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Institut für Religion
Mai 2005

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INTRODUCTION

Mexico is one of the countries in the Latin American region that, in spite of the impact of the globalizing forces that characterize modern times, still harbours traditions and cultural values that its inhabitants refuse to let die. In the region of Xochimilco which is located in the south of Mexico City, this phenomenon is a prominent feature, and this is the reason why the zone has been chosen for the study of the importance of cultural indicators in the definition of its sustainability.

The research project that the authors have been furthering for more than five years, has the general objective of evaluating the sustainability of the traditional agricultural practice which is carried out in the zone, best known as the "chinampa". The concept of the "chinampa" has been equiparated with that of a "floating garden", even though in fact, the majority of the chinampas that still exist in Xochimilco are neither floating nor gardens in the strict sense. The initial approach to the problem of evaluating the sustainability of the chinampa was, because of this, that of recopiling data that

would allow the detailed description of this special agrosystem; this labour was complemented with that of registering economic and social indicators, in order to achieve a sociological interpretation of the productive process.

In the course of these activities, it was almost inevitable to come into contact with the rich and colorful traditions that are still followed in the zone. The anthropological methodology of participant observation rendered the unique opportunity of documenting the salient features of the popular religiosity of the people of Xochimilco and of reconstructing the collective imaginarius shared by the social group.

In this paper we present some of the most important results of this research. We highlight the role played by the process of reciprocity in the social nets that are established between the people of the zone; we examine the impact on everyday life of the divine figures worshipped; we describe rituals and festivities, as well as the emotional responses they elicit; and we finally examine the importance of considering this cultural indicators in the evaluation of the sustainability of the zone.

Among the information we offer, special mention deserve the descriptions and interpretations of the cult associated with the Holy Child, our Lady of Sorrows, and our Lord of Chalma. Taken together, all the data allow the integrative analysis of the zone and its people and, most saliently, the analysis of the very important role played by the practices of popular religiosity as a mechanism that maintains social cohesion and group identity.

TEXT

In the agenda of modern religious studies, the field of popular religiosity constitutes one of the greatest research challenges of our time. The role of religion in social integration has always been a subject of interest for different kinds of intellectuals. Among them, Durkheim, Marx and Weber, are some of the authors that have analyzed the impact of religion on society, offering, each one of them, a different and unique view on the particular.

In the latinamerican context, the religious dimension in the heart of the people and the nations, as well as its collective expressions¹, is of great importance due to the historical development of established religion, mainly catholicism, in this area of the world. The concept of "sincretism" explains the process by whose means different religions merge in a given religious space; this process is the one that time and again happened in Latin America, where the human groups that existed before the arrival of the spanish conquerors were rich in deep religiosity and religious tradition.

Popular religiosity on the zone of Xochimilco is closely related to the one known as the "collective imaginariu", which understood in the most simple manner is a shared world view².

Xochimilco is a semiurban zone on the south of Mexico City, and it is a place where tradition is still strongly followed. The people of Xochimilco, even when the majority confess to being catholic, still keep deeply rooted indian prehispanic habits that make the expression of their religious feeling unique and surprising.

¹ Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments. 2001. "Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy: Principles and Guidelines": Vatican City.
http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccdds/documents/rc_con_ccdds_doc_2...

² Hackney, C.H. y G.S. Sanders. 2003. Religiosity and mental health: a meta-analysis of recent studies. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 42(1): 43-55.

Xochimilco is the site of origin of the traditional agrosystem known as the "chinampa". These so-called "floating gardens" are the extraordinary way in which the xochimilcans many years ago.

Modern chinampas are no longer "floating"; practically all of them are now an identifiable site within the xochimilcan landscape. On them, many chinamperos still apply the traditional practices which have been taught from one generation to the other.

This agrosystem is intensive as the most important crops are of vegetables and flowers that have cycles of three to four months, rendering the chinampas a system where one can obtain three to four crops per year. The modern chinamperos sometimes seek the aid of specialized agricultural machinery.

In registering this type of process, we did not only analyze the biological-agronomical-ecological issues, but being our research group really interdisciplinary, we explored too the human dimension, this from the anthropological and sociological perspectives. We consolidated the very different types of data that we obtained by constructing our reference frame from the standpoint of the concept of sustainability.

In what our research work respects, by framing our diverse endeavours in the context of the concept of sustainability, we soon came to regard our data as different types of sustainability indicators. As in many other research experiences we found we were dealing with ecological, economic, social and institutional indicators, but we soon came to the novel conclusion that was just beginning to be offered by other researchers, in the sense that there exists yet another type of indicators which is of the utmost importance, and which is the category of "cultural indicators"³.

³ <http://www.marion.sa.gov.au/Web/webmar.nsf/Lookup/Cultural+Sustainability>

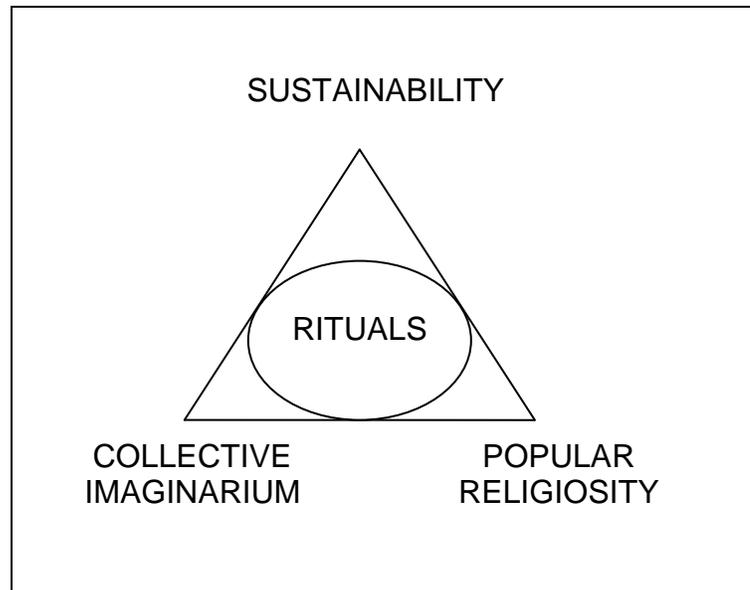
What we and others are proposing at the present moment is that sustainability is not only a matter of environmental, social and economic issues, but that it is too a matter a culture^{4,5}. In such a way, "cultural sustainability" must be assessed when doing sustainability evaluation, understanding by "cultural sustainability", in the broadest sense, our values and aspirations, our traditions and shared memories, the ways in which we develop, receive and transmit all these, and the ways of life that these processes favour⁶.

By assuming this position, our research, from the initial ecological viewpoint, shifted through the social and economic to the cultural arena, and in this manner we came to be confronted with the sphere of the collective imaginarium of the people of Xochimilco, with the emotive side of needs and wants that in this case encompasses the essence of the religious, not in the institutional sense, but in the open sense of the feeling of the people towards the presence of the divine. In this process, we came face to face too with the ritualistic aspects of everyday life in the zone, and have arrived at the conclusion that in social groups such as the one we work with, sustainability is closely dependent both on popular religiosity and the collective imaginarium, being the cohesive element between this factors, the rituals performed both individually as well as collectively. This idea can be represented by means of the following scheme:

⁴ Ibidem.

⁵ Stephan-Otto, E. y A. Zlotnik Espinosa. 2001. "La Chinampa: Evaluación y Sustentabilidad". Patronato del Parque Ecológico de Xochimilco, A.C. – Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana. México.

⁶ <http://www.marion.sa.gov.au/Web/webmar.nsf/Lookup/Cultural+Sustainability>



The zone is reputed of having more religious festivities than days of the year; the truth is that there are many very important festivities that the whole zone celebrates, and that each "barrio", which is a small portion of the whole, has its own particular festivities. The religious images that are venerated, mainly different advocations of the Holy Child, the Virgin and Christ, have their own very personal agenda that, in fact, practically has no leisure day.

So, while visiting different houses in the zone, in the marketplace, in the streets, we soon came into contact with the practices of the popular religiosity of the people of Xochimilco. The phenomenon is rich in emotivity. Nevertheless, and somewhat surprisingly, we did not need to give up our other research interests related with the sustainability issue because we came to be aware that the "four pillars of sustainability" (the ecological, the social, the economic, and the cultural), as they are sometimes called⁷,

⁷<http://www.marion.sa.gov.au/Web/webmar.nsf/Lookup/Cultural+Sustainability>

intermingle in a most intricate form. In such a way, one of the processes that is most salient in the zone is that of the cultivation in the chinampas of the products that characterize certain festivities. For example, the famous "romeritos" are cultivated specially for the festivities of Lent and Christmas, and in this manner the ritual not only includes the confection of the special meals, but begins in the chinampas, with the decision to cultivate the special crops.

Our investigation approach has consisted mainly on following the different religious festivities in the zone; this of course has been complemented with visits to the chinampas and to the homes of different informants, as well as the marketplace which is special because of the kind of interactions that are established in such a place. By doing this, we have been able to describe the main features of these festivities and, in general, of the ways of life of the zone, and we have analyzed too their importance from the sociological perspective.

Much is what we could say about the popular religiosity of Xochimilco, but I will mention only some of the most colorful examples. The first of them refers to the Holy Children venerated in the zone. The image of the Holy Child, which is the representation of Jesus in his infancy, is much venerated throughout Mexico. The signs of love and devotion that the people of the zone show towards their Holy Children, are really very much special. The most famous of the images is the Niño pan or the Child of the People. The Niño pan is considered about 500 years old and he is carved in wood. Almost as old as the Niño pan is the Holy Child of Belem, which is similar in features to the Niño pan, but of smaller size. Both children are reputed of being extraordinarily miraculous; many stories are told of how they have helped people, as well as of their antics. This because, being children, they are playful and sometimes mischievous, and they like to play with their

toys, taste the food and candy they are offered, and sometimes wander in search of the people that are in need and have to be helped.

More recent are the Sleeping Child of Xaltocan and the Holy Child of the barrio de San Juan. These children were bought by people of the barrios of Xaltocan and San Juan during the second part of the twentieth century, and were afterwards donated to the barrios in order to be given into stewardship ("mayordomía"). The mayordomía is a kind of organization in which the image is given in custody for a year to a family that guards him. The concept of the "mayordomos", usually wife and husband, is of the people that ask to have the image in their house in order to serve him. This means that they clothe him, care for him, "feed" him, everything that, in this case, would be done exactly in the same way for a real living child, but certainly with more commitment and love, because the child in question is holy.

Faced with this extraordinary ritual that is endless, many outsiders are at first enormously surprised by it. In the mayordomía organization many people participate, both men and women. The love bestowed on the image transcends the generic barrier, as even the men sometimes weep openly and unashamedly in the presence of the Holy Child. In the case of the Niño pan, which is the recipient of the most spectacular mayordomía, the image visits almost every day a different house in the zone. These visits are always a great happening and the feasts that are prepared for the image are very grand.

In a very similar way, the image of our Lady of the Sorrows is very much venerated in Xochimilco, and in this case the interesting thing is that even when the patron image is at the sanctuary at Xaltocan, each barrio has its own image, which lives with the people who keep mayordomías for them too. The Virgin is clothed, fed, taken out on different processions and pilgrimages and, given the circumstance that each barrio has

its own image, one can sometimes find two or three of the "little sisters" as the people call them, being carried together along the streets of the zone.

The great festivities for our Lady of Sorrows are in february; in this month, on Groundhog Day, which in Mexico is denominated the "Candelaria" because the candles are blessed at the temple, the mayordomías of the Holy Children change each year. Two to three weeks later, the festivities for the Virgin begin and take place for a whole week.

As I have already indicated, much is what can be said about the popular religiosity of Xochimilco, but everything could be quite senseless if I wouldn't point out the deep desire of almost every inhabitant of the zone for the preservation of the many traditions this religiosity encompasses. As an example of this phenomenon, I can narrate the experience of my research team in the course of the field work carried out to record much of the information I have already presented.

Not everything is tradition in Xochimilco. Many of the inhabitants of the zone are at present deeply immersed in the painful process of renouncing the forms of life they have kept for years, and of appropriating the global culture which nowadays spreads throughout the world. Because of this, many of the traditional practices of the chinampas are being abandoned and commercial greenhouses are appearing in their place. In some cases, the aim is to obtain certified organic products for the export markets; the importance of local trade is underrated, and the ambition is to be competitive at the global scale. In a similar manner, the value of agriculture is no longer accepted, and the land is coveted from the standpoint of its commercial value; this is the reason why many families are selling their chinampas for the construction of houses, and the reason why in the zone conflict appears as more and more external invaders settle in the zone almost every day.

All this, and other processes that pervert the traditional ways of life, are now a reality in Xochimilco, being this the reason why institutions as the Ecological Park are so important in the dynamics of the zone. Because of this, the majority of my managerial decisions tend to favor tradition over modernity. The gardeners that work at the park are all people of the zone, and the traditional knowledge of many of the chinamperos has been recuperated in the demonstrative chinampa that the park harbours. My research team has worked closely with many of the gardeners of the park, recording their sayings, their agricultural practices, their opinions of the site and of the world we actually live in. This, nevertheless, has not been the only activities carried out by my fellow teachers and students. In the course of our visits to the zone, we had the opportunity of coming in close contact with the family that during the years 2004-2005 fostered in their home the Holy Child of Belem. Deep was our emotion when the Holy Child's mayordoma, Mrs. Guadalupe Torres née Jiménez, offered a visit of the sacred image to the Ecological Park. This first event took place on March, 2004, and we were extremely fortunate to receive the visit of the Holy Child once more on January, 2005.

This visits were planned on the basis of making happy the Holy Child with everything that can make happy a real infant: flowers, ballons, music, candy, cake, toys, etc. We were fortunate enough to make contact with a priest that on both occasions offered mass for the image in the park's facilities. The image visited different zones of the park, that is quite big, and both festivities were of great joy and expectation. The offering of such visits is not something common among the people of Xochimilco, which tend to be jealous of their images, as they are very valuable possessions. Nevertheless, as I have said, the park has a very special significance and, due to the deep desire of many of the

xochimilcans for the preservation the zone's tradition of which I have talked already, we had the luck to twice receive the Holy Child.

The richness of these experiences make it almost superfluous to point out that even when we have been able to recopilate a lot of information that is really very interesting, our work has still very much to find out and to interpretate. We are conscious, nevertheless, that the effort so far carried out has been fruitful and has contributed to the preservation of the collective imaginarium of the people of Xochimilco. Unwelcome changes are taking place on the zone, many of them engined by globalizing pressures; in this context, our research is still young and we hope we may be able to continue with it for the benefit not only of the local people, but also to offer to the world's academic community as well as to the decision makers at the diverse political levels, a model of how to understand and assess sustainability from an integrative point of view.

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