



# **“We can remove the skin!” Realising the cosmic race in Mexican Xilam**

## **“¡Podemos quitar la piel!” Realizando la raza cósmica en Xilam mexicano**

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### **Key words**

- Race
- Ethnicity
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- Martial arts

### **Abstract**

Xilam is a modern martial art inspired by pre-Hispanic Mesoamerican warrior cultures and cosmologies, especially the Aztecs. As a human development system, Xilam aims to develop a young generation of Mexicans who are proud of their indigenous heritage and ancestry and are dignified as modern warriors. Its philosophy also stresses the hybrid nature of Mexican ethnicity and culture, blending indigenous, European and Asian influences. This article uses a critical, postcolonial approach to Mexican philosopher José Vasconcelos's post-revolutionary thesis *The Cosmic Race* to analyse the potential philosophical meanings of concrete practices within Xilam. Examining interview and video data collected towards the end of an ethnographic project, the art of listening is adopted to show how Xilam attempts to realise the cosmic race in the twenty-first century. Our research parallels the ideas of Xilam practitioners and Vasconcelos' thesis. It highlights how the revival of pre-Hispanic philosophical notions gives rise to “other” ways of problematising racism in Mexico without Vasconcelos' utopian messianism. In this sense, “removing the skin” (*Dzilam*) is presented as an alternative to “the cosmic race”; inclusive “Diversópolis” as an alternative to “Universópolis.”

### Palabras clave

- Raza
- Etnicidad
- Herencia
- Ancestralidad
- Artes marciales

### Resumen

*El Xilam es un arte marcial moderno inspirado en las culturas guerreras mesoamericanas prehispánicas, especialmente en la cosmovisión azteca. Como sistema de desarrollo humano, el Xilam pretende formar una joven generación de mexicanos como dignos guerreros modernos, orgullosos de su herencia y ascendencia indígena. Su filosofía también hace hincapié en la naturaleza étnica y cultural híbrida de México, mezclando influencias indígenas, europeas y asiáticas. Este artículo utiliza un enfoque crítico y poscolonial de la tesis posrevolucionaria La Raza Cósmica del filósofo mexicano José Vasconcelos para analizar los posibles significados filosóficos de prácticas concretas dentro del Xilam. Examinando datos de entrevistas y vídeos recogidos hacia el final de un proyecto etnográfico, se adopta el arte de escuchar para mostrar cómo Xilam reinterpreta la raza cósmica en el siglo XXI. Nuestra investigación encuentra paralelismos entre las ideas de los practicantes de Xilam y a la tesis de Vasconcelos. Destaca cómo la recuperación de las nociones filosóficas prehispánicas da lugar a formas "otras" de problematizar el racismo en México sin el mesianismo utópico de Vasconcelos. En este sentido, "remover la piel" (Dzilam) se presenta como una alternativa a "la raza cósmica"; "Diversópolis" como una alternativa a "Universópolis".*

### The Cosmic Race

State-sponsored texts (e.g. González y González 2010) illustrate Mexico as heavily associated with invasion and colonialism. Although some political figures claim that history lessons are excessive in Mexican schools, leaving a negative self-concept (Castañeda 2011), imperialism has actually left its mark in the form of racism and social inequalities throughout Latin America. Recently, Woo-Mora's intercultural study (2021) indicated a loss of socioeconomic status with the darkening of one's skin across a palate of 15 shades. Mexico itself is in fact named after the city of Mexico-Tenochtitlan, the capital of the Aztec (Mexica) empire. As Octavio Paz (1950) pointed out in his essay on Mexican national identity, *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, Mexico is a rare country named a city. Paz claimed that this was a continued imperial domination in the population's mindset. Indeed, Mexico was once home to numerous tribes, ethnic groups and city-states that later came under the submission of the Mexica empire, which ended in the Spanish Conquest (1519-1521) (Cervantes 2020). This landmass then became an expanded colony of Nue-

va España (New Spain), which imposed the Spanish language, Catholicism and racial divide between the Iberian Spanish, the colonising Spanish born in New Spain (*criollos*), the colonised native Mexicans ("*indios*") and the often-overlooked enslaved Africans (*negros*).

Today, 200 years after independence from Spain and 150 years since invasions from the French and Americans, Mexico remains dominated by the USA. It remains a class-divided society in which the economic and political resources remains away from indigenous people speaking their native languages, but to those from white and mixed ancestry, Spanish speakers and those from more recent immigrant groups, where a person's ethnicity predicts his/her access to economic and political resources and basic services such as health and education (see Woo-Mora 2021). Many indigenous groups have survived, yet the identity of the nation has been recreated as being a hybrid blend of chiefly Spanish and native Mexican ethnic influences. Much of this ideology emerged after the Mexican Revolution (1910-11) under which poets, painters and philosophers forged a new sense of *Mexicanidad* (Mexicanness) to instil in the nation (Dill

2014). And *La Raza Cósmica* (The Cosmic Race) was a cornerstone text.

*La Raza Cósmica* (1925) is an (in)famous essay written by Mexican philosopher, pedagogue and politician José Vasconcelos. Although nearly 100 years old, the influences of this text are far reaching in Mexican society and culture. For Vasconcelos (1925, 16), there were four relatively "pure races" in contemporary society that, for him, reflected "the four eras and the four divisions" of humanity: The "white race" (Europeans such as the Castellanos/Spanish and "Anglo-Saxons"); the "yellow race" ("Mongols"/Asians); the "black race" (of African descent), and the "brown race" (indigenous Americans). Adopting aesthetics over science (Dalton 2016), Vasconcelos deemed each race to have certain genetic, material and spiritual properties often tied to notions of beauty. Typical of the time and place, Vasconcelos paid particular attention to the white and brown races that many people consider the *mestizo* or mixed heritage that the majority of Mexicans claim to be their ethnic and cultural heritage. Nevertheless, he acknowledged that no race is totally pure, as he admitted that the Spanish often have Arab (Moorish) and Jewish influences, despite these people's exile after the *reconquista* (re-conquest) of Iberia.

Notwithstanding these "pure" typologies, Vasconcelos (1925, 30) acknowledged the racial mixing and complex heritage of Latin Americans, and he predicted Mexico, Brazil and other neighbouring nations to be future world powers thanks to "the sincere and cordial fusion of races". Taking a historical and cosmological perspective akin to prophecy, Vasconcelos claimed that all races have missions to complete, and believed the most recent dominance of the white race – currently expressed by "Anglo-Saxons" – was coming to an end (Lemus 2010), with this decadence in part due to the English reluctance to mix with other races, alongside the elimination of Native Americans. Despite holding science to themselves as European colonial powers, it is no longer in their possession due to its non-esoteric nature. For Vasconcelos, the white race had the mission to industrialise the earth and mobilise it with technology. He believed the white race, without knowing it, has provided the basis for a new era in which all peoples will mix. The white race would then mix further until it ceased to exist, just like other races had done. Vasconcelos proposed the idea of a fifth race known as "the cosmic race", which would combine the strongest aspects of each of the four races to form a universal human race. This is inspired by the Aztec cosmological vision of "the fifth sun" — a new age and cycle in their calendar (see Maffie 2014), which some people interpret as meaning

Mesoamerica will rise again in power to form a new civilisation for the entire world: Universópolis. Located in the foothills of the Amazon "Universópolis" would be the cradle of the fifth race from where "planes and armies will go all over the planet, educating people for their entrance into wisdom" (Vasconcelos 1925, 35). It is worth noting the messianic character of this thought.

Despite Vasconcelos's influence on Mexican education, people in Mexico today still characterise racial types and often idealise the white European appearance and whiter notions of the *Mestizo* in the beauty and entertainment industries such as in *telenovelas* (soap operas), as well as in religious images in the Catholic church where few people of indigenous appearance feature (Fuentes 2021). Many have understandably refuted and criticised Vasconcelos's theories (Dalton 2016), but the national imagination is that Mexicans are a mixed race of mainly European and native Mexican bloodlines, as well as some African influence along the coast, such as in Veracruz, with minor Asian influence in certain parts. However, Bonfil Batalla (1994), warned that Mexicans were not the racial democracy they claim to be, but instead remains based on a *México Profundo* (deep Mexico) expressing Mesoamerican civilisation.

In George Jennings's ethnography of Xilam (Jennings 2015; 2016; 2018a; 2018b, 2021) and study on other recently created Mexican martial arts (Jennings 2017), he has taken a postcolonial perspective drawing on theories from various areas of the social sciences, from anthropology to cultural critique. This acknowledges the multiple epistemologies on Mexico as a former Spanish colony with its own sense of ancestral identity, traditions and international relations. Moreover, Jennings (2018b) has endeavoured to use theories about Mexico that were written by Mexican intellectuals in postcolonial times. Some theories are very specific to Mesoamerica, Mexico and Latin America, and should not be read as general theories of human society. These are largely essays that have driven national thinking, art and further research in contemporary Mexico. The theory on the cosmic race is controversial and might be disturbing for some readers. Yet it is also very pertinent given the data-driven approach we have taken, and with the ideas of race and ethnicity hitherto largely absent from the ethnographic project.

Within our analysis of race, ethnicity and ancestry as a British sociologist and Mexican philosopher respectively, we aim to illustrate how Xilam develops a conceptualisation of "*The Cosmic Race*" of mixed indigenous, European, African and Asian heritage that is expected to have a manifest destiny to restore the

greatness of Mexico as a resurrected nation of warriors. We approach this by first situating the field of Xilam in its different guises of a concept, organisation and martial art. We then turn to the ethnography and ongoing 'deskwork' and 'listening' of the Xilam community from afar before dividing the interconnected elements of the philosophy and practices of Xilam that combine to make the techniques hone a sense of racial, ethnic and ancestral belonging. Overall, our analysis shows how Xilam envisages the development of a sense of belonging to an imagined "cosmic race", enabling it to be realised while illustrating how Vasconcelos's notions of *The Cosmic Race* are envisaged by Xilam in an adjusted, more nation-specific manner that can be regarded as a *Diversópolis*.

### Fields of Xilam

Markula (2016) reminds us that there are different positions on what constitutes a field, as in a fitness gym or wider fitness culture. The field of Xilam, like other martial arts, can be conceptualised in many ways: as an idea, an art, a communal group and even a brand. First, in historical terms, Xilam is in many ways a prime example of what Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983) termed *invented traditions*: ethnic and national customs that appear to be ancient but were created for pragmatic and nationalist purposes (like the Scottish kilt). Xilam contains invented traditions within the objects and practices that it employs in an effort to be recognised as a martial art, such as coloured belts seen in many Asian styles, and recently created oral creeds akin to the codes of conduct seen in other traditionalist arts such as Wing Chun (see Brown, Jennings and Molle 2009). Xilam is inspired by the Mesoamerican fighting arts of the Mexica, Maya and Zapotec, aiming towards a renaissance of Mexican martial arts and warrior culture (Jennings 2016). Created in the early 1990s by a Mexican woman, Marisela Ugalde, who hails from native Mexican, Spanish, French and Jewish ancestry (Jennings 2015), it is taught in industrialised areas of central Mexico. There are also regular seminars across the country aiming to disseminate worldwide, but it remains, as it claims, on its website ([www.xilam.org](http://www.xilam.org)) and advertisements, to be "a very Mexican martial art."

Although it does have some influence from Zapotecan and Mayan languages and cultures (in counting and names of animals), the "Mexican" aspect of Xilam is grounded chiefly in its use of Aztec philosophy as the basis of its human development philosophy (see León Portilla 1990; Maffie 2014). Rejecting the common assumption that the Aztecs had a pantheon of

gods (like *Quetzalcoatl*), the philosophy of Xilam posits that the four Tezcatlipocas (*Huitzilopochtli*, *Quetzalcoatl*, *Xipetote* and *Tezcatlipoca*) are in fact energies and concepts that are embodied in every human being, and can be cultivated through disciplined training harnessing the four elements of willpower, emotions, intelligence and awareness across the four ages (childhood, youth, maturity and old age). In fact, the core of the Xilam group refute the claim of abundant human sacrifice to these gods as reported by what they deem colonialist anthropology and archaeology. The Mexica philosophy is also expressed in the four colours of the Xilam logo and t-shirts (black, white, blue and red), and the four levels of basic, linear and complex dance alongside applications – as seen in the forms and their utilisation in combat. These four levels are developed across each stage of Xilam, taught from white to black belt according to seven indigenous Mesoamerican animals deemed important in the Aztec calendar and by other ethnic groups: Snake, eagle, ocelote, monkey, deer, iguana and armadillo (Brown, Jennings, Contreras Islas, Yun and Dodd 2022). Some of these animals have corresponding weapons sequences and drills, such as deer antlers.

As an organisation, Xilam is a complex physical culture that encompasses the plurality of body cultures envisaged by Eichberg (1998; see also Jennings 2018b). It is inspired by ancient body cultures of the Mesoamerican ball game (*juego de pelota*) in terms of the four-way movement in alignment with the Aztec calendar, as well as the fluidity of pre-Hispanic dance (and its contemporary expression through the *Concheros*). Yet Xilam also incorporates modern warm-ups and conditioning exercises along with imaginative games and shamanistic meditation. Xilam is registered as an *asociación civil* (civil association), which is a non-profit, grass-roots enterprise rather than a business or a government initiative. Nevertheless, in recent conversations, Marisela shared her plans to help the other Xilam instructors become professional and thereby earn a living and help sustain the art.

Now emerging as a "local business", as stated on its Facebook group (<https://www.facebook.com/silam8/>), Xilam is registered and copyrighted in the sense that its name, logo, forms and core structure cannot be replicated since its registration in 1992. Despite this legal and business framework, it retains a strong sense of (largely voluntary) community among its team of instructors, practitioners, their partners, friends and relatives who act as wider supporters – sometimes in the audience, often helping in demonstrations by holding a banner or assisting with the website or Facebook group. In this way, a comput-

er-savvy university graduate might help with the day-to-day post on Facebook, while an athletic practitioner would be used for photo shoots, videos and public demonstrations on the physicality of the art. Parents might be interviewed for their views on Xilam, while a bilingual student might assist Marisela Ugalde communicate with foreign journalists interested in the art. This media attention has continued over the decades, with frequent TV spots appearing on national regional news, as well as more informal recordings seen on YouTube.

Art is a further way of conceptualising Xilam. It is an expression of one martial artist's vision, yet also expresses the rich and complex culture of Mexico in a unique way: re-educating people about their indigenous past and identity through the moving body rather than books and archives. It is promoted virtually and in-person, using colourful and creative designs on postcards, flyers and posters. Although the physical art has remained relatively intact over the years (partly due to its registration), its outward presentation has altered to suit new fashions and audiences, from baggier uniforms in the 1990s to body paint displays seen in the 2011 Expo Artes Marciales, the nation's annual martial arts industry exhibition. Xilam utilises choreography for its public displays and use of dance and Aztec-inspired weaponry. Like many physical cultures and martial arts (see Sparkes 2017), Xilam is also a rich site to explore the senses. Many of the sounds, colours and rhythms of Xilam are difficult to put into words – even in an ethnographic article. Readers might wish to explore the numerous videos on the Xilam YouTube channel ([https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCZhJJaA1\\_VYfm9Kyagpeyew](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCZhJJaA1_VYfm9Kyagpeyew)) and peruse the archive and current footage to see and imagine the art in action.

These ideas of seeing and hearing accompanied by a social scientific imagination guided my analysis through Back's (2007) call for listening to often unheard voices. It also resonates with Enrique Dussel's (1973, 52-57) idea of "listening to the Other's voice" (oír la voz-del-Otro) as a responsive, open, humble, and vulnerable way of approaching and understanding others from a decolonial perspective. For Dussel, "listening-the-Other" (oír-al-Otro) is a way of being in the world that is learned through practice and can be applied to other existential practices like pedagogy, ethics, or erotics. We consider it a relevant way to conduct general scientific work and ethnographic research. "Listening-the-Other" while performing ethnographic research implies an openness to unheard voices, vulnerability to be touched and changed by them, and humility to recognize the impossibility of a "complete" understanding of their meanings.

## The Ethnography

Back (2007) advocates working from the stories first and building theory and analysis of the historical, geopolitical and cultural structures of social life. Using the stories and images of people often sheltered and obscured from public view, Back (2007) offers a useful framework for studying marginalised or seldom-heard voices and perspectives. However, as Dussel points out, listening to these voices requires approaching their discourses with the open attitude of hearing the voice-of-the-Other. It demands "the silence of speech itself, the silence of the world, self-abasement, and availability to the Other as other" (1973, 54).

This is especially pertinent considering that few martial arts scholars or practitioners know of Xilam. This is despite the fact that there is a strong online and media presence from the Xilam leaders stemming back to the 1990s, which is increasing in its international scope. Many in the Mexican martial arts online community regard Xilam with scorn for using practices and techniques that appear to be Asian in origin (Jennings 2021), but these critics often overlook the rich pre-Hispanic philosophy behind these movements and methods. From George's analysis of the Xilam organisation and its public videos, the viewers were clearly not listening, but merely watching. Instead, Back (2007, 4) extends, "an invitation to engage with the world differently, without recourse to arrogance but with openness and humility." Such openness and humility to the Other imply, so Dussel (1973, 58) a readiness "for its interpellation to overwhelm my security, my installation, my world, like a risky and disturbing clamour for justice". The meanings behind the practices of Xilam and the accounts of belonging thus require careful listening, critical scrutiny, and an openness to potential irritation.

The project has taken numerous directions as the object of study (Xilam) changed and George (the subject) matured and developed in the use of my tools (see Jennings 2018a). The study began in 2011 when George encountered the class by fortune. Having a background as an ethnographer and 'fighting scholar' (Sánchez-García and Spencer 2013) fairly well versed in the breadth of "martial activities" such as martial arts and combat sports (Martinkova and Parry 2016), George was keen to explore the social world and embodied pedagogy of this Mexican fighting and human development system. George is a white British, an able-bodied male and relatively privileged academic. With his then limited Spanish and understanding of Mexican history and politics, this study began as an apprenticeship in Xilam, using

his body and senses as the major instruments. This followed the pioneering participant observation work of Wacquant (2004) and coincides with recent work by Downey, Dalidowicz and Mason (2014) in native physical cultures. Over time, with changing personal circumstances and abilities, George later analysed the key printed and online documents of the organisation, while seeing Xilam as an institution: The Xilam Pre-Hispanic Martial Arts Association. Later, with the closure of the branch school in which George was a core member, he conducted a series of interviews with Marisela Ugalde to explore Xilam as a creation and general philosophy. Connected to this were several interviews with other Xilam instructors in an effort to explore Xilam as a general concept in relation to gender, sexuality and ethnicity in terms of its relationship with the imagined pre-Hispanic and colonial past and the post-colonial present. Here, in the physical presence of these martial artists, teachers and supporters of the Xilam community, George was able to listen closely, develop rapport and empathy for their project, and begin to trace the story behind the creation of Xilam (Jennings 2015).

This was accompanied by the second stage of the research: listening from afar while engaging in deskwork (writing ethnography). With George's return to Britain, he was no longer close to the practitioners, witness their bodily engagement and practise alongside them. Instead, this research entailed digital research examining the official Xilam website, Facebook and YouTube site to understand the main objectives and mission of the organisation to recover and spread a Mesoamerican warrior tradition (Jennings 2016). This is becoming an increasingly useful strategy in research extending data sets from field notes and interviews (e.g. Spencer 2014). For this article, George has turned to the archive videos from periods when he was not in Mexico (from the late 1980s to 2011), several demonstrations in which he was unable to assist (between 2011 and 2016) and recent uploads. The majority of these were posted in 2012 after a period of change with the social media and website, and continue to be uploaded on a regular basis.

Taking an active and empathetic role, George listened to what was said about Xilam. He also viewed the practices and movements to see the correspondence between what was said and what was done. From the two main types of video (journalistic interviews and recorded public exhibitions), the most apparent form of discourse was on the exact practices that constitute Xilam. The animal-inspired dances, the mantra and creed, the tying of belts and the weapons were of particular significance in the

dozens of videos he transcribed and analysed, and he then broke them down into categories such as "Aztec philosophy" and "the cosmic race", having identified some links to the martial arts studies literature, comparative philosophy and theories from Mexican scholars like Vasconcelos. The theme on race and ethnicity was also very clear as it emerged from George's analysis of interviews with four Xilam instructors, Marisela, Mayra, Andrea and José.

We have endeavoured to treat their stories and the public accounts on YouTube with humility and respect. As these are key concepts in Xilam evident from their oral creed, online writings and interviews, we have continued the postcolonial approach by adopting these values in our analysis and representation of the data, which, although in realist form (Van Maanen 2011), try to show the art, the community, the organisation and its practices in a dignified fashion as seen in their own words and using theories that are influential in their own nation and culture. George obtained ethical permission to continue his research after registering the study at a Mexican university, and he has kept in contact with his key informants who have also sought his advice as a scholar. In this sense, George remains a distant part of the Xilam community as a critical friend for some of their ideas.

Some martial arts scholars have positioned Xilam according to their theoretical and disciplinary backgrounds. As a poststructuralist theorist of martial arts studies, Bowman (2019) perceives Xilam as a postmodern martial art akin to lightsabre combat, while Molle (2022), meanwhile, with his mission for a political hoplology, considers Xilam as an expression of an indigenist political movement. David Contreras' background as a Mexican philosopher made him an ideal collaborator for the analysis and writing of this article.

David's role consisted in critically pointing out possible points of encounter between the Xilam and Vasconcelos' theory, as well as in proposing a dialogue with other thinkers – both classical and contemporary – who have dealt with Mexicanidad. His expertise with Capoeira also highlighted similarities between Xilam and Capoeira Angola regarding the interest of both practice communities in research and reviving their ancestral roots. Finally, he contributed to the discussion with Mexican and Latin-American postcolonial perspectives.

In what follows, we invite the reader to join our exploration of Xilam and its engagement with ideas on the potential realisation of *The Cosmic Race* (the theory) and the cosmic race (an emic concept): what it means, and what it might be.

### Conceptualising "race" through Xilam

Despite being founded by a woman, Xilam is chiefly concerned with ideals of Mexican ethnicity rather than feminism. In fact, all four interviewees used race, ethnicity, and the philosophy and structure of Xilam to explain their worldviews on Mexican society and identity. Our analysis examines particular voices of three female instructors and practitioners in relation to: 1) the current problems with racism in contemporary Mexico that drive the Xilam association; 2) ideal-typical views of "races" and "the cosmic race" in their philosophy; 3) the philosophical practices unique to Xilam. Due to the volume of data from this study, we have selected specific voices of knowledgeable assistant instructors responsible for public shows and the founder as seen through one-on-one interviews and transcriptions of demonstrations available on YouTube. These show the different facets of Xilam as a modern martial arts organisation, philosophy and system.

#### *Pride for one's ancestry in racist Mexico*

Andrea is a black belt with a background in dance and the corporate world. She is now a shiatsu therapist, and is still actively training in Xilam, although she mainly supports the group with events. With this background, Andrea is chiefly responsible for the major project *Los Siete Guerreros* (the Seven Warriors) that aims to showcase the philosophy and art of Xilam to the Mexican public through a virtual and live performance in the Zócalo (city centre square). However, she and the Xilam association have found it difficult to secure a corporate sponsor and partner, which they put down to the *malinchismo* of the Mexico City government's favouring foreign artists over local ones. This *malinchismo* stems from the fascination for the foreign other since the times of early contact between the Spanish conquistadors and the indigenous Mexicans such as Malinche, Hernán Cortes's translator and lover (for a critical discussion, see Paz 1950). In an in-depth interview, Andrea revealed her frustration with the current institutionalised racism against indigenous Mexicans in favour of those of primarily European descent. Despite two centuries after Mexican independence, the racism appears to be longstanding in the media, workplace and education. Andrea lamented:

*There's still a lot of homophobia and racial discrimination. Office workers...are normally white, tall, a certain build, and the people on the street*

*such as builders, street sweepers and rubbish collectors are dark skinned. Why do we identify brown people in certain jobs and white people in other jobs? Yes, there are exceptions. I have been fortunate to be the only brown person in an office in Santa Fe [business park], or two or three more [brown-skinned people], and the other 20, 25 people were white. It's still very obvious. The people who look at certain way – it opens doors just by being a distinct colour.*

Andrea's comments echo Woo-Mora's (2021) statistics indicating stark contrasts between the average socioeconomic situation of people of different skin tones in Latin America. Andrea explained the implications of this on the lack of pride and dignity for one's indigenous, dark-skinned ancestors that stems from the early (primary) education of Mexican children in which the Conquest was seen as a relief of human sacrifice and other 'primitive' practices:

*There is a problem right now with the majority of Mexicans – a lack of pride and dignity coupled with racial discrimination. Something that has been going on for decades. We feel like a conquered people. And it's something that starts with schools – the primary schools teach us that we come from a civilisation that undertook sacrifices, went around barefoot, and that's it. And then the Spanish arrived, and thanks to them, we have medicine and many things. The old civilisation [Mesoamerica] is almost depicted as a group of cavemen (laughs). And I believe that this feeling has left us to feel insecure and inferior. As a nation, if everyone feels inferior, we have lost. There is no growth. It's as basic as if like someone thinks that their mum or their dad, or both, is a bad person, is uncultured and lacks knowledge, you don't feel proud. You feel ashamed of that part [of the family]. And the father [Spanish] was a great man.*

The way pre-Hispanic cultures (and general non-European folks) are depicted in (or even omitted from) Mexican education has been analyzed as a way of producing and reproducing coloniality has been studied by authors like Dussel (1994; 2018) and Walsh (2007). Furthermore, Andrea's observation resonates with the voice of Paz when he thinks of the Mexican as someone who "breaks his ties with the past, denies his origin, and enters alone into historical life" (2005, 176).

Andrea made reference to the period of colonisation and resulting power structures in which many Spaniards reproduced with indigenous women

to create mixed-race children (*mestizos*). Later, with other invasions and waves of immigration, Europeans such as the French, Germans and British settled in certain regions of the country. These events are the same that Ramos (2005) mentions as causes of an inferiority complex he observes in Mexican identity. In Ramos's words: "It is not strange, then, that all these misfortunes lead to a 'self-denigration,' that is, to a negative valuation of nationality" (2005, 113) —or, more specifically, of the pre-Hispanic heritage.

However, Andrea stressed the importance of recognising this dual heritage that many Mexicans have in terms of indigenous and European blood, by exploring the complexity of genetics and history:

*Mexicans, we need to recognise ourselves as Mexicans. Mexicas, Zapotec [ethnicities] – we are a mixture, not just one race. We are not just the pre-Hispanic side. It's not enough to know your father's side of the family: you need to know your mother's side, too. Not just that one was a rapist who took everything [the Conquistadors], and the other one just allowed it all to happen [the pre-Hispanic peoples]. We must take advantage that we come from two cultures so distinct from one another, and not feel shame about it. This is something I observe...how do you not know about your ancestors? If you have a French, German or English ancestor, yes. But... "do you also come from the Purepecha or Tarahumara people [Mexican tribes]?" (mock question) "Me...no, no! I don't come from them!" (mock reply). But people don't want to acknowledge that part.*

Once again, it is notable how Andrea's words reflect the thoughts of prominent philosophers of the *mexicanidad* like Vasconcelos, Ramos and again, Paz's (2005) brilliant analysis of the Mexican expression "hijos de la Chingada" and the hypothesis that links the rejection of pre-Hispanic heritage to a (cultural) rape trauma.

The kind of ancestral research Andrea mentions is part of the extra-curricular activities expected of a more advanced Xilam practitioner. While this may seem unusual for practitioners of other martial arts, it is in fact, common in practices that actively promote their connection to certain ancestral roots. For example, it is common for Capoeira Angola communities to set themselves up as "study groups" in which they re-

flect on their African roots (see Head & Gravina 2012).

As Andrea noted, Xilam "is a rescue...I say that it is a reevaluation of the real pre-Hispanic philosophy, the essence of the philosophy, in a current and applicable for that fits with each individual, regardless of their country." So interestingly, despite the strong nationalist and revivalist stance, the Xilam association still aim to internationalise by spreading the art to other countries.<sup>1</sup> This transmission might be aided by its universal values of respect, harmony and dignity that could be readily understood by people of different ethnic backgrounds. Andrea offers reflections on these main values in Xilam:

*Respect. Respect for yourself, respect for those around you, respect to the environment and to the earth – the place you are positioned. And integrity. To keep your word. This is a great problem around the world: you can't trust anyone. You sign a piece of paper and then do something else. I look at you in the eyes, I say something and I do it. I'm going to do what I said. I'm giving you my face and my heart. This is something that Xilam fosters. And also dignity. To be dignified.*

#### *Cosmology and the Cosmic Race*

Underpinning these accessible values is a rich and complex philosophy drawn from a range of pre-Hispanic Mesoamerican cultures. Of all the members of the Xilam association, Marisela is the most knowledgeable and articulate of the underpinning Mesoamerican philosophy – notably Aztec worldview learned during her apprenticeship to the Conchero dance captain and Mexican leader, Andrés Segura Granados. Like Andrea, Marisela spoke of the importance of inspiring pride and dignity among the practitioners and explained this ongoing metaphorical process of slowly "removing the skin" (as in the energy or deity Xipetote, "the flayed one") to find one's ancestral origins in a martial art particularly created for future Mexican generations:

*For us, Xilam is to remove the ego, to remove one's older beliefs, our resources, for our own interest. Xilam is to remove one's skin, to work for other people [...]. A youth without direction or goal is a youth lost for our society. Xilam tries to give a goal*

<sup>1</sup> This tension between traditionalism and globalisation is also present in the field of Capoeira (De Brito 2016; Contreras Islas 2021).



*to every Mexican youngster to find their culture. It's the warrior that lives within every Mexican so that Mexico is found, in the near future.*

In a video by journalist de la Peña (2014), Marisela narrates the background rationale for the synthesis that is Xilam, one that she claims is part of one culture across the Americas:

*The Mexica created a synthesis of all the cultures on this continent. One continent, one culture, from Alaska to Patagonia. What the Mexica did was bring this culture together, as they knew a new time would come, a new period would come. That period was the Jaguar Period. The Jaguar Period is now over. What we are doing now is the recuperation of the Eagle Period. What we have to do is give splendour again to our pre-Hispanic civilisations.*

On numerous occasions, Marisela cited *One Continent, One Culture* (Martínez Paredéz 1967), one of the research sources she uses to supplement her learned oral testimony and embodied understanding of Mesoamerican philosophy (albeit filtered through the specific cultural lens of the Mexica/Aztecs). Taking a similarly predictive stance based on the specific paradigm of Aztec astrology, Marisela explained that the aforementioned conquest was actually already known to the Mesoamerican warriors, who accepted this change in periods. In a similar vein, Dussel (1994) has tried to reconstruct the experience of the Mexica in their encounter with the others in the context of the Conquest. Against the Eurocentric reading, which attributes the defeat of the Mexica Empire to the Spaniards' superiority, Dussel shows how predictions about the end of the era of the fifth sun played an essential role in this process. Marisela explains this alternative reading of history:

*There came along another Tlatoani [rulers]: the last of the Tlatoanis, Cuauhtemoc: "the eagle that descends." Because it was the dawn of our culture. And his name carried that function. He was from Tlateloco, "the place of the priests." Why Tlateloco? It had the function of the women to capture the European genetics alongside the newcomers to form the new race that is us: we are the synthesis of a culture, of races, of religions, and Mexicans, we are that. Here we can find people of all colours, all regions, all religions. Mexicans, we are in accord with this synthesis that we are. We can "remove the skin" and be in harmony as human beings. A change to become a cosmic humanity.*

Vasconcelos (1925) conceived the Cosmic Race as "a race of synthesis, which aspires to encompass and express all that is human in ways of constant self-improvement." (p. 25), a "synthesis that is to bring together the treasures of history, to give expression to the total longing of the world" (p. 27). It is interesting to note the parallels Marisela's words have with Vasconcelos' writings. Nearly a century since his seminal text, Marisela uttered sentences that held very similar racialist tones on four archetypal races of white, yellow, red and black, and the possible cosmic race uniting them:

*Among the four races, we have dual concepts. The white race is: "Sorry. Sin." You sin and ask for forgiveness. You ask for forgiveness in order to sin. Penitence. And it happens again. In the black race, there's happiness and sadness. They're ambivalent. There's joy among the blacks, but their happiness is extreme. Or a lot of sadness. The Orientals: life and death. The Orientals kill themselves. They're warriors. They kill. And they reproduce a lot. This is very strong. And the pre-Hispanics: Gluttony and sacrifice. The pleasure, for them, is to eat very well, dance, under the Sun above the Earth...the sacrifice of blood was given to the gods. Sacrifice. The pleasure of flavours, the pleasure of the senses, the pleasure of the colours. [...] You can sacrifice, as a family, ten years of your life, for one [15<sup>th</sup> birthday] party for your daughter. You are sacrificing, paying for it, and the party is going to be marvellous. Communion. Party. Life, death, sacrifice. Each one of the four races have an idea of life.*

On the one hand, one might ask to what extent Lemus's critique of Vasconcelos's "racism" applies to the philosophy of the Xilam. For him, the idea of a cosmic race "was not free of discrimination" since it proposes "the superiority of the mestizo race", instead of "accepting that all individuals – 'pure' or 'mestizo' - are alike and that it is good for them to coexist" (Lemus 2010). This resonates strongly with the Mayan notion of *Dzilam*, "to remove the skin" – so that the practitioner's humanity can be revealed beneath the veil of nationality, race and ethnicity.

On the other hand, the number four (as expressed in the idea of the four races) plays a central role in the Mexica philosophy. Marisela continued to explain this crucial figure of four, which is utilised in the cosmic philosophy of Xilam representing the four seasons (spring, summer, autumn and winter), directions (north, south, east and west) and ages (childhood, youth, adulthood and old age).

*In pre-Hispanic Mexico, there were different well-defined peoples in different forms; in terms of languages, we are multilingual and multi-ethnic. We were able to receive different cultures that came from Europe, from Asia, from Africa. We emerged to resolve and now is the time to unify everything under one concept: harmony. In Xilam, we have the four directions, because the human being is in the centre. You have your centre, regardless if you go to the north, to the south. We have the mantra "to respect the earth, respect those around us, no matter their nationality, respect the rules of the environment, and be ready to work." If you follow that, you won't have a problem anywhere. The new human being needs to be concerned with respect and harmony. And, curiously, in this time, we are referring to political nexus...Mexico is ready to receive people from other countries and harmonize with them. Here, foreigners are treated very well. They're very well received. A country that is multicultural and multi-ethnic is the place to receive and to process, to be able to homogenize to one world, one humanity. This is its work of understanding, of consciousness. This is its work of memory, of thinking, of intelligence.*

#### *The structure of Xilam*

How can the martial art go about developing its practitioners to achieve this precarious balance between nationalistic ethnic pride and harmony with those around them? Xilam has many practices common in martial arts such as the performance of formulaic sequences (see Dodd and Brown 2016) and more specific practices of oral creeds and particular animal-inspired techniques. In an interview and demonstration for a Mexican news channel, Marisela explained one of the fundamental practices of the oral creed uttered by all Xilam practitioners at the end of each class and what they wish to bring "to this sacred place known as Mexico":

*I accept with honour with pride and honour  
To know myself  
And the valuable distinction of honesty and truth  
To have consideration and to be aware of the needs of others as well as my own  
For that, with these convictions, of faith, of hope, and confidence in my ability to defend myself.  
And prepare my present which is part of my future.  
I promise in front of my teacher to respect my instructors, my school, my grade, my god who is my*

*creator and my parents who are my essence.  
In the name of my integrity, so be it.*

Marisela's daughter and trusted sidekick, Mayra, is an interesting case herself. An expert in the Aztec calendar, she is currently writing a book about Aztec horoscopes. Like the other interviewees, she explained Xilam in terms of its seven animals that structure the progression of the student's mind-body dispositions, and lead to wider research into their ancestry:

*We go through the steps, of willpower – you need to have that to get somewhere; emotional control, again, something very important is control over yourself; reactions, how you react, if you're sad... to balance your emotions...and to know your own force through the jaguar...obviously, alongside your willpower, with the control over your emotions. What happens is, you become stronger and you become more "you." After that, comes the monkey, that connects to the ego, and you have to seek that balance again. Then, there is the deer, which is the heart, the monkey and the deer accompany each other. For you to work with your ego and your vanity, it is balance, you connect to your centre; later, is the iguana, this is the recognition of your ancestors, and there's a genetic aspect, too. What limitations do you have? What abilities do you have? And later, the armadillo, you have already studied what you are, and now you are going to work on developing yourself: to create the self. I'm going to construct and forge myself.*

Andrea gave a succinct summary of the Xilam system as understood by its distinct animal levels, which includes later research into one's family tree at the iguana level where: "you start to look at where you come from – your family, why you are the way you are. You accept and don't pretend to be something you're not. There is introspection and investigation about your family." Similarly, Mayra provided an account of the structure of the martial art and its later levels that George had not reached:

*The last level is called Noyocoyali, which means "to create yourself": that you have to create and know who you are and what you want to be. And from there, you search who you are, and you seek out what you are...in Xilam, all this philosophy, you have to work on yourself, to remove the skin, all the external, all that isn't yours and arrive at what you really are: what you are. Despite whatever. And, from there, to work hard to forge what you are. And, in this form, you seek harmony with others.*

The accounts from Marisela, Mayra and Sara also offer a female viewpoint on this largely female-led martial art to balance my earlier accounts from my own male and foreign embodiment of this Mexican martial art that is designed for Mexicans but also for the world in the expression of respect, dignity and harmony: virtues that connect this potentially cosmic race to broader humanity.

## Conclusions

As the final output from an ethnography on Xilam, this article has explored the conceptualisation of a hybrid race and ethnicity (the cosmic race) inspired by Mesoamerican warrior ideals and cosmological philosophy of the Mexica and other peoples. Through an analysis of talk in archival and contemporary videos and my own one-on-one interviews with instructors and senior practitioners, the sense of belonging has been tied to the highly influential Vasconcelos's (1925) equally Mexica-inspired concept, *The Cosmic Race*. According to the data, the practice of Xilam might assist Mexicans to realise their human potential through the cosmic race by understanding their mixed ethnic origins as a starting point for their development. Although written decades before the inception of Xilam, *The Cosmic Race* offers a sustained legacy on how certain urbanised Mexican practitioners proudly see their heritage and ancestry in the postcolonial world. This utopian vision includes potentially changing world order in which Latin American countries might take a more prominent place in global society —to the level of a "world leader" in Marisela's own mission (<https://vimeo.com/89874130>).

With its non-conventional methodological and theoretical approach, this article has made several small contributions to the ethnographic scholarship on martial arts. First, it offers a national, Latin American perspective on race and ethnicity that adds to the plethora of established Western social theories that have examined martial arts to date, such as Bourdieu, Elias and Mauss (see Jennings and Cynarski 2019). Second, through its use of digital sources of footage taken from demonstrations, television interviews and short documentaries, it adds to the potential for secondary sources buffeting the established dominance of participant observation from martial arts scholars working in the field, who are frequently practitioners themselves. This perspective enables a relatively external and more distant perspective and assists one in assessing the long-term development of a martial art and association beyond the time of the official ethnography. This article has combined postcolonial,

local theory that can be added to the wider debate around popular concepts and grand theories.

Vasconcelos was one of the first Latin American writers to develop a complex ideology of race and ethnicity. Although he might have considered his theory to be progressive, it will be regarded as highly racist today (see Lemus 2010). Xilam adopts an Aztec/Mexica worldview that overly concerned with notions of race and ethnicity —a worldview that coincides with that of Vasconcelos, who was an admirer of Mesoamerican civilisation. There is no evidence that Vasconcelos is a direct stimulator for Xilam, which is inspired by Mexica/Aztec philosophy and the Mayan notion of *Dzilam*, "to remove the skin"— so that the practitioner's humanity can be revealed beneath the veil of nationality, race and ethnicity. Nonetheless, we found it fruitful to engage with *The Cosmic Race* as an etic theory while considering grounded, emic considerations of being proud of one's native heritage, which is achieved through the structure of the Xilam system. Further research could involve interviews and focus groups with students of Xilam and other martial arts concerned with colonial heritage, ancestry and race (as in Capoeira Angola) in order to understand the meaning that such emic concepts (e.g. removing the skin) and etic notions (e.g. *The Cosmic Race*) might hold for them in a society that has not realised Vasconcelos's utopian vision of the cosmic race and the new civilisation of Universópolis —but rather as Ciudad Juárez, as stressed by Lemus (2010). Such research could delve into their lived experiences of racism in contemporary Mexico and its challenges for those of black and indigenous ancestry. This might connect with critical scholarship on the legacy of racism in the country (cf. Navarrete 2016; Gall 2021).

On the other hand, it is notable how the interviewees' words often reflect ideas very similar to those of Vasconcelos, Ramos, Paz, and other authors who contributed to constructing the notion of Mexicanidad during the first half of the twentieth century. Although none of them referred to their names, texts, or concepts directly, it seems that the ideas of these thinkers survive in the Mexican imaginary to the present day. However, they do not remain static: in the case of the Xilam, unlike Vasconcelos' proposal, the four races are not transcended by merging them into a fifth "superior" race, but by "removing the skin," that is, by appealing to underlying equality that acknowledges our diversity. With this twist, the philosophy of the original peoples acquires new vigour and validity as an alternative to the messianic racism of La Raza Cósmica. It lets us picture "Diversópolis" as an alternative to "Universópolis." While Vasconcelos' Universópolis aspires to an ethnic homogeneity re-

sulting from the fusion of the four races into a fifth (not to mention the expansion of this race around the world with "planes and armies"), Diversópolis would be devoted to cultivating diversity in all its forms. A possible focus for future research could examine how the central philosophical ideas of Mexicanness (e.g., the inferiority complex in Ramos; solitude in Paz) have been appropriated and updated by practitioners of Mexican martial arts.

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