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FLOWER WORLD:
THE EVERLASTING CULT OF LIFE AND BEAUTY OF
MESOAMERICA AND THE AMERICAN SOUTHWEST

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Abstract

In 1922, Jane Hill first defined the concept of Flower World as a group of metaphors shared amongst Uto-Aztec groups throughout Mesoamerica and the Greater Southwest. Flower World can be understood as a place where ancestral souls reside. Some of its most prominent themes are closely related to music, trance-like states, birds, butterflies, and olfaction. These can be found spaced throughout the archaeological record, in art, songs or cantares, and dances. The concept of Flower World, however, goes beyond the previously understood linguistic and cultural boundaries and it is important to consider how this cult of life and beauty, while ancient in its origin, can help us understand the interwoven and complex cultures of native communities.

In 1992, Jane Hill conducted a groundbreaking study that would facilitate the general conceptualization of prominent motifs and symbolism within the Uto-Aztecan speech community. Defined by Hill as "Flower World," this concept of a floral paradise has existed long into antiquity, primarily amongst the native communities of Mesoamerica and the American Southwest. In scholarly literature, Flower World is used to describe a system of associated floral motifs found in song, pottery, and art that evoke the spirit world of these ancient communities.

The Uto-Aztecan groups of primary focus for this paper concern the Mexica or Aztec group of central Mexico, the Hopi of the American Southwest, and the Yaqui of the Sonoran Desert. However, discussions of Flower World will concern the prehistoric Olmec of coastal Veracruz and western Tabasco on the Gulf of Mexico and the Maya groups in the Yucatan region and Guatemala.

In her research, Hill utilizes Claude Levi-Strauss's term of chromaticism to help define the visual imagery conjured up by the ancient artistic expression of the floral paradise. This cult of life is a cult of beauty which encapsulates the vibrancy of the spiritual plane inclusive of "colored flowers and other brightly colored and iridescent natural phenomena including dawn and sunset, rainbows, hummingbirds, butterflies, and other colorful and iridescent insects, shells, crystals, and colored lights and flames" (Hill 1992, 117).

While chromatic symbolism was indeed widespread throughout the Americas, it is significant how pervasive and cohesive chromatic elements are in the songs of the Uto-Aztecan communities. The widespread distribution of these chromatic expressions as an association with spiritual experiences must represent a "level of ancient thought." (Hill 1992) The evocation of this specialized rhetorical system calls upon a multitude of meanings which, once fully developed exhibit the following properties of Flower World, as determined by Hill:

1. Song is the most appropriate verbal genre for invoking flowers.
2. Flowers are representative of the spirit land, paradise, and the spiritual aspects of human beings, houses, pathways, and patios.
3. Flowers may stand for real flowers, human hearts, and aspects of human vitality, such as organs, or blood. Flowers are not usually associated with female genitalia and erogenous zones in this discourse.
4. Flowers are symbolically associated with fire.
5. Flowers are associated with gender identity. While it is androgynous and can stand for female beauty and fecundity, it is more often a symbol of male strength and spirituality.

Prevalence and Impact in the Historical and Archaeological Record of Mesoamerica and the American Southwest

Uto-Aztecan songs or cantares are considered the *par excellence* medium for the expression of chromatic symbols (Hill 1992) as these verses offer a detailed representation in narration and performance of the waking beauty of the Spirit Land. Through this form of verbal and performative art, the singer can evoke sacred experiences through art and reenactment.

Among the Aztec, song is an influential genre as it was the most appropriate for evoking and influencing the Spirit Land. The association of flowers and songs is evident as cantares represent the Flower World complex with an exceptional level of detail. Cantares venture in a variety of topics, and are generally concerned with reasserting native values amidst the cultural shift brought upon the introduction of Christianity by conquistadores (Bierhornst 2009). These topics are addressed with recurring motifs of flowers, quetzals, and butterflies which saturate descriptions of war, male strength, and spirituality as it is concerned with life, death, and rebirth.

(1) Canto de Tortolas (Leon-Portillo 2011, 1077):

Sólo me he de ir,
Por eso lloro,
Se van mi flor, mi canto.

Yo cantor,
Yo en mariposa florida
Me convertiré frente a los demás,
Me iré volando, me voy,
Y mi canto y mi flor.

Turtle Dove Song

Alone I shall go,
So I cry,
My flower is gone, my song.

It is I who,
Into a flowery butterfly
I shall transform in front of all,
I shall leave flying, so I go,
And my song and my flower.

(2) Aqui empieza un canto llano de señores (Leon-Portillo 2011, 921):

La casa de las pinturas floridas
Está en alguna parte.
En el interior de la casa de las mariposas cuál flores, allá, es tu casa.
Como un canto viviste, tú, Motecuhzomatzin,
Como una flor has venido a brotar en la tierra,
Has venido a alegrar a la gente
En el lugar de los atabales, aquí.

Here begins a plain song of men

The house of the flowery paint
Is out there somewhere.
Inside the home of butterflies like flowers, there, is your home.
As a song you lived, Motecuhzomatzin,
As a flower you come to sprout from the earth,
You have come to fill people with joy
In the home of the timpani, here.

(3) A la Manera Tlaxcateca (Leon-Portillo 2011, 797)

Por breve tiempo,
Por un día, la flor de la guerra
Es tu palabra, tu, Cuauhtemoc.
Las flores de tu nariguera de oro
Resplandecen con luz de amanecer;
Tus flores de algodón con plumas de quetzal relucen.

The Tlaxcatecan Way

For a brief time,
For a day, the flower of war,
Is your word, Cuauhtemoc
The flowers from your golden nariguera
Shines like the morning sun;
Your flowers of cotton with quetzal plumes shine.

There is a seeming mutability between flowers as representations of homes, warriors, or weaponry songs (Bierhornst 2009). This floral characterization is the manifestation of the spiritual aspects of humans like that of their environment. As warriors become destined for the other world where they will become companions of the sun, elements of the floral complex are drawn upon to express the chromatic divinity of ascension. The Aztec floral paradise is a land where honored dead are reborn and flutter as birds and butterflies meant to feed off the beauty and divine vitality of flowers.

Nevertheless, the influence of Flower World for the Aztec was not limited to dance and song. The Florentine Codex is a 16th-century ethnographic research study of Mesoamerica by the Franciscan friar Bernardino de Sahagun, and chronicles tales of warriors who would transform into precious birds and butterflies (Sahagun 2012). These tales largely parallel those of warriors whose soul resides in a floral paradise where they would consume honey of the beautiful sweet flowers in the Spirit Land encapsulated by sun, music, and luminous hues.

The Yaqui Deer songs

The Yaqui or Yoemem—as they refer to themselves—are a Uto-Aztecan speaking indigenous group primarily located in the Valley of Rio Yaqui in the Northern Mexican State of Sonora. Due to colonial persecution and subsequent diaspora of the Yaqui, these communities would come to inhabit the neighboring states of Chihuahua (east of Sonora), Sinaloa, and Durango (both south of Chihuahua), with communities also present in the southwestern United States. Survivors of persecution and efforts of extermination, the Yoemem are an example of permanence, much like the ancient verbal art of the Yaqui Deer Dance.

The beautiful ritualistic Deer Dance is known for being a celebration of life, death, and spiritual continuance. Yaqui Deer songs are a traditional form of Yaqui songs known for conventionality in structure, diction, thematic, and mode of performance. All actions taken by the deer dancer have a parallel in the Yaqui *sea ania*, or "Flower World." (Evers and Molina 2014)

For the Yoemem Flower World is described to be associated with spiritual places like *yo ania* or the "enchanted world" which is the home of the prototypical deer hunter (Hays-Gilpin and Hill 2008). In their verses, we find descriptions of an ethereal Flower World with *sewam* or "flowers" as anything good. A flower is anything beautiful, and anything that is influenced by *sea ania* is a *sewam*.

It is here where we get another representation of Flower World as a Spirit Land and paradise characterized for its vibrancy and beauty. Flower World as the ancestral resting place for Aztec warriors parallels the prototypical deer hunter, which inhabits *sea ania* and associates "the hunt" with the spirit world.

Hopi and the Katsina

The Hopi are a Native American tribe who currently reside in Northeastern Arizona and are considered one of the Pueblos of the American Southwest along with the Ancestral Puebloan, and the Zuni. Amongst these groups, there is an overlap in their religion as it is concerned with agricultural fertility, pertaining to maize and rain. Among the Hopi, the *katsinam* are the embodiment of the rain spirits that closely relate to the concept of "breath soul" and the Flower World Complex (Taube 2001).

The *katsinam* are Hopi spirit messengers who send prayers for rain and a bountiful harvest. The *katsinam* appears among the Hopi people in physical form singing and dancing for ceremonies. These are the masked portrayals of the *Katsina* cloud spirit and are notable for their portrayed breath soul frequently emerging from its mouth during spring and summer dances. Throughout these performances, the *katsinam* carry flower effigies that exhibit the same breath cord which hangs from the center of the flower (Taube 2004).

Furthermore, the *Katsina* masks have ears in the form of blossoms, which exhale the breath plume. As flowers relate to Hopi ancestors and the breath spirit, the flower effigy's breath cord is a symbolic depiction of soul essence. Moreover, the cyclical rising from the underworld into the sky is comparable with the cyclical rebirth and celestial ascension, which are vital thematic of the floral paradise.

The Classic Maya and Flower Mountain

The Maya are perhaps one of the most well-understood and best-studied cultures of Mesoamerica. Geographically located throughout the southern Mexican states of Yucatán, Quintana Roo, Campeche, Tabasco, and Chiapas and southward through Guatemala, Belize, Honduras, and El Salvador, the Maya civilization are iconic in their mythology, art styles, and

artistic renditions. While the Maya are not part of groups that comprise the Uto-Aztecan speech community, there is overlapping evidence of Flower World elements throughout Maya art, pottery, and architectural works.

In contemporary Yucatec belief, the end of present-day creation is thought to be a gentle land: a place of beautiful and fragrant flowers and plants. Comparably, among the contemporary groups of the Tzotzil Maya of Highland Chiapas, a creation myth describing the newly born sun rising in celestial paradise is evidence of the documented belief of a heavenly, solar paradise. (Taube 2004)

These beliefs held by modern-day Maya communities parallel those described by the Aztec in colonial times. Both the Aztec and contemporary Maya reference a beautiful, colorful, and fragrant land after death in which ancestors reside. It is this description of a solar paradise, which is wholly a creation of New World civilizations (Mesoamerica and American Southwest) and apparent ancient ones at that.

Among the Maya, the breath soul's concept is widespread as it relates to scents, the aromatics of flowers and copal, and the ethereal qualities of music that are carried by air and wind. Flowers and breath are depicted in Maya iconography by a flower or carved jade placed at the tip of the nose or face and are portrayed as living entities. Blossoms and wind signs similar to those of breathe ornate Maya musical instruments. (Taube, 2004)

However, the best-established evidence of the Flower World complex amongst the Maya is the continuous appearance of Flower Mountain throughout the archaeological record. Flower Mountain appears in a vast array of Maya art dating back to the Late Pre-Classic, establishing itself as an ancient belief. Flower Mountain can be described as the mountain of the dawning

sun—a dwelling place of ancestors and "the means by which they and celestial gods ascend into the sky" (Taube 2004, 81).

The excavations at the site of San Bartolo in Guatemala uncovered a remarkable Late Pre-classic Maya scene of Flower Mountain as one of the murals found at the interior of the north wall depicts a scene of emergence. In the mural, a group of figures are pictured atop a plumed serpent emerging—or exhaled—out of a zoomorphic mountain covered with flowers (Saturno et al. 2005). Out of the serpent's snout are visible breath blossoms that deem the plumed serpent a creature of both breath and wind. The figures in the scene include the Maya maize god and his assistants who take tamales and a water gourd out of the cave of Flower Mountain (Saturno et al. 2005).

The mural at San Bartolo depicts an early myth of emergence with mythical beings, carrying food and water—elements of substance and life—out of a mythical Flower Mountain cave. The inclusion of the plumed serpent, a creature representative of breath and wind as a ground line between supernatural beings, is not an isolated incident. It is to accentuate the scene's divinity further as this embodiment of exhalation of the mountain cave provides the Maya with sustenance for earthly life.

Furthermore, the scene at San Bartolo is widespread and reminiscent of the imagery present at other sites like Tulum. Here, structure 16 portrays deities atop plume serpents with blossoms on their bodies and flowers exhaled from their snouts (Taube 2010). Similarly, at the Temple of Quetzalcoatl in Teotihuacan, feathered serpents are portrayed as emergent from blossoms related to the recurring motif of plumed serpents as divine flowery roads (Taube 2010).

Cultural Origins in Antiquity

In Jane Hill's 1992 article, she provides several scenarios to account for the widespread distribution of floral paradise among the ancient peoples of the American Southwest and Mesoamerica. Hill presents three main theories of dispersion of the complex throughout the New World. These theories include a method of dispersion from north-to-south, south-to-north, and by ancestral commonality.

The theory of conceptualization of the Flower World Complex in the American Southwest is one Hill does not lend much credence to. Supported in her assertion by a lack of evidence in the archaeological record, it is improbable that this ancient floral paradise originated in the north and dispersed south into Mesoamerica and Eastern Maya regions. Conversely, as Hill posits, it can be hypothesized that the complex was introduced into the American Southwest in the 16th century by Christian missionaries who used a Christianized version of the Aztec Flower World to advance evangelization (Hill 1992). Nevertheless, evidence found in the Southwestern archaeological record discredits this theory.

As Hays-Gilpin and Hill in a later publication explain, the Flower World complex in the American southwest dates back to A.D 1054-1116 with a cache of ritual regalia, found at a Chacoan great house. This cache is considered the first evidence of Flower World in the American southwest to be firmly dated (2008, 413). Furthermore, kiva murals thought to date back to the 15th and 16th centuries depicted Flower World ideologies at the Hopi sites of Awarovi and Kawasaki-a (Hays-Gilpin and Hill 2008).

While the dispersion of the Flower World complex in the American Southwest predates what was initially believed by Hill, I agree with her assertion that it is highly unlikely the complex originated from this geological region and dispersed south. Instead, Flower World can

be understood as originating amongst an ancient Uto-Aztecan speech community, which then spread its cultural patrimony into more distant communities. (Hill 1992)

Alternatively, it is more promising to consider dispersion in which the conceptualization of Flower World took place further south than previously believed in Mesoamerica. This postulation implies that the conceptualizations of flowers were to diffuse into an Old Uto-Aztecan community alongside agriculture. There is substantial evidence to support such a claim.

Scholars widely regard the Olmec as one of the earliest complex cultures in Mesoamerica. This *Cultura Madre*—or Mother Culture, inhabited the fertile southern Veracruz and neighboring Tabasco region of modern-day Mexico. Dating back to the Early and Middle Formative periods, the Olmec developed a complex religious system based on maize, rain, and symbology of agricultural fertility. According to Karl Taube, the Olmec were "a cult intentionally disseminated to integrate distant peoples into the Olmec economic network," and while it is likely that the Olmec never expanded their direct network beyond Guerrero, the themes and ancient agricultural complex they established permeated Mesoamerican and Puebloan beliefs and ceremonial practices (2010, 76).

One of the overlapping thematics is the curing to indicate breath in Olmec and subsequent Maya iconography. By the Middle formative, these double-volutes were a representation of the breath-like aroma of flowers. Furthermore, floral blossoms are depicted in an incised celt, thought to have originated from Chalcatzingo while earspools from La Venta depict floral breath elements (Taube 2010). These are reminiscent of the earspools found in Hopi *Katsina* masks with ears as blossoms which exhale the breath plume. Furthermore, these flowers, which are reminiscent of caves and kivas, evoke Flower Mountain parallels.

Legacy in Modernity

While there is still scholarly debate about the origins of the Flower World complex, its impacts throughout Mesoamerica and the American Southwest is evident. This complex is ancient in origin and international in its distribution. Nevertheless, upon Spanish conquistadors' arrival in the 16th century, the cultural exchange and trade that became an integral part of Mesoamerican and Southwestern society would be threatened, and the Flower World complex along with it.

In 1521, the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan would fall to Hernan Cortes after a 93 day siege, aided by disease, native alliances, and superior weaponry. The Aztec empire collapsed as Spain began to consolidate power and control over what would become New Spain. In their efforts to evangelize the native groups they conquered, Catholic texts were transcribed into Nahuatl, and as years passed and evangelization proved successful amongst the Mexica, a convergence between native and Christian mythologies occurred.

(4) Canto de mujeres acerca de la resurreccion de Nuestro Señor (Leon-Portillo 2011, 611)

Como ajorcas con cascabeles,
Vienen resonando tus cantos, señor nuestro.
Entonemoslos,
Que con ellos se alegre nuestra alma,
En tu lugar de lluvia, San Francisco.
Que haya alegría,
Hemos llegado al lugar de gran alegría.

Los brotes de las matas preciosas
Vienen surgiendo.
Las espigas doradas se dividen.
Comámoslas,
Que con ellas se alegre nuestra alma,
En tu lugar de lluvia, San Francisco.
Que haya alegría,
Hemos llegado al lugar de gran alegría.

Ballads of women about the resurrection of Our Lord

Like an anklet with rattles,
Your songs are echoing, our lord
Let us join,
Because with them our soul is overjoyed
At your storm, San Francisco.
Let there be joy
We have reached the land of joy

The sprouts of precious plants
Are blossoming.
The golden spikes are dividing,
Let us eat it,
Because with them our soul is overjoyed
At your storm, San Francisco.
Let there be joy
We have reached the land of joy

(5) Cantar 43r (Leon-Portillo 2011, 617)

Qué se dé principio aquí,
Que se levante,
Ya hemos llegado a la Pascua,
Ha llegado Dios,
El Redentor, a la tierra,
Aquí, ya en verdad.

Flores de colores de mazorca tierna
Se agitan con variados matices,
Son tus flores.
Sobre nosotros esparcen.
Que con ellas haya atavío,
Vosotras, hermanas menores,
Aquí, en la tierra
Cada cosa tiene su lugar

Ballad 43r

Let it begin here,
Let him rise amongst us,
It is finally Easter,
God has finally arrived,
He, redeemer of earth,
Here, finally truly here.

Flowers the color of tender cob
Get agitated with varying hue,
They are your flowers.
Amongst us they spread.
With them there are attires,
Us, little sisters,
Here, on earth
Everything has its place.

In these Aztec cantares, while the songs still have reoccurring themes of flowers and the floral conception of rebirth, the references to Christianity are explicit. These songs are a result of the evangelization of the Aztec by Spanish conquistadores and missionaries; therefore, the mention of Christian figures like God, Jesus Christ, and San Francisco is no accident. The assertion by Bierhornst (2011) that many of the Aztec songs deal with reasserting old native war ethic in the face of Christian values is correct, making it clear that cantares of a pre-colonial Aztec population would be widely different from those that remain. When these Christian elements are contrasted with beliefs of life, death, rebirth, and beauty of the Flower World complex, there are significant overlaps that may help to explain their approval by the Spanish. After all, religious mythical places like the "Garden of Eden" serve as a parallel to the Aztec Spirit Land, where the landscape is luscious, and all that exists within it is good and beautiful.

The Crowned Nuns

Even though Native women were prohibited from becoming nuns and joining New Spain's convents until 1724, their presence at these convents as servants would allow these

Amerindian women to contribute to the material production and cultural preservation of Mesoamerica. While many of the existing material remains that date back to the colonial rule sought to destroy native heritage and replace it with Catholic themes and symbolism, there is an exquisite and unique combination of indigenous and Christian practices in coexistence. Such a manifestation of this cultural transfusion is the colonial portraits of *monjas coronadas*—or crowned nuns. (Cordova 2011)

The term originates after the New Spanish funerary portraits of deceased New Spanish nuns depicted with immense floral crowns and floral staff. The New Spain portraits contrasted Spanish works of women in a high societal rank like abbesses, convent founders, and royal women pictured with simple wreaths and palm fronds. Conversely, the portraits of the nuns of New Spain had elaborate religious figurines, birds, and butterflies amidst their floral crown. (Cordova 2011)

There are various overlaps with the stylization of flowers for the crowned nuns with Flower World elements and the history of the native women who stylized them. These elements are emblematically Mesoamerican as they relate to sun, heat, music, and luminous colors that are missing from Spanish and South American nun portraits. Instead, the portraits of the crowned nuns of Mesoamerica conjure images of Aztec warriors who, upon death, metamorphosed into precious birds and butterflies. They allude to an afterlife like that of the Maya, whose Flower Mountain symbology became a representation of life force and the afterworld. The implementation of the chromaticity of Flower World into New Spain mainstream traditions indicates the permanence of the cult of life, and beauty largely mirrors the Christian doctrine of a paradisiacal afterlife. This apparent correspondence of both native and Christian elements

guaranteed the survival of Mesoamerican beliefs and traditions into modernity and their incorporation into popular culture.

El Día de Los Muertos

The Day of the Dead is a tradition that originated in Mexico and expanded throughout various Latin American countries. The festivity is celebrated on November 2nd and is a day for the living to celebrate the lives of their deceased ancestors. The Mexican custom is well known for combining indigenous Aztec ritual elements with those of Catholicism.

Moreover, nowhere is this better exemplified than in the "Altar de Muertos." These personal altars are set up in honor of passed family members and are the dead's pathway to return to the land of the living from the land of the dead. In contemporary Mexico, a standard altar is decorated with marigolds, salt, candles, incense (copan, which was also of Maya use), water, food, Pan de Muerto or Bread of the Dead, sugar skulls (perhaps related to tzompantli), and a guide dog (as in Aztec tradition).

Marigolds are emblematic of the Day of the Dead celebration. In contemporary lore, the flower is used for its odor to attract the ancestral spirits to the altar. Moreover, its vibrant yellow hue helps guide spirits home and reflect the golden tone of the sun in its honor.

While not many of those who celebrated the Day of the Dead are aware of the link between Marigolds and the Flower World complex, its association with Aztec mythology is undeniable. The use of Marigolds in ancestral altars evokes ancient chromatic imagery of civilizations' past. Spirit breath, floral aroma, and beautification of a landscape call upon spiritual experiences of antiquity, as for a day, mortal reality is transformed into a golden paradise.

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