

The indigenous voices of Mexico

Miguel León-Portilla*

Today voices of Mexico still resound, as it has been for thousands of years, in many indigenous languages.¹ Mexico ranks first in the world in terms of the number of people speaking Spanish. But it is equally true that more than ten million Mexicans maintain their ancestral native tongues.

A treasure-trove of literary testimonies of “the ancient word” exist in Nahuatl (the Aztec language), Maya, Mixtec, Zapotec, Otomí and other tongues, notwithstanding the great losses which accompanied the Conquest. The few extant native hieroglyphic books, called *códices*, convey something of the ancient beliefs, annals, calendrical records, worldview and wisdom. The inscriptions on stone monuments or ceramics also inform us what happened in a remote past, where humans and gods interacted.

Yes, much was burnt or destroyed in other ways, to be lost forever. At least some humanistic-minded Spaniards — mainly friars who became interested in the natives’ culture in order to accommodate it to the Christian faith— devoted themselves to investigating what were called “the antiquities of the Indians.”

¹ In Mexico the word *indigenous* is usually used instead of *Indian*, which is often considered to have pejorative connotations. (Editor’s note.)

* Emeritus researcher at the Institute of Historical Research, UNAM, and member of the National College.

Thus, expressions of the ancient word in several indigenous tongues were transferred from the oral tradition and glyphic and painted books into alphabetic writing. Poetry, narrative, speeches of the elders, prayers, songs, stories and so on were thereby preserved.

In the case of the Nahuatl language, an incredibly rich “literature” from the pre-Hispanic tradition as well as from Colonial years was rescued from oblivion. In our own century people like the renowned scholar Angel María Garibay (1892-1967) —as well as many others (myself among them) who have followed in his footsteps— have dedicated themselves to studying the universe of indigenous expressions.

More recently, some people of native lineage have also begun to take part in this effort, as well as composing new forms of literature in their own languages. Thus both the ancient and the new word in Mexico’s native tongues enrich a country that now recognizes itself as multilingual and multicultural. A recent amendment to Article IV of the Mexican Constitution acknowledges this.

I will give a few examples here of this literature in Nahuatl, a language still spoken by more than one and a half million people. First I will present my translation of some poems from ancient times and then of two contemporary expressions of the new voices.



Indigenous boy from the mountains north of Puebla.

The ancient voices

Let us listen to what the wise ruler of Texcoco, Nezahualcōyotl (1402-1472) expressed regarding the evanescence of all that exists on the earth. His is a keen awareness of time, *cahuatl*, "that which leaves us."

I, Nezahualcōyotl, ask this:
Is it true that one really lives on the earth?
Not forever on earth,
only a little while here.
Though it be jade it falls apart,
though it be gold it wears away,
though it be quetzal plumage it is torn asunder.
Not forever on earth,
only a little while here,
If jade and gold fall apart and wear away, then faces and hearts, more fragile, will have to die and be erased like paintings.
I comprehend the secret,
the hidden:
Oh my lords!
Thus we are,
We are mortal,
Men through and through,
We all will have to go away,
We all will have to die on earth.
Like a painting,
We will be erased.
Like a flower,
We will dry up
Here on earth.
Like plumed vestments of the precious bird,
That precious bird with the agile neck,
We will come to an end...
Think on this, my lords,
Eagles and ocelots,
Though you be of jade,
Though you be of gold,
You also will go there,
To the place of the fleshless.
We will have to disappear,
No one can remain.

At last Nezahualcōyotl found an answer to his questioning. He held that he had unveiled the meaning of flower and song, the Nahuatl metaphor for art and symbolism.

At last my heart knows it:
I hear a song,
I contemplate a flower...
May they never fade!
When the heart at last has found its way, it seeks out the flowers and songs that never perish.

Nezahualcōyotl is anxious to find the flowers and songs that will not come to an end.

He believes that those whose hearts have discovered flowers and songs can indeed approach the mystery that surrounds the Giver of Life.

Tloque Nahuaque, the Lord of the Near and Close, also has a book of paintings. In it, with flowers and songs, he draws and colors whatever exists on earth.

With flowers You write,
Oh Giver of Life.
With songs You give color,
With songs You shade
Those who must live on the earth.

Later, You will destroy eagles
and ocelots;
We live only in Your book
of paintings,
Here, on the earth.

With black ink You will blot out
All that was friendship,
Brotherhood, nobility.

You give color
To those who must live on
the earth.
We live only in Your book
of paintings,
Here on the earth.

The faces and hearts of men on earth are close and yet far from the Giver of Life. Nezahualcōyotl's thought, immersed in mystery, reaches out toward Him but expresses the impossibility of unveiling the mystery.

The ancient manuscripts contain numerous poems, hymns and songs of authors who for us remain anonymous. Friendship is a recurring theme in several of them. Let us enjoy their message:

Let us have friends here!
It is the time to know each
others' faces.
Only with flowers
Can our song enrapture.
We will have gone to His house,
But our word
Shall live here on earth.
We will go, leaving behind
Our grief, our song.
For this will be known,
The song shall remain real.
We will have gone to His house,
But our word
Shall live here on earth.
The "Song of Brotherhood"
expresses a yearning to find a way to befriend the community and all humankind. With necklaces made of macaw feathers, with circlets of song, the poet encompasses those who are his friends, trying to give them whatever he has. A singer believes that this is the most he can do while on earth, until the day comes when all will have to go to the region of mystery:
I am come, oh my friends,
With necklaces I entwine you,
With feathers of the macaw I
adorn you,
A precious bird, I dress
with feathers,
I paint with gold,
I embrace humankind.
With trembling quetzal feathers,
With circlets of song,
I give myself to the community.
I will carry you with me to
the palace
Where we all,
Someday,
All must betake ourselves,
To the region of the dead.
Our life has only been lent to us!
Friendship is indeed a consolation
to humans on earth. As a garland of
flowers it can entwine us.

The new voices

Women and men who have kept alive their culture and language are conscious that they possess a legacy that must be maintained. To foster it, and to let their people and others

know what they think and want, they are creating a new literature, a new word. A Nahuatl friend of mine, Natalio Hernández Xocoyotzin, has conveyed this insight in a marvelous way:

Sometimes I feel
That we, the Indians, are waiting
For the arrival of a Man
Who can achieve all,
Knows everything,
Is ready to help us,
Will answer our problems.

But, this Man
Who can achieve all,
Knows everything,
Will never arrive
Because he is in ourselves,
Walks along with us.
He has been asleep,
But now he is awakening.

The one who is awakening now must be on the alert, since some people do not think very highly of the indigenous cultural heritage. Thus it is a must to let them know that the Nahuatl and many others have made a decision as to the future of their languages and cultures. These are the words of another contemporary Nahuatl writer, Joel Martínez Hernández:

Some non-Indians say
We Nahuatl-speaking people
will disappear,
We Nahuatl people will vanish;
That our language no more will
be heard,
Our language no more will
be used.
Non-Indians rejoice at this,
Non-Indians are looking for this.
Why is it thus,
That they are looking for
our destruction?

It is not necessary to think
very much,
Four hundred years have taught us
What the non-Indian wants.
The non-Indian covets our lands,
He wants to have our forests,
He is looking for our rivers;
He wants to take advantage
Of our work.
The non-Indian wants

To take us into the large towns...
So that we become his servants.
That is why he wants us
To abandon our communal lands,
Our own forms of work...,
Our own language.

Where is our home?
How many are we?
We the Nahuatl-speaking people,
We are not just in one place,
We exist here and there,
We have our homes

In sixteen different
Mexican states...
We, the Nahuatl-speaking people,
Still live and move around
Everywhere in Mexico...
Now we can say
That even if the non-Indian
May want us to vanish,
We, the Nahuatl-speaking people
We will not disappear,
We will speak our language,
We will preserve our own ways
of existence! ✽



They possess a legacy that must be maintained.