establishing a collective farming initiative with my brother and two friends.

Day to day, *la milpa* is where human relationships are strengthened—this is where we talk, we think, we question, we respond, we imagine, we reflect, join, weave, and deepen life. It is a space of encounters in which uncles, cousins, friends, neighbors, brothers, sisters, and grandparents participate. For us, the Indigenous descendants of Olmecan (mesoamerican) culture, *la milpa* is important, because for a long time we have based our subsistence on it. ***La milpa is the center of our culture, it is the center of our way of life.*** The individual relationships that Indigenous People have with *la milpa* allow us to recognize it as the axis of our political power. That is to say, the more that we produce our own food, the wider our margin of freedom. Now, since *la milpa* is at the center of foundational activities that are related to humanity, to nature, and to the earth, we can represent it through a codex that has been called “The Communal Flower”², which will allow us to understand the various elements of my community if you read it from its center, outwards.

Land (territory), political power, work and communal celebration are the four foundational pillars through which we wield, live, and organize our life in the community. We understand territory as a space where we are established and that we physically embody. From a concrete perspective, we consider part



Image credit: Mario Martínez

¹ Milpa - ancient Indigenous farming system developed in the Americas that includes the simultaneous cultivation of corn, beans and squash. In North America the milpa is referred to as the three sisters by Native Americans.

² Further reading: Rendón Monzón, Juan José, *La comunalidad. Modo de vida en los pueblos indios*. Tomo I, México, CONACULTA, 2003. Note: The Communal Flower was not developed by Mr. Rendón alone, but rather it is a communal millenary process. Mr. Rendón synthesized the methodology with the help of various Indigenous communities.

of the territory to be the earth, the forest, the jungle, the water, the rivers, and all of the natural resources that we take, conserve, and defend in my community. The archeological zones, the ceremonial and sacred sites like the caves, the trees, the hills, and the spring, are part of our territory. **Another aspect of our territory is community organizing, because this is the basis of our economic and cultural sphere.** This aspect is important to the autonomous development of our community, even if currently, within my community this pillar is one of the most fragile due to an influx of money and various political parties.

Communal power is power that establishes itself through a system of roles that realize communal will. These positions can be civic or religious and can make up authorities, commissions and committees, such as, the communal authority or *ejidal*³ authority, the committee for potable water, and the commission for celebration that organizes communal gatherings. **All of these positions are elected in the general assembly where all members have an obligation to deliver on their commitments; if they refuse to serve the community they can be fined.** When we speak of an assembly, we understand it as an agency where the will of the community is defined through reflection and decision-making, generally arrived at through consensus.

In an assembly, all matters are attended to that concern the life of the community, for example all that is related to the use and defense of the territory, political power, collective work, public works, and communal celebrations. **The importance of the assembly resides in that it is here that we manifest our collective needs, where we contemplate alternatives of wellbeing that satisfy us—solutions—and where we decide the paths that will define the destiny of our community.** A complement with high importance in the assembly is the Council of Elders, generally made up of people who have delivered on all of their responsibilities and who enjoy ample prestige and respect in the community. Their principal role is to conserve the will of community members and through personal consultation and dialogue, to be certain of the community's destiny.

Communal work is what we practice to satisfy all of our family's needs also known as mutual interfamily aid, this support takes on a circular form: I help you, you help me, we help each other. Likewise, within other Nations, it is called *Guelaquetza*⁴, *gozona*, or mutual aid. Nevertheless, there is another type of communal work that we call *tequio*⁵, which serves to build and maintain public infrastructure—all members of the community participate, it is done voluntarily for the collective benefit. For example, the cleaning of a well that is used by the community is *tequio*.

We consider communal celebration a very important element because through collective enjoyment, we acquire and affirm our communal identity with much happiness, and arrive at a moment where we forget our agrarian, civic, and vicinal issues. Additionally, celebration has the central function of paying religious tribute to the patron saints of towns, which were substituted for natural ancient energies, with the purpose of requesting and expressing gratitude for favors. We also think that this element is completely threatened, because in my town like in many other towns, there are invasions by religious sects that are in contradiction with our communal traditions.

³ Ejidal - a system of holding the land that is destined for communal services.

⁴ Guelaquetza - refers to mutual aid and reciprocity in important movements of communal life. It symbolizes trust and solidarity.

⁵ Tequio - traditional communal work for the benefit of the collective, without the use of money, to resolve communal necessities.

II

In my community, there are a series of elements that exist that support communal life, for example the norms and common laws that are a combination of rules, customs, and traditional ethical values that help us regulate our life. There are maxims to command while complying, to carry out communal statutes, and to solve conflicts through dialogue, or reparations and consequences for an offense, without arriving at punishment.

Equally, traditional education is that which is transmitted in the core of the family and community; with traditional education we are prepared, we are informed, we are shaped from a very young age. This is the intention behind incentivizing participation in a productive life, in a communal life, so we may continue reproducing it through the generations to come.

On the other hand, the Native tongue is that which my community chooses to use to educate the smallest individuals. Through this medium we deal with any community issue in our assemblies, our interaction with authorities, elders, family members, doctors, etc. Additionally, we use it to communicate with our energies, to call out the elements of nature, the human body, illnesses, remedies and other matters. In my community, **I can attest that in my community our Native tongue is what gives us identity**, although it is true that in these times, as Indigenous Nations, we are experiencing the deterioration of our Native tongues, which are being replaced by Spanish. In consequence there are more collective efforts to strengthen our mother tongue.

In the same manner, we consider the cosmovision to be a conjunction of experiences, understanding, myths, knowledge and beliefs, that give meaningful sustenance and justify our communal life. We utilize this cosmovision in productive activities, individual and collective behavior. For example, faced with the great superior force of nature, or the impossibility or difficulty to understand her and control her, in my community we tend to grant them a sacred character. In this way we can explain, accept, and attempt to control them through ritual ceremonies, because that gives us a sense of belonging to life. For example, at the time of planting, we consult on what day will be good to plant *la milpa*, this consultation is done by the farmer with a specific person that dedicates their life to the study of the primary (mesoamerican) calendars.

III

Equally, within the communal flower there exist auxiliary elements that support the sustenance of individual and familiar life in my community. Technology is considered an auxiliary when it has the following cultural components: agriculture, the raising of animals, fishing, hunting and gathering, the preparation of food, art and crafts, the production of compost, trades and communal services. In the same manner, **ceremonial life has a symbolic character, because it helps us to satisfy the spiritual needs that define our individual and collective identity**. Ceremonies can be agricultural, religious, civic, or individual; and in the same manner, the greeting and the respect of the other. The egalitarian exchange of products or services of mutual interfamilial aid, also called *trueque*⁶, is reflected considerably in interactions between businessfolk or people in my community. A division of labor is reflected in agricultural production and in artistic production. Interpersonal relationships are acquired (godfather, godmother, brother-in-law, sister-in-law), but can also be blood bonds; these relationships

⁶ Trueque - ancient system of exchange, trade without the use of money.

are important to find identity within communal life and that is why we can consider them a cohesive factor, and a medium to agree upon mutual aid within family. Community service is an element that we can observe in the practices of traditional doctors, praying folks, counters of the day, bone people, midwives, and countless others. The artistic and intellectual expressions in my community are observed in the artisans, in the religious ceremonies, in the communal parties, we may also include myths and interpretations of our realities. And the last element is the free time where we visualize, descry and enjoy games, myths, legends, histories, and company.

Within the current conditions of the world, it's important to direct our perspective toward the ways of living of Indigenous Nations, because they can be one alternative to life, to strengthen community bonds in the big cities. Lastly, let's stop thinking that rural work, earth work, is an aspect of the past, because our life without corn, without farming, without milpa is not life at all. **To live, to feel oneself in collective, is to be in harmony with mother nature, who is the end and beginning of our existence.**

—Parménides Rodríguez (*The Shadow*)

From some milpa of the lower Mixe region, Oaxaca, August 10 of 2021⁷



Image credit: Parménides Rodríguez (*The Shadow*)

⁷ Translated from Spanish by Prof. V



Parménides Rodríguez (The Shadow): Speaker of the Ayuuk tongue, persistent in finding stories, and committed to the milpa and letting time run without chasing it.