

L A T I N A M E R I C A N I N D I A N
L I T E R A T U R E S :
A Mutual Learning Experience

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FLOWER AND SONG: AZTEC POEMS. Translated by EDWARD KISSAM and MICHAEL SCHMIDT. (London: Anvil Press, 1977. Pp. 143.)

FOLK LITERATURE OF THE TOBA INDIANS. Edited by JOHANNES WILBERT and KARIN SIMONEAU. (Los Angeles: UCLA Latin American Center, 1982. Pp. 597. \$30.00.)

SONS OF THE WIND: THE SEARCH FOR IDENTITY IN SPANISH AMERICAN INDIAN LITERATURE. By BRAULIO MUÑOZ. (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1982. Pp. 321. \$27.50 cloth, \$12.95 paper.)

During the conquest period, numerous Spanish friars devoted much time to learning indigenous languages in order to enhance their efforts at evangelization. In the process, Indian assistants helped them compile a treasure of oral literature for future researchers, one that might otherwise have been lost entirely for lack of a written language (except in the case of the Maya).

Acquisition of additional knowledge progressed slowly throughout the centuries following the conquest. Although there was some interest in pre-Columbian literatures after the early Spanish priests, it was not until the late 1900s that articles in anthropology, linguistics, archaeology, ethnology, ethnohistory, and literature began to produce a wealth of information about various topics relating to early Native American civilizations. These studies were made possible by various factors: the preservation of some literary works; Indians reciting myths, stories, and tales; Mesoamerican codices; other artistic sources; and newly written material by Indians. The results of these studies are valuable for two basic reasons: to suggest solutions to social, economic, and political problems of present-day indigenous communities and to facilitate understanding and interpretation of Indian ideas on the basis of Indian concepts of these societies.¹

The growing interest in Latin American Indian literatures prompted Juan Adolfo Vázquez of the University of Pittsburgh to estab-

lish a new journal, *Latin American Indian Literatures*. Founded in 1977, this journal attracted contributors and readers from many areas of the world. Each biannual issue contained articles about these literatures, narratives (often trilingual with commentaries), book reviews, article abstracts and reviews, an extensive bibliography, notices of new books and journals, notes and news, and an annotated list of books received. In Volume 4, Number 1 (Spring 1980), a new section on rock art was initiated; and in Volume 7, Number 2 (Fall 1983), one on ethnological reports was added. Although the journal will be suspended after Volume 8, Number 2 (Fall 1984), a successor, *Latin American Indian Literatures Journal*, will be published at Geneva College to continue the tradition established by *LAIL*.

Further impetus to the study of these literatures was given in 1982, when the Latin American Indian Literatures Association/Asociación de Literaturas Indígenas Latinoamericanas (LAILA/ALILA) was founded. This organization is dedicated to the following purposes: stimulating and developing interest in indigenous literatures; facilitating the collaboration of researchers, teachers, students, and interested professionals; providing a means for the exchange of ideas and information; encouraging research and the publication of texts and scholarly studies; and supporting the creative literary expression of diverse Indian groups of Latin America. To help achieve these goals, a symposium is held each year and four *Newsletters* are published.² In addition, the association sponsors panels at other professional meetings and encourages its members to participate in outside conferences.

Although there are many types of publications about Latin American Indian literatures, only three will be reviewed here: a translation of poems compiled during the colonial period, a translation of a collection of narratives from contemporary oral literature, and a work discussing *indigenista* literature of Latin America.

When translating material from one language to another, the translator must constantly bear in mind the differences between the two cultures and must give careful consideration to linguistic problems as well as those related to semantics and cultural diversity. In addition to phonological diversities, the phonemic, morphemic, and syntactic structure of both the source and receptor languages must be studied. In relation to the structural problems, the translator must decide whether to use a literal approach or a free translation. Miguel León-Portilla, an outstanding scholar of indigenous literature, prefers a "translation that follows the structural arrangement of the original as closely as possible, thus keeping its linguistic taste, but without doing offense to the genius of the receptor language."³ Also, the translator is confronted with various kinds of problems when trying to convey meanings: how to deal with a concept that has no lexical equivalent in the receptor language,

the diversity of connotations for specific words, the absence of referential markers in one language, stylistic procedures, and other linguistic elements.

In their introduction to *Flower and Song: Aztec Poems*, Edward Kissam and Michael Schmidt briefly discuss some of the problems encountered in translating Nahuatl poetry. To help the reader appreciate these problems, they provide information on the Nahuatl language as well as on devices of the Nahuatl poetic tradition such as rhythm, alliteration, epithets, repetition of syntactical structure, refrains, restricted vocabulary consisting mainly of images, as well as thought levels that are literal, philosophical, mythical, and religious and may all be found in a single statement. Even in translation, refrains and stanzas are the most visible forms. Refrains sometimes appear with slight variations in wording, and their purpose parallels poetic refrains used by other ethnic groups, namely, to provide rhyme, rhythmic unity, assonance, and the effect of phrased punning. Stanzas may resemble an internal dialogue or unite a body of images that encompass precise ideas. Allusions are not uncommon in these poems, and the authors have defined those that they consider most important in the glossary immediately following the text.

To provide the reader with some background on Nahuatl cultures, Kissam and Schmidt summarize information on Aztec history and society, the high civilization of the Toltecs, the missionary interest of the early friars, the sources of the poems, and the relation of contemporary Indian poetry to pre-Columbian poetry. Much credit is given to Fray Bernardino de Sahagún, an early friar who compiled a storehouse of information, including a large number of poems.

The poems are divided into four sections entitled "Songs of Life," "Ritual Songs," "Myths and Legends," and "War." The poems about the war cult include the famed eagle and jaguar warriors, laments over the loss of family and friends, the deceit of allies, the impersonality and insignificance of sacrifice, the celebration of battles, and symbolic accounts of specific campaigns. The latter two themes are the most frequent. The authors state, however, that the categories dealing with life, rituals, and myths and legends are more important poetically than that about war. In these three categories, the Toltec heritage is clearly observable. To demonstrate continuity in the poetic oral tradition and to provide brief illustrations of verse from other Mesoamerican groups, selections translated from Otomi, Lacandon, and Huichol poetry are included in the Appendix. *Cantares mexicanos*, *Romances de los señores de la Nueva España*, and *Veinte himnos sacros de los Nahuas* provided the principal sources of the poems collected in this volume. Secondary sources were *Cantos de los vencidos*, Sahagún's "Anales de Cuauhtitlan"

in the *Epica Náhuatl*, and *Llave de Náhuatl*. Specific sources for each poem are listed along with the translator at the end of the text.⁴

Readers without a knowledge of Nahuatl culture will at least be able to appreciate the beauty of the poetry in this collection. Also, the section entitled "Myths and Legends" will familiarize them with some Nahuatl myths: the formation of the men of the fifth sun (our present Age of Man, according to Nahuatl belief), the origin of human sacrifice, the establishment of corn as sustenance for man, the journey of Quetzalcoatl to the sea, and his transformation into Venus. In the other three sections, some general concepts may be apparent to lay readers, but a more precise knowledge of Nahuatl ideas and beliefs will be needed to interpret these works within the context of meaning of the indigenous poets. As León-Portilla has observed, "Only when the reader of ancient or contemporary Amerindian literatures has become, little by little, informed about the social realities, the world view and the symbolic universe of the corresponding culture, will he be able to perceive the meaning of the message or information that is being offered to him."⁵ León-Portilla himself recently edited a volume of translations from various genres of Nahuatl literature.⁶

Beginning in 1970, Johannes Wilbert undertook the difficult and admirable task of publishing collections of folk literature of marginal tribes of South American Indians. To date he has edited comprehensive volumes on six marginal groups: *Folk Literature of the Warao Indians: Narrative Material and Motif Content*; *Folk Literature of the Selknam Indians: Martin Gusinde's Collection of Selknam Narratives*; and *Folk Literature of the Yamana Indians: Martin Gusinde's Collection of Yamana Narratives*. In collaboration with Karin Simoneau, Wilbert has edited *Folk Literature of the Gê Indians, Volume 1*, and *Folk Literature of the Toba Indians, Volume 1*, the latter being under consideration here. The narratives included in this most recent book were contributed by outstanding researchers working in Argentina: Edgardo J. Cordeu, Rafael Karsten, Robert Lehmann-Nitsche, Alfred Métraux, Sara J. Newberry, Enrique Palavecine, and Buenaventura R. D. Terán. Métraux and Terán provided 158 of the 199 narratives and tale fragments. These scholars recorded the myths and tales between 1912 and 1980 while working among three Toba tribes: the Argentine Toba, the Toba-Pilagá, and the Bolivian Toba.

The narratives are divided into seven categories: "Cosmology and Star Mythology" (seventeen myths), "Cataclysms" (thirty myths), "Origin Stories" (fifty myths), "The Tricksters" (forty-one myths), "Animal Tales" (twenty-four myths), "Heroes and Legendary Beings" (thirty myths), and "Extraordinary Creatures and Places" (seven myths). All three Toba groups are represented in "Cataclysms," "Origin Stories," and "Heroes and Legendary Beings," while the other sections contain

myths of just the Argentine Toba and the Toba-Pilagá. It is not uncommon for the texts to repeat similar myths.⁷ This type of presentation is an extremely precious tool for comparative literary analysis and is certainly most helpful in “tackling the problem of authenticity and provenience” (p. 7).

Done with great care, the translations read very smoothly. In places where explanations are needed to interpret rituals, symbols, or cultural concepts, brief, but clear, footnotes are found at the bottom of the page. Following each narration are the name of the informant (when identified), the source, a summary (in most examples), and the motif content. The conciseness of the summaries makes it possible for the reader to scan a multitude of myths quickly when searching for a particular motif. Motifs are enumerated after the narratives and are categorized and numbered according to Stith Thompson's *Motif-Index of Folk Literature*.⁸ At the end of the volume, motif indices are further broken down into sections entitled Motif Distribution by Narrative, Topical Motif Index, Alphabetical Motif Index, and Motif Distribution by Motif Group. Although a laborious task for editors, this kind of indexing furnishes a comprehensive treatment of the subject. A short glossary provides definitions for words denoting animal and plant life as well as translations for some concepts expressed in Spanish. A bibliography closes this magnificent work.

Like the prior publications in this series, this tome on the Toba Indians not only offers a wealth of information to scholars but will delight the lay reader as well. Discovering the roles of animals, extraordinary creatures, heroes and legendary beings, in addition to such concepts as the origin of living beings and fire, cures, and weapons, may provide an enjoyable means of escape or it may stimulate a desire to learn more in order to understand these fascinating narratives.

The third text to be reviewed here is a completely different kind of publication. In *Sons of the Wind: The Search for Identity in Spanish American Indian Literature*, Braulio Muñoz expresses concern for the destiny of the Indian people of Latin America who have been entangled in the process of cultural definition. Muñoz utilizes literature to interpret “key issues related to cultural development from an Indian point of view” (p. x), and he is quite aware that specialists in literature and the social sciences may misinterpret the task he aims to accomplish. He opens the work by explaining the Spanish American dream for unity, discussing a cultural identity desired by intellectual leaders and tracing the history of this dream to its roots in the colonial period. The beginning chapter establishes several threads that will be interwoven throughout the entire work. One theme is the mestizo as the basis of unity, so well depicted in José Clemente Orozco's 1926 masterpiece, *Cortés y Malintzín*. In accordance with the view of an ideal society as

being mestizo, Muñoz explains, the Spanish religion and language have been used to exploit the Indians and to coerce them into conforming with Spanish traditions. Indians were always expected to participate in this dream by becoming mestizos, which meant that their ethnic identity was to suffer and die. Thus, according to Muñoz, the utopian dream that was supposed to resolve the Indians' problems actually resulted in their destruction.

As a context for his discussion of indigenista writers and their works, Muñoz provides some historical background on the Olmec, Nahuatl, Maya, and Inca civilizations and literature, stressing the need for readers to become acquainted with prequest life and the sociocultural context of the indigenous world before the arrival of the Spaniards. Muñoz explains that numerous writers would try to create in their literature a place for the beings whose society had been devastated, many considering themselves "called" to help these poor creatures find a brighter future. Proceeding up through the Romantic period, Muñoz argues that the resulting literature actually dealt with the Indians' past, not their present or future. He uses León Mera's *Cumandá* and Clorinda Matto Usandivaras's *Aves sin nido* to illustrate the Romantic desire to incorporate the Indian into mainstream society and the inability of those who wanted change to suggest an alternative means to charity.

The remaining chapters are arranged so that background information precedes the elaboration of ideas that would be found in the novels of the period under discussion. The Andean indigenista novel used the Indians' past to exalt and unite indigenous peoples but was critical of Indian superstitions, belief in magic, total identification with nature, and lack of knowledge of their own history as factors that have kept Indians subservient. Both liberal and socialist writers conveyed the message that the only way to help the Indians was to erase their culture and incorporate them into a mestizo society. Muñoz compares the Andean indigenista novel with its parallel in Guatemala. Mario Monteforte Toledo's novels *Entre la piedra y la cruz* and *Donde acaban los caminos* are used to indicate that a culturally united South America has not been created. Muñoz then compares and contrasts the indigenista novels with Mexican novels concentrating on isolated indigenous folk who consequently did not suffer from such degrading living conditions. Although Muñoz discovers both contrasts and similarities between the Mexican and Andean novels, he concludes that they offer no solution for the problems of Indians, whose only escape is depicted as death.

In the next stage of this literature appear the magico-realist novels exemplified so well by José María Arguedas's *El zorro de arriba y el zorro de abajo* and Miguel Angel Asturias's *Hombres de maíz* and *Mulata de tal*. In such works, the dream of cultural unity is now viewed as part of

reality. But although Indians have become part of the *mestizaje*, their social and economic conditions have undoubtedly remained unaltered.

Finally, Muñoz describes the emergence of the new Spanish American novel, with its extremely pessimistic view of Spanish America. The dream of unity lingers on but threatened by an additional fear—the possibility of becoming submerged in an international culture. Muñoz concludes that as long as contemporary writers are addressing crises of national identity, their concern for the Indian will be secondary. Thus, despite centuries of suffering, indigenous peoples will continue to be blown along the same miserable path as though they were merely sons of the wind.

Although the three works reviewed here differ considerably in their aims and accomplishments, all three contribute to the laudable goal of making Latin American Indian literatures more accessible to the interested generalist who does not read either Spanish or Nahuatl. It is to be hoped that such works will make readers aware not only of the historical problems of indigenous peoples but of their continuing plight. Finally, works like the three reviewed here can awaken readers to the awareness that contemporary society can learn much from native American cultures that may be of use in seeking cures for our own ailing civilization.

NOTES

1. Juan Adolfo Vázquez, "The Field of Latin American Indian Literatures," *Latin American Indian Literatures* 1, no. 1 (Spring 1977):10.
2. The first annual meeting was held 21–22 April 1983 at the University of Pittsburgh. Forty-eight papers were presented in the panel sessions. Miguel León-Portilla of the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México gave the keynote address on the topic of "Translating Amerindian Texts—Differences of Culture and Semantics." Johannes Wilbert of the University of California at Los Angeles spoke on "Myths and the Art of Thinking in Images." The Second International Symposium on Latin American Indian Literature was held at George Washington University 27–28 April 1984. More than fifty papers were read, and Peter A. Furst of SUNY, Albany gave the keynote address, "The Contributions of Leonhard Schultze Jena to Latin American Indian Literatures." Edmundo Bendezu of the Universidad de San Marcos in Lima spoke on "José María Arguedas and the Indigenista Novel." The *LAILA/ALILA Newsletter* is published in January, May, September, and December. The first issue covers the yearly symposium, and the other three issues provide information about the organization, members, and their publications, about conferences and symposia, as well as other pertinent news, a periodical index, and selections from Latin American Indian literatures.
3. Miguel León-Portilla. "Translating the Amerindian Texts," *Latin American Indian Literatures* 7, no. 2 (Fall 1982):113.
4. Regarding Nahuatl influences in Chicano poetry, the reader may wish to consult John Bruce-Novoa's *Chicano Poetry: A Response to Chaos* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982).
5. León-Portilla, "Translating the Amerindian Texts," p. 118.
6. See *Native American Mesoamerican Spirituality: Ancient Myths, Discourses, Stories, Doctrines, Hymns, Poems from the Aztec, Yucatec, Quiché Maya, and Other Sacred Traditions*.

(New York: Paulist Press, 1980). This work contains extensive notes and numerous poems translated by Miguel León-Portilla, J. O. Arthur Anderson, Charles Dibble, and Munro S. Edmonson.

7. For example, *Star-Woman*, the great fire, the flood, the long night, the great darkness, the origin of women, the origin of fire, the rainbow snake, the origin of pottery making, Nedamik the transformer, the fox and the jaguar, the mite and the ostrich, the jaguar and the armadillo, Carancho kills the man-eating bird, and Asin.
8. Stith Thompson, *Motif-Index of Folk Literature*, 6 vols. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1955–1958).