Book Review


Reviewed by Paul M. Worley, Western Carolina University

Lest the casual reader overlook this volume because of its narrowly focused title, it must be pointed out immediately that the work is far more than another collection of Maya tales. Drawing on decades of fieldwork in Mexico collaborating with Ausencio “Chencho” Guzmán, Nicholas A. Hopkins and J. Kathryn Josserand’s latest publication combines the presentation of bilingual texts (in Chol and English) with highly nuanced essays and thorough introductions to the stories themselves. This format provides the novice in the field with enough information to engage the material and the expert with a number of challenging insights into Chol culture and storytelling in general. In sum, the work should find a welcome home on the shelves of scholars and enthusiasts alike, and may even be useful in upper-level undergraduate or graduate classrooms as an accessible text that could be used to introduce students to the complexities of contemporary Maya cultures and storytelling traditions.

Within this context, one of most fascinating aspects of Hopkins and Josserand’s study is the fact that their principal collaborator, Ausencio (Chenco) Cruz Guzmán, “identifies himself as a Ladino, not an ethnic Chol,” whose life experiences meant he was fluent in Spanish and Chol and “had acquired an extensive repertory of folktales and stories” (p. xi). In other words, the volume’s central storytelling voice challenges many preconceived notions about who tells stories, how, and why. Although the authors themselves do not spend much time meditating on the implications of a non-Maya interlocutor relating Maya stories in a Maya language, Cruz Guzmán’s positionality no doubt opens up into a series of fascinating questions as scholars have long noted a tendency for these racial power dynamics to run in the opposite direction. Writing on the ethnic identity of James D. Sexton’s collaborator, Tz’utujil Maya Ignacio Bizarro Ujpán, for example, Marc Zimmerman compares his status to that of K’iche’ Maya Rigoberta Menchú Tum, noting that Ujpán may “best represent the more individualized, ladinoized Indians integrated in relatively privileged ways into the national system” (1996:121). Cruz Guzmán would seem to be the opposite, a self-described Ladino who has incorporated aspects of a Chol Maya identity. Given the privileged status of language as a marker of cultural and ethnic identity in academic scholarship and indigenous movements alike, the notion of a mestizo or ladino who is culturally and linguistically fluent enough in an indigenous language to be a superb storyteller strikes one as something of an impossibility. And yet, in both language and style, that is precisely what Cruz Guzmán appears to be.

The stories are grouped into three sections—“Myths and Fables,” “Tales of the Earth Lord,” and “Things That Come Out of the Woods.” Unlike many collections of Maya narratives, these include not only iterations of frequently anthologized tales such as “The Blackman” (“El Negro Cimarron”) and “The Turtle and the Deer,” but also a contemporary narrative about a personal encounter with the supernatural, “A Visit to Don Juan.” The historicity that results through the juxtaposition of these narratives themselves creates a welcome counterpoint to the articulation of folklore as occurring in a remote past. Recalling the format of a book like Allan F. Burns’s An Epoch of Miracles, here the presentation of the stories themselves further emphasizes storytelling’s status as living verbal art through introductions that locate individual tellings as occurring...
among a unique set of actors in a particular setting at a particular moment in time. Digressions and audience interventions are included as part of the stories themselves, aspects of storytelling’s meaning-making process, and not ancillary events to be discarded in preparation for publication. What may strike some as a mundane editorial decision thus underscores communal aspects of storytelling that are all too frequently lost when these features are removed. It should also be noted that Hopkins and Josserand archived most of the texts in the book online at Archive of the Indigenous Languages of Latin America (at the University of Texas at Austin; ailla.utexas.edu), so that the Chol language recordings are readily available to anyone with an internet connection anywhere in the world.

The volume places several essays in dialogue with the stories themselves, from the helpful introductory background information of “The Chol Maya and Their Folktales” and “The Narrative Structure of Chol Folktales” to the “Discourse Analysis of Chol Texts,” which breaks down each narrative according to the structures outlined in the “Narrative Structure” essay. These essays have the considerable merit of showing how a particular theory of Chol narrative can be put into practice, but beyond this, Hopkins and Josserand throughout include personal narratives that help the reader better understand the authors and their approach to this subject matter. For example, in the essay on narrative structure they point out that many published collections of folklore edit out evidentiality statements (a trap that, as they confess, they themselves previously fell into). The resulting translated texts “often adopt a Western storytelling style that differs starkly from the original texts” (p. 18). This anecdote situates the book in the context of a decades-long learning process that Hopkins and Josserand have engaged in through their collaborations with Cruz Guzmán. Their openness to revelation and to learning about indigenous storytelling from storytellers themselves shines through as the ethos of their project, decentering Western academic perspectives as the endpoint of our studies, and privileging storytelling as an art in and of itself.

As Hopkins states in the preface, the book brings together work that he has been completing since the untimely passing of Josserand, his longtime scholarly collaborator and wife, in Palenque in 2006 (pp. xv–xvi). Beyond adding a poignancy not often encountered in academic publications, this information, along with other anecdotes drawn from their thirty-six year marriage, celebrates the subjective, human elements of storytelling that Hopkins and Josserand endeavor to foreground throughout this collection of narratives. The storytellers they work with are human beings just as they are, and this intimate approach to the collection and publication of indigenous literatures makes the text all the richer.

Reference

Zimmerman, Marc