The State of Zapotec Poetry: Can Poetry Save an Endangered Culture?

Clare Sullivan

¡Ay! diidxazá, diidxazá
diidxá rusibi naa,
naa nanna zaniti lu
dxí guiniti gubidxa cá.

Oh, Zapotec, dear Zapotec
language that gives me life,
I know you will not die
until the sun’s demise.
– Gabriel López Chiñas, “Diidxazá”

In 1981 in Juchitán, Mexico, the local COCEI political party ousted the national PRI party that had been ruling Mexico for decades. This victory gave control to local people (most of them indigenous) over their political destiny. The city of Juchitán is located on Mexico’s Isthmus of Tehuantepec, the narrow strip of land that connects the Yucatán Peninsula to the rest of Mexico. Spain invaded the region in the sixteenth century, the Mexican government subsumed it into the national system in the nineteenth century, and, beginning in the twentieth century, global superpowers sought passage from the Gulf of Mexico to the Pacific Ocean. Yet local people have always fought to preserve their culture and language and to reconcile it with outside influences. This battle has been waged in and with their language, Zapotec, the oldest written language in America.

The Isthmus Zapotecs call their language Díidxazá from diidxá’ (tongue) and za (cloud). The Binnizá or “People of the Cloud” live in the state of Oaxaca near the Pacific coast. Like many indigenous languages, Isthmus Zapotec has been relegated to the status of a dialect by governmental entities, even though it is as different from other variants of Zapotec as one Romance language from another. According to the 2000 census, Isthmus Zapotec is spoken by between 75,000 to 100,000 people (probably a low estimate). Nevertheless, it has produced one of the most prolific Mexican indigenous literatures of modern times. Carlos Montemayor, a critic and translator known for his knowledge of indigenous literatures, calls it the most important modern literary tradition of all the indigenous languages of Mexico. How could a language spoken by a relatively few number of people stake such a claim? Perhaps because Zapotec poetry expresses itself in a richly musical language, embraces other artistic traditions, and confronts the threat of globalization with its verses.

As early as the late nineteenth century, Zapotec poets began to leave the isthmus for
Mexico City, but they continued to write in their language and worked to defend their culture. Poets such as Enrique Liekens Cerqueda (1882–1978), Andrés Henestrosa (1906–2008), Pancho Nácar (1909–63), Gabriel López Chiñas (1911–83), and Nazario Chacón Pineda (1916–94) helped to found the Sociedad Nueva de Estudiantes Juchitecos (The new society of Juchitecan students) and a newspaper called Neza (The Pathway) in the capital. These forums became a source of inspiration and an outlet for the next generation of writers.

One such writer, Víctor de la Cruz (b. 1958), received national recognition for his abundant poetry as well as his literary, historical, and educational pieces about the region. Fittingly, he founded the cultural magazine Guchachi’ Reza (Sliced Iguana) in 1975, a journal that defended Zapotec culture and politics. Guchachi’ Reza contained poetry, artwork, and essays in Zapotec and Spanish. In addition to showcasing local artists, however, the journal also brought the rest of the world to the Zapotec by translating essays about topics such as anthropology, politics, and sociology from other languages.

Another place where artists gather to formulate their ideas and showcase their work is the municipal cultural center or Casa de cultura founded by painter Francisco Toledo in 1974. Poet Macario Matus (1943–2009) was one of its directors, and he helped to support the Casa’s publication of new poets such as Víctor Terán (b. 1958). Terán, for his part, was a vital member of the COCEI (Isthmus Coalition of Workers, Peasants, and Students) movement and reinforced the connection between political activism and poetry with his verses. Most of his poems defend Zapotec culture not with slogans or overt political messages but by portraying the beauty of the natural world and the sanctity of everyday life.

Nourished by the poets and artists that came before them, Terán’s generation constitutes a large and prolific group. These contemporary writers retain a link to their language and culture of origin while tackling the themes of globalization and alienation. They are often charged with translating their own works into Spanish, and with disseminating their works into other languages and cultures.

One of the complications that arises when sharing Zapotec poetry with the rest of the world originates in the complexity of its sound. Like classical Greek and Latin, Isthmus Zapotec has both long and short vowels. Importantly for poetry, this means that syllables will vary in length. And, unlike Spanish or English, Zapotec is a tonal language with three pitches: low, high, and ascendant (the movement from a low to a high tone). In spoken language and in poetry, however, the stress does not necessarily correspond to a high or ascendant tone, nor does it always take place on a long syllable. Therefore, sound becomes much more complicated than in Spanish or English where the poet only needs to match consonant and vowel patterns.

By way of comparison, in a Shakespearean sonnet, sound is governed by the rhythm of iambic pentameter and by alternate end rhyme. In Zapotec poetry, such patterns must also be accompanied by the repetition of syllabic duration and tone. Carlos Montemayor offered a single verse from the poem “Beeu” (Moon) by Víctor Terán as an example: “gucagasi, nanda.” This verse has six syllables of equal length (short), but the sound gets interesting when one compares the accented syllables to their tones. The stress falls on the first, third, and fifth syllables, while the tones are as follows: low (l) on the first syllable; high (h) on the second, third, and fifth; and ascendant (a) on the fourth and sixth. The verse might be diagrammed as such:

\[ gú / ca / gá / sì, / nán / da \]
\[ (l) (h) (h) (a), (h) (a) \]

Thus, the stress falls where the tone changes, from low to high in the first instance and in the next two from the motion of a high tone to an ascendant one. This unexpected pairing of stress and tone surprises the reader with its

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Editorial note: Visit WLT online to listen to bilingual audio recordings of Zapotec poetry by NataliaToledo, Irma Pineda, and Víctor Terán; to view an artists’ gallery featuring César Martínez, Soid Pastrana, and Natividad López Amador; and to read a note on the recent Macondo Writers’ Workshop in Oaxaca City, Mexico.

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As Montemayor commented, “This ‘random condition’ makes it possible for the syllabic quantity and duration, the stressed segments, and the tonal pitch to produce dazzlingly rich rhythms and auditory effects.”

Contemporary poets often give readings nationally and abroad and have attracted followers to the cause of Zapotec culture with their mesmerizing verses. Natalia Toledo (b. 1967), a poet who also designs clothing and jewelry, has traveled the world to read poetry in her native tongue. She commented that when she reads her verses in Vietnam, Italy, or the United States people are enchanted, even if they don’t understand the words. It is the sound itself that entrances. Antonio López Pérez (b. 1961), an accomplished poet from the same generation who took his degree in agronomy and animal husbandry, captures the delight of speaking his language in his poem “Zapoteco”: “Zapotec / I saw you / flying / like a carpet / upon the pleasure / of my tongue.” When it comes to translating such poetry, there is no clear way to capture the layers of sound that happen in the original. Instead, the translator must rely on the beauty of the imagery that suffuses so much of Zapotec poetry.

Indeed, the imagery and subject matter of Zapotec poetry help to preserve the indigenous way of life. This poetry brings to life various traditional arts such as weaving and cooking. In “Ni riguiiba” (The weaver), Natalia Toledo remembers the craft she witnessed as a child, one that is still an economic and artistic activity in the community:

Breasts of tender cotton
in the shadow: she spins.

Corridor cool as coconut water in its belly, a swarm of threads anchor on the frame
hot southern fan upon its face
a silver needle always crisscrossing
the silk of my memories.

Though many people wear store-bought clothes, weaving is still an important industry for local and national consumption. And almost everyone dresses in traditional clothing for festivals. Toledo herself the daughter of a weaver, honors this art and acknowledges its role in the past and present of her people.

As with traditional dress, the primacy of Zapotec cuisine is challenged by modern manufacturing, in this case fast foods imported from the capital. But regional foods make a unique contribution to Mexican cuisine: dishes like totopos (crunchy tortillas, larger than Frisbees), iguana eggs, braised armadillo. These foods are a source of pride and commerce for the Zapotecs. Many people make a living by traveling and selling such local delicacies in other parts of the country. These foods remind them of who they are and how they are connected to their ancestors and to the land. In the poem “Yoo lidxe’” (Childhood home), Toledo expresses the intimate connection between food and a way of life. Here is an excerpt:

We stretched ourselves out on a petate,
like shrimp drying in the sun.
The Southern Cross slept upon our eyelids.
Tortillas fresh from the comical, ropes dyed for the hammocks,
food was prepared with the happiness of light rain upon the earth.
We stirred chocolate,
and dawn was served up to us in a gourd bowl.

In this poem that celebrates traditional cooking methods and ingredients, daylight itself nourishes the poet’s people. This way of life connects them to the natural world.

For these poets, much of the strength and power for resistance in their culture comes from its connection to the natural world. In his poem “Juchitán,” Macario Matus, one of the founders of Zapotec contemporary poetry, enumerates a list of elements from the natural world that embody his pueblo, Juchitán. He ends with this striking image that describes both the strength and vulnerability of his culture: “Manifold iron flower I carry you / in my whole fragile heart.”

For his part, poet, teacher, and social activist Enedino Jiménez (b. 1951) addresses his language as a tree in “El zapoteco”: “lush, leafy tree / you rise up loftily / at the edges of my soul.” Meanwhile, Antonio López Pérez calls it a bird:
My Zapotec
delicate bird
that runs
in the mountains
walks upon the feet
of children, old people,
totopos, stones and women.

Thus, language unites the world of nature with that of human beings. And since the natural world is endangered by global trade and development, these poets speak out against it.

Because of its geographic position between the Gulf of Mexico and the Pacific Ocean, the Isthmus of Tehuantepec has always been vulnerable to invasion and globalization. In recent years it has experienced such developments as a Walmart and a four-lane superhighway. The Zapotec people have always found ways to incorporate the new without forsaking their traditions. But they recognize that the pace of globalization threatens not only the traditional arts of weaving and cooking but also the natural world that sustains them. Poets have raised their voices to decry this rapid change.

One such voice is that of Irma Pineda (b. 1974), a teacher, translator, and poet who has been published internationally in Italy, Yugoslavia, the United States, Spain, and Canada. In angry and nostalgic verses, she describes the changes wrought to the sea that used to sustain her people:

the sea
was once our glory
but long ago stopped making fish
and now it vomits rusty cans

The ugliness of this image reinforces the danger of life without nature, especially for a people so linked to it. Poetry gives them an opportunity to rail against such events and call their people to arms. As Pineda writes in another poem from the same series: “The rivers will dry up / but the binnizá will not perish.”

In spite of their fierce words, many poets worry that they are the final generation to speak their native tongue. Natalia Toledo expresses this fear in a metaphor that reiterates her connection to the natural world: “Perhaps I am the final branch who will speak Zapotec. / My children, homeless birds in the jungle of forgetfulness, / will have to whistle their language.” In “Pozo de arena” (Sandpit), Esteban Ríos Cruz (b. 1962), a poet whose four volumes of poetry link the fate of his people to that of the earth, echoes her concerns: “We are the final embers in this sentimental fire / that lets us hear the beating heart / of a people who resist oblivion and death.” But in this recognition of loss lie the seeds of hope and preservation.

The COCEI party has been in power in Juchitán, Oaxaca, for the majority of the past thirty years. This victory belongs to poetry as well as politics. When poets write in Zapotec, they entrance their readers with their melodic verses, remind their people who they are by reimagining local traditions, and call them to take responsibility for the future of their language and culture. As Enedino Jiménez points out in the poem he addresses to language itself: “It will not come from foreign lands / Your own people must give breath to your existence. / I will walk happily upon the path where you lead.”

Of course, the future is uncertain. Indigenous peoples are threatened by the loss of linguistic and cultural treasures and also by the reality of environmental degradation. Still, in spite of the tremendous odds against them, Zapotec poets continue to produce verses prolifically and thus serve as an example and a hope for other indigenous languages and cultures worldwide. As Irma Pineda writes in “No me verás morir” (You will not see me die):

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