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The Poetics of the Ancestor Songs of the Tz'utujil Maya of Guatemala

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Abstract

This essay attempts to define the relationship between a song tradition that survives in the Mayan highlands of Guatemala, and 16th century poetic Mayan literature. This song tradition of Santiago Atitlán, Guatemala is slowly disappearing as the socio-cultural context in which it flourished changes. By comparing the poetics of the song texts (including their rhythmic structure, versification, and use of poetic devices such as assonance, alliteration and onomatopoeia) to the poetics of the *Popol Vuh*, a K'iché Maya text probably copied from a manuscript that predates the Spanish invasion, a continuity is discovered that places the song texts squarely within the tradition of Mayan literature and suggests common origins.

The poetics of the ancestor songs of the Tz'utujil Maya of Guatemala

This essay attempts to define the relationship between a song tradition that survives in the Mayan highlands of Guatemala and 16th century poetic Mayan literature. The comparison of the poetics of the songs of the Tz'utujils, an oral tradition, to the poetics of the conquest-era K'iché-Maya written codex, the *Popol Vuh* (The Book of the Council), reveals a remarkable continuity of style and may enhance the understanding of Mayan literature.

The current study of the poetics of Tz'utujil song texts is part of a broader project, the aim of which is to discover the historical and cultural roots of the songs of a people closely related to the authors of the *Popol Vuh*. A study of the music of Tz'utujil songs, as well as of the construction, tuning, style, and technique of the guitar that singers play, already suggest roots in early colonial times.

The Tz'utujil Maya

The town of Santiago Atitlán occupies a place of great beauty on the southern shores of Lake Atitlán, which lies 5,125 feet above sea level in the southwestern highlands of Guatemala. Of its approximately 30,000 residents, an estimated 95% are indigenous Maya, whose language, Tz'utujil, belongs to the larger family of K'ichean languages, as does K'iché, the language of the *Popol Vuh*. The songs are part of "the Old Ways," which include the traditional calendric rituals and other customs of the ancestors, and their texts are vehicles for the transmission of the customs. In the twentieth century, socio-economic pressures towards modernization and the factionalizing effects of a multiplicity of Christian sects significantly eroded the viability of the "Old Ways, leading increasingly to their abandonment.

The oral literature of the Tz'utujils does not draw a strictly geographical picture of the world but describes the world as a living body called "Face of the Earth" or "San Martín." Stories, songs, and shamanic prayers describe the observable parts of the Face of the Earth, the terrain, and the lake which together form a flat, elliptical disc that floats within the sphere described by the path of the sun. At the four intercardinal points lie the sacred mountains on which the ancestors and spirits of nature reside. Some of these, like *Dios* (God), *Jesukrista* (Jesus Christ) and *Mriy Dolors* (Mary of Sorrows) are Catholic deities and saints who have been assimilated into the company of the ancestors or whose names have been assigned to ancestral deities, called the *nawals* or Old Ones. The hemisphere through which the sun travels in the day is the world of the living, and the hemisphere beneath the earth, where the sun goes at night, is the underworld of the dead and the dwelling of the drowned and the lords of darkness who rule there. In the very center, in the place called "the navel of the Face of the Earth," is Santiago Atitlán. In its center stands a 16th century stone cross, pointing, again not geographically but mythographically, to the four intercardinal directions. The vertical column of the cross points both upward, toward the zenith of the sky, and downward, in the direction of the underworld. It visibly marks a spiritual axis, along which the shaman-god, *Rilaj Mam* or Old Grandfather, the protector and watchman of the people, travels to the upper- and underworlds.

Tz'utujil stories present the Old Ones as powerful and wise and the customs, prayers, music, and dance they left are capable of controlling the forces of nature to influence such forces in favor of the people's needs. In prescribing the customs, the Old Ones established the divine economy that operates between living people and the world of the spirits and gods. The faithful

carrying out of these customs ensures the continued prosperity of the Tz'utujil people. Thus, traditionally, the old customs are the models for everyday life and conduct.

Tz'utujil songs

The Tz'utujils call these traditional songs *bix rxin nawal*¹ (songs of the Old Ones), *bix rxin Ruch'lew* (songs of the Face of the Earth), or *bix rxin ojer* (songs of yesterday). As mentioned, the songs are vehicles that describe and preserve traditional cultural and social norms, customs, and myths. *Ajbixa'*, or “songmen” sing of proper conduct in liminal life situations (songs for courting, marriage, mourning, etc.) and of the gods of the agricultural calendar and fertility (songs of the flowers and fruit, midwives' songs). Others are used for healing or are directed to the gods who form or inhabit the Tz'utujil cosmos (songs of “Our Father the Sun,” songs of the Face of the Earth god, songs of Old Grandfather shaman god). Some songs are sung in the *cofradías*², others in the home; those related to courting may be sung in the streets. They are performed by a songman either as a solo guitar piece or as a song in which the singer accompanies himself on the guitar.

The songs used in this study are part of my ongoing research of the music of Santiago Atitlán. I recorded the songs both in ritual contexts and in songmen's homes. Later, the text was written down in Tz'utujil by a bilingual Tz'utujil translator who also wrote the Spanish translation. Together we listened to the recording again while he translated aloud into Spanish, and I checked the spoken translations against the recording and the written Spanish. We often stopped and replayed, to clarify obscure passages and the meaning of the traditions.³

Edmonson's publication of the *Popol Vuh* as poetry arranged in couplets with side-by-side translation into English (Edmonson, 1971a), made it apparent that there is a tradition common to both the texts of the Tz'utujil *bix* and the *Popol Vuh* (O'Brien, 1975, p. 34, note 1). Tz'utujil songmen create their songs in parallel verse, and since K'iché and Tz'utujil languages are quite similar, common words, phrases, and lines are easy to identify. There are also common elements, like lists of gods and animals, lines ending with “they say,” themes (gourds, dolls of wood, colors, roads), the phrase “face of the earth,” and a strong sense of a common vocabulary, style, and mythology.

The Survival of the Song Tradition

There is a consensus among Mayanists that, in spite of Spanish efforts to destroy indigenous Mayan culture, the culture, in fact, persisted, thanks to the Maya's “capacity to transform their models of the cosmos without destroying the basic structures of the models themselves.” (Freidel, Schele, & Parker, 1993, p. 38). The *Popol Vuh* is itself evidence that Maya authors continued to record their traditions in writing even under Spanish prohibitions against any traditional arts that would preserve the “memory of a world that had no Spaniards and no church in it” (Tedlock, 2010, p. 299). Carlsen (1997) describes this cultural continuity in the specific case of Santiago Atitlán.

The songs of the Tz'utujils survived the upheavals of the 20th century, and this analysis suggests that they are part of an oral tradition that has continued for much longer. The opportunity presents itself now to address the question of their origins, in the context of much useful ethnography and ethnomusicology by Carlsen (1997), Navarrete Pellicer (2005), Stanzione (2003), Christenson (2001), and the work on the poetics of Mayan literature by

Edmonson (1971a) and Tedlock (1987, 1996, 2010). These provide a strong and useful background of information for a return to the study of the songs in my collection and of the current focus on their roots.

Since the end of the 36-year civil war in Guatemala (1960-1996), the visible erosion of traditional culture in Atitlán has become all too apparent. Decades of civil war, military occupation, and political violence have led to the ongoing loss of subsistence agriculture, the influx of a drug-based economy, a community fragmented into religious factions, and the slow abandonment of the traditions modeled by the Old Ones.

Mayan Alphabetic Literature

The longest Mayan poetic text written in the western alphabet is the *Popol Vuh*, or *Book of the Council*, of the K'iché Maya. Other Mayan texts contain passages written as prose, but closer examination shows them also to contain verse of the kind found in the *Popol Vuh*. Tedlock (2010) shows that the same style of versification is also characteristic of recent Mayan oral literature. The *Popol Vuh* was chosen for comparison because of its poetic character and length and because some themes of the *Popol Vuh* are common to Tz'utujil songs. The *Popol Vuh* is the story of the creation of the world and humans by the gods, the adventures of heroic ancestors, and of the K'iché people's journey to their present home in the Guatemalan highlands. According to the *Popol Vuh*, thirteen tribes originated in the east, as the K'iché did. The Tz'utujil, who speak a language closely related to K'iché and whose songs are the subject of this study, were counted among them.

The *Popol Vuh* was written in K'iché using the Spanish alphabet between 1554 and 1558. It seems probable that it was a translation from a document in Mayan writing⁴ from before the Spanish invasion. The translation was copied and translated into Spanish by the Dominican friar, Francisco Ximénez, around 1701. It was not until 1861 that it was copied and published by a Flemish priest, Charles-Étienne Brasseur de Bourbourg, with a French translation.

Mayan Poetics

In comparing Tz'utujil songs to the *Popol Vuh*, I rely heavily on Dennis Tedlock's important and extensive work of analysis and description of the poetics of Mayan literature and of the *Popol Vuh* (1983, 1996, 2010), and for the complete text of the *Popol Vuh* in K'iché, on the work of Mundo S. Edmonson (1971a). It is interesting to note that the arrangement of Mayan script before the Spanish invasion, in which signs are arranged in pairs, is continued in the couplets which are pervasive in the alphabetic text written after Spanish contact. Referring to the continuity between Mayan literature before and after contact, Tedlock (2010, p. 2) points out: One of the features that unites texts in the Mayan script with those that Mayans wrote in the alphabet is that many passages take the form of parallel verse, in which recurrent patterns of sound reflect recurrent patterns of meaning rather than operating at a level below that of meaning.

In the *Popol Vuh*, lines of verse that are the same except for small variations, form couplets, triplets, or quatrains. These groups are often preceded or followed by a single line which is in some way different. In contrast to the familiar end rhyme of European poetry, rhyme is internal in the *Popol Vuh* in the forms of alliteration and assonance. Onomatopoeia, in which non-lexical words are used to convey meaning through the sounds they imitate, is common.

There are several mentions of songs in the *Popol Vuh*, and there are two short song texts. In the song text that follows, the parallelism of the lines is obvious in both the K'iché text and in the translation:

| | |
|---|--|
| { “Alas! We were lost at Tula! We have broken ourselves up. | { “Akarok! x oh zachik chi Tulan! X oh paxin vi q ib. |
| We have left behind again our older brothers Our younger brothers. | X e qa kanah chik q atz, Qa ch'ak'. |
| { Where did they see the sun then? Where might they have been when it dawned?” | { A vi mi x k il vi q'ih? A vi'on 'e q'o vi ta mi x zaqirik?” (Edmonson, 1971a, pp. 182-183) |

The Poetics of Tz'utujil Songs

Tz'utujil songmen improvise lines of their songs to tunes which are associated with a theme, such as “a young man’s song” (*bix rxin k'jol*) or “a sad song” (*jun trist*). A songman’s text is created for the particular circumstances of the occasion (a mother is sad because her daughter has died), from stock phrases for this type of song and from non-lexical vocables⁵. The tunes are in triple meter, or 6/8 duple meter with hemiola that alternates between duple and triple meter. They can be transcribed in music notation in 3/4, 3/8 or 6/8 meter, but they are not metrical in a strict sense: -an extra beat, an extra measure added whether sung or instrumental - are common. This rhythmic flexibility or asymmetry is not confined to songs but is found across Tz'utujil vocal and instrumental musical styles. In songs this flexibility allows the songman to stretch the tune in order to accommodate a longer line of improvised text, or to provide a moment to consider his next improvised line.

Parallel verse: couplets, triplets and quatrains with a single initial or final line

In the following *Bix rxin Rajaw mund* (Song to the Lord of the world) the songman sings a couplet and a triplet, each followed by an ending line which is different. Changes of line are dictated by the singer’s pause, the end of the musical phrase or motif, or a guitar interlude.

Bix rxin Rahaw mund (Song of the Lord of the world)

| | |
|-------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| { Naya' rabendicion | Give us a blessing |
| { naya' rainstrumentos | give us the instruments |
| con bona santa voluntad, Dios | with good, holy will, Dios. |
| { Naya' qkxilway | You give us our tortillas |
| { naya' qichaj | you give us our herbs |
| { naya' qmunil | you give us our fruit |
| ay'on qk'aslemal. | you are the giver of our life. |

The following lines are from a courting song in which a young man quotes the insults flung at him by the girl he is courting. She thinks he is too poor for her because he can't afford the colorfully woven clothes that more affluent Tz'utujils wear. The triplet is preceded by a

single line that introduces it. The triplet's lines are analogous in wording and in meaning. At the end a final line contains a variation in the form of the addition of a synonym, "your tie":

Bix rxin k'jol (Song of the young man)

| | |
|-----------------------|----------------------|
| Majo'n k'a awc'atzil! | You are worthless! |
| { Sak aska'w | White are your pants |
| sak akwton | white is your shirt |
| sak apas, | white is your sash, |
| atnwkon. | your tie. |

A similar structure is found in the *Popol Vuh*, in which a word is dropped in the final phrase, calling a halt to the rhythm, as in:

| | |
|----------------|-------------------|
| ca catzininoc, | it still ripples, |
| ca cachamamoc | it still murmurs, |
| catzinonic | ripples |

(Tedlock, 1983, p. 222)

The following triplet from the same Tz'utujil song has a final line that completes the thought:

| | |
|------------------|----------------|
| { Kamik k'a ala' | Now, then, man |
| kamik k'a k'jol | now, then, boy |
| kamkc k'a nen | now, then, I, |
| ks etzel njo'n. | I felt so bad. |

Quatrains are common in the *Popol Vuh* and in Tz'utujil songs. The following is an example of a quatrain, again with a completing fifth line at the end:

| | |
|---|--|
| <i>Bix rxin k'jol</i> (Song of the young man) | |
| { Pr kinwaj k'a jun nsantaw, nute' | But I want to have money, mother |
| pr kinsmaj k'a, nute' | because I work, mother |
| pr kinsmaj k'a, nidta' | because I work, father |
| pr kinsma j k'a, in'ay'on kank'a | because I work, and you have left me alone |
| chwach munt ruch'lew nute'. | in the world, the Face of the Earth, mother. |

Passages of more than four parallel lines

Although not common in the *Popol Vuh*, Tz'utujil songs contain frequent examples of five and more parallel lines. The following example is from a courting song:

| | |
|--|--|
| <i>Bix rxin q'poj</i> (Song of the young girl) | |
| { mskna' xk'yil si' | even if he is a firewood seller |
| mskna'x ch'roy chaj | even if he cuts heart-of-pine |
| mskx cloy much' | even if he cuts hay or <i>chipilín</i> |
| mskx cloy echaj | even if he cuts purple herb |
| mskx pc'oy skil | even if he sells ground <i>chiles</i> |

| | |
|------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| mskx y c'ul wajqex | even if he herds cattle |
| mskx . . . | even if . . . |
| bnoy ch'it ruya'l chit muqil | if he sells small plants . . . |
| chi nmaqil | ⁶ |
| { mskx chpoy tap | even if he is a crab catcher |
| { mskx s luy aqoq | even if he hunts ducks |
| { mskx chpoy ch'u' | even if he is a fisherman |

Another example comes from a couple's song:

Bix "Xketi' ki' (Song "They fought")

| | |
|-------------------|--|
| { atjun Dios | I want <i>Dios</i> (literally: "that there were <i>Dios</i> ") |
| { atjun sant | I want a saint |
| { atjun prcipal | I want a principal |
| { atjun rmament | I want this moment |
| { atjun awuk' | I want a family |
| { atjuna wch'alal | I want a brother |
| { atjuna wamig | I want a friend |
| { atjuna. . . | I want . . . |
| { atjuna acha | I want a man |

Rhythmic patterns and onomatopoeia

Tedlock notes Edmonson's observation that "there is no meter—in the strict sense of recurrent quantifications of stresses, vowel lengths, or syllables, all at the segmental level—in the indigenous verbal arts of the New World." (Tedlock 1983, p. 218; Edmonson 1971, p. 99). Tedlock adds:

"Even in songs whose texts consist entirely of vocables rather than words, where tight metrical patterns would be easy to achieve if they were desired, there are seldom more than two or three successive lines that even have the same number of syllables" (Tedlock 1983, p. 218).

This same unevenness in the metrical patterns of parallel lines is found in Tz'utujil songs. The following lines, used above as examples of couplets and triplets, illustrate this characteristic. Accented syllables in the lines of parallel verse are in bold capitals:

Bix rxin Rahaw mund (Song of the Lord of the world)

| | |
|--|-------------|
| { Na YA' ra BEN di CION | 6 syllables |
| { na YA' ra IN stru MEN Tos | 7 syllables |
| con bona santa voluntad, Dios | |
| { Na YA' qkxil WAY | 5 syllables |
| { na YA' qi CHAJ | 4 syllables |
| { na YA' qmu NIL | 4 syllables |
| ay'on qk'aslemal. | |

However, in Tz'utujil songs, there are often several successive lines in an even metrical pattern, in passages that are lexical or non-lexical or both. In this courting song, the young man complains about the insults delivered to him by a young woman, understanding that the stronger her insults, the more she likes him. The following passage has an initial line of four syllables, followed by six lines of five syllables:

Bix rxin k'jol (Song of the young man)

| | |
|------------------|------------------------------|
| Ximba pbey nen | I went into the street, mama |
| xintz'uja anen | they insulted me |
| xintz'uja acha | they insulted me, man |
| xitz'u'ja q'poj | they insulted me, girl |
| tela' k'jol ala' | hurry up, boy |
| tela' k'jol achi | hurry up, man |
| tela' k'jol ala' | hurry up, boy |

The following is an example ten lines of non-lexical vocables in regular five-syllable rhythm:

Bix rxin Mam (Song of Mam)

yana yana li
yana yana la
nana nana na
nana nana nu
nana nana ni
nana nana nu
nana nana na
nana nana nu
nana nana na
nana nana nu

Characteristic of K'iché poetry is the use of non-lexical vocables that imitate what they refer to, or onomatopoeia. Tz'utujil songmen often imitate the sound of a musical instrument, e.g. "china china," the sound of strumming the guitar. The following lines from a song to *Rilaj Mam* have seventeen consecutive lines in steady five-syllable rhythm. The non-lexical lines marked in bold are not devoid of meaning, but rather they use onomatopoeia to imitate the sound of the drum and the guitar.

Bix rxin Mam (Song of Mam)

| | |
|---|-------------------------------------|
| China china ⁷ acha ⁸ | ching ching , man |
| china china 'ala' | ching ching , boy |
| Xawxin k'a ala' | It is yours, boy |
| xawxin k'a guitar | yours is the guitar |
| xawxin k'a ventur | yours is the bandurria ⁹ |
| xawxin k'a scarment | yours is the instrument |
| xawxin k'a q'jom | yours is the drum |

| | |
|---------------------|--------------------------|
| xawxin k'a a'a | it is yours, mister |
| xawxin k'a papá | it is yours, papa |
| aq'ojom A Lu | your drum, Lucha |
| tuna tuna na | boom boom boo |
| tuna tuna na | boom boom boo |
| Anen k'a anen | I, then, I |
| anen k'a mamá | I, then, mama |
| aq'ojom a'a | your drum, mister |
| tana tana ni | knock knock ock |
| tana tana na | knock knock ock |
| tatjic' wq'uin a'a | you were with me, mister |
| tatjic wq'uin achi | you were with me, man |
| awxin ventur | yours is the bandurria |
| quinq'jomana | I will play it |

Some songs use onomatopoeic vocables in combination with a single final word:

Bix rxin Mam (Song of Mam)

| | |
|------------------------|--------------------------|
| tana tana ꠄalá | knock, knock boy |
| tana tana ꠄalí | knock, knock mama |
| tuna tuna ꠄA Lu | boom boom , Lucha |
| tuna tuna ꠄalá | boom boom , boy |
| tuna tuna ꠄA Lu | boom boom , Lucha |

Lists

In the *Popol Vuh*, lists of animals, plants, names, and titles are frequent. Here a list of the names of the gods is introduced by an item, "Hurricane," which stands alone (Tedlock 1996, p. 203):

| | |
|----------------------------------|--|
| Juraqan, | Hurricane, |
| ch'ipi kaqulja, raxa kaqulja, | Newborn Thunderbolt, Sudden Thunderbolt, |
| uk'ux kaj, uk'ux ulew, | Heart of Sky, Heart of Earth, |
| tz'aqol, b'itol, alom, k'ajolom. | Maker, Modeler, Bearer, Begetter |

Lists also appear often in Tz'utujil songs. In the "Song of the young woman" below, the songman sings the prayer of a young girl who calls upon the female ancestor gods as she appeals to them to send her a husband who wears expensive clothes: a vicuña hat and sandals:

Bix rxin q'poj (Song of the young woman)

| | |
|--------------------------|-------------------------|
| Natzirk'awa' Dios? | Why, Dios? |
| Natzirk'awa' mund? | Why, world? |
| Natzirm k'awa' ruch'lew? | Why, Face of the Earth? |
| Nute' Mriy Perdon | My mother Maria Pardon |
| nute' Mriy Dolors | my mother Maria Dolores |

| | |
|----------------------|------------------------------------|
| nute' Mriy Santuaria | my mother Maria Santuaria |
| nute' Mriy Santa Ana | my mother Maria Santa Ana |
| nute' Mriy Dolors | my mother Maria Dolores |
| nute' Mriy Saragost | my mother Maria Saragosa |
| tia' jun ala' chwa | give me a boy |
| tia' jun ajcuñ chwa | give me one who wears a vicuña hat |
| tia' jun ajskaw chwa | give me one who wears sandals |

In another example from the *Popol Vuh* animals made by the gods are named:

| | |
|---------------------|---------------|
| Deer | R kieh, |
| Birds | Tz'ikin, |
| Panthers, | Koh, |
| Jaguars, | Balam, |
| Serpents, | Kumatz, |
| Rattlers, | Zochoh, |
| Yellowmouths, | Q'an Ti, |
| Guardians of plants | Chahal q'aam. |

(Edmonson, 1971a, p. 14).

A list of animals also appears in a *Bix rxin Ruch'lew* (Song of the Face of the Earth). Here the songman addresses the god who is the living earth, "Face of the Earth". An introductory line is followed by a list in which the parallelism of couplets is varied with a triplet and an explanatory line:

Bix rxin Ruch'lew (Song of the Face of the Earth)

| | |
|------------------------|---|
| Prk Dios Jesucrist | Because Dios Jesucristo |
| {msk mejor kej | even the best horse |
| {msk mejor wakax | even the best bull |
| {chi jun jan, | and a fly |
| {chi jun snik | and an ant |
| {chi jun chkop, | and an animal |
| k'ola p montaña, ndta' | that is on the mountain, my father, |
| {chi tz'e', | and a dog |
| {chi jun syaw | and a cat |
| {atrpalben mund, | they are walking on you, world, |
| {atrpalben ruch'lew. | they are walking on you, Face of the Earth. |

A similar construction occurs in the following song when the songman replaces the words 'my father,' which introduce the passage, with 'honey', 'tortilla dough,' and so on, for a quatrain, followed by a summarizing line and another couplet:

Bix rxin Ruch'lew (Song of the Face of the Earth)

| | |
|----------------------------|---|
| Awxin ndta', awxin | Yours, my father, yours is . . . |
| {awxin kab, awxin kxilway | yours the honey, yours the tortilla dough |
| {awxin loc', awxin kanel | yours the produce, yours the cinnamon |

| | |
|----------------------------|---|
| awxin rexwach, awxin tuja' | yours the black corn, yours the yellow corn |
| awxin pujuy, awxin . . . | yours the corn of all colors, yours the . . . |
| selwir pñac'a xlxaw pujuy | upon your hands appeared the corn of all colors |
| {awxin much' awxin chaj | yours is the chipilín, yours the heart-of-pine |
| {awxin . . . , awxin xkoy. | yours the . . . , yours the tomato. |

Assonance and alliteration

Another common characteristic found in both sources is the use of poetic devices called assonance, or internal rhyme, and alliteration. Note the assonance in the succession of “ā” sounds (rmaj, kar, maj, kinya', etc.), and the alliteration in the repetition of “k” sounds in this song, in which a young man promises to hire marimba players for a young woman to dance “one son, two *sones*,” popular, traditional dance pieces:

Bix rxin q'poj i k'jol (Song of the young man and young woman)

k'jol:

jun rmaj, **kar** maj

kinya' k'a chawa

kantzej bejk'a **kamik**

kamik k'a nqoba chjay

ki' k'a nuk'u'x

young man:

one *son*, two *sones*

I give now to you

I say to you now

let's go home now.

Now I am happy.

Conclusion

Comparing the rhythmic patterns of the sung lines of Tz'utujil songs to the written lines of the *Popol Vuh* is in some ways like comparing apples and oranges. Unlike written or recited texts, in the songs, the rhythms of the tune and the guitar accompaniment, as well as the interpretation by the singer, bestow their own pulse on the text which, in terms of their number of syllables and accents, might be irregular in rhythm. Therefore, poetic scansion of a song text does not provide complete information about the regularity of its rhythm when it is sung. In a text sung to a metrical tune, the regularity of the rhythm or lack of it does not always depend on the number of stressed and unstressed syllables, or poetic feet, in each line, as is the case for poetry. This is because the rhythm of stressed and unstressed beats provided by the rhythmic pulse of the music may predominate over the rhythm of the words fitted to it. Sub-divisions of the beat by the addition of unstressed notes are commonly found in song tunes in order to accommodate such extra syllables. Consequently, lines of verse may have an unequal number of syllables but the same number of beats.¹⁰

This means that if we were to consider the song texts without any reference to the music, passages of lines that are not parallel in patterns of sound or meaning and that have uneven rhythm could easily be taken for prose passages. Lines of song texts in this essay are arranged according to the pauses the singers made. As such, versification was determined by the musical performance itself. It follows that, although written Mayan poetic literature seldom contains more than three successive lines which have the same number of syllables, the possibility exists that these texts were originally sung to the rhythm of a tune. In such a case, the rhythm of the sung text would have depended on the rhythm, possibly regular, of the tune. It must be added that the few lines cited above (p. 8) from the *Popol Vuh* that are identified as a song are not

rhythmically regular but might well have been conformed to the regular rhythm of a tune. A similar rhythmic irregularity in the texts of Tz'utujil songs has been shown above as a feature that relates them to Mayan literature.

Examples of more than three lines of equal syllables are scarce in Mayan literature, even in songs and non-lexical passages; yet examples of several successive lines of equal syllables are common in Tz'utujil songs. My translator seldom wrote down more than two of the non-lexical lines of a song, probably because they are repetitious and thought to be insignificant, nor did I insist that all lines be written, knowing I could add them later. What this suggests is that the absence of more than three successive lines of equal rhythm in other written Mayan literature could be explained if the lines of text were written versions of what was, or was intended to be, sung.

The texts that Tz'utujil songmen improvise in the *bix rxin nawal* have been shown to share versification and rhythmic patterns, as well as the use of onomatopoeia, alliteration, and assonance with poetic passages of the *Popol Vuh*, placing the song texts within the tradition of written Mayan Literature. Paired verse form continues to be characteristic of Mayan oral literature, though examples are few, especially of songs, of which there is no other extensive documentation.¹¹ There is evidence that the *bix rxin nawal* have origins in the colonial era or earlier. The Tz'utujil guitar is tuned in a manner dating at least to the early 18th century, and research on the tunes shows probable roots in Spanish popular music of the colonial era. The texts of the songs portray some customs of courting, which date from an early period. It is hoped that further study of the origins of the Tz'utujil guitar and of the tunes for these songs will uncover concrete historical data about their origins.

Notes

1. *Bix* is pronounced as in English “beesh”. Tz'utujil words are generally accented on the final syllable, exceptions being words borrowed from Spanish and non-lexical syllables. Pronunciation of vowels and consonants is close to Spanish pronunciation, so that *j* = English *h*, and *x* = English *sh*; *q* = the hard sound of English *c* before a vowel. An apostrophe ['] indicates a glottal stop, equivalent to the sound between the syllables of “*uh-uh*” meaning “*no*” in English.
2. *Cofradía* refers to organization of men and women who practice the traditional Old Ways and to the prayer-house used for their rituals.
3. The texts in this essay are faithful to the transcriptions and translations of the translators, except for correcting the use of *k*, *c* and *q* to conform to the standards for Mayan languages set by the Academia de Lenguas Mayas (1988). I have not changed their use of capitalization or punctuation. English translations are mine.
4. Mayan writing has long been referred to as “glyphs,” derived from “hieroglyphs”. Due to new understanding, and following Tedlock, I avoid the term *glyph* and refer to Mayan writing as text or script. (Tedlock, 2010, p. 405).

5. A vocable is group of syllables valued for their sound rather than their meaning, e.g.: *e-i-e-i-o*,“ or *lala la*. Some vocables are onomatopoeic, and sound like what they imitate, as “plink plink.”
6. Elipses indicate passages the translator could not understand or translate.
7. “China china” was explained by the translator as the sound of the guitar, “tuna tuna” as the sound of the drum, and “tana tana” as knocking or banging.
8. Elision marks (◌̣) indicate the union of two adjacent vowel sounds to produce a single syllable, so that “china◌̣ acha” is pronounced “chinacha”.
9. The bandurria is a musical instrument described by Marcuse (1964) as “*a flat-bodied plucked chordophone of medieval and modern Spain, mentioned in the early 14th century.*” (p. 34). It is a flat-backed guitar which is still used in parts of Latin America. Its use at any time in Atitlán is not documented, and it is not among the instruments now used for traditional music there.
10. An example of this is the following scansion of the first lines of verses 1 and 2 of a well-known song. In the first verse, there are two unstressed syllables (indicated by a lower case vowel with a mark for weak stress, e.g.: ě) on beat 1, whereas in the second verse there is only one unstressed syllable. Yet, the rhythm of accented beats (indicated by a capital letter with a stress mark, e.g.: Ó), and of the tune, remain the same.
- first verse, line 1:*
 Whěn JÓhn-ňĵ cōmes mÁrch- ĩng hÓme ě - gÁin [9 syllables, 4 beats]
- second verse, line 1:*
 Thě Óld chŭrch bEIl wĭll pEal wĭth jÓy [8 syllables, 4 beats]
11. There are 100 sung texts of *bix rxin nawal* in my recorded collection, of which some are non-lexical.

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