

GHOSTS OF THE IMAGINATION: JOHN BIERHORST'S
TRANSLATION OF *CANTARES MEXICANOS*

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John Bierhorst's new translation of one of the most extensive collections of Nahuatl poetry differs radically from all previous interpretations. This is the first full publication of this important body of work. The first volume, titled *Cantares Mexicanos, Songs of the Aztecs*, contains a long general introduction, a side-by-side paleographic text and English translation and a synopsis and commentary on each song. The second volume, *A Nahuatl-English Dictionary and Concordance to the Cantares Mexicanos* is a complement and supplement to the first. In it he describes the orthographies used in the work and provides a "Dictionary-Concordance" based on the vocabulary used in the *Cantares* with both literal and Bierhorst's figurative meaning. This is followed by an "analytic" transcription of the Nahuatl text which includes glottal stops and long vowels. Finally, the author includes some grammatical notes, which are intended to supplement J. Richard Andrews' *Introduction to Classical Nahuatl* and a concordance to nonsense syllables in the *Cantares*. This publication represents an enormous amount of work on the part of the author. Since this is the first full-length, paleographed English publication of the *Cantares* and is published with the *imprimatur* of the Stanford University Press and with the prestige of a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, it acquires an instant credibility which must not go unchecked. Unfortunately, the work is fatally flawed by Bierhorst's almost obsessive adherence to his particular theory about the origin and meaning of the poems in the *Cantares*.

In Chapter 13 of the Introduction, Bierhorst argues that no prior translator has succeeded in accurately translating the *Cantares* due to inadequate preparation in the language, sloppy paleography and most particularly because of a failure to understand the fundamental meaning of this body of poetry. The author's basic thesis is that, "... the ninety-one songs in the *Cantares*, without exception, belong to a single genre... [which] for the sake of convenience, I have chosen to designate by the term "ghost songs" (I, p. 3)". He believes that by the middle of the Sixteenth Century,

Aztec society had become so dislocated and was in such cultural chaos, that a nativistic or revitalization movement arose similar to the one that took place among the Plains Indians in the United States or the Cargo Cults in Melanesia. He postulates that the songs in the *Cantares* are analogous to those of North American Indians (with which Bierhorst's previous work deals), that warrior-singers summon the ghosts of their ancestors in order to swell their ranks in a revolt to overwhelm the Spanish and restore life as it was before the Conquest. Although he admits (I, p.4) that this revitalization movement is not otherwise documented in Sixteenth Century writings, he rationalizes this absence in two ways.

[Even though Aztec society was ripe for nativism] ... That no such activity has heretofore been identified owes much to the fact that it was so compatible with Spanish Catholicism on the one hand, and so covert, on the other, that local authorities either failed to perceive its significance or were not threatened enough to insist on sanctions (I, p. 60).

The failure of all other interpreters to perceive the true nature of the *Cantares* is explained as follows,

The *Cantares Mexicanos* and its congeners comprise a closed system unintelligible to those who have not been initiated, even if they are fluent speakers of Nahuatl. Neither the standard dictionaries of Molina and Simeon nor the voluminous *Florentine Codex* can provide the lexical information needed to comprehend this highly figurative and complex idiom. True to the nature of esoteric idiom and jargons generally it must be studied from within (I, p. 15).

This also provides a rationalization for Bierhorst's circular method of reasoning in justifying his translation. He argues that the previously standard translation of the Aztec metaphor *rochiu cuicatl*, "flower" "song" to mean poetry was invented by Angel Ma. Garibay with no basis in fact (I, p. 17). He proposes that "flowers" and "songs" in phrases in the *Cantares* such as- "I am a song ...", "From heaven, oh, come the good flowers, good songs ...", "My songs are marching forth ..." are not ambiguous and prove that flowers or songs are metaphors for persons (I, p. 18). As further proof, he points out that other terms such as jade (*chalchihuitl*), feathers (*quetzalli*) and cypress (*ahuehuatl*) are listed as denoting people in Fray Andrés de Olmos' *Arte para aprender la lengua Mexicana*. With

no further proof, he states a thesis to which he will return through all of the volume, i.e. "... In addition to noting that songs may be persons— more correctly, deceased persons or spirits— we learn from the above phraseology that songs are revenant Kings such as Montezuma and Axayacatl. They descend from the sky world, moreover, and are brought to life on earth through the joint efforts of the singer and his god. These, in brief, are the essential points. Having grasped them, the reader will find that they are reinforced in varying degrees throughout the manuscript (I, p. 18)." All these songs were composed after the Conquest and "... deal mainly with the Conquest itself or its aftermath, preserving all the imagery now adapted to the crisis at hand. Waves of incoming Mexican revenants, it is hoped, will establish a paradise on earth in which Mexicans, while embracing Christianity, will enjoy superiority over Spanish colonists or at least rise to equal status (I, p.4)."

The fundamental logical fallacy involved in Bierhorst's approach is its complete circularity. First, he admits that there is no independent evidence for the existence of a revitalization movement or his "ghost song" interpretation of the *Cantares*. Secondly, he lists an enormous number of nouns (I, pp. 35-37) which he will assume to mean revenants (or "ghosts"). These range from terms which are common metaphors for warrior such as *ocelotl* (jaguar) or *cuauhtli* (eagle) to the name of any bird, jewel or flower or any combination thereof or even the term for water (*atl*). Using this procedure almost any noun in Nahuatl could be translated as a "revenant". Finally, he claims that the "proof" that the *Cantares* are "ghost songs" is the plethora of allusions to these self-defined revenants in the text. The complete circularity is obvious.

Bierhorst (I, p. 61) argues that the cult of the Virgin of Guadalupe, who appeared at the former site of worship of an earth goddess, Tonantzin, and whose cult grew rapidly, is evidence of a revitalization movement. He presents no supporting evidence for this conclusion and does not refer to the most common explanation for this phenomenon, a clear case of syncretism (Lafaye 1976), or to Sahagún's warning of the danger posed to the Spanish missionary effort by such syncretism (Sahagún 1969: Vol. 3, p. 350).

The author claims again with little supporting evidence that the "volador" dance supports his interpretation of the poems. In this dance, four dancers, dressed in bird costumes, tie themselves with ropes to a small platform on top of a pole. As music plays, they fling themselves out and descend in continually widening circles until they reach the ground. Bierhorst claims that these dancers represent "ghosts" or "revenants" returning to earth (I, pp. 67-68) analogous to

lines in the *Cantares* such as "For a moment they come whirling, they are eagles ...", "Roseate swans, cornsilk flowers, are whirling ..." A more convincing argument, since calendrical cycles are a well-known preoccupation of the Aztecs, is the explanation of the dance as a calendrical ritual in which the unwinding of the ropes produces exactly fifty-two revolutions representing the fifty-two years of the Aztec Calendar Round (Torquemada 1975: Book 2, Chapter 38).

The date in which these "songs" were composed is crucial to Bierhorst's thesis. If any of these songs were of pre-Columbian origin, the revitalization hypothesis would be untenable since there would have been no need for a revitalization movement before the Conquest, yet Bierhorst claims that without exception all of these songs are "ghost revitalization songs". In developing his argument, however, Bierhorst shows an interesting pattern with respect to both the glossator of the *Cantares* and to outside sources. Basically his method is to declare all data which tend to support his thesis valid, and to claim that statements or facts that contradict his thesis to be in error, even if derived from the same source. For example, when the glossator to the *Cantares* dates songs number 55, 56, and 58 as being composed in 1553, 1550 and 1564, respectively, Bierhorst agrees (I, p. 107). On the other hand, when the same glossator states that songs 20-43, "... used to be performed in the palaces of Mexico", Bierhorst states that he is in error (I, p. 108). When Durán's description (1967:193) of the performance of dances supports his view that "ghost songs" were representational, Bierhorst agrees (I, p. 71). However, when Durán (1967: 195) states that he heard the performances of songs composed by Aztec rulers, which would date them as pre-Columbian, Bierhorst declares Durán in error (I, p.111). Bierhorst goes to even greater lengths in dealing with the gloss to a song titled, *Chalca cihuacuicatl* beginning in folio 72r of the manuscript. The translated gloss reads as follows, "A Chalcan composition, with which they came to entertain the ruler Axayacatl. He conquered them but only the little women." Bierhorst (I, p. 502) admits that León-Portilla was correct in pointing out the striking parallels between this piece and the chronicler Chimalpahin's description of a female war song performed for King Axayacatl by visiting Chalcans in 1479 (Chimalpahin 1965: 211-214). However, since this would constitute outside verification of the pre-Columbian origin of the song, of a known author, and of a traditional meaning rather than of being a "ghost song", Bierhorst must discredit Chimalpahin. He argues that Chimalpahin must be in error because he has too much detail and therefore must have invented the entire episode. This criticism is too facile and

unsupported by any evidence, other than his need to discredit Chimalpahin. Bierhorst contradicts his own thesis regarding the dating of this genre. He claims (I, p. 85) that two songs in the "Manuscript of 1528", also known as the *Anales de Tlatelolco*, are "ghost songs", but he also believes that this material is pre-Columbian when a revitalization movement would not have existed and "ghost songs" would not have been necessary.

Bierhorst's attempts to find "ghost songs" in the extensive Sahaguntine corpus is not very successful. He first cites a passage in the *huehuetlatolli* ("talks of the elders") section of Book 6 of the *Florentine Codex* (Dibble and Anderson 1950-1969: 116). He states, without supporting evidence, that, "[this song was] ... inserted with a clumsy and certainly erroneous explanation, that breaks the *huehuetlatolli* style (I, p. 84)" and claims that this is intrusive material added by one of Sahagún's bilingual glossators. In fact, the *huehuetlatolli* in question deals with the reverence and worship which are due to those who die in war and the song which deals with this topic fits in perfectly as illustrative material. Since this does not support Bierhorst's preconceived thesis, he distorts in his translation the ordinary meaning of words to fit his thesis. For example, the first line of the passage reads as follows (as paleographed and translated by Dibble and Anderson (1950-1969: Book 6, p. 116):

Timixcoatl tocomamaceoa cuicatl, tiiloliz tlalticpac

Thou Mixcoatl, meritest the song,
thou will live on earth.

Bierhorst renders the line as, "Oh Cloud Companion (or ghost warrior)! You will succeed in being born as a song on earth." There is absolutely no justification for translating Mixcoatl (literally "Cloud Serpent") in this fashion. This is the name of a major Aztec deity, of a historical Toltec ruler, and the line preceding the poem in the *Florentine Codex* clearly states that the song is dedicated to a young man named Mixcoatl. Again we find that, if one is to believe Bierhorst, the Aztec authors do not know the meaning of their own words.

A second example cited as a "ghost song" in Sahagún is the "Song of the Mimixcoa" in the Appendix to Book 2 of the *Florentine Codex* (Dibble and Anderson 1950-1969: 230). The first lines of the song are paleographed and translated by Dibble and Anderson as follows:

Chicomoztoc quinehoaqui
ca niaueponi zan in zan in teiomi
tziuactitlan quineuaqui
ca niaueponi, zan i zan i, teiomi.

...
 From bewitched seven caves
 alone I went my way.
 From bewitched cactus lands
 alone I went my way.

Dibble and Anderson's translation parallels those of Garibay (1958: 93-97) and Seler (1960: Vol. II, pp. 1017-1024). Bierhorst translates these lines as (I, p. 84):

They've departed from Chicomoztoc! Where do they bloom?
 Where these prickers?
 They've departed from Spine Land! Where —ahl— do they
 bloom?
 Where these prickers?

He interprets the song as follows: "The ancestral revenants (or "cloud companions") are returning from the dead land (called Chicomoztoc and Spine Land) in response to the muses' call for warriors ("prickers", "arrow spines") whom he seeks in a song trip, bringing them down in his pack basket, picking them up in his hands (like flowers) (I, p. 84). Bierhorst is only able to produce this translation by a severe distortion of Nahuatl imagery and by doing the kind of distortion of paleography of which he accuses his predecessors. Chicomoztoc (Seven Caves) is *not* the land of the dead, it is the quintessential place of *origin* of the Aztecs. Tziuactitlan (Land of the Cactus) refers to the Chichimec or hunting-gathering life style in the long migration of the Aztecs from another mythical place of origin, Aztlan. Bierhorst functions as though all Aztec mythology and history were *tabula rasa* for him to write upon. Additionally, in order to get an analogy with flowers, he converts *niaueponi* to *cueponi* ("to bloom") and *teiomi* as *teomiuh* (someone's awl", "pricker") without justification.

Bierhorst deals with the problem of Christian influence and allusions in numerous songs by claiming that these are nevertheless "ghost songs" and are Aztec adaptations of Christian adaptations of Aztec ghost songs (I, pp. 33-34). He needs this very strained interpretation in order to preserve revitalization as a prime mover. A summary of his argument is that very early in the Sixteenth

Century, Friar Pedro de Gante adapted Aztec ghost songs to Christian use by replacing the militaristic subject matter with Bible stories and saints' lives (there is absolutely no evidence for this other than Bierhorst's imagination). Gante's versions did not survive but they formed the basis for subsequent reworking by the revivalist authors of the song of the *Cantares*.

Garibay's interpretation (1965: xlv-xlv) is more convincing. Other Christian glosses and interpolations are due to attempts by missionaries to follow the First Bishop's Council of Mexico which ordered that, "... [the Indians] should not sing songs of their rites or ancient histories without these songs being examined by priests or by people who understand the language well and that the ministers of the Scripture see to it that they don't deal with profane matters but those of Christian doctrine ... (Garibay 1965: xlv)". One approach was to write new songs such as those in Sahagún's *Psalmodia Christiana*. Another was to be satisfied with removing the names of the old gods and replacing them with sacred Christian names. As an example, Garibay cites a song in folio 23, line 1 of the *Cantares* (1965: xlv):

From the white willows, from the white reeds
Mexico is your dwelling.
You blue heron (*aztatl*) have flown down
You, go Holy Ghost (Espíritu Santo).

The song refers to Huitzilopochtli, the patron deity of the Mexica, both by reference to the homonym *aztatl* (heron) and *Aztlan* (mythical place of origin) and by the ritual blue color of the deity. Garibay feels that Espíritu Santo was added gratuitously by a Christian corrector. Similarly Garibay points out that "Virgin Mary" is systematically used to replace the name of Aztec female goddesses even when inappropriate as in a poem dealing with human sacrifice.

Syncretism was encouraged from the beginning of the Conquest by the Church. This is exemplified by the use of Testerian Writing, Aztec pictorial conventions utilized by priests who were not fluent in the language to teach Christian doctrine (Ricard 1966: 53, 104). Other examples are the syncretism of Tonantzin with the Virgin of Guadalupe, mentioned above, (Sahagún 1969: Vol. III, pp. 352), Tozi with St. Anne and St. John the Baptist with Tezcatlipoca (Sahagún 1969: Vol. III, pp. 353, 354). In other cases, hallucinogenic drugs were renamed by the natives so that they could be invoked in healing chants with less risk of being denounced to the Inquisition

(Aguirre Beltrán 1963: 133, 147-148). Thus peyote was called "Baby Jesus" or "St. Mary's Herb" and *ololiuhqui* was called "Our Lord" or "Most Holy Mary". The principle of parsimony in logic would make the well known and documented practice of syncretism a better explanation for many of the Christian allusions in the *Cantares* than the convoluted and circular revitalization theory proposed by Bierhorst without independent documentation.

If Bierhorst's translation were to be widely adopted, it would eliminate or radically change much of what is generally accepted as Aztec philosophical thought about the nature of life on earth, the ephemerality of life, and the epistemology of arriving at truth since the publication of León-Portilla's work (1966; 1961). Before acquiescing in his translation, it is necessary to look at evidence supporting the orthodox metaphorical meaning of *xochitl* and compare it to the paucity of independent support for *xochitl* as "revenant". One must also consider which interpretation fits better into the totality of Aztec beliefs and world-view.

It would seem redundant to again review the metaphoric range of the term *xochitl* (flower) but the meaning assigned to it by Bierhorst as "ghosts" or "revenants" makes it necessary because it limits rather than expands its meaning. Particular attention should be paid to the metaphoric use of *xochitl* in pictorial manuscripts since this use is unambiguously pre-conquest. One well-accepted meaning of *xochitl* is as a metaphor for fertility and Spring, as shown by the name of the god and goddess of fertility, love, carnal love and Spring—Xochipilli ("Flower Prince") and Xochiquetzal ("Precious Flower"). Flowers are an essential element of these gods' costumes and distinguishing characteristics in the codices.

Xochitl can be used as a symbol of blood, particularly that of sacrifices. Flowers are often seen in codices and stone sculpture in conjunction with the *zacatapayolli* (a sacrificial grass bundle), *uitztli* (a sacrificial thorn) and/or an *omitl* (a sacrificial bone awl). Many examples could be cited, the ones listed here and subsequently are illustrative and not exhaustive (see Seler 1960: Vol. II, 722, 725; Codex Borgia 18, 22, 47, 48, 61, 67). With an *omitl* it is an essential component of the headdress of Quetzalcoatl. This is in remembrance of the creation myth of Quetzalcoatl's self-sacrifice in order to create man (Codex Borbonicus 5, 16, 18, 22; Codex Magliabecchiano 61r, 62r; Codex Telleriano-Remensis 2, 3, 7, 16).

Flowers as metaphors for blood are also seen in connection with warfare (Codex Borgia 5 column 30, 70), self-sacrifice (Codex Borgia 8 column 59; Aubin Tonalamatl 17; Codex Telleriano-Remensis 17), and with sacrifice in general, adorning knives or streams of blood

(Codex Borgia 15, 22, 64; Aubin Tonalamatl 20). Flowers and hearts are often seen in connection with *quauhxicalli* (receptacles for the hearts of sacrificed victims) (Codex Borgia 57, 59, 60, 62; Codex Borbonicus 5, 7). This sample clearly demonstrates an overwhelming amount of support for the metaphorical interpretation for *roxchitl* used by translators preceding Bierhorst.

The validity of a metaphor can also be judged by the degree of fit with the world view and mythology of the society. It is clear from all sources that the Aztecs prized bravery in war and that human sacrifice provided blood (*chalchiuhatl* "precious water") for feeding the gods, repaying a debt owed by man since his creation and maintaining the stability of the universe (Nicholson 1971: 402; Caso 1958). The interpretation of *roxchitl* as "blood" as well as the exaltation of war, warriors and sacrifice is entirely congruent with the cosmovision of the society. As Bierhorst himself points out, there is no independent support for his interpretation.

One particular *difrasismo* (two-word metaphor) requires special mention. *Xochitl cuicatl* ("flower- song") has heretofore been universally accepted to mean "poetry" or "poem" but Bierhorst denies its existence, claiming that Garibay invented the term; however, there is pictorial pre-Columbian support for this use. The conjunction of ornate speech (i.e. *cuicatl*) and flowers can be seen on the Teopancaxco mural at Teotihuacan where two priests have large speech virgules decorated with flowers (Wasson 1980: 157). A drummer singing with an ornate speech virgule decorated with flowers is shown in page 5 of the Codex Borbonicus. There are other examples of speech virgules accompanied by flowers (Codex Borbonicus 19; Codex Laud 4D, 23). Perhaps Father Garibay was not operating in a vacuum after all.

One very interesting aspect of the term *roxchitl cuicatl* developed by León-Portilla (1966:142-147; 1961:128) is that the Aztecs considered poetry and artistic endeavors in general as a particular way to achieve truth. As León-Portilla says:

...The idiomatic expression, *in roxchitl in cuicatl*, which literally means "flowers and songs" has the metaphorical sense of poem, poetry, artistic expression and in a word symbolism. Poetry and art in general, "flowers and songs", are for the *tlamatinime* an occult and veiled term which may sweep man off on the wings of symbol and metaphor, and may hesitantly project him beyond himself, thus perhaps mysteriously bringing him nearer to his origins. They seem to affirm that true poetry implies a peculiar way of knowledge,

the fruit of an authentic interior experience, or if it is preferred, the result of an intuition (1961: 128).

An additional metaphorical meaning of *rochitl* proposed by Gordon Wasson (1980) may provide supporting evidence for León-Portilla's interpretation of "flower and song". Several observers (Furst 1976; Schultes and Hofmann 1979: 27; La Barre 1970) have pointed out that shamanism and the use of hallucinogens have persisted in the New World to a greater degree than elsewhere. It is particularly interesting that Aztec society retained shamanic elements and the use of hallucinogens even though this was done in the context of a state religion rather than in that of the simple societies they are usually associated with. In some cases, the word *rochitl* may refer to hallucinogens. One of several examples occurs in folio 34v of the *Cantares* (Garibay 1965: 77):

*In anteopixque in ma namechtlatlani:
Can ompa ye huitz
teihuintirochitl teihuinticuicatl?*

I ask you, priests; whence come
the flowers that inebriate?
Whence come the songs that inebriate?

The word used to describe flowers and songs is *ihuinti*. The standard dictionaries translate *ihuinti* as "drunk" or "inebriated" which in our context would seem to indicate alcohol, but the usage in native texts is somewhat different. It is the word repeatedly used to describe the action of known hallucinogens such as *ololiuhqui*, peyote, *Datura* sp. and mushrooms as well as tobacco (Dibble and Anderson 1950-1969: Book 11, pp. 129-130, 146). The term *iollomalacachoa* ("to make the heart spin around", i.e. to alter a mental state, since the thinking faculties were supposed to reside in the heart) is used both in describing *rochitl* poetically (Garibay 1965: 113) and the action of *ololiuhqui* (Dibble and Anderson 1969: 129).

We know that visions seen under the influence of hallucinogens are projections of ourselves, but to shamans and other aboriginal users, the hallucinogenic experience is another dimension of reality. Because it is accompanied by feelings of ecstasy and significance it is usually considered to be a "superior" form of reality. These experiences are then used as a guide for behavior in real life because hallucinogenic "reality", encompassing both the actual physical world and the visions produced by the drug, represents a

fuller (i.e. nearer to the truth) version of the world than that perceived through the senses without the drug (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1978a: 198-200; 1978b: 151-152; Benitez 1968: 104; Harner 1973: 6; Furst 1976: 53, 144-145).

The Aztecs were familiar with these experiences and thus with the idea that perceived reality is not necessarily "truth". "Truth" can only be achieved by transcending ordinary reality to see its meaning in the true order of the universe. This vision could be obtained through the ecstasy of hallucinogenics (*xochitl*) and/or by becoming *yolteotl* ("heart made divine" or "heart possessed by God") through artistic endeavor (*xochitl cuicatl*). Garibay's and León-Portilla's translations are thus supported independently with a metaphorical interpretation of *xochitl* that fits what we know of Aztec society and shamanic religions better than the concept of "ghosts" and "revenants".

When a work proposes a radically new interpretation of well-accepted views of long-standing, the burden of proof lies with the author. Here, John Bierhorst has failed to prove his theory. The definitive version and full publication of the *Cantares Mexicanos* still lie in the future.

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Resumen

En esta reseña sobre la reciente edición publicada por John Bierhorst del manuscrito de *Cantares mexicanos*, a la vez que se reconoce que implica un gran trabajo, se muestra que lamentablemente el traductor partió de suposiciones carentes de fundamento. Su hipótesis de que son estos "cantos para invocar espíritus", lo lleva a distorsionar por completo la significación de estas composiciones. Con abundancia de pruebas Ortiz de Montellano hace ver que Bierhorst procede imaginativamente al proponer su hipótesis. La conclusión es que hay que aguardar todavía para tener en definitiva una traducción completa y adecuada del valioso manuscrito de *Cantares mexicanos*.