

Flower and Song of the Aztec People

Translation must move us, not just from one language to another but, more significantly, from one world to another. But can we, through the songs of the Aztecs, know the world as they knew it? Can we ever again feel what it meant for them; shift from our worldview enough to comprehend it? And in fact, does it matter? Do we gain more by appreciating the songs in terms of our own understanding or by trying to glimpse that world from which they came? These and similar questions arise following the two major translations direct from the Nahuatl into a European language, made twenty years apart, and leading to very different conclusions.

The songs were written down phonetically in Nahuatl – the lingua franca of the Central Mexican plateau – in the 1550s, that is, thirty years after the Conquest, by certain acculturated Indians of the Aztec nobility for their teachers, the Spanish friars. With the sword of conquest in 1519/20 had come the cross of Christianity in 1523 brought by the Franciscans. They had immediately established schools for the young sons of the Aztec nobility in order to teach Spanish and convert. There was, at first, much genuine interest among the Spanish and admiration for the culture they were so swiftly to destroy. The most assiduous among these friars was Fray Bernardino de Sahagún – ‘the first anthropologist’ – who collected painstakingly all he could find and wrote the 12 volume *General History of the Things of New Spain*, known as the Florentine Codex. To him we owe the greatest percentage of our knowledge of the Aztec world.

Cortes had placed acculturated Indians in positions of authority as governors of local townships – they could more easily be leant on to control their own people – it was these Indians who collected and wrote down the songs for Sahagún and the other friars. It is important to realise that the songs were collected and written down by Indians educated in the Spanish convents,

fascinated by their own past but with no knowledge of it: bemused and admiring but without the ability to explain. So the songs remained un glossed and were housed in the National Library in Mexico City in two main collections, the *Cantares Mexicanos* and the *Romances de Nuevo España* (the Romances went later to Austin, Texas).

Despite late nineteenth century American attempts on some of the poems, it was not until 1964 that the whole oeuvre of Nahuatl literature was translated into Spanish. This was achieved by the Mexican anthropologist, Angel Maria Garibay Kintana, to enormous acclaim and jubilation. A ground-breaking event in the intellectual life of Mexico at that time, the translation spelt enormous national pride: the wealth and richness of Aztec thought could now shine forth in all its glory after four hundred years of obscurity. These translations proved at last internationally that here was a people of great sensitivity and sophistication – a ‘civilisation’ in the Western sense of the word, equal in beauty and stature to Greece and Rome, equal in fact to the Old World. Their artefacts were no longer relegated to odd ethnographical cases in European museums (as they had been at the British Museum) but worthy of halls and museums of their own: Indeed, a true civilisation with a high ‘art’ of its own. Such was the feeling of pride and exuberance which the publication of these poems generated.

Garibay presented the songs in an accessible format. He took the lengthy folios of repetitive sung phrases and broke them down into short fragments, producing beautiful lyric poems which he titled – 5 or 6 words to a line, between 12 and 20 lines to a poem. Lifted out of their context these short lyrics assumed a life of their own.

‘Life of Illusion’

Friends, let us still rejoice.

O friends, be not sad.

It is true the earth is nobody's possession:
 None shall remain upon it!
 Feathers of quetzal are torn;
 Paintings, they are destroyed;
 Flowers, they wither:
 Everything goes to His Home!
 Only a brief moment, we wander intoxicated
 Beside thee, at thy side, O Giver of Life.

'Ephemeral Life'

We live in a flower-land
 Where no one can ever annihilate flower or song;
 So do they also endure in the House of the Sun.
 Earth is the region of the ephemeral moment.
 It will not be thus in the Land of Mystery.
 Will there be happiness - will there be friendship there?
 Have we come only to know one another on earth?

'The Poet's Mission'

I? Who am I?
 I live as a fugitive, singer of flowers.
 Songs I make,
 And butterflies of song.
 They bloom in my soul
 So that my heart may taste them.

*(These poems are translated from Garibay's Spanish into English by Irene
 Nicholson in her book Firefly in the Night)*

These translations haunt the memory with their fleeting images of nostalgia
 and their philosophical questionings that please the Western mind. They

speak of friendship and its precious quality in the face of life's quick passing. 'It is not true, not true that we come to live on earth. We merely come to sleep, we were merely born to dream'. Enjoy friendship while you can for life is short. And shot through this existential wistfulness is the brilliance of the birds that come whirling down and the beauty of the flowers that so quickly fade: wisps of antique lore that catch at the heart. Academia flourished on Garibay's translations, with now-redeemed 'spiritual' Aztecs and poet kings discussing 'art'. Later translation was to see the songs differently.

It was twenty years later in 1985 that John Bierhorst, a professor at Stanford University, having first compiled a full English/Nahuatl Dictionary, translated the *Cantares Mexicanos* into English with a detailed explanation of each song and a lengthy introduction. Bierhorst takes a new look at the songs, he sees them in terms of their own American context and places the work squarely in the American Indian tradition of the Spirit Warrior and Ghost Dance rituals. He gives a framework on which to hang the many complexities and allusions in the songs. This is an extract from his translation of folio 17, from which some of Garibay's 'poems' already quoted were taken. The repeated ending 'ohuaya ohuaya' acts as a refrain and has no translatable meaning.

Though my heart desires shield flowers, Life Giver's flowers, what might happen to this heart of mine? Alas, it's for nothing that we've come to be born here on earth. Ohuaya ohuaya
I'm to pass away like a ruined flower. My fame will be nothing, my renown here on earth will be nothing. There may be flowers, there may be songs, but what might happen to this heart of mine? Alas, it's for nothing that we've come to be born here on earth. Ohuaya ohuaya
Friends, be pleased! Let us put our arms round each other's shoulders here. We're living in a world of flowers here. No one when he's gone

can enjoy the flowers, the songs, that lie outspread in this home of Life Giver. Ohuaya ohuaya

Earth is but a moment. Is the Place Unknown the same? Is there happiness and friendship? Is it not just here on earth that friends are made? Ohuaya ohuaya

O friends, who are they that dwell within God's house, O green swan cacao flowers? Keep on tilling this plume garden. Let me, let me see them laughing like jade flutes, conversing like flower log drums. And might these lords and princes strike and resonate the turquoise-brilliant drums within this house of flowers? Ohuaya ohuaya

Hear it! He's shrilling, warbling on the branches of the flower tree. He's shaking! It's the golden flower-bell, the rattle hummingbird, the swan, Lord Monencauhtzin. Like a gorgeous troupial fan he spreads his wings and soars beside the flower drum. Ohuaya ohuaya

They've reached the top. Flowers have reached the top.; the flowers are blooming in the presence of Life Giver. And He's given you the echo, Oh, heart! Ohuaya ohuaya

You've brought down precious birds of God. Your songs, your riches, are plentiful. You're giving pleasure. Flowers are stirring. Ohuaya ohuaya

Though more awkward stylistically, this translation shows the songs to be ecstatic outpourings of prayerful and urgent intent. For Bierhorst, 'friends' are the warriors who come, summoned down by the singer and the intensity of his song, they come whirling, chirping and nectar-sucking as flowers and birds. They lend their sweet presence to their companions on earth, but they cannot stay long. This is the friendship and loss that the songs sing of, not the fleeting quality of human life and friendship as Garibay saw it. But what is real? Which is the reality, this life on earth, so hard and full of sadness, or that glorious life with them, the life beyond, that lasts for such a little time,

but is so sweet, that is in fact the only thing that makes life worth living, the only place that endures or seems to have any meaning, the only place to connect, know God and be with him? This is the dilemma for the Indian soul and the burden of their song.

In Nahuatl these danced, intoned songs are called 'in xochitl in cuicatl' translating as 'flower and song', one of the complex nouns so beloved of the Aztec mind which they used to describe things in all their complexity - 'obsidian butterfly', for the mother goddess Coatlicue; 'face and heart', a man's being; 'black ink and red', knowledge; 'heart and blood', cacao; 'chaff and straw', falsehood. The words 'flower' and 'song' recur throughout the songs. But what does the phrase signify? It is not explained within the text. Garibay took it to mean 'Poetry' or 'Art' as a general term denoting that which civilises society; Bierhorst argues that it stands for 'descending spirit warriors'. But it could also mean exactly what it says: 'flower' the narcotic flowers of cacao, tobacco, datura, salvia, morning glory and passion flower and 'song' the beat of the drum - *the* two ingredients basic to the trance state, the gateway to that other world and the ecstasy it brings. The first song of the *Cantares Mexicanos* describes collecting 'flowers' (narcotic flowers or mushrooms?).

I wonder where I can get some good sweet flowers. Who will I ask?
 Let me ask the quetzal hummingbird [hummingbirds for the Aztec embodied the souls of dead warriors], the jade hummingbird. Let me ask the troupial butterfly. They're the ones who know: they know where the good sweet flowers bloom. Let me wander through this needle grove where the trogons are, let me wander through this flower grove of roseate swans. That's where they're bending with sunstruck dew. That's where they blossom in beauty. Perhaps I'll find them there. If they showed them to me, I'd gather a cloakful, and with these I'd greet the princes, with these I'd entertain the lords.

(This and all ensuing song quotations are taken from John Bierhorst's American translation from the Nahuatl of the Cantares Mexicanos.)

In such trance songs meanings are almost infinite. 'Flowers' could be flowers, narcotic flowers/peyote mushrooms, the warriors themselves who are flowers, or the songs which are flowers and must be gathered from that other world which is within, and not a physical place at all. But it is certain from archaeological and written evidence that the sacred use of psychotropic plants was widespread in pre-colonial Mexico as it is today among the Huichol, Nahua, Mixe, Chinanteco, Mixtec, Mazatec and Zapotec. Sahagún and Duran (who came with Cortes to Mexico as a boy in 1519) both refer to Aztec religious ceremonies in which at the outset intoxicating mushrooms were consumed and say that certain individuals danced, while others laughed or cried. These plants were vehicles for contacting the gods, a source of ecstasy, through them the partaker was transformed and could fly to the spirit world to commune with spirit beings. The drum-beat too seems to have been important and the way of distinguishing the songs. Two thirds of the songs are headed by specific drum-beat markings. The four beats are 'ti', 'to', 'qui', 'co'. So a song could be marked 'tico toco toco tiquitiquiti quiti quito' or on another 'Toco ticoto cotoco tititico tititico'.

The drums used were the *teponaztli* or log-shaped drum of wood with two separate slats cut in its top surface and played with mallets, and the *huehuetl*, an upright skin drum played with bare hands. It was the nobility who composed the songs, intoned them, and played the drums: rituals learnt to exacting standards over many years in the schools for boys and young men, the *calmecacs*. Sahagún describes how the requisite quality was maintained after training:

The tonsured priest of The Mother of Pearl Serpent was concerned with the songs. If someone composed a song, he consulted with him, so that he could provide, he could dispatch the singers to his house. When someone composed a song, he had to pass judgment upon it.

Approval obtained, the song could then be intoned in public. Sahagún adds that mistakes could be punished by death.

Flowers are thus narcotic flowers. 'Flowers' are also warriors; past warriors who live in glory and can be reached by the singer with his song and drum-beat and brought down to earth to be near and with his companions again.

In Aztec mythology there were three realms of heaven: a paradise for those who had died by drowning, a paradise for warriors and sacrificial victims, and a third underground limbo for everyone else. Sahagún in the prologue to his *Arte Divinatoria* writes,

They used to say that in the sky where the sun dwells there are many flowers, many fruits, and many delights . . . and also they said that four years after death the souls of these warriors turned into various kinds of rich-plumed and fine-coloured birds, and they went along sucking all the flowers both in the sky and here on earth, as hummingbirds do.

Duran has left a description of a dance performed by the Indians and much enjoyed by the Spanish who had it produced for visiting governors.

The dance they enjoyed most was the one they did with adornments of roses, with which they crowned themselves and encircled themselves. For this dance they made a house of roses . . . and they made artificial trees all filled with fragrant flowers. While they danced, some boys descended dressed as birds and others as butterflies, well adorned

with rich plumes, green and blue and red and yellow. They climbed up in these trees and went from branch to branch sucking the dew of those roses. . . . This was the most impressive dance that this nation had, and occasionally nowadays I see it danced anew, though very seldom.

A Jesuit historian, writing a century later, gave an eye-witness account of a *tocontin* danced in 1645 which more resembles the dances seen today in the *zocalo* of Mexico City performed by *danzantes* and *concheros* for the tourists. (The *concheros* are an interesting group who reverted to – or always believed in? – the Aztec knowledge and emerged strongly in the late sixties with the student riots at Tlatelolco and the writings of Carlos Castaneda.) The Jesuit adds that at the end of the grave and beautiful dance they add a kind of *volantines* who come flying through the air. In fact the ‘*Voladores*’ from Papantla (now performed regularly for tourists outside the National Museum in Mexico City) do embody the whirling arrival of the warrior ancestors. Four men tied by a harness fling themselves backwards off a revolving platform atop a very high pole and slowly descend, arms outstretched like birds, twirling round as their ropes unwind and they finally reach the ground. A fifth man at the top of the pole plays a flute during their descent.

‘Comrades are scattering down as plume-like popcorn flowers, spinning down as white morning glories’ one of the songs says. Birds are also warriors. Birds who live in the two worlds of earth and heaven. In these songs flowers, birds, glorious warriors, and companions of the past all are aspects of the One.

A reciprocity exists between the intensity of the singer’s call and the answering ‘echo’ from heaven. In Aztec mythology music itself had come in this way from the sun through Ehecatl, god of wind.

Seeing Ehecatl approach, the sun said to his musicians, 'No one must answer him, for whoever, answers him must go with him.' These musicians were dressed in four colours: white, red, yellow, and green. And now, having arrived, the wind god called to them with a song, and one of them instantly answered it and went off with him, carrying the music that they perform to this day in their dances in honour of their gods.

Music and warfare were virtually synonymous for the Aztec. An anonymous conquistador reported that 'while they fight they sing and dance'. A warrior in actual combat is said to be 'music-making' or 'song-weeping' and conversely the musical performance was regarded as an act of war and the dance floor the field of battle.

Ancestors are close and dear. In a worldview not so caught up with the individual, the brave and powerful ancestor stands for and 'contains' the individuals who remember, and bring him back. A song called 'Another by a ruler who remembers rulers' mourns the anguish of the Indians' split culture after the Conquest. The old Lords are still so real but they can no longer be contacted. They cannot know of the 'new bliss' (Christianity?) and cannot be warned of the danger they are in (Hell fire?). The loving veneration with which the Indian soul embraced the Catholic dogma enforced upon it is striking.

Alas I sing in sadness, remembering these princes. Would that I might return to their side, would that I might fetch them, might bring them back from the place where all are shorn. If only it were possible to live twice on earth! Would that these princes might come and be awed by that which awes us. Perhaps they would indeed be awed by the preciousness of Life Giver. If only we ingrates realized the extent of our blessing! It makes my heart weep. I set my memory in order, I, the singer. With weeping and in sadness I remember.

(Cantares Mexicanos, Song 8)

And another, even sadder:

Where does my heart live? Where is my home? Where does my city lie? I am poor on earth.

You give a gift of jade stones. You unfold them spun as plumes: you give a flower crown of troupial to the princes.

And when these sundry flowers have clothed my heart, making it drunk, then I cry and go before our mother, Santa Maria.

I say to Life Giver, "Do not frown, do not be reluctant here on earth.

Let us – us! – live beside you in your home within the sky". Ohuaya
ohuaya

But can what I say be real, O life Giver? We merely sleep, we were merely born to dream, and though I say it here on earth it falls on no one's ears.

Though it be jade, thought it be jewels, directed to Life Giver, even so it falls on no one's ears.

(Song 11 Cantares Mexicanos)

The old connections are wrenched apart for ever and where can their beloved forebears wander? The old songs are losing their power.

Flowers are also war and death and sacrifice – war is called the 'flowery field' in Nahuatl. This leads to the central element of Mesoamerican thought, so vital to them and so crucial for an understanding of their worldview: their relationship and debt to the sun. There had been four worlds, each ending in catastrophe. The present world is the fifth and was bought at great price. The

earlier worlds may have existed in geological time, but the end of the fourth world was recent. Focusing down the lens of historical time to the high plateau of central Mexico, possibly the greatest city-state of all their time, Teotihuacan, with its two hundred thousand inhabitants, had been built in the fourth world. Following its devastating collapse, those remaining joined by the incoming Toltecs called it the place where gods were born, the place of 'spirit becoming' because it was here that the fifth world was made.

Their myths tell of the gods' desperation with no men left to honour them and of a minor god covered with sores who threw himself onto a bonfire to bring light; others followed suit, one becoming the sun, another the moon. So life could continue and the fifth world of man was born – but at a price. As the gods had sacrificed to bring light and life so men must sacrifice to feed this light, the sun: life-blood the price, a warrior's life-blood the worthiest price, and so fighting was a way of life, and prisoners of war a necessity. This was the burden of the Mesoamerican world. (Interestingly the sacrificial god of the Spanish presented no problem to the Indian mind. His sacrifice had also 'bought' his people, made the bond.)

This predisposition to sacrifice was deliberately intensified in the mid-1400s when the Aztecs finally gained control over the central highland based on Tenochtitlan. The old books were burnt and a new history was written: they were now the 'chosen people of the sun', linked to the past glories and wisdom of the Toltec and under the patronage of their special god, Huitzilopochtli, god of war. Under this mystic militarism sacrificial numbers reached unbearable heights. But as they saw it, the debt owed to the sun and the care taken of it were crucial not only to the well-being of the Mexica, but also to the well-being of the whole world: It was truly a matter of life and death. It is this realisation, visible in the songs, that marks them out as so different. They are not fey musings, 'nice ideas', but pragmatic fact: man must connect and man must sacrifice to enable the world to go on. Jung in

his 1925 visit to the Pueblo Indians at Taos noted the integrity this belief gave to the Indian. 'That man . . . can render back something which is essential even to God induces pride for it raises the individual to the dignity of a metaphysical factor. Such a man is in the fullest sense of the word in his proper place.' Song 24 of the *Cantares Mexicanos*, among many, shows clearly the concept of the flowery war.

There! The blaze is seething, stirring, Honour is won, shield fame is won. Lords are strewn at the place of the bells. Ohuaya e
They'll never tire, these war flowers. They're massing ah! At the flood's edge. These jaguar flowers, these shield flowers, are blossoming. Lords are strewn at the place of the bells. Ohuaya ohuaya
There! Jaguar cacao flowers are massed at the place of the sprinkling down, the field! They're diffusing fragrance in our midst. Who does not desire them? They're praise. They're honour. Ohuay ohuaya
Restless are the flowers. Restless ones are pleased. Heart flowers are created. There! On the field of battle princes are born. Ah! They're praise. They're honour. Ohuaya ohuaya

These songs were written in a language that was both obscure and many-layered. Many contemporaries attest to the difficulty in understanding them. Duran says, 'These *cantares* are composed by means of certain metaphors so obscure that there is scarcely anyone who understands them . . . I myself, intently, have set about to listen very closely to what they sing and among the words and meaning of the metaphor: it seems nonsensical to me.' And Sahagún added, 'They sing the old *cantares* that they used to perform at the time of their idolatry, not all, but many and no one understands what they say, because their *cantares* are very obscure.'

Bierhorst argues that there may have been an added intention to this. The form of the spirit warrior song is pre-conquest, but he suggests these songs

collected under the title of *Cantares Mexicanos* were composed by a Tenochtitlan-based elite and performed for each other in their palaces, written down in the 1550s, thirty years after the conquest, when the last men who had been trained to the exacting standards of the old ways would have been in their fifties and beginning to disappear. He suggests these men used the old forms to express in secret the present anguish they suffered as their world was submerged under Spanish domination and lost irretrievably.

Certainly the songs with their exclamatory, repeated phrases and ecstatic but limited vocabulary have an insistent, emotional urgency. The noun-verb combinations heighten this effect: 'in grieving songs I plume-spin princes', 'I'm craving flowers, flower-chirping', 'I flower-sing, I, a butterfly of song', 'you're singing beauty'. So too do the powerful mixed metaphors: 'Before your eyes he's sprouting jades, he's leafing out as plumes' 'in blazing flood', 'lords are blossoming'. And the repeated terminal, *ohuaya ohuaya*, accentuates the rhythmic dance element. The songs are in fact danced prayers with the fixed purpose of bringing down spirit warrior companions.

The overwhelming feeling is of ecstasy and above all *connection*. It is the trance world of total apprehension, not consecutive understanding: a knowing-all-at-once, the sharp intrusion of the vertical plane. Now, in this moment, through the intensity of the song two worlds meet. It is a way for man to go beyond to his real home, 'God's presence', 'Life Giver', 'Ever Present' (time) and 'Ever Near' (space).

Sahagún in the Florentine Codex quotes a king's advice to his sons: 'Attend! This is your role: Care of the drum and the rattle. You must wake up the people to give pleasure to the Lord of the Universe. In this way you will search out the design of His Inner Being and he will be at your disposition. This is the way to petition and seek the Lord.' This odd injunction, emphasizing as it does an intimate and (to the West) unfamiliar relationship

to the Power beyond, points to the essence of 'flower and song'. As Song 17 says, 'with plume-like bracelet beads he pleasures the Only Spirit. How *else* would Life Giver acquiesce? How *else* could there be anything good on earth?' This could be the ultimate role of these songs – an understanding which gives us a glimpse into their world – for the songs betoken a total dependence on the deity, a sensation we are almost unaware of today, dependence for life, for water, sun, growth, harvest, power, stability, for all life. It was essential therefore to find ways to mitigate, to come close, to connect. The songs were one of these ways.

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