

THE VITA-MIGAS OF TEPITO

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***Migas*, now a hearty dish in some Mexico City restaurants, originated as scrap food in Tepito, a barrio of the city. Made of pig bones, stale tacos and stale bread, *migas* have become iconic of Tepito and its people. The residents historically maintained themselves and their neighborhood's viability by rehabilitating discards—appliances, clothing, and food. Surrounded by new upscale residences and under pressure to succumb to urban development, Tepiteños have shown defiance and successfully resist such encroachment. (Barrio, Mexico City, recycling food, appliances, and clothing)**

In the history of Mexico City, the Tepito neighborhood has experienced it all: modest indigenous barrio, miserable colonial enclave, central slum of the City of Palaces, and cultural watering hole of the modern metropolis. Just eight blocks from the UNESCO-anointed Historic City Center, Tepito has always been known as the mess hall of the streets and the wardrobe of the masses, where the poor can buy rehabilitated appliances, and dress and feed themselves without going into debt.

The city has a soft spot for Tepito, and Tepito is one of its emblems: the part stands for certain essential qualities of the whole. The two are united by the survival instincts that arise in response to every urban process, from real estate speculation to the imposition of stigmas. Tepito has learned to recycle stigmas, like the label of criminality, and make them over into a kind of collective charisma. But it goes beyond that. The so-called *barrio bravo* (literally, brave and angry neighborhood) has grown resistant to anti-barrio viruses by maintaining its own ways of organizing work, its own daily rhythms, and even its own urban dialect. The verbal art of the *albur*, a play of double and triple meanings, is its three-dimensional chess played on the run. Conjugating words in irregular ways multiplies their possible meanings and broadcasts them with an attitude. In the agile listener, an ancient awareness is revived.

Tepito is the last stand of spatial practices that were once widespread in Mexico City. In the colonial period, poor neighborhoods all but surrounded the downtown, forming a horseshoe shape that was later pejoratively named the *herradura de tugurios* (horseshoe of slums). Their basic unit was a kind of tenement called a *vecindad*, a large construction organized around a courtyard. During the Mexican Revolution, and through the many economic crises of the twentieth century, low rents and landlord absenteeism allowed people to modify the old *vecindades*.

Subdivided to accommodate many families, these became prodigious, self-employing matrilocalities, niches of possibility for innumerable trades and the workshops of urban artisans. Cooking, child rearing, and crafts of all kinds filled the inner patios and spilled out through the massive front gates. The sidewalks and side streets were ideal for makeshift market stalls. Taken together, the mazes of tented stalls formed the *tianguis*, a removable open air market.

Tepito's fame for repairing used and broken items drew people from all over the growing city who came to shop at its secondhand *tianguis*, called *El Baratillo*, derived from the word for cheap. There you could find the best selection of recycled goods. A small industry was dedicated to taking apart and reassembling small appliances like electric irons. These were supplied by an army of peddlers (*ayateros*) who walked the streets of the city trading cheap pottery for castoffs. Tepito's tailors replaced the collars and cuffs of good used shirts, and specialists called "turners" took apart faded suits, turned the pieces inside out, resealed them, and added buttons so that they looked brand new. Shoes and boots were similarly "turned" to extend their working lives. Entrepreneurs were just as glad to varnish furniture to make it look antique as they were to fix appliances. Given the constant contact with out-of-order junk, and the need to invent techniques for every conceivable kind of material, traditional artisans evolved into industrial-age experts with no engineering education. Their reputation as *chingones*¹ was always at stake; whatever came out of their workshops had to be in perfect working order.

Like the peddlers who roamed the better neighborhoods, there were also *Tepiteños* who plied daily routes with buckets, gathering bones from butchers' shops, stale bread from bakeries, and leftovers from restaurants, all with resale value in the barrio. These assorted castoffs, called *escamochas*, were sold in waxed paper envelopes; in the 1950s, one envelope cost 20 centavos. With luck you might get a piece of steak, but you might also have to fish out a cigarette butt, a toothpick, or a shred of napkin.

As the city's population exploded in the 1950s, Tepito's tent-stalls market grew busier, and survival oriented women struck out to sell a range of cheap snacks called *tentempié* to tide over shoppers and craftspeople until mealtime. They elaborated the survival foods they knew best, and although their commercial possibilities expanded, the history of their trade had different roots, entangled with the fortunes of that quintessential indigenous beverage, *pulque*.

Made of the fermented juice of the maguey, and not to be confused with tequila, the smelly, nutrient-rich pulque had been produced in Mesoamerica since pre-Hispanic times, and was very widely consumed among the poor in Mexico City well into the second half of the twentieth century. Soon after the Second World War, in the midst of middle-class anxiety about public drunkenness and the specter of violent outbursts against the well fed, the government imposed a series of controls on the commercialization of pulque. Merchants who brought it into the city, mainly from the arid maguey-growing areas to the north, had to pay tariffs at checkpoints on the main roads approaching the city center. Tepito's proximity to the northern pulque checkpoint led to a flowering along its streets of special cantinas called *pulquerías*, often two or three to a block. Pulque consumption staved off hunger and functioned

as a social shock absorber. Outside the pulquerías, market women installed themselves to sell snacks to the drunks: tacos and *quesadillas*, boiled eggs, fried entrails of beef or pork, but also *migas* and *chilaquiles*.

In times of scarcity, Mexico City grandmothers have always taken charge of recycling leftovers, most of which consist of tortillas and bread. Both harden after a few hours, so they became the basis of two stewed dishes: *chilaquiles* and *migas*. The virtually stigma-free *chilaquiles* are prepared throughout Mexico. They are made by frying torn-up stale tortillas, and then simmering them in a sauce of red or green tomatoes and chile peppers. Ideally, cilantro, onion, and garlic are also included to make a homey dish best enjoyed with spiced coffee.

Migas, on the other hand, are not so widely consumed, and are often viewed with contempt, not only as poor people's food but also as something slimy. They are really nothing more than stewed old bread—a soup of crumbs. The base comes from boiling cracked ham bones to release the marrow, to which garlic, onion, *cascabel* peppers, and *epazote* (an herb) are added. As the ingredients ooze together, they make a gelatinous pottage improved at each reheating by adding lime juice and oregano.

In Tepito, despite the odds, fate favored the *migas* over pulque. *Migas* have a high caloric value and were sometimes the only meal of the day. Many people claimed that there was no other food that could restore a drunk's energy so well after a pulque drinking session. Some were sure it was an aphrodisiac. Thus it was, that to combat the effects of the pulque, habitual consumers on exiting prescribed themselves a large bowl of *migas* just outside the pulquería, where the dish was prepared, seasoned, and served. For those who were not regular drinkers, *migas* still made an economical meal, especially when ordered with a bone that allowed one to savor the marrow and shreds of meat still attached to it. In time, the pulque trade was displaced by public hygiene programs and with the popularity of bottled beer. Still, *migas* retained a niche in the old-fashioned cantinas. Nowadays, besides being the favorite food of drunks, *migas* have become a nostalgia dish for the connoisseurs of the *barriada*, the low-income barrio belt.

Those who appreciate a good bowl of *migas* praise their dose of “vita-*migas*,” a play on *vitaminas*, a nutritional supplement that makes a person strong, brave, and daring. They prove this by being able to walk home or even go to work, no matter when or how much they drank. In the affluent times that came with the high profits in *fayuca* (contraband, mainly in electronics) during Mexico's period of import-substituting industrial policy, the dish took on additional meaning. By the 1970s, Tepito's market was specializing in *fayuca*, and as it enjoyed a period of clandestine prosperity, people took new pride in the ingenious cultural elaborations of necessity. It was in this context that certain *migas* kitchens gained fame for the quality and authenticity of their product. This is the case with a restaurant called *Migas La Güera* which, after decades in the heart of Tepito, has its third generation of owners, whose motto is “our quality is the result of care, not coincidence.”

José Luis Frausto, the owner of *Migas La Güera*, travels every evening to see ham specialists in the meatpacking district, where he buys about 100 kilos of bones. He and his team set them to boil through the night, so that in the morning the base

is ready. A dish of migas also contains the equivalent of about two dinner-rolls' worth of old bread. On an average day, the restaurant seats about 250 people between nine in the morning and three in the afternoon. The cost is just 30 pesos. A big cracked bone to suck on is optional and costs five pesos more. According to the size of the bone and the assiduousness of the diner, the meal can easily last 45 minutes. Customers tend to be couples and families, either former Tepiteños passing along the tradition to their children, who are not being raised in the barrio, or *Chilangos*¹ whose family traditions include shopping trips to Tepito.

During the waves of "urban removal" projects that ravaged low-income barrios every six years since the 1960s, vecindad tenements have been magnets for bulldozers. The ring of colonial-era barrios was targeted for elimination and few traces of them remain, except for Tepito. On the other hand, the galaxy of tianguis markets, the visible facet of the informal economy, expands with strategic retreats. The tianguis has been a tactical element of Tepito's exceptional resistance, and through the gaps in the tianguis, one can still catch a glimpse of Mexico City's working class history. The *Casa del Obrero Mundial*, the cradle of Mexico's anarcho-syndicalist movement, is here, half buried under knock-off jeans and compact discs. Though the official emblems of Mexico City are monuments like the Angel of Independence, the obstinate barrio of Tepito stands as a symbol of *la raza*, the people, for whom the hunger pang is always a memento of the past, poverty is a spur to a better future, and the present is best left to the *chingada* (literally, "the fucked," but figuratively, death personified).

In the face of a predatory urbanism that devours the oldest quarters first, Tepito cultivates a tough, even macabre image. In any large, chaotic city, the neighborhood that casts no shadow commands no respect. And though Tepito does not pretend to be a model barrio, it can honestly claim to be exemplary for continually defending its place in the sun. The genome of its identity has evolved in the form of a hinge that connects the tianguis archipelago to the Historical Downtown.

The continuity of its history does not cease to baffle woolly minded scholars who study urban marginality using mass-market concepts. They are amazed by the dynamism of Tepito, which overcame its ascribed status as a holding pen for the "redundant" to take charge of informal spaces opened by the contradictions of the formal economy. Tepito knows how to not make itself a target. Like a taut spring and like an unlit match, it appears harmless. But what transcends particular battles is a philosophical attitude summed up by Tepito's motto: *Comer bien, coger fuerte, y enseñar los huevos a la Muerte* (Eat well, fuck hard, and show your balls to Death herself). Tepiteños succeed by providing Tepito with everything it lacks, and as a consequence they appear to be threatening.

Tepito's destiny is carved out by the knowledge that nothing can be left to fate. Every day requires applying the entirety of accumulated knowledge with a passion that arises by itself, and never falls to the temptation of putting any achievement on a pedestal. Tepito today can be characterized as the historical preserve of a post-modern tribe that fights fiercely to protect its future, at the risk of looking like a black sheep in the urban flock. Its activity and productivity contrast with mass-media misrepresentations of its battles as pure aggression. The sheer volume of vital

possibility that Tepito generates nourishes the proliferation of forms of life and labor adapted to every niche and every resource. It hardly seems possible that such a small territory can contain so much energy.

Every day the *barrio bravo* is fully immersed in the tumultuous experience of having to subvert each wave of brutal change, more or less in the way its inhabitants must figure out what to do with every load of industrial detritus dumped on it. Tepito is defined by everything it transgresses, which is its curse and also its blessing. By building on self-serving definitions of marginality, sell-out intellectuals promote half-truths about real communities. How can Tepito laugh in the face of what would make any other neighborhood cry? (Could it be the *migas*?) In their self-assurance, the urban experts miss the fact that every little technique invented in a patio workshop builds on, and builds up, natural intelligence and the five senses. Those who go forward as the subjects of the *barrio* experience have skills that reveal themselves as the only crisis-proof form of wealth. On intimate terms with Madame Poverty, they are not ashamed to be associated with her, but neither have they allowed her to define them as poor. That is why, in the face of socioeconomic upheaval, *Homo Tepitecus* long ago evolved into the *Ñero en la Cultura*,³ and made Tepito the most brilliant of all *barrios*.

That is also why the authorities are constantly concerned about the Tepiteños (not to mention their real estate), as if they were direct descendants of Cain, a lineage of the disinherited whose attitude reveals a permanent skepticism and rebelliousness. For Tepito has an identity that propagates invisibly, infecting and adopting new arrivals, doing so with a spirit of resistance sufficient to keep working and fighting on behalf of its future. Its culture is oriented to self-defense. An underlying rhizomatic structure, linking past and future, serves as a barricade against the anti-*barrio* virus. It generates a form of life recognizable as distinctly Tepiteño—a way of life in the city and a state of mind.

NOTES

1. A *chingón* is an exquisitely clever person, a term derived from *chingar* (to fuck). The *chingón* differs significantly from the mere *chingador* (mean fucker).
2. *Chilango* is slang for a Mexico City resident and an indirect reference to smog and pollution, as a *chilango* also is a fish that thrives in dirty water.
3. *Ñero* is an abbreviation of *compañero* (comrade). A *Ñero en la cultura* is a comrade with awareness and cultivation. During the artistic and political movements geared to saving Tepito's housing in the 1960s and '70s, calling someone a *ñero* conferred hipness and acknowledged his solidarity with the *barrio*.