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Reflections on How to Study Folktales and Legends From Oral Indigenous Heritage of México

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The article draws from the premise that oral tradition collections of tales and legends of our indigenous peoples are expressions of a deep syncretism between indigenous and Hispanic cultures; in other words, even the tales and legends enunciated in native languages reveal a deep-rooted cultural miscegenation of more than four hundred years. This quality has been frequently denied, especially by cultural policies that attempt at a redemptive function and some anthropological and ethnological studies that, incredibly, insist ignoring the fact that Hispanic presence is completely rooted in a large part of the folkloric collections of the predominantly indigenous communities. The analysis rests upon the study of motifs (as minimal narrative units) in a wide corpus of tales and legends collected in Spanish and indigenous languages, especially Nahuatl, Tének, Mixe, and Maya, published in bilingual editions from the early 20th century to the present. The purpose of the article is to review some of these examples in order to underline the relevance of miscegenation as a defining reality to study of our cultural heritage, as well as understanding ourselves without opening a gap between the indigenous and the Hispanic.

Keywords: syncretism, indigenous peoples, Hispanic peoples, oral tradition, Mexico.

In cultural and global context where there is a reevaluation of the so-called “aboriginal peoples” and their cultures as part of the heritage of humanity, a kind of ethnic equity would finally seem to be glimpsed. However, we continue approaching these cultures from somewhat external perspectives (Western and/or academic, where cultures are treated as objects of study, political or social causes, etc.) without paying attention to the particularities of the historical processes concerning each of these populations. Undoubtedly, the study of folklore has been a channel for gathering knowledge about these “aboriginal” cultures (as well as non-aboriginal ones) but it is of little value if we do not approach from the present standpoint, and if we

disregard an undeniable condition of cultural *interbreeding* that is perpetuated throughout the history of humanity. The intention of these notes is not to judge historical facts, but to accept that five hundred years ago Spanish culture, during wild conquest and after it, spread throughout the territory of Mesoamerica and parts of Aridoamerica. It is also assumed hereby that in Mexico, unlike any other county of the continent, from the inception of former colonial New Spain, a strong process of miscegenation both by means of marriage, forced or not, between Spaniards and natives and also by means of assimilation, forced or not, of cultural elements: from religion and language to artistic and culinary expressions; from agricultural products to the rearing of domestic animals, to name just a few. We should be mindful that the same aspects of African cultures are also present and enduring same processes.¹ It shouldn't be neglected that, in our land, there was already an inter-breed among the peoples. For example, at the time of the conquest, the Aztecs had already dominated a huge part of the territory and partially imposed their language, cosmogony, and customs on other groups.

Traditional Oral Literature of Mexico

In Mexico, more than sixty active indigenous languages are recognized,² but many more peoples are considered indigenous because numerous groups have lost their language and speak only Spanish. Despite the linguistic diversity and the level of precariousness and underdevelopment in which much of these communities live, their socio-cultural context has visibly changed. For example, around the 1940s, when Pablo González Casanova collected a sufficient corpus of tales from the oral tradition of indigenous peoples in their na-

¹ The presence of the artistic and cultural manifestations of black slaves in New Spain has been studied from different disciplines, although there is still a lack of knowledge about the element of the miscegenation, although there are regions of the country (central and southern) where African presence is evident, although in much lesser degree than Hispanic. From a cultural perspective, Aguirre Beltrán's 1958 work strives to resume research on this aspect. On the coexistence and interinfluence of literary traditions through popular singing in that sociohistorical context see, among others, the works of Maserá (2006), Swiaddon Martínez (2004), García de León (2006).

² The National Institute of Indigenous Languages (*Instituto Nacional de Lenguas Indígenas* (INALI), <https://www.inali.gob.mx/>) recognizes, studies, and disseminates 68 living languages in Mexico. The number of speakers of each varies greatly but according to data from the INEGI Population Census 2020 (<https://censo2020.mx/>, accessed 07.03.2021), the total number of indigenous language speakers is 7,364,645, just over 6% of the total population of the country exceeding 126 million, and of that 6%, 11.8% do not speak Spanish (865,972 people), i.e. out of seven million indigenous language speakers, more than six million are bilingual – a reference relevant to our position regarding the relevance of the miscegenation.

tive languages, most of the inhabitants of those communities were illiterate. Since the last decades of the 20th century, the literacy rate has significantly increased and, while the poverty condition is widespread, the isolation of these communities has declined and there is an increasing interaction between rural and urban areas. If the teaching of Spanish was previously privileged as the only way of accessing modernity, and at the same time detrimental for the original language and its culture,³ some twenty-five years ago, a clear reevaluation of the native language occurred – both at the community and governmental level – that encourages oral and written bilingualism, proof that the strength of voice and memory withstood the onslaught of supposed development; we also have a broad heritage, in indigenous and Spanish languages⁴, which reveals Mexico as a multicultural country. For this reason, terms such as amalgam, mosaic, weaving, among others, have been used to express the complexity of these cultures. As for the several traditional oral literatures of our country, I also find appropriate the comparison with the kaleidoscope, due to the dynamism and movement of its images.

Most studies on Mexico's indigenous literatures are written by anthropologists and ethnologists, while researchers of literature had not taken care of the subject. So, it often happens that researchers omit the literary value of tales and legends and consider them “probative documents of survival of pre-Hispanic elements and not traditional literary expressions that nowadays enforce cultural amalgamation” [“documentos probatorios de supervivencias de elementos prehispánicos y no como expresiones literarias tradicionales, vigentes hoy en día, de una amalgama cultural”] (González 2006: 191–192). There is another critical opinion: “they [tales and legends] only speak of myths and ‘mythical’ times without clarifying the nature of the specific accounts or prayers from which they extract or infer the mythical information in an attempt to build or imagine the ‘worldview’ of contemporary indigenous peoples” [“sólo hablan de mitos y épocas ‘míticas’ sin aclarar la naturaleza de los relatos o plegarias concretas de donde extraen o infieren la información mítica a partir de la cual intentan construir o imaginar la ‘cosmovisión’ de los pueblos indígenas actuales”] (Montemayor 2000: 101–102). That is why I propose that the study of the stories and legends should not be performed as

³ As it is easy to assume, the pre-eminence of Spanish led the native language speakers to stop practicing their languages within their communities and in many cases, over the generations, the languages were forgotten.

⁴ It should be remembered that in New Spain, unlike the other regions of Latin America, several of the first missionaries and humanists took on the task of transcribing the native languages or translating them into Spanish – tales, beliefs, history, and customs from oral testimonies of the Indians, among others: Bartolomé de las Casas, Vasco de Quiroga, Motolinía, Sahagún, Díaz del Castillo. So, the first collected tales and legends in indigenous languages date back to that time.

they are only cultural and artistic manifestations, but as discourses poetically articulated in spirit of a collective aesthetics, at the same time particular and universal, forming the memory and tradition of the people. For this approach to narrative discourse, I find the study of constituent motifs relevant. Such an analysis allows us to understand the structure of literary discourse, how the subject is treated and the various meanings of a specific tale and, at the same time, to compare it with other expressions (versions) of the same folktale or different ones, both from the same region and culture as well as the others.

The Motifs

A motif should be understood as a minimal narrative unit; it conveys an action made by a subject, and is usually expressed with a verbal noun such as transformation, deception, revenge, confinement, or punishment. Antti Aarne, Stith Thompson and later Hans-Jörg Uther came up with this same idea decades ago; however, they understood the reasons why it is a minimal but not necessarily narrative unit: [a motif is] “one of the elements of a tale (that is, a statement about an actor, an object, or an incident)” (ATU 2004: 10). But as we said, neither actor nor an object could be a motif in itself because often they do not have any incidence in the narrative composition. A motif can exist independently and have a meaning (even a story could contain a single motif – it would be a short but complete story), while a magic ring or a certain space cannot do so, in our sense. The presence or absence of the other elements (a character and an object) may show particularities of one version or similarities with others from how the same motif is expressed. Including one motif or another and giving it greater or lesser development have a direct impact on the plot of the narrative, the character’s settings, and the message and meaning the teller wants to convey. That is why I consider that studying minimal narrative units allows us to know and understand more deeply how the indigenous discourse is constituted, how it assembles different cultural periods and strata and, therefore, facilitates a better approach to its meaning, its universality and, at the same time, its uniqueness.

Below I review a number of motifs in traditional oral tales from different indigenous cultures of Mexico. In some cases, I bring versions collected in Spanish and, in others, versions transmitted in native tongue and translated by the storyteller or by the collector⁵.

⁵ It is essential not to dismiss the Spanish versions for several reasons. Firstly, many indigenous peoples speak only Spanish. Despite the policies undertaken to revive the original languages and, above all, the struggle for the same purpose of multiple communities whose members dedicated themselves to the task of studying their language, claiming it and standardizing it, Spanish continues to keep prevalence in many communities and is,

Deception is a recurring motif in all traditions; a modality of this one is what we might call “killing the messenger”. It is the well-known biblical motif of Uriah’s letter: King David, in love with the wife of one of his bravest and most faithful soldiers, sends a letter, with Uriah as a messenger, instructing to place his soldier on the front line of combat securing thus the Uriah’s death and enabling the union with his wife: “The next morning David wrote a letter to Joab and sent it with Uriah. In the letter he wrote: ‘Put Uriah at the front of the fiercest fighting, then withdraw from him so that he is struck down and dies’” (Samuel 11, 14–15).

Among the Teneks from the Huasteca region we find an example with the same motif: “An yetse’inik ani an alwa’inik”, translated into English by the compiler as “The powerful and the innocent”:

In a very big place, where there was a lot of working men and women, the owner would pick the younger and prettier women to make them his. There was a young couple, the owner liked the woman but he couldn’t find the way to have her. Days were passing by until one morning, when the richest man woke up, he decided to send the young man to take a message to God. That bad man thought that the young man would never find God... (Sánchez Flores 2010: 149).

The young man didn’t get lost nor die. He found people and animals who helped him and an old man, who turned into a buzzard (zopilote), took him to God’s place. God told the young man the boss’s true intention and sent him back with a letter for his boss. When the rich man was reading the letter, the house was taken by fire and he died.

In some cases, the motif does not include the desire for another man’s wife, but is simplified to the intention of getting rid of the messenger; this is the case in *El hijo del fantasma* (*The Ghost’s Son*), a tale of the Mixes of Oaxaca. The extensive folktale talks about the troubles of a child, miraculously born of the spirit of his father’s dead wife. He is left in the custody of a priest who, soon after, is unable to properly educate him. In addition to being very intelligent and strong, the child is not afraid of anything or anyone and behaves badly, so the priest decides to send him with a message for the devil:

paradoxically, the language used for the expression of the native tradition For example, among the Tepehuas of Veracruz, most of the stories are collected in Spanish although rural teachers, speakers of Tepehua, have translated them and published in bilingual editions aiming to revive the original language (Tesillos García 2015). However, I believe that if the stories live in Spanish, it will take a long time for the young population to master the language, assimilate the tales and give them life in Tepehua. Nevertheless, it is a commendable effort and the publication itself is an achievement in strengthening the original language.

Y se puso a escribir el siguiente recado: – Hombre, Rey diablo, aquí te mando a Pioquinto, pues no tiene respeto a los demás y quiero que tú veas qué hacer con él. Y por favor, no le vayas a mandar por aquí.

Llamó a Pioquinto y le dijo: – Pioquinto, ve al infierno a dejar este recado, por favor.

Y se fue Pioquinto a dejar el recado al infierno sin saber lo que decía el mensaje. Se quedó allí para siempre, pues tal vez le dieron un castigo duro o tal vez se volvió más diablito en el infierno (Scheffler 1983: 86).

[And he began to write the following message: – Hi, King Devil, I send you Pioquinto, because he has no respect for others and I want you to decide what to do with him. And please, don't send him back here.

He called Pioquinto and said: – Pioquinto, go to hell to bring this message, please.

And Pioquinto took the message to hell without knowing what the message said. He stayed there forever, maybe because they gave him a harsh punishment or maybe he became another devil in hell (Scheffler 1983: 86).]

This motif, in modality where things turn out less harmful to the bearer of the letter, is present in several versions of tales such as *John the Bear* and accounts for the incompatibility of two beings of different nature: human (the priest) and marvelous (*Pioquinto*, John the Bear), so it should come as no surprise that it is inserted into stories related to the shaping of heroes.

Similar story lives in the Tojolabal oral tradition – *The Wolf's Advice* (*El consejo del nahual*). Instead of a written message, there is a request for a task under deception, as operated by the Hebrew king, but fused with the *nahuales*⁶ tradition. The patron asks his most faithful servant to seek medi-

⁶ Although beliefs in *nahuales* and *tonas* differ in particularities in each culture, it can be said that the former are people with the ability to transform into a particular animal thus acquiring its characteristics and abilities. At the same time, this comes as a kind of gift. The *nahual* is an individual and non-transferable attribution, it is always protective and acts for the benefit of those who have it. They can be assaulted and, while in human form, show the wounds. As for the *tona*, it is an animal, the soulmate of an individual from his/her birth. Their bond is indissoluble, and functions as reciprocal protection. Belief in *tonas* is widespread in the south of the country, especially in Oaxaca and Chiapas (Weitlaner 1977: 169–171). A sharp difference between the transformations of these entities and witches is that the last are usually shaped by European or Christian conceptions in which the character is identified as someone related with the devil, a link that allows him to metamorphose. In folktales we can find the same reason for transformation but with different developments and meanings. Another important feature is that in the European

cine for his illness, but he plans to send his *nahual* to kill the servant, plotting to enjoy servant's wife. She knows patron's true intentions and, because she also has a *nahual* (her husband has not), she explains how he should hide from the patron's *nahual* and wait for the right time to return. The wife sends her *nahual* to attack the other, and her *nahual* accomplishes its mission. The servant manages to return safely, and the patron dies soon after, due to his *nahual's* death (Gómez et al. 1999: 259–261). Despite the nuances in the plot, it is the same motif – with particular characteristics and combinations – present in five different stories and enunciated in diverse languages, settled in various spaces and times.

The motif of the marvelous or magic birth of a child, who becomes a founding hero or divinity, is virtually universal, perhaps because of the universal need to create and believe in superior being, marked from birth. There are multiple examples of this in the indigenous cultures. Some occur completely in a context of marvelous, like King Kontoy among the Mixe, to which I will return later, or Dhipák, in the Tének tales and Chikomexochitl among the Nahuas from the Huasteca. Both characters are the corn's spirits or the *elote* itself and were begotten by a young virgin (Van't Hooft & Cerda 2003: 23–26). Others are named using expressions of undeniable miscegenation; such is the circumstance, in Chiapas, of the different versions of *Juan López, a Tzeltal hero*. Like in many other cases, the genre ranges between the folktale and the legend. It is a real-marvelous character who acts on behalf of the Tzeltal Indians to defend them from the mestizos. The temporal location is diluted in the chains of events that we can locate, by the name of the character, in time after the conquest; at the same time, timeless references or allusions to remote times are included, giving the character an almost divine coating. He is a hero who has died and risen; he is placed in colonial times, in the processes of the Zapatista rebellion of 1994 and today, already old, walking some streets although young people “do not easily recognize him when he goes by”. The events occur in several villages in the same region of Chiapas: Bachajón, Chilón, and Ocosingo, among others, and in natural locations that have acquired a sacred character for Tzeltals such as caves, mountains, and streams, but hero travels also to modern spaces such as a plane runway close to the community. Six collected versions from old Tzeltals include the magic birth, and some of them develop the motif:

current oral tradition, transformation occurs, most of the time, in folktales where the initial fiction pact eliminates any possibility of truth value of the real, contrary to what happens in many tales from Mexico where a ‘rhetoric of truth’ predominates (Oring 2008), so the texts are valued as true; hence there is a few legends about transformations of people into *nahuales* and *tonas*, and their occurrence is helped by the fact that this type of mutation generally lacks negative nuances.

Por arte de magia se embarazó una jovencita. Mis abuelos contaban (pero no les pregunté, en ese momento, cómo se llamaba la muchacha) que la joven no había tenido ninguna relación con varón. Un día la madre la llevó al río para pepenar *xuti* o caracol en el lugar llamado Tz'ibaron Ch'en, que significa cueva o roca con letras. Cuando llegaron, la joven se acercó a la cueva, es decir, a la roca grande: "Eh, mamá, este lugar es agradable", dijo, "quisiera que fuera mi casa para siempre. Qué bonito está no tiene ni una gota de lluvia, es como una casa". Enseguida se puso de rodillas y se acostó. Un mes después de haber gozado de ese rato de sueño sintió síntomas de embarazo: lo que de grande fue Juan López (Gómez Gutiérrez 1996: 77).⁷

[By magic a young girl got pregnant. My grandparents told me (although at that time I did not ask what the girl's name was) that the young woman had not had any relationship with a man. One day her mother took her to the river to harvest *xuti* or snails in a place called Tz'ibaron Ch'en, which means cave or rock with paintings. When they arrived, the young woman approached the cave, that is, the big rock: "Hey, mom, this place is nice," she said, "I want it to be my home forever. How beautiful it is, there isn't a single drop of rain, it's like a house". She immediately got down on her knees and lay down. A month after having enjoyed that moment of sleep, she felt first signs of pregnancy: how big Juan López was.]

Those versions also include the initial parent's enquiry and the truth revealed in dreams of both the daughter and the parents and grandparents.⁸

Some versions mention only that Juan López had no father or that, he was taken by the river as a baby and returned to his mother after eight years. The relationship of this motif with another miraculous birth (Jesus's of the Virgin Mary) is evident. The utilization of the biblical motif is very clear; mo-

⁷ Miguel Vázquez, originally from Bachajón, transmitted in Mayan language his version entitled *Jwan Lopes, yajaw inyo* (Juan López, Indian God). Carlos Montemayor translated from Mayan into Spanish this and other versions collected by Gómez Gutiérrez.

⁸ In the third version *Batsil ajaw Juwan Lopes, kanan chij* (Juan Lopez, the shepherd), the young woman's family, returning from the trip, spends the night in a cave by the C'antela River and the next day: "When they headed home, the girl began to feel pain in her womb and felt that something was going to happen. Those were the signs that she's pregnant with what King Juan López was going to be" (Gómez Gutiérrez 1996: 95). In the fourth version *Juan López, Xbojt'il chenek* (99–103) and in the fifth, *Ajaw Juan Lopes, jpas moch* (104–107), the young woman goes to work to the *milpa* (cornfield) with her family, and when it starts raining, she takes refuge in the cave where she sleeps for a while and gets pregnant.

tif stays the same, although the Tzeltal tradition strips it of Christian traits appropriating it and treating the birth of a hero as an event that is between human and divine. One of the narrators notes: "I keep thinking about the life of Christ who came to another country. It seems [Juan López] is the Tzeltal Christ" (Gómez Gutiérrez 1996: 89). The events look the same, but they're not. The hero was constructed from features that combine the Mayan's cosmology (of the Tzeltal group) and Christian elements (often narrated as tales by the first missionaries) until an absolute fusion or articulation is reached

Another motif related to the marvelous aspect of the protagonist, which underlines his dual character (human/superhuman) is the one that develops the unfitness of the child (before becoming a hero) to human social context. This is the case with protagonists of folktales such as *Juan, the Bear* (son of a woman and a bear), but also with characters like Kontoy (born from an egg or by a young woman and a hill). His mother tries to introduce him into the community of children and to prepare him for school. On the Mixe hero's version:

El niño seguía asistiendo a la escuela y seguía siendo un peligro para sus compañeritos porque era capaz de matarlos de un solo empujón [...] En otra ocasión, en un descuido del maestro, el niño volvió a empujar a otro de sus compañeritos y lo mató; era ya el tercer niño que mataba, entonces se decidió que ya no podría seguir en la escuela porque era un peligro para los demás alumnos. Después de eso, el niño echó a andar para conocer otros lugares... (Díaz Pérez 2008: 32).⁹

[The boy continued to attend school and still represented a danger to his classmates because he was capable of killing them with a single push [...]. On another occasion, due to the teacher's carelessness, the boy again pushed another of his classmates and killed him; it was already the third child he had killed, so it was decided that he could no longer stay at school because he was a danger to the other students. After that, the boy set off on a journey to see other places (Díaz Pérez 2008: 32).]

In two versions of *Juan, the Bear* noted in communities outside indigenous cultures, the behavior and superhuman strength of the protagonist are the same:

Entonces, como el niño era muy fuerte, se hizo peleonero y la gente iba y le daba quejas al cura: que a cada rato golpeaba a los

⁹ The version was told in Mixe by Juan Díaz Vázquez, in 1985 in Santa María Ocotepéc, Totontepec, Oaxaca and was translated into Spanish by Federica Díaz.

otros muchachos y que ya le tenían miedo, pero el cura sabía por qué. Entonces, como en aquel tiempo de los reinados usaban pantaloncillos cortos abajito de las rodillas, los muchachos le tiraban de los pelos y le hacían enojar y él se defendía. Y así, hasta que al fin el cura le dijo que ya tenía muchas quejas y que hasta había golpeado al profesor.¹⁰

[So, since the boy was very strong, he became a fighter, and people complained to the priest that he beat the other boys every so often, and that they all were already afraid of him; but the priest knew the reason. Then, at the time of the kingdom when short trousers below the knees were worn, the boys pulled his hair and made him angry, so that he defended himself, until finally the priest told him that many complaints had been filed against him, even that he had hit the teacher, among others.]

Allí, la señora puso a su hijo en la escuela, pero los compañeros le jalaban los pelos y se burlaban de él y el osillo de una guantada los tumbaba. Entonces, el maestro le dijo a la señora que Juan ya no podía estar en la escuela porque era un problema. Entonces la señora se lo llevó a su casa [...] Allí estuvo mucho tiempo, pero cuando era un muchacho decidió irse a buscar aventuras por los montes.¹¹

[There [at the village], the lady sent her son to school, but the classmates pulled his hair and made fun of him, and the little bear-boy knocked them down. So, the teacher told the lady that Juan could no longer be in school because he was a problem. Then the lady took him home [...] He stayed there for a long time, but when he grew up, he decided to go to the mountains to seek adventure.]

We can assume that Juan Vázquez, who told Kontoy's tale, knew *Juan, the Bear*, and it would be easy to think of a narrator's mistake or, as purists would say: pollution. However, we may also think that the transmitter, or the person from whom he received the story (or previous links in the chain of oral transmission), chose a motif present in his traditional background for this version, which could perfectly function in the Mixe hero's settings. Both characters share a miraculous birth and a remarkable strength, so why not include the hero's conflicting childhood episode if it reinforces their char-

¹⁰ The tale was recorded by myself on August 11, 1993, and was told by Serapio Prieto Delgado, 83 years old smith from San Pedro Piedra Gorda, Zacatecas.

¹¹ The tale was recorded by myself on April 5, 1994, from Alicia Guadalupe Cruz, 9 years old, Ejido San Francisco, Zaragoza, Nuevo León.

acterization? We could qualify this version as unique, but if the community keeps it in this form, it is because it responds to their idea of Kontoy and his many adventures.

Likewise, the presence of the same motif in different indigenous groups and languages is not unusual. In one tale, for example, it is mentioned as the reason for the transformation of a dog into a woman who secretly prepares food. In a Huichol and a Tének tale, the man decides to spy on what happens at his home while he is at work. Although the outcome is different, the main reason is shared. The Huichol tale says:

La viejecita se volvió aire, y el indio fue a limpiar su campo. Vivía con la perra en una gruta, donde la dejaba de día cuando se iba a su labor. Como todas las tardes que volvía encontraba tortillas, tenía curiosidad de saber quién las hacía. A los cinco días se escondió detrás de unas matas, cerca de la cueva, para espiar, y vio que la perra se quitaba la piel y la colgaba, quedando convertida [en] una mujer que se arrodilló a moler. Entonces se acercó poco a poco por detrás, cogió el cuero y lo echó a la lumbre. 'Me has quemado mi ropa' gritó ella poniéndose a aullar como perro. El indio le lavó la cabeza con el agua del nixtamal que ella misma había preparado; la refrescó así, y desde entonces, ha seguido siendo mujer: Tuvieron muchos hijos e hijas que se casaron y poblaron el mundo yéndose a vivir en las cuevas (Lumholtz 1904/II: 191).

[Nakawe¹² became wind, but the man went on with his work clearing the field. He lived with his bitch in a cave; during the day, while he was in a field, she remained at home. Every afternoon, on coming back, he found corncakes ready for him. He was curious to know who made them. After five days had passed, he seated himself among the bushes near the cave to watch. He saw the bitch take off her skin and hang it up. Then he noticed that she was a woman, who knelt down to grind corn on the metate. He stealthily advanced towards her, approaching from behind, and quickly caught the skin and threw it into the fire. 'Now you have burned my tunic!' she cried, and began to whine like a dog. He bathed her with water mixed with the ground corn she had prepared, and she felt refreshed, and from that time on she remained a woman. He had a large family, and his sons and daughters married, and the world became peopled, and they lived in caves (Lumholtz 1900: 169–170).]

¹² Takutsi Nakawé is one of the oldest Huichol female deities, known as Grandmother of Growth and Germination. According to Lumholtz, "all vegetation (na'ka, 'to grow') is her product. She is also the mother of the gods, especially of Grandfather Fire. All the earth belongs to her, and she lives in the underworld" (1900: 13).

And the Tének tale, entitled *The Salt Woman*, says:

Hace muchos años había un hombre que vivía solo con un perro. Este hombre salía todos los días a trabajar, y cuando regresaba, su perro lo recibía muy contento. El hombre estaba muy sorprendido porque siempre que regresaba de su trabajo, encontraba preparada la comida y las tortillas y muy triste porque no sabía quién las hacía. Un día el hombre decidió espiar para saber quién hacía la comida cuando él salía a trabajar. Hizo como que se iba a trabajar y, después de un rato, regresó, vio entonces que el perro se convertía en mujer. Cuando ya tuvo la forma de mujer, escondió su piel debajo de las piedras del fogón, sacó sal de los sobacos y se la echó a la comida. El hombre no pudo aguantar y entró corriendo a la casa para regañar a la mujer, le dijo que por qué salaba así la comida. La mujer muy triste le dijo al hombre: – Ahora porque me regañaste, me voy lejos de aquí. [...] La mujer se fue al mar y por eso ahí el agua es salada (Sánchez Flores 2010: 45–46).

[Many years ago, there was a man who lived alone with a dog. This man went out to work every day, and when he returned, his dog received him happily. The man was very surprised because whenever he returned from work, he found the food and tortillas ready but he was sad because he did not know who made them. One day the man decided to spy to find out who made the food when he went out to work. He pretended to go to work and, after a while, he came back, then saw that the dog was turning into a woman. When she was in the form of a woman, she hid her skin under the stones of the stove, drew salt from her armpits, and added it to her food. The man could not bear it and he ran into the house to scold the woman, he told her why she salted the food like that. The sad woman said to the man: – Now because you scolded me, I'm going away. [...] The woman went to the sea and that's why the water is salty (Sánchez Flores 2010: 45–46).]

In both narratives, discovering the mystery eliminates its continuity and radically modifies the man involved. In the Huichol tradition, this motif is part of a much longer tale about the flood and the relationship of the old woman – goddess Mother Earth – with the Indian. On the other hand, in the Tének tradition, it lives as a short and independent tale, only in combination with the motif of salting the sea¹³. Although the reason for transformation is universal,

¹³ It could be argued that the difference between two tales – one being a part of a more extensive narrative and the other living autonomously – has to do with time of collecting the corpus. The Tének tale was recorded in the early years of the 21st century, while the

the way it develops here reveals what we might call elements or traits of pre-Hispanic origin. It is the way that it is told, rather than the content: it is an animal that becomes human (in Western culture usually it is the other way around), and the event is linked with the etiological explanation of the world.

Among the many folktales and legends where topics, motifs, and characters clearly of indigenous origin predominate, there is a group of tales¹⁴ that deals with beings who are the 'owners,' 'guardians' or 'lords' of the Nature: of the hill, of the river, of thunder, lightning, wind, among others. The substrate of these narratives is a religious thought that "the Western man no longer understands what was still understood by the Greeks of antiquity: that the planet is not something inert, inanimate, but a living being" (Montemayor 2004: 10–11). The protagonists are elements of nature or beings of the "invisible world" that come to life and interact with human beings and are neither positive nor negative. The complexity of these stories lies in their interpretations, because from a Western and Christian perspective, some of the actions are often identified as typical of the devil, especially the tales in which the 'lord' or 'owner' of the hill, or animal gives money or does favors to a member of the community, so analogies can be easily established with stories about pact with the devil without this being the issue. As an example, I present two stories from Nahua communities in the Sierra Norte de Puebla¹⁵. The first tale has an obvious mythical substrate that explains the origin of the region's soil characteristics and the unfortunate sentimental life of the hill:

Huichol story about the flood dates back to Lumholtz's works in the late 19th century, although Montemayor (1998: 125) states that almost the same version was collected in the sixties by Peter Furst and Barbara Myerhoff (possibly included in the article: *El mito como historia: el ciclo del peyote y la datura entre los huicholes*, in *El peyote y los huicholes*, ed. Salomón Nahmad Sittón, Otto Klineberg, Peter T. Furst, and Barbara G. Myerhoff, México: Sep/Setentas, 1972, 53–107, that I have not been able to consult). In any case, the literary autonomy of the motif allows it to constitute a folktale by itself and not necessarily involve the fragmentation of a larger text.

¹⁴ A genre classification of this corpora is complex because we often intend to apply the Western nomenclature without any flexibility or, equally erroneously, set aside categorization and apply a term as ambiguous as a 'story' for all prose narrative forms. Without intention to delve into it here, I consider that we can talk about folktales, legends, and even mythical tales or legends with a mythical substrate, noting the elements that compose them (if they have truth value, if they allude to an ancient conception of the world although it is no longer a belief and if they are accepted and told as fiction, etc.), and their function in the group that preserves them.

¹⁵ All over Mexico, there are so many stories about guardians or dual entities, as María-Cruz La Chica shows in her study about Tojolabales from Chiapas Southeast, especially the tales *Los Hermanos Rayo* [*The Lightning Brothers*] and *El hombre Viento* [*The Windy Man*] (2017: 81–96).

El Tentzo era una especie de volcán. Entonces se enamoró, se enamoró de la Malinche y ella dijo:

— Sí te acepto, me caso contigo, pero vamos a hacer un trato: Se va a formar unas nubes de la Malinche y va a caer una tromba, un aguacero. Si logras atajar el caudal de agua, si logras atajarlo, pues me caso contigo.

[...] Entonces el Tentzo dijo que sí. Aceptó, pero cuando empezó a llover, trombas, mangas de agua, el Tentzo se aventó para atajar el caudal y todo eso, pero no lo logró atajar, porque se pasó por Molcaxac una parte del cerro, y no lo logró atajar, no se llevó a cabo el matrimonio entre el Tentzo y la Malinche. Por eso, porque no atajó el caudal, todo eso, hay una parte, hay pura piedra, porque toda la arena que trae el caudal se lo llevó. Si lograba atajarla, se estancaba toda el agua y la arena quedaría. Habría terrenos más fértiles, arenosos (Badillo Gámez 2014: 159).¹⁶

[The Tentzo was a kind of volcano. Then he fell in love, he fell in love with the Malinche [a mountain], and she said:

– Yes, I accept you, I'll marry you, but we are going to make a deal: some clouds are going to form from the Malinche and a downpour is going to fall, a downpour. If you manage to stop the water flow, if you manage to stop it, then I will marry you.

(...) Then the Tentzo said yes. He accepted, but when it started to rain, downpours, waterspouts, the Tentzo jumped in to stop the flow and all that, but he did not manage to stop it, because he went over Molcaxac a part of the hill, and he did not manage to stop it, so the marriage between the Tentzo and the Malinche did not take place. That is why – because he did not stop the flow – the ground is covered by stones, because all the sand brought by the flow was carried away. If he managed to stop it, all the water would stagnate and the sand would remain. There would be more fertile, sandy soils (Badillo Gámez 2014: 159).]

Another tale depicts Tentzo's embodiment: he appears as an old bearded owner and lord of the hill, generous and protective of his own people, the inhabitants of the region, but fearsome and harmful to the strangers from other

¹⁶ The tale was told in Spanish by Alfonso Arrijoa Méndez, 55 years old, and recorded by Gabriela Samia Badillo Gámez on 18 July 2012 at Atoyatempan, Puebla. This tale, together with other 25 different tales about Tentzo, is a part of Badillo's master's thesis.

regions. He is a supernatural entity that seems to keep balance of reciprocity between the men of the visible world and beings of the invisible one:

De cuando hicieron la carretera, que hay, que se quebraron las máquinas, cuando rascaban se quebraban, no se podían hacer la carretera hasta que fueron al Tentzo, ya le dijeron a, o sea que hablaron con el Tentzo y le dijeron que dejara que se hiciera la carretera, y les dijo que sí pero que iba a recoger almas, no de las de este, este lugar, que serían de los que vienen, que no sean de por aquí. Y que según entonces sí ya dejó que se hiciera la carretera. Y bueno, son cuentos o quién sabe, pero hasta ahorita, nadie de por aquí se ha muerto en esa carretera, se han muerto de otras partes que vienen a dejar material o de otros viajes. Si se han muerto... a lo mejor como unos cuatro. Según dijo el Tentzo que sí iba a recoger esas almas porque la gente de aquí le va a rasurar los bigotes... bueno de que así va uno a leñar y a cortar, y por eso según la gente de aquí no se va a morir la de aquí, sino la que viene (Badillo Gámez 2014: 189).¹⁷

[When they built the road, the machines broke, while they were scraping, they broke, they could not build the road until they went to the Tentzo. They told him to, they talked to the Tentzo and told him to let them build the road, and he said yes, but that he was going to collect souls, not from this, this place, but from those who come, who are not from around here. Things happened according to that, and he did let the road be built. And, well, these are stories or who knows, but up to now, nobody from here has died on that road, those who died came from other places, coming here to bring building material or for some other reason, those who were passing through. There was maybe about four of them who died. According to Tentzo, he was going to collect those souls because the people from here are going to shave their mustaches... Well, that's how you are going to cut and cut, and that's why, according to the people from here, the people from here are not going to die, but those who come here (Badillo Gámez 2014: 189).]

These final phrases are relevant because they express the aforementioned reciprocity and balance between man and nature: the people in the region work under Tentzo, “they shave their beard and mustaches” i.e., they cut firewood and gather palm to survive, so he protects them. However, sometimes it is not easy to distinguish ‘us’ and ‘them’ because the expression used

¹⁷ The tale was told in Spanish by Dominga Paredes, 32 years old, house-keeper, and recorded by Samia Badillo Gámez on 25 July 2012 at Huatlatlauca, Puebla.

when referring to “taking some souls,” in a building context, easily matches to the “dealing with the devil” motif, so prevalent in other traditions. It is true that in the Mesoamerican cosmogony good and evil are not separated, but united: they were deities and dual entities (López Austin and Millones 2008: 31–36). The devil as such does not exist, so “taking souls” in indigenous traditions has to be understood as an exchange for protection rather than the Christian idea of the devil who takes souls that belong to God.¹⁸

I highlighted earlier the complexity of some characters such as Juan López, Tentzo, and Kontoy, a Mixe hero, almost a divine or, at least, supernatural. I will consider some comments regarding this character brought up in the final essay by Jaime López Reyes, an Ayöök doctoral student.¹⁹ The paper is about a version of Kontoy by Fortino Vázquez, a Mixe from Tlahuitoltepec (Oaxaca), and it was published as *The Origin of Cong Oy* (Barabás & Bartolomé 1984). López Reyes says that we are not dealing with one legend but the mix of more than four versions which the author intertwined so that is impossible to distinguish one from the other, like it happens in oral tradition.²⁰ López Reyes emphasizes the complexity of the entity²¹:

¿Quién o qué cosa fue Kontoy? Dios, héroe, divinidad, rey, hombre, humano, fuerza creadora. Culebra o piedra, carne o tierra. Padre compasivo, deidad beligerante. ¿Todas ellas? Los historiadores hablan de un campeón divinizado, los antropólogos de un culto, los poetas de una potencia primigenia, los sociólogos de la imaginación indomeñable de un pueblo, y los literatos, de una figura literaria. Los mixes no están seguros. Y, sin embargo, Kontoy fue. Corrección: es. Kontoy existe, a los mixes no les queda duda. Recórrense las montañas mixes por uno, dos, diez años, y se obtendrá la misma convicción y el mismo desconocimiento: ‘No sabemos bien a bien quién es. Pero existe. Y sólo existimos en tanto que él existe’. mismo [...] En nuestra literatura oral ocurre lo mismo: relatos míticos

¹⁸ However, I consider that after 500 years of Christianity, even the indigenous community cannot be able to explain it clearly because of analogies between both ideas.

¹⁹ Ayöök is adjective or noun for the Mixes who belong to the community of Totontepc. It is also the name of the Mixe linguistic variant.

²⁰ Especially because not one tale about Kontoy does tell everything, but only relates motifs or episodes depending on the teller’s interest. In López Reyes words: “Kontoy was born from an egg, had a brother or sister born in the same way. The eggs were found by a very old couple. Kontoy was born as an adult or he grew up incredibly fast. He traveled to Oaxaca, or to Tlacolula, Mitla, Tule, Mexico City; fought against Zaachila, Moctezuma, or even Jesus. Many enemies pursued him, but he never died. Finally, he took his captains and trophies to a mountain or in a cave and he promised to come back” (López Reyes 2018).

²¹ More than fifty years ago, Walter S. Miller (1956: 203) gave an account of the religious syncretism of both the Mixes and the current status of the legend, but I prefer to use López Reyes’s words, which are more recent, because he belongs to the Mixe community.

cos, leyendas, cuentos, poesía, canciones, todo imbuido del aliento de aquel ser. Pero en cada uno de manera distinta. Ni siquiera el nombre es constante: Kontoy, Kondoy, Condoy, Kong oy, Oy Cong, Konk, Condoyac, Candoyoc. Todos el mismo, y todos uno distinto. [...] Kontoy concatena, como los héroes épicos, los valores y el código ético de su comunidad, y en este caso algo más: la esperanza y la misma supervivencia (López Reyes 2018).

[Who or what was Kontoy? God, hero, divinity, king, man, human, creative force. Snake or stone, flesh or earth. Compassionate Father, belligerent deity. All of them? Historians speak of a deified champion, anthropologists of a cult, poets of a primeval power, sociologists of the indomitable imagination of a people, and literati of a literary figure. The Mixes are not sure. And, nevertheless, Kontoy was. Correction: Kontoy exists, the Mixes have no doubt. Go over the Mixe mountains for one, two, ten years, and you will get the same conviction and the same perplexity: ‘We don’t really know who he is. But he exists. And we only exist as long as he exists’. [...] In our oral literature it is the same: myths, legends, tales, poetry, songs are all imbued with the breath of that being. But each of them in a different way. Not even the name is constant: Kontoy, Kondoy, Condoy, Kong oy, Oy Cong, Konk, Condoyac, Candoyoc. They are all the same, and each is different. Kontoy concatenates, like epic heroes, the values and ethical code of his community, and in this case something else: hope and survival itself (López Reyes 2018).]

In some ways, the words of the Ayöök López Reyes allow us to understand the complexity of the indigenous literatures of our country, especially the narratives about beings who are between the visible and the invisible world, who possess traits that refer to a mythical substrate, and who are enlivened in combination with motifs common to other traditions but which, fused, are the sound of an integrative memory flowing constantly, a “deep voice”, as Montemayor calls it. In that same tenor, Luis Díaz Viana says that rather than described as “traditional”, an object, song, clothing or tale are expressions or productions “created or recreated within a tradition, following the rules and causes, the codes and, if preferred, the collectively assumed grammar that given tradition offers” (1995: 20).

Conclusion

A brief sample like the one I researched in this article is not big enough to characterize a whole type of literature and, much less, to outline gener-

alizations on the various indigenous literature composed, at their deepest level, by the fusion of three or more cultural strata. But this sample is sufficient to convince us of the need to ponder several aspects, for example: to remove singular terms such as “the indigenous literature of Mexico” from our vocabulary and to opt, given its diversity, for the plural. Also, to accept that much of the corpus from indigenous peoples’ oral tradition are enunciated in Spanish: from tales and legends to songs and prayers;²² from some rituals to the transmission of knowledge about productive activities and traditional medicine. In other words, we must accept that if we are talking about a *mezitza* essence it is not surprising that, often, it is enunciated in Spanish, and although in such cases the richness of the mother tongue as a vehicle for artistic expression will be missed. It will also be undeniable that the enunciator is a bearer of a community’s memory; a person qualified with community skills and recognized by her/his group as a possessor of knowledge, a recreator of a collective tradition and aesthetics.

Indeed, motifs reviewed here let us ask why some researchers qualify as “foreigners” the tales with motifs that also appear in the Hispanic or European tradition if the peoples, the Indians, consider them their own. As Montemayor said: “From my point of view, it would be a hard, absurd task trying to convince them that their folktales are not theirs but Grimm brothers’, Perrault’s, Aesop’s, or Ovid’s”²³ (1998: 131–132). Probably, from the opposite standpoint, it would be more of an ideological stance than a scientific one, but it certainly leads to false or misleading assertions about our culture or, at least, it leads to contradictions such as saying that “the folktales are imported: obviously they are outward” and explaining that the folktales “were brought from Europe and were intimately mixed with a native corpus; they broke away from their initial context and changed with extended episodes, disrupted with mythical, heroic, supernatural feats”²⁴ (Ramírez Castañeda

²² Prayers, rites, and Catholicism live in a miscegenetic way in our communities. Montemayor has studied them in the Mayan culture and he reveals how so many elements from the “new” religion easily fitted in the Mayan religious beliefs and system (1998: 116–117). Often, we find tales where saints and pre-hispanic entities act together, at the same time, at the same little village, and the narrator makes no distinction between the two traditions, there is only one voice. Many communities set their foundations during the viceroyalty or in colonial era, and do not at all divulge time-passing.

²³ “Resultaría una difícil—y absurda, desde mi punto de vista—tarea tratar de convencerles de que sus cuentos no son mayas, chontales, purépechas, nahuas o tzotziles, sino de los hermanos Grimm, Perrault, Esopo o el Ovidio de las *Metamorfosis*” (Montemayor 1998: 131–132).

²⁴ Given statements concern the folktales included and collected in her book, as well as the mythical stories and legends from the first volumes, from the oral tradition of different indigenous groups. The original words are: “Los cuentos maravillosos del cuarto volumen son importados: evidentemente son externos: Se han adoptado como propios

2014: 13–14), when all those facts that Ramírez mentioned (appropriation or adaptation) mean that the peoples appropriated the folktales, so those stories belong to them as much as the most mythical tale. Is it not folk literature? Why insisting on qualifying those tales as foreigners even if they are told in Náhuatl, Mixe or Tének? Why, if they have lived for more than four hundred years in these peoples' memory? It is not possible nor serious to proceed equalizing indigenous and pre-Hispanic, because this position is taking out the object of study, the tale, from its real context.

We should understand oral literature as an open system²⁵ where the memory constantly builds itself; where each version reveals an equilibrium between preserved and innovative features, characters, motifs, contexts, and values. And on this road, studying motifs as narrative units helps us to comprehend the unit's meaning, but also the tale's main significance derived from analyzing its composition: which motifs are assembled in each version, what is their function inside the story. Prose narratives from oral tradition are somewhat, as Montemayor said, an *ars combinatoria* (the art of combination). We should dismiss the attempt to separate into parts a system that does not have "parts." That is why I propose that every approach to our indigenous oral heritage, has to be done beginning with the conception of miscegenation as an essential item of our being.

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ayudantes mágicos, proezas extraordinarias, pruebas absurdas, metamorfosis peculiares. Queda adherido a la narrativa nativa aquello que tiene más semejanza con lo propio, los cuentos que son más afines a la tradición ya existente. Fueron traídos de Europa y quedaron íntimamente mezclados a un corpus nativo; se desprendieron de su contexto inicial y cambiaron con episodios aumentados, trastocados con hazañas míticas, heroicas, sobrenaturales" (Ramírez Castañeda, 2014: 13–14).

²⁵ These ideas were used for the study of *Romancero* and other folk ballads. The pan-hispanic genre is a good example of memory, combinations, miscegenation: a narrative poem that is more than seven hundred years alive in different cultures, times and places.

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Reflexiones sobre cómo estudiar cuentos y leyendas del patrimonio indígena de México: la tradición oral

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Resumen

El trabajo parte de la premisa de que los acervos tradicionales de cuentos y leyendas de nuestros pueblos indígenas son expresión de un profundo sincretismo entre la cultura indígena y la hispánica; es decir, aun los cuentos y leyendas enunciados en lenguas originarias revelan un arraigado mestizaje cultural de más de cuatrocientos años. Esta cualidad se ha querido negar con frecuencia; especialmente, desde políticas culturales que intentan una función redentora y de algunos estudios antropológicos y etnológicos que, increíblemente, se empeñan en no ver la presencia hispánica completamente arraigada en gran parte de los acervos folklóricos de las comunidades mayoritariamente indígenas. El análisis se desprende del estudio de temas y motivos de un amplio corpus de cuentos y leyendas recogidos en lenguas indígenas—especialmente náhuatl, purépecha, otomí, maya y tzeltal—y publicados en ediciones bilingües de los años cincuenta del siglo XX a la fecha. En el trabajo se establecen comparaciones entre personajes, motivos y tratamiento de los diversos temas incluidos en los relatos. La finalidad del artículo es subrayar la relevancia del mestizaje como realidad definitoria para estudiar el patrimonio cultural mexicano, y comprenderlo sin abrir una brecha entre lo indígena y lo hispánico.

Palabras-clave: sincretismo, indígena, hispánico, tradición oral, México.

Размишљања о томе како проучавати народне приповетке
и предања аутохтоног усменог наслеђа Мексика

Мерцедес Завала Гомез дел Кампо

Резиме

У раду се полази од претпоставке да збирке традиционалних усмених приповедака и предања аутохтоних народа Мексика изражавају дубоки синкретизам између аутохтоних и хиспанских култура. Другим речима, чак приче и предања испричани на домородачким језицима откривају да је културно укрштање раса дубоко укоренењено више од 400 година. Овај квалитет се често пориче, посебно у културним политикама чија је функција превасходно усмерена на искупљење, као и у неким антрополошким и етнолошким студијама које, невероватно, тврде да хиспанско присуство није потпуно укоренењено у великом делу фолклорних збирки претежно аутохтоних заједница. Анализа полази од проучавања мотива (као најмањих приповедних јединица) у обимном корпусу прича и предања сакупљених на шпанском језику и домородачким језицима, посебно на наватл или астечком језику (Nahuatl), језику тенек (Tének) (то је локални назив за језик вастек(о) или хуастекански језик – Wasteko, Huasteco), језицима михе или мише (Mixe) (језичка породица михе-соке или мише-соке, мисокејски језици – Mixe-Zoquean, Mije-Sokean, Mizoquean), и мајанском језику (Маја). Овај корпус објављиван је у двојезичким издањима од почетка 20. века до данас. Циљ рада је да се осврне на неке од ових примера и да подвуче значај укрштања раса као фактора који одређује стварност културног наслеђа Мексика, те да омогући саморазумевање не отварајући јаз између аутохтоних и хиспанских народа.

Кључне речи: синкретизам, аутохтони народи, хиспански народи, усмена традиција, Мексико.

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