

Textos orales sobre la figura del indio de Nuyoo

(Oral Histories about the Indian from Nuyoo)

Grissel Gómez Estrada

Autonomous University of Mexico City/Conacyt/

Government of Oaxaca

Mexico City, 2012, 144 pp.

I forgot what had happened, but what my grandfather says—and he was told by his great-grandfather—is that Remigio left to fight in Huajuapán; he turned into a pig, and then he turned into a cat to fool the soldiers, but, since he was very clever, he didn't let himself get captured.

Demetrio Andrés López Rojas,
73, peasant, Santiago Nuyoo, Oaxaca



It is legitimate to speculate that in turbulent times, when uncertainty and radical changes govern everyday life, communities convulsed by them resort to myth and legend as a mirror in which they can recognize themselves and identify their history, their values, and their traditions. Not to mention that these ideas sink deep roots into society; they are not conscious or deliberate, and they have a symbolism that gives them a power of permanence capable of transcending several generations. That mirror image is not only the reflection of the times when they originated; it is also the invention of the communal identity and the creation of the glue that holds them together, keeping them coherent with a vast, more structured totality.

Conceived as something alive and active, legend, myth, or historical event do not adapt to the times: they offer sustenance to changes, giving them the on-going, basic recognition of an identity. Society adapts to the transformations in its relations thanks to the recognition that allows it to continue to be itself in its becoming: history, tradition, and myth are both cause and effect of a community that develops over time.

In this order of ideas, the research on which Grissel Gómez Estrada's based the book I am reviewing is exemplary.

It is a meticulous collection of oral histories, rescued from oblivion and from the marginal knowledge of two places in the state of Oaxaca, a city and a rural community, associated with a certain episode in the history of Mexico's independence.

In 1812, the caudillo Valerio Trujano, one of General José María Morelos's men, took Huajuapán de León, an enclave that would turn out to be strategic for the later occupation of the state capital, at that time the Intendancy of Oaxaca. The town was almost immediately surrounded by the Royal Army commanded by General Régules, whose superior forces outnumbered ten to one those of the troops fighting for independence. However, Trujano and his men managed to resist the siege for 111 days, making it the longest of the war. The conflict was resolved when Morelos, dubbed the "Servant of the Nation," who had been fighting in Cuautla, came to the insurgents' aid, forcing the royal troops to withdraw. This is as far as official history takes us.

This episode is mixed together with a legend that remained on the sidelines of history, but has lasted in the collective memory of the region's inhabitants for more than 200 years. Central to that story is the figure of Remigio Sarabia, seemingly a mule driver from Santiago Nuyoo, a small indigenous

community of Tlaxiaco, who by chance—it was market day—was in Huajuapán when it was surrounded, cutting the city off from the outside. In other versions of the story, the so-called “Indian from Nuyoo” was in town looking for a priest—in order to kill him—who had run away with his wife or had taken her by force. In any case, Sarabia joined the rebel troops, rendering them a great service, as will be seen.

It is said that the man was a *nagual*, that is, he had the ability to turn himself into an animal; and that he used this ability to enter the enemy camp every night and spy on Régules while he gave his subordinates their orders. That way, he was able to tell Trujano the movements the Royalist Army would make the following day, giving the insurgent general the opportunity to take countermeasures. Despite all this, the defense of the town became unsustainable, making it urgent to notify Morelos about the situation so he could help the rebels. Once again turned into an animal—legend tells, it was specifically a pig—the “Indian from Nuyoo” was able to cross the royalist lines and make his way to the generalissimo alerting him to the difficult straits of the independence fighters. The national hero immediately went to their aid and forced the royalists to retreat.

The center of the legend I just described has several versions. Grissel Gómez researches and classifies them based on extensive fieldwork, whose results make up the final body of this traditional story. She tells us, for example, that the narrators interviewed in Santiago Nuyoo told the orthodox version—shall we say—of the story, while the residents of Huajuapán de León, a much more modern, populated urban center, had developed versions in accordance with Catholic mythology, no less magical than the original indigenous version. Thus, in Huajuapán, Remigio Sarabia’s ability to break through the enemy lines is attributed not only to his being disguised, covered with a pigskin, but to the Lord of the Heart, a black Christ that has become the patron saint of the locale, performing a miracle so he would not be discovered. By contrast, the inhabitants of Santiago Nuyoo maintain that the hero was a *nagual* and that these beings exist, or at least existed. As such, he is attributed with a series of extraordinary acts, such as producing rain in times of drought by smoking a cigar; all of these versions are logged and ordered in her book.

But not only that: as a scholar of oral literature, she also offers a large number of elements to understand the function, meaning, and research method of the legend with its variations. Other disciplines like anthropology, history, ethnography, and even psychology benefit from the material gathered with

a view to understanding how a community affirms certain values and identifies itself with them through the narrations that connect it to its own country. This is why Gómez Estrada observes that the values that all the variations of the narration include, like Sarabia’s cleverness and courage, allowed this first people, usually neglected in national history, be included in it: the “Indian of Nuyoo” is also all the anonymous indigenous people who fought for independence without their contributions being recognized, with a few individual exceptions such as in the case of “El Pípila.”¹ Referring to her interviews, which she reproduces in Spanish and in many cases also in Mixteco, she comments,

In addition to talking about the vision people have of Remigio Sarabia, considered a *nagual*, who could turn himself into a cat or a pig, they recreate places, they tell popular anecdotes about the times of the fight for independence, they sketch for us their world view and beliefs. From another perspective, the inhabitants of Nuyoo have not only identified with the figure of Remigio Sarabia as an emigrant, but he has also served to give them an identity in the national context.²

The book, then, is a valuable document whose content is superior to what it seems at first glance. The recovery and reflection about this kind of story transmitted orally from parents to children are experiencing an irreversible turning point. Over the course of her fieldwork, this researcher has proven that it is older adults who keep the memory of stories like this one alive. New generations do not seem interested in keeping alive the cultural baggage of their people, and, in any case, have not shown any intention of maintaining and ordering their rich collective imaginary. Though sad, this is one more reason to be pleased that this book exists, offering us the beauty and power of a legend still living that in the near future may no longer be with us. ■■■

Arturo Cosme

Mexican editor and writer

NOTES

¹ “El Pípila” is the name given to an indigenous miner said to have won the siege of Guanajuato by approaching under the cover of a stone slab the wooden door of the fortress where the Spaniards had barricaded themselves and setting it on fire, thus allowing the insurgents to breach it. [Translator’s Note.]

² Grissel Gómez Estrada, *Textos orales sobre la figura del indio de Nuyoo* (Mexico City: UACM/Conacyt/Government of Oaxaca, 2012), p. 74.