

We Have Always Been Here: Xinka Resistance as a Continuation of Xinka Cosmogony

David Nisthal

Department of Social Work, Thompson School, University of Hawai'i at Mānoa

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Abstract

On October 22, 2017, a peaceful Xinka community protest against the Escobal extractivist mining project was met with brutal repression by the Guatemalan state, revealing enduring patterns of colonial governance and Indigenous dispossession. This article examines Indigenous Xinka resistance to extractivist megaprojects in the southeastern region of Guatemala as an expression of cosmological continuance, rather than merely a reaction to external violence. Drawing on Xinka creation narratives, ancestral governance practices, and relational approaches to knowledge, the analysis traces how encroachments, processes of invisibility, and racialized state violence have shaped Xinka marginalization from the Spanish invasion through the Guatemalan Civil War and into the contemporary extractivist era. Through historical and relational analysis, the article demonstrates that Xinka resistance is rooted in reciprocal relationships with Ixiwá—the manifestation of life—and in ancestral obligations to steward Nana Naru—Earth Mother. Contemporary opposition to the Escobal mine is situated within a long genealogy of territorial continuance that challenges settler-colonial logics that render land and bodies as extractable resources. By centering Xinka cosmology and land-based epistemologies, this article contributes to Indigenous scholarship by reframing extractivism as a struggle over the maintenance of Indigenous life.

Indigenization Statement

I locate myself within the cosmological map of Xinka lineage and diaspora through my maternal line. My grandmother was born within ancestral Xinka territories, and our family remains largely campesino—rural farmers whose practices continue to sustain Indigenous milpa systems and forms of communal land governance. This lineage has shaped my understanding of reciprocity, relational responsibility, and collective forms of resistance.

My family's migration to the United States is part of a broader history of displacement shaped by U.S.-backed violence and the Guatemalan Civil War, which forced many Central American communities into diaspora. This context situates me within an urban Xinka diaspora that maintains ongoing, intergenerational ties to ancestral territory, even across distance and rupture. While I am racialized in the United States as a Brown, Latino man, I identify—as my grandmother did—as someone whose lineage is rooted in Xinka territories and ways of life. Being in diaspora reflects

how colonial and state violence displaces Indigenous Peoples while also working to erase Indigenous identity.

As someone perceived and categorized as male, I also recognize how masculinity is shaped and weaponized through colonial biopolitical systems, particularly in ways that have harmed Indigenous women and queer bodies. My responsibility to these communities is forged through accountability to the intimate relationships that shape my life, grounding myself in the teachings of my beloved spouse and sister, who embody Trans and Two-Spirit beings and ontologies. My research orientations therefore draw directly from Indigenous feminist and queer frameworks that center the knowledge, autonomy, and resistance of these communities. This grounding informs my commitment to anti-imperial, anti-capitalist, and community-centered research that is reciprocal, accountable, and rooted in solidarity with Indigenous struggles.

Introduction

On October 22, 2017, Xinka and neighboring communities gathered in the town of Casillas, within the department of Santa Rosa, Guatemala, to peacefully protest the ongoing extractivist project known as El Escobal, one of the country's largest mining operations and a major global silver reserve (Rivera, 2017). Explosions and seismic activity from the mine had already disrupted daily life, generating fear and instability throughout the region. That morning, community members prepared for a day of song, dance, and storytelling, assembling along the main highway leading to the mine. Without warning or judicial authorization, the Guatemalan National Civil Police fired tear gas into the crowd (Rivera, 2017). Canisters were launched not only at demonstrators but into nearby homes and clinics, harming dozens of residents. This disproportionate use of force reflects a broader pattern of state violence directed toward Indigenous communities defending their territories, and reveals the Guatemalan state's continued alignment with extractivist development projects. Yet the events at Casillas raise a deeper question: why are collective acts of caring for land, water, and community so often treated as threats requiring repression?

Indigenous Xinka communities, whose territories are situated within the southeastern regions of Guatemala¹, have long enacted resistance through the protection of their ancestral lands. This article argues that their resistance to extractivism is not solely a political action; rather, it is an ancestral obligation that emerges from Xinka cosmogony itself. Drawing upon oral traditions, community voices, historical analysis, and contemporary accounts of Xinka organizing, this article examines how Xinka understandings of reciprocity, relational responsibility, and collective life have shaped resistance across successive waves of invasion. Tracing histories of Spanish invasion, *ladinización*, the Guatemalan Civil War, and contemporary struggles against the Escobal mine, I argue that Xinka resistance must be understood as an expression of continuance rooted in ancestral commitments to maintain harmonious relationships with territory, community, and the wider web of life. Through this lens, the protection of land and water is not only a political act, but the realization of a living cosmogony.

Ways of Knowing Through Relational Accountability

In a Xinka context, life is understood as shared and communal rather than lived in isolation. Xinka communities acknowledge that they are part of a network of relationships bound together through the *Wiriki Na Rahlki*—the sacred creative force that animates all life (Lopez Ramirez, 2007). Because humans share this bond with nonhuman relatives including animals, plants, rivers, mountains, and the natural world, they carry ancestral obligations to live in harmony and balance with one another. As Maya Kaqchikel scholar Aura Cumes reminds us, Indigenous ontologies orient toward all living beings as sacred; therefore, what Western

¹ According to Xinka ancestral authorities, ancestral Xinka territory is located within the southeastern regions of Guatemala, specifically spanning the contemporary departments (provinces) of Santa Rosa, Jalapa, and Jutiapa.

frameworks may classify as an object or resource—separating human life from the natural world—Indigenous ontologies guide us to receive as relatives that possess a living, binding energetic force living within all forms of life (Cumes & Fúnez-Flores, 2025). Relational accountability then emerges from this cosmological understanding of existence. It is the recognition that relationships are not merely connections, but living commitments that generate responsibilities. Therefore, reciprocity functions not only as a practice but as an ethical orientation guiding how individuals engage family, community, territory, and the wider web of life. Commitments to harmony, balance, and reciprocity are continually realized through the everyday practices that Xinka communities enact within their homes, communities, and territories.

Relational accountability shapes this article by recognizing that relationships give rise to responsibilities and therefore require accountability to the communities from which knowledge emerges. This aligns with Opaskwayak Cree scholar Shawn Wilson’s theorizing of relational accountability as a methodological approach grounded in an Indigenous community’s knowledge within their own context, ensuring that research is not extractive but actively contributing to Indigenous struggles for self-determination (Wilson, 2008). Because Xinka knowledge is carried through relationships, the voices of elders, community members, activists, and scholars are centered throughout this article. Drawing upon a framework of reciprocity and accountability, this article works through a relational analysis of existing historical literature compiled through secondary sources and the works of other scholars, alongside public media documentation and community repositories—such as those provided by the Museo Xinka in their publicly available educational materials (Cooperative El Recuerdo San Pedro Pinula, 2018). Local, community-based journalistic reports are engaged to honor the voices already speaking on the frontlines.

This methodology is clarified through Maya Q'eqchi' and Xinka scholar Lorena Cabnal's understanding of how Indigenous lands and bodies are sites of targeted colonial and patriarchal violence and extraction (Cabnal, 2016). Methodologically, tracing these connections allows the text to function in solidarity with Indigenous resistance by refusing to see community knowledge merely as a static data source, engaging instead relationally with these teachings as wisdom and a path toward Indigenous autonomy. Oral teachings documented by elders anchor discussions of Xinka cosmogony and the principles that guide community life. Published interviews and media testimonios² provide vital accounts of how Xinka communities continue to enact these principles through everyday practices and political struggle. Analyzing secondary historical literature helps trace longer genealogies of colonial invasion, resistance, and continuance across time.

Approaching these materials through relational accountability means reading them in conversation with one another rather than privileging colonial forms of knowledge production over community knowledge. This orientation centers Xinka ways of knowing, being, and relating while challenging colonial frameworks that have attempted to render Xinka communities invisible. Rather than interpreting Xinka communities through narratives of disappearance, or as confined to the past, this article approaches their stories, teachings, and actions as expressions of their continuance. In doing so, the article seeks to honor the relationships from which this knowledge emerges and contribute to the ongoing centering of Xinka voices, experiences, and understandings of the world.

Xinka Cosmogony: Reciprocity as Guiding Ethic

² While literally translated as "testimonies," *testimonios* in this context represent first-person political and narrative accounts. They function as intentional, community-based interventions enacted in solidarity with Indigenous struggles for autonomy and self-determination.

In Xinka cosmogony, before animals, waters, mountains, skies, stars, humans, and the entirety of the cosmos—there existed Wiriki Na Rahlki, a sacred, creative force that sustains and gives rise to life (Lopez Ramirez, 2007). Although often translated into Spanish as *palabra* (word), within a Xinka context this concept signifies far more than the written or spoken word. Wiriki Na Rahlki manifests as the primordial energy characterized by stillness, darkness, and emptiness, yet holding within itself beauty, intelligence, strength, and the potential for love, laughter, poetry, song, and dance. It represents a cosmic state of harmony from which all existence becomes possible. As Xinka elder Virgilio Monterosso (Don Virgilio)³ teaches, animated through Wiriki Na Rahlki were three foundational and sacred energies—water, fire, and wind—which converged and generated the necessary movement for creation (Lopez Ramirez, 2007). Through these cosmic movements emerged the sky, alongside Nana Naru (Earth Mother), and the diverse forms of life inhabiting the planet. These interconnected beings exist as direct expressions of the primordial forces that brought forth and continue to nurture the living world.

Through oral traditions, Xinka communities understand themselves as descendants within a much older cosmic lineage. Because the natural world preceded humanity, mountains, rivers, stones, plants, and animals are not viewed as resources existing apart from human life, but as elder relatives with whom humans share a common origin (Lopez Ramirez, 2007). Xinka cosmogony teaches that life is sacred because all beings emerge through Wiriki Na Rahlki and remain bound together through this shared ancestry. Consequently, the world is not something to be possessed or exploited, but a living community to which humans belong. The connection

³ Biographical details for Don Virgilio are drawn from oral history interviews conducted by Xinka community leader Ramiro López Ramírez. Don Virgilio grew up in Chiquimulilla, Santa Rosa, and was 111 years old at the time his *testimonio* was transcribed.

between Xinka communities and Nana Naru is therefore not one of separation or distance, but of deep kinship, where the natural world is approached as a living relative rather than an object. Through this kinship, humans and Nana Naru share an interconnected and interdependent bond—the earth exists as the sustaining elder, while humans hold a sacred duty to protect the earth in return. It is from this cosmological foundation that Xinka understandings of human life and responsibility emerge, principles that become more fully realized through the story of the creation of the first Hurak—the first human.⁴

The First Hurak

The Xinka creation story of how the first human was brought into being is taught and shared by Xinka elder Sebastián Hernández from Guazacapán, Santa Rosa (Cooperativa El Recuerdo San Pedro Pinula, 2018). In this account, Tiwix o Ow Kajna Tata⁵ set out to form the first human—Hurak—by gathering trees. From the pile, the creator chose an árbol de pito⁶ and shaped the initial being. This form could barely walk, however, and quickly forgot its maker. Disappointed, the creative force tried again, gathering the finest clay from the most fertile soils and molding it into human form. This Hurak was able to walk, and Tiwix o Ow Kajna Tata, delighted by the creation, called for rain and wind. Yet as the elements arrived, Hurak was destroyed. Learning from these attempts, the creator molded another being from the same clay and built a great bonfire with dry trees. When the fire burned at its brightest and hottest, the form

⁴ It is critical to distinguish the Xinka term *Hurak* (meaning human or person) from the Maya sacred energy *Huracán* (associated with wind and sky in K'iche' cosmogony). Though phonetically similar, *Hurak* belongs to the distinct, non-Mayan linguistic isolate of the Xinka language and carries its own specific ontological meaning within this creation account.

⁵ Within Xinka cosmology, *Tata Tiwix* is a creative force that embodies both solar and lunar energies, representing the vital cosmic balance required for existence.

⁶ The *árbol de pito* (*Erythrina berteroana*) is a coral tree native to Mexico and Central America, valued for its medicinal properties and ecological role in traditional Mesoamerican agro-ecosystems, as well as its spiritual significance within Maya cosmogony.

was placed within the embers. After some time, it was removed and placed outside to cool. A gentle breeze passed over the body, and Hurak stood tall and began to walk. Tiwix o Ow Kajna Tata called forth the heavy winds and rains once more, and this time Hurak did not break. The first human, now fully tempered, offered ceremony in gratitude to the creative force, and was whole.⁷

The story of the first Hurak serves as a teacher for understanding how life emerges through relationship rather than domination. Within this narrative, Ixiwá—the physical manifestation of the sacred force that animates all existence—is revealed through the very elements that participate in the creation of human life (Cooperativa El Recuerdo San Pedro Pinula, 2018). Trees, soil, clay, fire, wind, and rain are not objects or resources, but active participants in the formation of Hurak. In this sense, Hurak is never separate from Ixiwá but is bound to them from the very beginning. The repeated testing of Hurak demonstrates that life is not achieved through mastery over the natural world, but through learning to exist in reciprocal balance with it (Lopez Ramirez, 2007). The completion of Hurak is marked not by power or conquest, but by ceremony. Offering ceremony is not merely symbolic; it represents a way of being that affirms the mutual bond between humans and all forms of life. Therefore, Xinka cosmogony situates human and nonhuman life within a constellation of interconnected relationships that must continually be nurtured and sustained.

Life as a constellation of relationships signifies that existence is never lived in isolation. Human beings are not separate from the natural world or from one another; instead, they participate within an interconnected and interdependent web of life. Reciprocity, then, becomes the continual work of maintaining harmonious alignment with the universe. Through these

⁷ In the Xinka language, *Hurak* also serves as the numeral description for the number 20, signifying a "whole count" or a complete being.

connections emerge commitments and responsibilities that orient how one ought to live. Xinka communities continue to embody these principles through everyday practices, such as greeting rivers before bathing, asking permission before entering forests, or offering thanks before harvesting fruit from trees (Sippel & Sippel, 2024). These actions function as protocols of relational governance that recognize Ixiwá as a living presence rather than an extractable resource. During community ceremonies, reciprocity is put into practice as members bring flowers, candles, fruits, and other offerings that represent both their tie to Nana Naru and the labor that sustains their families and communities. In this way, relationships give rise to sacred commitments, and these commitments transform into responsibilities that guide how life is lived in reciprocal balance.

Territory as Relationship

Because relationships generate responsibilities, reciprocity extends directly to interpersonal connections and to territories. Territory within Xinka thought encompasses far more than a description of land or geography; it is a living network of relationships that bind humans, animals, waters, mountains, plants, ancestors, and sacred energies together. The body itself participates within this web of connections and cannot be isolated from them. Commitments to family, community, and the natural world are therefore inseparable, as each is sustained through reciprocal balance with Ixiwá and Nana Naru. Territory is thus not an object to be possessed, but an ontology that emerges through relationship.

This understanding is deepened through the *Cuerpo-Territorio* framework developed by Maya Q'eqchi' and Xinka scholar Lorena Cabnal (2016). Writing from an Indigenous communitarian feminist perspective, Cabnal argues that the body and territory are simultaneous sites of both colonial violence and Indigenous resistance. Because territory is not confined to

land and water, but includes the emotional, spiritual, communal, and embodied dimensions of life, Indigenous bodies—particularly those of Indigenous women and queer peoples—have been historically targeted by colonial and patriarchal systems seeking to fracture these sacred bonds. *Cuerpo-Territorio* highlights how colonial violence enacted upon the land is simultaneously violence enacted upon Indigenous bodies, while also revealing how healing and reclamation emerge through the protection of territory (Cawayu & Vertommen, 2025). Reciprocity, then, is not abstract; it is actively enacted through movement, labor, ceremony, and collective care for one another and for the Earth. Through this lens, Xinka ontology directly challenges settler-colonial logics that reduce land and bodies to commodities to be extracted and controlled.

Historical Waves of Invasion and Enduring Resistance

Because Xinka life is rooted in reciprocal relationships, imperial interventions have always constituted an assault on both the body and territory. From a Xinka perspective, colonial invasion is a physical occupation of land alongside a systemic attempt to fracture the sacred connections that bind communities to their territories, waters, ancestors, knowledge systems, and ways of life. Settler-colonial powers—threatened by Indigenous forms of governance and spatial organization—have long relied upon brutal violence, dispossession, and erasure to render Xinka Peoples invisible and disrupt these relational webs. Tracing the historical waves of invasion reveals the structural attempts to dismantle Xinka life, as well as the persistent power of Xinka continuance across generations. To understand why contemporary struggles remain deeply bound to community and territory, it is necessary to examine the historical processes that attempted—yet ultimately failed—to sever these relationships.

The Spanish Invasion

Before the Spanish invasion of 1524, Xinka communities were situated across the southeastern region of Iximulew⁸ (Guatemala), extending from the Río La Paz in the east to the Río Michatoya in the west and encompassing what are today the departments of Escuintla, Santa Rosa, and portions of Jalapa and Jutiapa (Dary Fuentes, 2016). Xinka Peoples were organized through networks of *pueblos* (communities) that collectively formed regional confederations, with local leadership structures guiding community affairs and territorial stewardship. While *pueblos* such as Chiquimulilla, Atiquipaque, and Guaymango maintained distinct forms of governance, they remained connected through shared territory and reciprocal relationships. These connections shaped how communities cared for the land, made decisions, and sustained communal life prior to Spanish arrival.

The first encounter between Spanish forces and Xinka communities occurred in 1524 when the *pueblo* of Atiquipaque⁹ confronted Pedro de Alvarado, who led Spanish cavalry advancing from the northeastern region of Iximulew into southeastern territories (Dary Fuentes, 2015). This invasion moved eastward from Atiquipaque and eventually reached Guazacapán, where Spanish forces, accompanied by Kaqchikel Maya and Choluteca auxiliaries, carried out coordinated assaults on Xinka communities. In response, Xinka Peoples organized across their territories and mounted fierce armed resistance. Their ability to coordinate across multiple communities and defend shared territories contributed to several early victories against the invaders and their allies. These confrontations reveal how Xinka communities actively protected their lands, forms of governance, and ways of life.

⁸ *Iximulew* translates literally to "land of corn" in the Mayan K'iche' language. It is intentionally utilized by Indigenous communities to refer to the territory currently known as Guatemala as a means of decentering colonial cartographic designations.

⁹ The historical Xinka town of Atiquipaque no longer exists as a physical community; it is documented to have been located within the modern-day municipality of Taxisco in southeastern Guatemala before its dissolution.

Despite these initial victories, Spanish incursions escalated into genocide, enslavement, and territorial dispossession (Dary Fuentes, 2015). Xinka populations were drastically reduced, particularly through the introduction of European diseases. A visible legacy of this violence remains in *El Puente de los Esclavos*¹⁰, located within the department of Santa Rosa. The bridge was built in 1592 by enslaved Xinka Peoples to facilitate Spanish eastward expansion into what is now El Salvador. Beyond military force, Spanish colonialism sought to rupture the relationships through which Xinka communities organized life. These acts of violence laid the groundwork for colonial systems of control that imposed rigid racial hierarchies to organize social and political life. Over time, these structural inequities gave rise to assimilationist strategies aimed at severing Indigenous Peoples, including the Xinka, from their territories, systems of governance, and cosmologies (Batz, 2024).

Racial Hierarchies & *Ladinizacion*

The Spanish imposed rigid identities and institutions rooted in whiteness and patriarchy, disproportionately marginalizing African and Indigenous bodies (Batz, 2024). These racial hierarchies homogenized diverse peoples into imposed classifications such as *indio*, *negro*, *mestizo*, and *ladino*¹¹—categories that governed access to citizenship, mobility, labor, and state protection (Martínez Salazar, 2012). Racial hierarchies also disrupted Indigenous geographies by redefining territory through colonial cartographic systems that claimed land and centralized power. Colonial centers were established to regulate the movement of African and Indigenous

¹⁰ *El Puente de los Esclavos* translates to "The Bridge of the Slaves" and is located in the department of Santa Rosa. Today, Xinka communities reclaim this historic colonial site as a space of collective memory and resistance, gathering at the bridge to conduct ceremonies honoring ancestral survival and contemporary continuance.

¹¹ Historically emerging from colonial *casta* systems to categorize individuals of mixed heritage, African descent, or acculturated Indigenous identities, the terms *ladino* and *mestizo* are used in contemporary Guatemala to designate non-Indigenous populations, playing a central role in national discussions of race and citizenship.

Peoples, while categories such as *mestizo* and *ladino* functioned as tools of assimilation that enforced conformity to European identities. In this way, racial hierarchies operated as a mechanism to control bodies, reshaping how communities understood territory, belonging, and governance.

Ladinización functioned as a socio-political strategy aimed at whitening African and Indigenous Peoples through their incorporation into European racial identities (Sachse, 2014). This process was enabled through displacement and labor exploitation. Spanish economic systems relied heavily on plantation agriculture, requiring a steady labor force for the production of cacao, corn, and later coffee. Xinka communities were displaced from their territories and forced into labor systems that served colonial economic interests. Communities subjected to displacement were often absorbed into the imposed categories of *indio*, *mestizo*, or *ladino*. As a result, large portions of southeastern Guatemala came to be seen as lacking Indigenous populations, while remaining Xinka communities were increasingly rendered Spanish-speaking and non-Indigenous within the colonial imagination. The Christian church played a significant role in consolidating settler power through religious conversion (Martínez Salazar, 2012). Conversion efforts were conducted exclusively in Spanish, further marginalizing the Xinka language and contributing to its near extinction as speakers were punished for its use.

Ladinización also persisted because Xinka communities did not conform to colonial expectations of Indigeneity, raising enduring questions regarding who could be recognized as Indigenous in Guatemala (Sachse, 2014). Colonial and later state definitions of Indigeneity relied upon rigid markers such as speaking one's Indigenous language, attire, and other visible expressions of cultural continuity. Xinka communities frequently fell outside these imposed categories, in part because centuries of genocide, enslavement, displacement, and language

repression had profoundly altered community life (Dary Fuentes, 2015). Xinka clothing traditions were rooted in what the land provided. Men commonly wore white cotton shirts and cotton pants suited for agricultural labor, while women often wore cotton skirts and blouses embroidered with representations of flowers, fruits, animals, and other elements of the natural world. Unlike many neighboring Maya communities, Xinka Peoples did not traditionally wear *traje*, *corte* or *huipil*¹² garments that colonial authorities and later Guatemalan state institutions often used as visible markers of Indigenous belonging. Despite these colonial definitions of who counted as Indigenous and where Indigenous peoples belonged, Xinka communities persisted and adapted to the conditions imposed upon them.

Xinka existence itself demonstrates that colonial efforts to erase Indigenous identity never achieved their intended outcome. Even as colonial rule attempted to sever relationships to territory, governance, language, and community life, Xinka Peoples continued and adapted their forms of resistance to changing political, economic, and social conditions (Dary Fuentes, 2016). One expression of this can be seen in the continuation and maintaining of communal lands and kinship-based governance systems. The community of Jumaytepeque provides a particularly significant example as they maintained communal lands managed through family and community governance structures, with agriculture serving as a primary form of livelihood (Dary Fuentes, 2016). During the eighteenth century, Xinka communities fought to recover lands that had been seized by the Spanish Crown and ultimately succeeded in purchasing them back (Toro, 2022). And while future incursions with the Guatemalan state would challenge their claim to

¹² Within Indigenous Maya communities, traditional attire (*traje*), woven skirts (*corte*), and woven blouses (*huipil*) serve as profound expressions of cultural continuity, encoded with complex cosmological principles and community identities woven directly into the embroidered patterns.

these lands, Xinka communities at this point strategically utilized colonial legal frameworks to secure stewardship of their territories.

Guatemalan Civil War

The Guatemalan Civil War (1960–1996) unleashed the most intense state violence against Indigenous Peoples since the Spanish invasion (Batz, 2024). Although framed by the Guatemalan state as a war against communism and socialist guerrilla movements, the conflict functioned as a genocidal campaign that disproportionately targeted Indigenous communities, particularly during the presidencies of Generals Fernando Romeo Lucas García and José Efraín Ríos Montt in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Backed by U.S. and Israeli military and intelligence support, counterinsurgency operations swept across Indigenous territories under the assumption that Indigenous communities aligned with guerrilla movements because of their longstanding struggles for land and self-determination (Batz, 2024). While some Indigenous people did participate in revolutionary movements, the state's logic frequently collapsed Indigenous existence itself into insurgency. More than 200,000 people were killed during the horrific thirty-six-year war, the overwhelming majority of whom were Indigenous. The violence of the Civil War represented another attempt to sever the relationships that connected Indigenous Peoples to their territories.

In 1996, the Guatemalan government and the *Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional de Guatemala*—the coalition representing leftist guerrilla forces—finalized the *Acuerdo de Paz Firme y Duradera* (Peace Accords), culminating a series of negotiated agreements that marked a significant turning point (Batz, 2024). Within these accords, the Xinka Peoples were recognized alongside Maya and Garifuna Peoples as Indigenous *pueblos* of Guatemala (United Nations [UN], 1995). This acknowledgment revealed a profound contradiction; at the time of the accords,

a national census indicated that only 433 individuals self-identified as Xinka. After centuries of genocide, displacement, assimilation, and repression, many families had learned to distance themselves from an Indigenous identity in order to survive. This visibility from the state arrived alongside the legacy of colonial attempts to erase Xinka identity. Simultaneously, however, the accords created new political openings by exposing the limitations of national narratives that had long claimed the Xinka no longer existed, allowing Xinka communities to strategically engage legal frameworks to protect their territories.

The story of the postwar period is another layer of evidence to Xinka continuance. From the 1996 census to the latest census in 2018, the number of self-identified Xinka Peoples has increased from 433 to nearly 300,000 (Aguilar-Støen & Sveinsdóttir, 2024). This dramatic increase does not only reflect the emergence of a new population, but the reassertion of a community who has persisted despite centuries of invasion. Colonial narratives such as “*Aqui no ay Indios!*”—*Here there are no Indians!*¹³ which claimed that Indigenous communities did not exist in southeastern Guatemala, had functioned as mechanisms for denying Indigenous presence and legitimizing dispossession. The resurgence of Xinka identity directly challenged this narrative. Rather than disappearing, Xinka communities maintained their relationships, even when those relationships were rendered invisible by the state. The postwar resurgence of Xinka identity therefore represents a continuation of longstanding practices of survival, adaptation, and resistance.

Living Cosmogony: Collective Life & Contemporary Resistance

¹³ This derogatory refrain reflects deeply entrenched, commonplace state and societal messaging aimed at erasing Indigenous presence in southeastern Guatemala—a narrative of erasure experienced by community members both within the region and throughout the diaspora.

Understanding how Xinka cosmogony is brought to life requires a look at both the historical tracing of how Xinka communities have organized their survival, and how contemporary Xinka life continues to enact cosmogony in the present. Grounded in relational processes, Xinka principles and values show that everyday life is shaped through the ongoing care, maintenance, and strengthening of ties with territory, community, and the broader web of life. It is also through these deep connections that sacred obligations emerge, particularly when they are threatened or disrupted. In this way, contemporary Xinka continuance is inseparable from a cosmological grounding that gives rise to organized and varied forms of resistance. Through the maintenance of governance systems, community practices of reciprocity, as well as organized protest and legal contestation, Xinka communities continue to bring their cosmogony to life.

Xinka Communal Governance

Xinka communities have sustained traditional land stewardship through expansive kinship systems that extend beyond blood relations and are supported by ancestral authorities—a council of elders and leaders who guide the organization and continuity of Xinka communities (Toro, 2022). These systems enable the collective management of territory in accordance with Xinka cosmological values. Colonial and state projects repeatedly sought to sever this authority over land. As noted previously, the community of Jumaytepeque fought to recover their territory from the Spanish Crown, yet these lands were seized once again under the Guatemalan Republic. In 1916, President Manuel Estrada Cabrera transferred their communal lands into municipal control, legally stripping the Xinka authority of ownership (Toro, 2022). While subsequent efforts to reclaim the land were halted by state repression during the Civil War, their resistance endured and in 2019 the community once again secured their land deeds through the Property

Registry, which recognized them as the property owners. Despite centuries of forced displacement, these lands remain communal, caretaken by the families that live and work on them, along with community councils and elders.

Following the 1996 Peace Accords, Xinka communities strengthened their community councils, which then represented what is known as the *autoridades ancestrales*¹⁴, who support stewardship of Xinka communal lands (Dary Fuentes, 2016). Xinka elder Expectación García Pérez (Don Chonito), a founding member of these ancestral councils in Jumaytepeque, describes Xinka continuance as rooted in the responsibility to care for Nana Naru as an ancestral obligation (Osorio, 2024b). Don Chonito also helped establish the *Parlamento Xinka*, a central collective that has become a leading organization advancing Xinka rights to land, water, and self-determination. For Don Chonito, Xinka continuance is a struggle, but one grounded in an obligation to sustain Xinka knowledge and ways of life (Osorio, 2024b). Through the maintenance of communal lands and the centering of ancestral authorities within community governance, Xinka communities continue to enact reciprocity as a living framework for collective life.

Reciprocity through Everyday Life

Xinka communities enact their cosmological principles through the everyday practices that sustain collective existence. While community members move across both urban and rural spaces, these bonds continue to be nurtured through gatherings, ceremony, foodways, and mutual care. Corn remains central within Xinka households and is sustained through the milpa system—

¹⁴ While operating in parallel with other regional Indigenous organizational structures, contemporary Xinka ancestral councils are composed of elders and community leaders who guide collective decision-making, defend ancestral lands and waters, and steward the revitalisation of Xinka language, culture, and traditions.

a Mesoamerican agricultural practice that cultivates corn alongside beans, squash, chilies, fruits, medicinal plants, and other crops. For many campesino¹⁵ families, the milpa system remains a vital part of daily sustenance, providing food for households and communities while reaffirming relationships with Ixiwá. Through the cultivation, sharing, and preparation of food, reciprocity becomes a lived reality rather than an abstract principle.

An expression of this continuance can be found in the *atoleadas*¹⁶ in the community of Nancita, in the department of Santa Rosa—a community gathering tradition more than one hundred years old that brings people together to share *atol*, a corn-based drink prepared from crops grown and harvested by local *campesino* families (Osorio, 2024a). These gatherings, in addition to feeding the community, create spaces for music, dance, storytelling, laughter, and poetry that strengthen communal ties. Through the sharing of food, labor, knowledge, and time, reciprocity is continually renewed. Such practices are not remnants of the past but contemporary expressions of a living cosmogony. Through these community gatherings and the continued cultivation of the corn and local crops, Xinka communities enact their ancestral commitments to live in harmony with one another, with territory, and with the broader interconnected world. These commitments weave family, community, and shared spaces together through the principle of reciprocity, guiding both everyday practices and community governance. This ontology shapes how communities respond when territory is threatened, meaning that contemporary struggles to protect land and water emerge as an extension of ancestral responsibilities, not as

¹⁵ A Spanish term meaning peasant or rural farmer, *campesino* carries distinct political and socioeconomic connotations in Guatemala, often designating small-scale agriculturalists who farm communal plots or provide labor for large agro-industrial estates.

¹⁶ This tradition is centered within the Xinka community of Nancita. The community intentionally cultivates the corn collectively and utilizes traditional clay pots to prepare the *atol*. This gathering occurs annually as a communal preparation for honoring the town's patron saint, *Santo Domingo* (Saint Dominic), seamlessly weaving ancestral agricultural reciprocity with local spiritual practices.

isolated social or political actions. Within this precise context, the struggle against the Escobal mine becomes clear.

The Case of El Escobal

The Escobal Mine is a large extractivist megaproject located in San Rafael Las Flores, Santa Rosa, dedicated to the extraction of silver, zinc, copper, and gold (Dary Fuentes et al., 2022). Initially operated by Tahoe Resources and later acquired by Pan American Silver, the mine began operations in 2011 and remained active between 2014 and 2017. From the outset, Xinka communities raised concerns regarding environmental degradation, threats to water sources, and disruptions to everyday communal life (Dary Fuentes et al., 2022). Daily movement between *aldeas*¹⁷—once central to familial relationships, community gatherings, agricultural labor, and ceremonial practices—became increasingly shaped by surveillance, militarization, and fear (Aguilar-Støen & Sveinsdóttir, 2024). For many Xinka communities, Escobal represented not simply a mining project, but another wave of invasion into ancestral territory.

The impacts of Escobal damage not only the ecology of Xinka territories, but also Xinka ways of life. Water sources, including springs and rivers, were contaminated, affecting drinking water, agricultural production, and traditional fishing practices (Dary Fuentes et al., 2022). Essential crops such as corn, beans, and squash were placed at risk, while roads and pathways connecting communities to schools, work sites, ceremonial spaces, and sacred locations were altered or restricted. Despite Guatemala's ratification of International Labour Organization Convention No. 169 (ILO Convention 169) which guarantees Indigenous Peoples the right to free, prior, and informed consultation regarding projects affecting their territories, Xinka

¹⁷A Spanish term denoting a small town, village, or rural subdivision to a central municipal town. In Guatemala, terms like *caserio* or *paraje* can also be used to describe a village.

ancestral authorities were not adequately consulted regarding the mine's development (International Labour Organization, 1996; Prensa Comunitaria, 2024). This exclusion represents a pattern that goes far deeper than a legal violation. Because territory is understood within a Xinka ontology not as property, but as a living network of relationships connecting people, water, land, ancestors, and future generations, the denial of consultation constituted a direct disruption of Xinka governance and an assault upon the reciprocal relationships that sustain communal life.

Escobal's violations through the desecration of ecology, community life practices, and the exclusion of consultation further demonstrate the colonial practice of governing Indigenous territory without Indigenous consent. While extractivist projects treat territory as an inert resource, Xinka communities continually show it to be a living network of relationships. Land, water, mountains, rivers, and communities are bound together in reciprocal relationships that make Xinka life possible. The authorization of an extractivist project without the participation of Xinka ancestral authorities is therefore not only a political act, but a relational and spiritual rupture. Escobal's violation to not uphold ILO Convention 169, reproduces the same logics of dispossession that accompanied earlier waves of invasion, when encroachment on Xinka territory was facilitated through law, force, and the attempted erasure of Indigenous governance. Thus, Escobal represents a contemporary wave of colonial invasion, transforming living territory into property and profit while undermining the reciprocal relationships through which Xinka communities sustain life. For Xinka Peoples, resistance to the mine is not only opposition to extraction, but an expression of their responsibility to protect Nana Naru and Ixiwá, upholding the relationships that bind past, present, and future generations together.

Xinka communities have responded to Escobal through community organizing, legal advocacy, peaceful protest, and the leadership of ancestral authorities. The militarization surrounding the mine transformed everyday life through surveillance, checkpoints, and the criminalization of community members, reshaping movement across ancestral territory into a landscape marked by fear and uncertainty (Dary Fuentes et al., 2022). Xinka organizing and peaceful mobilizations have been met with state-sanctioned repression; the peaceful protest in Casillas in 2017 added to the tapestry of how organized resistance against the mine is met with aggressive state actions. A devastating example of the repression faced by Xinka resistance is the assassination of Xinka elder and ancestral authority Don Noé Gómez Barrera in 2023, near his home in Jutiapa, Guatemala. A father, grandfather, and member of the *Parlamento del Pueblo Xinka de Guatemala*, Don Noé dedicated decades of his life to the protection of Xinka lands and waters, organizing against multiple extractivist megaprojects, including Escobal (Alvarez, 2025b). On October 28, 2023, Don Noé was murdered, shot as he made his way back from a day of community work. To this day, the Guatemalan state has not identified suspects in his murder. The assassination of Don Noé reflects the profound risks faced by Indigenous land defenders throughout Guatemala and the broader patterns of violence that continue to accompany extractive development. Despite these conditions, Xinka resistance has remained steadfast. Xinka efforts engaging legal paths, political pressure, and consistent community mobilization resulted in the temporary suspension of Escobal's operations in 2017 (Alvarez, 2025a), demonstrating the strength of collective action rooted in ancestral responsibility. Although the mine has not been permanently closed, Xinka resistance affirms that the defense of territory remains inseparable from the continuity of collective life.

Conclusion

This article has held the question of what happens when a community whose life is grounded in deep ancestral relationships to land, community, and the cosmos encounters waves of colonial violence that seek to sever those relationships. It has also asked what it means when a community's commitment to protecting the web of relationships that sustains life is interpreted as a threat and met with repression. The case of Xinka resistance to contemporary extractivist projects demonstrates that these struggles cannot be understood solely within the context of political opposition. Rather, they are expressions of longstanding commitments to reciprocity, harmony, and balance that emerge from Xinka cosmogony and continue to guide how life is lived.

The oral traditions that transmit Xinka cosmogony illuminate a world in which all forms of life are bound together through reciprocal relationships and shared responsibilities. These teachings have been carried across generations despite successive waves of invasion, genocide, dispossession, and assimilation. As the historical experiences of Xinka communities demonstrate, colonial projects repeatedly sought to fracture relationships to territory, governance, language, and collective memory. Yet Xinka continuance endured. Resistance adapted to changing political realities while remaining grounded in the same cosmological principles that have long oriented Xinka life. In this sense, resistance is not the source of Xinka continuance; rather, Xinka continuance is what makes resistance possible.

The struggle against the Escobal Mine illustrates how these commitments continue to be enacted in the present. Xinka communities organize not simply in reaction to extractivist development, but as an expression of their responsibilities to protect territory, water, community, and future generations. Through ancestral governance, collective organizing, ceremony, and everyday practices of care, Xinka communities continue to realize the reciprocal obligations

inherited from their ancestors. These efforts affirm that Xinka Peoples were never absent, never disappeared, and never ceased to exist. They have always been here, continuing to protect Nana Naru and sustain the relationships that make life possible.

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