



“Flower Song Convocation” and *Songs of Mexico*. The present poem comes from a codex known as *Cantares Mexicanos*, the largest collection of Mesoamerican verse extant. It consists of 85 folios on which 91 songs were compiled in Nahuatl somewhere around 1585, probably by native Mexican nobles under the guidance of Catholic monks. These *cuicatl* or songs range widely in genre, from ecstatic hymns celebrating humanity’s reciprocal relationship with heaven to historical ballads, bawdy satire, and philosophical musings. Glosses abound in a different hand, often trying to spin the mention a native deity into a reference to the Christian god.

Though many of the poems in *Songs of Mexico* are attributed to specific philosopher-kings and singers of pre-Conquest times, there is essentially no outside support to claims of

authorship. However, the text and tradition affirm that poem XVII (often referred to as a *dialogue on flower and song*) is a record of hymns composed and sung at a gathering of Nahua *tlamatinime* or philosopher-poets hosted in the late 15th century by King Tecayehuatzin, ruler of the city-state of Huexotzinco. His intent was to pose a question: what is the value of *xōchicuīcatl* (“flowersong” or “poetry”) to humanity’s spiritual life? Various perspectives are then explored by different voices in the poem, providing a moving overview of the faith of the Nahua peoples just before the Spanish conquest.

Flower Song Convocation

Poem XVII of the Aztec Codex *Songs of Mexico*

Overture

Where have you been, singer?
Bring out your flower drum,
Entwined with quetzal plumes,
Studded with golden blossoms!

You will entertain the princes,
The lordly men, the eagle knights,
The jaguar warrior clans!

Look! He has descended,
There beside the beating drum
Where the singer lives,
Opening the holy hymn
Of the Giver of Life,
Spreading it to the winds.
The bell bird answers him,
Singing as it flits about,
Offering up flowers--
Let those be our blooms!

How do I hear the words
That are sung by Him,
The Giver of Life? Oh!
In that echo, that echo:
The bell bird answers him,
Singing as it flits about,
Offering up flowers--
Let those be our blooms!

Jade rains down around us
Like precious bits of hail:
Thus Ayocuan¹ and Cuetzpal²
Once spoke Your word.

¹ Prince of Tecamachalco, a Chichimec kingdom conquered by the Aztec Triple Alliance in the late 15th century

² Captain of the Otomi people.

Yes, those lords did truly know
The Giver of Life.

Thus he comes,
Composing hymns,
That glorious prince,
Festooned with precious bangles,
Bringing sweet joy to our god.
Who knows whether, perhaps,
The Giver of Life will accept?
Who knows whether, perhaps,
Truth can exist on this earth?

Song of Tecayehuatzin

TECAYEHUATZIN³: Briefly, for a while,
Even just a moment,
Let me borrow them:
Emeralds, bracelets,
Mighty lords.
I braid the nobility
Into flowery wreaths,
Enveloping them
With my melody
Here beside the drums.

I, King Tecayehuatzin,
Still am gracious host
Here in Huexotzinco.
Like jades and emeralds
I gather those lords.
I braid the nobility
Into flowery wreaths,
Enveloping them
With my melody
Here beside the drums.

³ King of Huexotzinco and host of the convocation.

CHORUS⁴: From heaven's heart
 Blessed blooms
 And holy hymns
 Coming spinning down,
 Shattering rage,
 Shattering rue.
 Oh! He sings,
 The Chichimec lord
 Tecayehuatzin--
 Rejoice in that tune!

TECAYEHUATZIN: Like precious popcorn flowers
 My comrades begin trembling,
 Weaving ermine morning glories
 Into the very weft of their being,
 Marching onward and Beyond
 As they inhale the sweet smoke
 Of gorgeous angel's hair blossoms.

 A golden bell bird's chiming call:
 Such is your exquisite melody,
 And you lift that aching beauty
 Oh! there in that flowery land.
 Perched upon those blooming boughs,
 You sound the eternal clarion.

 So perhaps you are the ibis of god
 And perhaps you are the chosen king,
 First among all who regard the dark,
 Awaiting the dawn...
 Holy singers, every one.

CHORUS: Though my heart desires
 Shield flowers,
 Blossoms from god,
 What can my heart
 Devise on its own?

⁴ Sections of the poem have never been textually or traditionally attributed to any of the singers present. Other translators have assigned them to Tecayehuatzin, but they are clearly a separate voice. I have opted for putting them in the mouth of an anonymous chorus (perhaps of lesser court dignitaries or singers).

In vain have we come,
In vain we set foot
On this earth.

Thus will I leave,
A withered bloom,
My glory come to naught,
My name erased
From the land itself.
What can my heart
Devise on its own?
In vain have we come,
In vain we set foot
On this earth.

Song of Ayocuan and Aquiauhtzin

AYOCUAN: Let us enjoy ourselves, my friends,
Exchange warm embraces here and now.
For the moment we live on the flowered earth
Where no one can silence the eternal poem
That flows from the abode of the Giver of Life.

A fleeting moment on this earth...
It cannot be likewise in that Unknowable Realm.
Does happiness or friendship exist there Beyond?
No. Only here. The sole chance for connection is now.

CHORUS: I have heard a song!
I hear him sound his conch,
That flowered mooring line,
King Ayocuan!

He answers you!
Lord, he answers you
From within the house of flowers--
It is Aquiauhtzin,
Nobleman of Ayapanco!

AQUIAUHTZIN: Where do you dwell, my God,
Source and bane of my existence?
I seek you constantly,
A poet suffering in your absence,
Yearning to delight you.

Fragrant white flowers—
Sweet words rain down
Like pale precious blooms
In the summer home of this your scribe,
Yearning to delight you.

Song of Camaxochitl and Cuauhtencoxtli

CHORUS: Oh! There in Tlaxcala
They chant to the thrum
Of jade stone gongs
Beside the beating drums.
Herbal bliss from tipsy blooms—
Xicontecatl, King of Tizatlan,
And Camaxochitl
Revel in those melodies.
With flowers they await
The word of our god.

CAMAXOCHITL⁵: Oh! Your home is everywhere, Giver of Life—
This world Your mat, Your seat of power!
Spun with flowers, the princes croon their prayers.

A forest of flower trees strains heavenward
Beside the drums, Your accustomed place.
Their boughs are laced with quetzal plumes,
Their beautiful blossoms trembling.

Above this gorgeous, glittering wood
The bellbird wings the skies, trilling as it flies—
Answering the Master's holy hymn,
Numbing eagles and jaguars with bliss.

⁵ "Flowery speaker." A Tlaxcallan nobleman.

CHORUS: Flowers have been scattered:
 Let the dance begin, my friends,
 Yonder by the beating drums.
 All of them await His presence—
 Anguish rules our hearts.

 Hark! He comes...Creation's Lord...
 Dropping down from heaven's bourn,
 Singing as he nears—
 Round about, the unseen conches
 Echo every note.

CUAUHTENCOZTLI⁶: I, Cuauhtencoztli, am tormented:
 Our flowered drums
 Are garlanded with grief.
 Is Man truly this way?
 Is our song no longer real?
 Why should we stand?
 Why even be born?
 There Beyond we live...
 There Beyond we exist!
 You are suffering, friend—
 Let me bear you across,
 Then rise there Beyond!

Song of Motenehuatzin

CHORUS: "I just sit and sing alone."
 What are you saying, friends?
 He rules here!
 He sings here!

MOTENEHUATZIN⁷: Where the flowered courtyard lies,
 He arrives: Coyolchiuhqui, a noble.
 He comes wailing a bitter dirge.

⁶ "Yellow forest," an otherwise unknown poet.

⁷ "The celebrated one," an otherwise unknown poet.

In the house of spring
There are no peaceful blooms
No soothing melodies—
Sounds of conflict everywhere arise.

Yes, with anguished struggle,
Grieving all the while,
We...ah! we somehow live.
I, Motenehuatzin,
Weave laments into nobles' souls,
Into the warp and weft of lordship,
Of royalty, of Xayacamach,
Prince Tepolohuatl.

All of us live
In the house of spring.
There are no peaceful blooms
No soothing melodies—
Sounds of conflict everywhere arise.

Song of Monencauhtzin

CHORUS: I catch snatches of a song:
I glimpse him in spring,
Walking by the light of dawn
Along the bloom-dotted water,
Addressing as he strolls
The racket-tailed motmots,
The blue grosbeaks,
The roseate spoonbills.
Behold—Prince Monencauhtzin!

MONENCAUHTZIN⁸: O, Comrades! Who are those fellows who sit
In god's motmot-blue house of cocoa blooms?
Come harvest these gorgeous fields!
Let me watch as they make those jade flutes laugh,
As they greet one another with flowery log drums.

⁸ "The lazy one," an otherwise unknown poet.

It may be those men are princes or lords,
Beating and shaking their blue-green drums
At the heart of the sweat-lodge during *temazcal*.

CHORUS: Listen closely! He twitters and trills
On the branches of the Flower Tree.
The golden flower bells
And maraca-thrum hummingbird
Are shaking out a rhythm...
It's the ibis—Prince Monencauhtzin!

Like fans of ruddy oriole plumes
He opens wide his wings
And soars to the place
Of the flowery drums.

MONENCAUHTZIN: Higher and higher the flowers strain
Till they blossom broadly by Lifegiver's side.
You call down the blessed bird of god
And he echoes you.

What riches you have!
So many songs!
You bring bliss to all
And the flowers stir.

I journey everywhere,
And each place I visit
I croon these melodies,
For I am a singer.

Precious popcorn blooms
Shower down
In the flowery courtyard,
Within the butterfly house.

Simply everything comes from there
Where the flowers stand eternal,
Dizzying blooms that whirl the filth
From the human heart.

They come dashing petals to the ground,
Shaking out those twisted, blissful buds.

Song of Xayacamachan

CHORUS: He often approaches that flowery throne
In Your home within the House of Holy Writ.
He sings, he trills, does Xayacamach,
While cocoa blooms intoxicate his heart.

A true and godly hymn now thundering swells—
Tlapalteuccitzin⁹ intones his melody.
His flowers bring such delight,
Cocoa blooms that scatter petals as they fall.

XAYACAMACHAN¹⁰: O comrades, how I have searched for you!
I crossed every field, and now here you are!
Keep on rejoicing and telling your tales...
I have arrived! Your comrade, your friend.

Or am I simply polluting this garden
With horseweed pompons, snakewood florets?
Is that how I am, easily blown apart by the wind?
The very thought grieves me, my friends.

Who am I? I soar from place to place, composing—
I flower-sing melodic butterflies...
Let my passions emerge!
Let my heart perceive!

Finally I drop to earth. From above I come,
Descending like an ibis in spring.
I spread my wings beside the flowery drums—
My song swells and rushes across the land.

CHORUS: So I, too, ferry flowers—
I travel among these songs,
Cultivating, watering them

⁹ "Red shell," possibly an epithet of Xayacamachan.

¹⁰ Ruler of Tizatlan, a Tlaxcallan city-state.

With my precious jug,
Tethered by golden cords to me,
Your poor friend.

I guard the crops,
I, your poor friend.
With flower-dyed corn husks
I thatch this bloom-harvest shack—
Thus I find contentment
In god's innumerable fields.

XAYACAMACHAN: Rejoice with all your might,
shattered jewels and blooms!
He is nonetheless king!
Will we ever come to live
A second time?
Ah, your heart knows the answer:
Just once do we descend.

God Arrives

HUITZILOPOCHTLI¹¹: I have arrived, alighting in the branches
Of the Flower Tree.
A flowery hummingbird,
I indulge my sense of smell,
Rejoicing at the fragrance.
My mouth is filled
With such sweetness.

THE POETS: Giver of Life:
Flowers in hand,
Heads bowed,
We send you prayers,
We bring you bliss
Beside the flower drums,
Lord, in your palace
On the shore

¹¹ Principal god of the Nahuatl peoples under Aztec (Mexico) rule.

Of the cosmic sea.

The drums have been set aside,
Stored there in the House of Spring.
Your friends now await you—
Those who offer glorious battle,
Those who deal sacrificial death,
Men like Ayocuan: with blossoms
Those princes are sighing.

Siege of Huexotzinco

Envied and hated,
The city of Huexotzinco,
Like some blockaded cactus,
Bristles thick with spears.

Turtle-shell timpani thrum
In your houses, Huexotzinco—
There Tecayehuatzin stands guard,
There Lord Quecehuatl chants
And plays his flute,
Alone in his chambers.

Ah, listen closely, all:
Our father has descended.
In Jaguar house the pounding drums—
Timpani songs come rolling out.

His quetzal cape stretches forth
Like blossoms toward the sun—
Guarded in the House of Holy Writ,
Where city and land and god are kept.

Flaming, flowery arrows fall
Upon your jade-green home.
This golden house of written words—
Your dwelling place, my God.

Closing

Now, dear comrades,
Listen to the dreamsong—
Each spring
The golden, budding maize
Sustains us,
The ibis-red kernels
Bring us life,
And we are bespangled
With the surety
That the hearts of our friends
Still keep the faith.

—translated by David Bowles