Cultivating Socio-Ecological Diversity
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In the Amecameca Valley of Mexico’s Central Highland region, human and non-human actors work and struggle together to produce dynamic cultural, economic, and ecological diversity. Small-scale peasant farmers tailor their cultivation practices to the highly variant local agronomic conditions. They also devise creative ways to share labor on their communal ejido plots and improvise alternatives to prohibitively expensive planting and harvesting machinery and chemical inputs.

Maize, the dominant crop in the region and the foundation of local diets and livelihoods, has diversified over 9,000 years of selective breeding and genetic adaptation to the region’s high altitude (2500m). It thrives in the nutrient-rich volcanic soils alongside a wealth of cultivated and uncultivated herbs, legumes, grasses, and flowers, many of which are used for food and medicine by local human communities. Though a few farmers in the valley produce small amounts of hybrid varieties of maize – purchased from commercial seed companies – the vast majority cultivate native varieties that they breed themselves. Unlike genetically-uniform hybrid maize, which is typically fed to animals and considered ill-suited to human consumption, different types of native maize are precisely tailored to a wide range of everyday uses.

Blue, red, white, yellow, and pozole varieties can be harvested and eaten fresh, or dried, ground into masa flour, and used to make uncountable local dishes. These native varieties fetch the highest prices in the local street market, where farmers from the valley sell their maize as seed, grain, husks, forage, and prepared food items in a market system that they negotiate among themselves. The end of harvest season is a time to celebrate the maize that is a source of food security, livelihood, cultural identity, and biodiversity in this agrarian landscape.