



Memories and reflections of the Ecoversities planetary gathering in Siwa

March 2022 | José Salomón Espinoza Andrade

A community of the spirit [fragment]

There is a community of the spirit.
Join it, and feel the delight
of walking in the noisy street,
and *being* the noise.

Drink *all* your passion,
and be a disgrace.

Close both eyes
to see with the other eye.

Open your hands,
if you want to be held.

Sit down in this circle.

(...)

Jalal al-Din



The call of life - *emergence*¹ -

For much of my journey, I had asked myself, what gives my life meaning? Maybe you have done the same, or are doing it. In my case, I decided to start by getting to know myself, reconnecting with my ancestors, recognizing my own cycles, those of nature and those of other people, opening my heart to the beings that surround me and integrating the multiple realities that emerge each moment.

This process led me to meet new friends, activists, tribes, collectives, volunteers, communities, weaves, dreamers and alliances. These people co-created rich and diverse spaces, almost like oases for regeneration. Several of these places are still scattered in the colonialist, capitalist, patriarchal, violent and murderous system.

In these pluriverses I was called to question my feelings, thoughts and actions. And only here I have felt confident to be able to imagine myself from other perspectives.

I am still unlearning and deconstructing my individualistic, utilitarian and macho thinking, but with each step I feel that I am finding another part of the answer to my question (because the answer, as well as the question, is complex, organic and emergent). And I do it along with my family (which extends beyond the loved ones who raised me), along with love, magic, our relationship with the divine, nature.



People from different parts of the planet came to the sixth planetary gathering of the Ecovercities Alliance. Each one with our own life story, ancestry and diverse cultures. And we connected, what a joy to be able to say it! We connected with fluidity, depth and solidarity. Contrary to what we could have learned within a system that teaches discrimination and separation, we managed to unite with our differences and

¹ One of the six values and orientations found on the web page of ecoversities.org. (1/6)
Emergence: An invitation to the unknown, allowing diverse ways of being, knowing, doing, relating to emerge.



complexities, and lived in a *heterotopia*² for six days in the oasis and desert of Siwa, Egypt.



The arrival to the desert - *emplacement*³ -

Siwa is an oasis in the Sahara desert that stretches 80 kilometers in length and 15km in width. It has lakes and salty lagoons, springs and ditches, where life flourishes, finding its own ways to do so. One of the ways to get to Siwa from Cairo is to go by land, passing through Alexandria, Marsa Matruh and finally reaching the oasis that is close to the Libyan border.

² Concept of heterotopia by Michel Foucault (spanish resource), https://revistas.uptc.edu.co/index.php/cuestiones_filosofia/article/view/7707/5991

³ One of the six values and orientations found on the web page of ecoversities.org. (2/6)
Emplacement: An invitation to reconnect with and learn from the land, the place and the non-human. To engage in and promote deep localization. Observation: In Latin America, the term territorialization could also be used, making a connection with the notion of territory.

Walking along its sandy beaches you can find fossils of snails and other marine animals, since millions of years ago the Sahara was a sea that covered Africa. In fact, Siwa is 13 meters below sea level.



A great curiosity invaded my body the moment I got out of the car and arrived at the HajMoulein farm, on the outskirts of the town of Siwa. In the distance I was hearing various voices and drums. I was being welcomed by some friends at the entrance of the farm, but my body was pulled by the energy of a circle that was being formed outside the pergola (*marbou'a*⁴). It was a call to dance, at sunset, led by women. What a great welcome! Escaping from the approaching cold, we began to move our bodies. Feet, knees, waist, shoulders, elbows, hands, head and everything in between these spaces shook to the rhythm of the Egyptian drum and chants from the region.

Once the dance was over, we entered the pergola. I had traveled for several days and with some stops to get to the gathering, I felt that I could finally rest my luggage and my being in one place. Root myself in that space. And although it was not the first time that I was in the oasis, I realized how magical, unrepeatable and wonderful it was to find myself in HajMoulein, with these people, to co-create a gathering about the reconnection, reimagining and regeneration of our knowledge, our communities and our Mother Earth.

Radiant tribe⁵ - *inter(trans)cultural dialogue⁶* -

My senses took me everywhere. I wanted to listen, learn and share with various people. I jumped from conversation to conversation, I felt like a

⁴ A marbou'a is an essential part of Siwi households (indigenous tribes of the Siwa area). It is not only used to receive guests and guests, it is a place for meeting. In the Siwi culture they say that when you enter, you should leave your worries outside.

⁵ Link for the photos of the gathering: <https://photos.app.goo.gl/U7zPw4EpFkP3Ck2N8>

⁶ One of the six values and orientations found on the web page of ecoversities.org. (3/6)
Inter(trans)cultural dialogue: An invitation to learn in-between cultures, epistemologies, cosmologies, and to learning ways we might not recognize or have experienced before. To learn from/ within/ beyond diversity.



bird fluttering in its new nest. In short, I realized that my curiosity continued to grow, but my energy was not enough to encompass that much.

It was my first time meeting the people who are part of the Ecoversities Alliance, and being surrounded by the abundance of all their experiences, learnings, initiatives and projects. I had to ask for advice on how to navigate the sharing during the days of the gathering.

The people with whom I spoke, and who already had been to other gatherings, agreed on two ideas: find a moment such as mealtimes or the campfire at night to ask someone about how their day went (this way I could get know other participants while they shared their point of view about the conversations they were in). And the second, to trust that I was in the right place, with the right people and that I would share what I came to share.



The exchanges we had in the big sharing circle, in micro-workshops, thematic tables, art and healing spaces, in the kitchen, washing dishes, waking up at dawn to see the sun, laughing, and also in the harsh realities, were the threads of a great weave that began to unite us.

We all witnessed how these threads of Africa, America, Europe and India no longer had a beginning or an end, they linked together, allowing new universes, micro and macro, to coexist.



Together all the time - *experiential learning*⁷ -

The HajMoulein farm had three overnight options: one's own tent, shared unisex tents, and mixed cabins. I was very lucky to find a space in one of these cozy little houses, the puppy house⁸. Once settled on the farm, my experience deepened even more. I am convinced that living with other people generates a unique connection. In my experience I have come to form bonds similar to those I have with my family with whom I grew up: intimate, affectionate, authentic, committed, trusting and belonging.



I remember that at the beginning I was trying to take photos of the thematic tables or the sharing circles but I couldn't find a good angle or suitable light. I was a bit frustrated so I decided to put my camera down for a while. I shifted from the role of observer and began to live the experience, fully immersed.

When I stopped taking photos, I had the opportunity to talk, share, laugh, listen, support and understand the realities of the people who were at the gathering. Many moments will remain engraved only in our memories and hearts, and I value that immensely.



One day we were told that we were going to go for a walk outside the farm. The proposal was to see some emblematic places in Siwa, so I decided to take my camera.

⁷ One of the six values and orientations found on the web page of ecoversities.org. (4/6)
Experiential learning: Learning with our senses, stories, spirits, hearts, hands, heads and homes in order to find ways we are interconnected, and entangled in each other's struggles and dreams.

⁸ I discovered that it was called that way because it was the first house made for the puppies of one of the dogs with whom we lived together during the gathering.





I will never know how each of our relationships developed within the gathering. But I can tell you that on that day I felt and saw its fruits.



The moments I saw through my lens were those of a great family. The fact of having shared several days together, strengthening our ties and living together in HajMoulein made this experience nest in our hearts, something that perhaps no one imagined would happen.





Self-organization - *inquiry in solidarity*⁹ -

At the gathering I discovered that some of the participants had already met before but only by video call. During the covid-19 pandemic they built their relationships until they reached a beautiful friendship, with the commitment to support each other within the Ecoversities multiverse, and this was the first time they saw each other without the digital filter.

These friendships, and others that already existed before the pandemic, made it possible for the self-organization dynamics to work in harmony during the gathering.

By harmony I do not mean that there were no moments to correct the course. It took effort and confidence for us to reach fluency and teamwork. By harmony I mean that everything that happened, for us to

⁹ One of the six values and orientations found on the web page of ecoversities.org. (5/6)
 Inquiry in solidarity: An invitation to be authentic and critically engaged with co-learners, whilst invoking self-reflection, kindness, and compassion to support others in their own inquiries and discoveries.

create this heterotopia, was part of the rhythm that guided, sustained and nurtured us. Only then could we share how we did it.



Several links were strengthened, groups that had not previously had the opportunity to get to know each other better took advantage of the gathering to do so. And the groups that already knew each other specified some visions for the future.

In my particular case, I joined the Latin American sharing table. I had a warm welcome. I noticed that the group was very fond of each other and together they wanted to achieve big dreams and goals.

I shared in this circle about what my collective and I do in Ecuador: Through 12 principles¹⁰ we have created several projects and dreams for the regeneration of our Mother Earth. Among the main projects we have a vegan restaurant, a festival of healing, art and permaculture, and a cultural house that includes several regenerative projects. And concerning our dreams, we want to create and nurture an ecovillage in the Ecuadorian Amazon linked and open to exchanges with other ecovillages and initiatives such as Ecovercities¹¹.

Once the initiative was presented, I was welcomed to the community of ecovercities in Latin America, to co-create a plan to give life to an alternative learning space in the ecovillage and to collaborate with other initiatives and working circles in the region.

Anger acknowledgment and experience with borders - *de-colonising¹² -*

¹⁰ Link for the 12 principles of Collective Wave: <https://seedstranscendence.pro/principles/>

¹¹ <https://ecoversities.org>

¹² One of the six values and orientations found on the web page of ecovercities.org. (6/6)
De-colonising: An invitation to address, explore and unlearn the dimensions of oppression, power, and privilege that are part of our own lives, relations, tools, structures, histories and beliefs.



To end these memories and reflections of the gathering, I want to share with you two experiences that are related to the invitation to unlearn in order to independently investigate our meaning and the call to confront the dehumanization and violence produced by colonialist processes today.



At the gathering I had the opportunity to participate in a micro workshop on anger. It was refreshing to find a space that openly welcomed this emotion that is often avoided and seen as "bad". Anger is an emotional state loaded with information and strength. It tells us, for example, that we do not agree with the actions carried out in a certain situation. This honest and unbiased self-perception is the prelude to radical self-expression.

When we mistakenly believe that we should not feel and express our anger, and we avoid communication, we stop understanding each other and the distances that could have been created by an error or confusion can become greater. Support networks cannot be created since their threads are so far apart that we fall between them. However, I know that we are capable of remembering how to feel, to find our own meaning outside of the imposed power, and to return to our communities, families and circles of belonging where we all have a place.



At the end of this process of introspection and experiential acknowledgment we realized that something was happening in the pergola (marbou'a), music and drums sounded from inside, but at the entrance there was a strange air, different from the one we had shared throughout the gathering.

I approached and heard that questions were being asked to enter the pergola: What's your name? What are you doing here? Do you know the people inside? I was afraid. A few weeks ago I had a bad experience in the immigration area of an airport and the treatment felt the same:



dispossession of autonomy and oppression by a person who spoke for the system.

My mind jumped with thousands of possibilities. I even thought that the people asking me the questions had been undercover all this time and that they were actually part of a police check. It may seem nonsense, but it is through the devices for reproducing inequalities that I inherited this fear of persecution, backed by the violence established in the system.


I took care of what I said as a precaution. I did not give more information and tried to remain calm to understand what was happening. After a couple more questions they let me in.

Still not fully understanding what had happened, I passed the threshold of the door. I was received with joy, there was a great celebration inside the pergola. The veil was uplifted and I reconnected with my emotions.

Anger and sadness were present. I understood that this "border control" had been organized by our group of friends from Palestine. Still resonating with several conversations that I had been able to listen to, before and during the gathering, and having done the translation of the manifesto¹³ that Munir shared with us for this sixth gathering located in Siwa, Egypt, Africa, the East and part of the global south, there emerged in me a greater interest in learning about the political, social and cultural contexts, and also the recognition that the wars and conflicts in the area cannot continue like this, including the occupation of Palestine.

In this sense, I take this opportunity to invite the reader and myself to cross the threshold of a world governed by a paradigm that assumes the direction of development and neoliberalism (through the colonization and oppression of tribes and communities) to one where we recover our sense of belonging, where we have social tools focused on regeneration and where the diversity of knowledge is nourished soil for all.

¹³ Lint for the manifesto *Embroidering Communities with Wisdom*

 **SIWA gathering some ideas.docx**

Later, that same night, our friends from Palestine explained to us that these controls are experienced daily, but their reality does not end there, the controls are only part of oppression, violence and war.



Decolonization has the capacity to highlight the institutions of power that have been created in our communities, families and in our own life experiences, and therefore leads us to a deep questioning to face the oppressions that operate at various levels of our lives.

Layer by layer, with the wisdom of our elders, their valuable memory and the nourishing experiences that we create, will give way to the construction of communities based on solidarity that listen and dialogue freely, aware of their roots. And related to the spirit of ecoversities, that stimulate unlearning with new ways of learning for the regeneration of our Mother Earth and our humanity.



*"We are all leaves of one tree.
We are all waves of one sea."
Thich Nhat Hanh*

About Salo¹⁴

¹⁴ https://www.instagram.com/j_salomoon_e/



Since I entered the traditional education system, I was taught that life revolved around study and work. There was no room for spontaneity, exploration of emotions or free questioning. There was a schedule and homework to complete, a semester to finish, or a grade to earn. Year after year, this was repeated and I did not stop to ask myself questions until I arrived at university.

During those years, outside of my native country, the bubble of comfort I had been in gradually dissolved. This happened not because of the education I received but because of the relationships I cultivated and the life experiences I had. Called by the search for meaning in my life, I slowed down to look beyond the prefabricated plan of the system.

Life with its powerful call, its goodness and blessings, has led me to rediscover my roots. I appreciate the experiences with my family, my friends, my guides, my mestizo culture, my heart and our home, our Mother Earth, since they were the ones that allowed me to observe life from other perspectives.

It is from this interior, collective and regenerative space that I share with you what I experienced in the sixth gathering of Ecoversities in Siwa - Egypt.

