

CUCULCAN AND COMPANY: INDIAN NAMES
USED BY MIGUEL ANGEL ASTURIAS

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The Guatemalan writer Miguel Ángel Asturias (1899-1974) was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1967 and ranks as one of the leading authors of modern Latin American letters. He made an extensive study of Mayan scripts and the Quiché language, enabling him to translate the Popol Vuh (the sacred book of the Maya) into Spanish. His first major literary work, Leyendas de Guatemala (1930), is a poetic-prose reinterpretation of Guatemalan legends.

This paper will present an analysis of Asturias' use of Indian names for both characters and locations, particularly in Leyendas de Guatemala. The names are of Maya origin predominantly, although there also appears to be some influence of Carib and Aztec (Nahuatl) as well. The names to be investigated include that of Cuculcán (Kukulcán, Gucumatz, Quetzalcóatl), the feathered serpent, one of the principal deities of the Indian pantheon. Others to be included are: Guacamayo, the sun bird; Ts'ité, the coral tree; Hurakán, the wind god; Xibalbá, the place of the dead; and Chin-

chibirín, the yellow flame. It appears that the sound of the Indian words is used to add to the authentic native atmosphere of the works. As Professor Allen Walker Read has noted about Walt Whitman,¹ Asturias was also fascinated by the sounds of the Indian words and names. Asturias evokes the poetry of mythic origins, the mingling of fantasy and reality, dream and illusion, poetry and history that is called "magical realism;" he investigates the suggestive power of words that goes beyond their meanings.²

Several problems arise in interpreting Asturias' use of Indian names. There were several Maya tribes, such as the Yucatec, the Quiché and the Cakchiquel, who spoke different dialects and even different languages. Those tribes which came into contact with Aztec and Carib speakers developed new vocabulary entries. After the Conquest, the influence of Spanish was very strong, particularly in the transcriptions of oral traditions. At the conclusion of Leyendas de Guatemala, Asturias provides a glossary in which he explains some of his sources and interpretations for the names he used.

The work opens with "el Cuco de los Sueños que va hilando los cuentos," the wizard of dreams who goes around weaving stories. There follows a list of the evocative names of Guatemalan cities; some are historical, such as Palenque, Copán, Quirigua, Tikal or Iximche (the ancient capital of the Cakchiquel Maya).³ Others are so mythical, such as Tulán or Xibalbá (the place of the

dead or of the invisible spirits), that they add an air of mystery to the text. This litany of real and imaginary names is one of the facets of Asturias' use of "magical realism." Some Spanish place names are also offered, such as Santiago, Antigua and Asunción; these Christian referents contrast with the Maya place names.

The characters then begin to appear. "Los güegüechos" are the ancient ones, José (Don Chepe) and Agustina (la Niña Tina), who are prepared to explain the ways of the gods. Titilganabáh is an anointed chief; Asturias explains the origin of his name through three elements: titil - gana - abah = afeites para los jefes (oils for the chiefs).⁴

In this first introductory section of the book, several figures from creation myths are introduced: Cuero de Oro = Golden Skin; Monte en un Ave = Mountain Bird; Nido = Nest; Volcán = Volcano or Smoking Mountain; Cabrakán = de dos pies, soberbio, temblores = two-footed, proud, earthquakes; Hurakán = un pie, corazón del cielo = one-footed, heart of heaven.⁵ The elements of creation are thus left shrouded in mystery.

The book is then divided into a series of legends which are Mayan in origin but which have been tempered by Hispanic and Christian elements. One such legend involves a nun, Madre Elvira de San Francisco, who is tempted by "el hombre-adormidera," a strange figure who represents the poppy flower, opium, sleep and sensuality. The nun overcomes the temptation and the temptor.

Her long hair is cut; the tresses become intermingled with "el hombre-adormidera," who evolves into the figure of "el Cadejo," a sort of snake-devil, a monstrous animal with the hooves of a goat, the ears of a rabbit and the face of a bat.

The next legend is that of "la Tatuana." The name is a variation of "la Tatuada," the tattooed woman.⁶ One character, "el Maestro Almendro," the almond tree that walks, divided his soul in four pieces and gave them to the four directions for safekeeping.

The directions are represented as colors: East - red

North - white

South - yellow

West - black.⁷

The West sells its piece of soul to "el Mercader de Joyas sin precio," the merchant of priceless jewels. The remainder of the story concerns Maestro Almendro's attempts to recover the piece of his soul, with the aid of the mysterious and beautiful Tatuana, who has the power of invisibility. This could be a variation of the Quiché myth of the goddess Chimalmat, who was made invisible by enchantment.⁸

The next legend involves "el Sombrerón," the big hat or the hat of the devil and its effects on a priest and a small boy. Another story describes Atitlán or Lake Atitlán, the place of the Grandmother of the Waters, which is still the home of the zutuhil tribe.⁹ This story describes the arrival of "los hombres

de Castilán," the men of Castile, Spain to "el Lugar Florido," the flowered place, the land of the Maya. Several names which are poetic in any translation appear in the next legend. The character of Juan Poyé is a god who has a namesake goddess in Juana Poyé. They encounter Cristalino Brazo de la Cerbatana, the crystalline arm of the blow-gun; el Serpiente con Chorros de Horizontes, the Serpent with Streams on the Horizon; el Río de las Garzas Rosadas, the River of the rose-colored herons; and la Diosa Invisible de las Palomas de la Ausencia, the Goddess of the doves of absence.

The last part of the book presents a mythological play concerning the struggle between the forces of day and the forces of night. Cuculkán is the protagonist; he is the feathered serpent god, the god of the sun. His name has several interpretations: Kukulkán, the yellow lord, the serpent-bird; Gucumatz, the green snake-bird; Quetzalcóatl, the feathered serpent god.¹⁰ He is frequently taunted by Guacamayo, the macaw, the colorful, long-tailed bird who is identified as Vucub CaKix (Caquix), a false god, a deceiver, the Rainbow of Deceit.¹¹ Ts'ité is the coral tree or pito, the red beans which wizards use for divining.¹² Chinchibirín is "el Guerrero amarillo," the yellow warrior. Ralabal and Huvaravix, Maestro de los Cantos de Vigilia (Master of the Songs of the Vigil) are names of gods found in the Anals of Xahil. Yai' or Yia is "Flor Amarilla," a yellow flower, the wild, golden anis

burned as incense to the gods, who represents a lover for Cuculcán. Other named characters are la Abuela de los Remiendos, the Grandmother of remedies; Bárbara Barbada, la Tortuga Barbada, the wild, bearded turtle; Blanco Aporreador de los Tambores, the white drummer. The other characters are various types of animals who are involved in the day/night conflict: pijuyes = lechuzas = owls; tortolitas = turtledoves; tortugas con flecos = turtles with bangs; chiquirines = small birds; coches de monte = mountain birds; chupamieles = hummingbirds; coyotls = coyotes.

In other works, Asturias introduces names like Gaspar Ilom, which combines Spanish/Christian and Indian elements. He also employs the use of the "nahual," the Indian belief in a protective animal spirit which is given to each child when it is named.¹³ In such later works as Hombres de maíz, El señor presidente and El Papa verde, Asturias turned to more political themes, including dictatorship and economic exploitation, yet he continued to blend in Spanish and Indian myths (as in Mulata de Tal). We are often unaware of the influence of Latin American Indian languages on American English; this influence can be seen in such words as volcano, hurricane, chocolate, tomato, ocelot and coyote. In the works of Asturias, we can see further evidence of this influence. This is an area open to comparative literary onomastics. With Paul Valéry, we can discover the works of Asturias as a tropical dream, a Guatemalan elixir for the soul.¹⁴ We can also see in

the works of Asturias the interconnections between Spanish and the major American Indian languages, such as Aztec and Maya.¹⁵ In his works, Asturias has shown the wonder of names; his skillful use of the evocative power of names adds to the attraction of "Magical realism."

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NOTES

¹Allen Walker Read, "Walt Whitman's Attraction to Indian Place Names" in Literary Onomastics Studies (Vol. VII, 1980), p. 189.

²Atilio Castelpoggi, Miguel Ángel Asturias (Buenos Aires: Editorial La Mandrágora, 1961), pp. 21, 26. For more information on Asturias' definition of "magical realism," see also: Luis López Álvarez, Conversaciones con Miguel Ángel Asturias (Madrid: EMESA, 1974), p. 164.

³J. Eric S. Thompson, Maya History and Religion (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1970), p. 179.

⁴Miguel Ángel Asturias, Leyendas de Guatemala (Buenos Aires: Editorial Losada, 1957), p. 164.

⁵Albertina Saravia E., Editor, Popol Vuh (México: Editorial Porrúa, 1965), pp. xiii, xx, xxiv.

⁶Asturias, Leyendas de Guatemala, p. 159.

⁷Thompson, Maya History and Religion, p. 276. For further information on the Maya, see: Herbert J. Spinden, A Study of Maya Art (New York: Dover Press, 1975).

⁸Castelpoggi, Miguel Angel Asturias, pp. 33-34.

⁹Asturias, Leyendas de Guatemala, pp. 151-152.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 158 and Saravia, Popol Vuh, p. xxiii.

¹¹Richard J. Callan, Miguel Ángel Asturias (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1970), p. 124. Guacamayo is also referred to "Saliva de Espejo" or a type of mirror image.

¹²Saravia, Popol Vuh, p. xxix.

¹³Asturias, Leyendas de Guatemala, p. 161.

¹⁴Paul Valéry, "Carta de introducción" to Asturias' Leyendas de Guatemala, pp. 9-10. For additional commentary on Asturias, see: Helmy F. Giacomán, Editor, Homenaje a Miguel Ángel Asturias (New York: Las Américas, 1971).

¹⁵Information on the languages of Guatemala is found in the following texts: Marvin K. Mayers, Languages of Guatemala (The Hague, Netherlands: Mouton and Company, 1965); Ralph L. Rags, The Book of Chilam Balam of Chumayel (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1967); Alfred M. Tozzer, A Maya Grammar (New York: Dover Publishers, 1977).

