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Traditions Of Guatemala 3



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ESSAYS

DATA FOR A STUDY ON POPULAR POETRY IN GUATEMALA

Gonzalo Mejía Ruíz

I

Within the richness of Spanish octosyllabic verse¹, there exists a ten-line stanza form known as the *décima*. It is also referred to as the ***espinela***², likely named after its creator.

1 "The quintessential Spanish verse is the octosyllable. Just as Italy has its hendecasyllable in cultivated poetry and its heptasyllable in popular poetry, and France has the alexandrine and the enneasyllable, we achieve the most characteristic expression of popular art—and, why hide it? —also of scholarly art, in the octosyllabic verse."

(Diez Echarri, Emiliano, *Teorías métricas del siglo de oro*, Madrid, Revista de Filología Española, 1970 —reprint— p. 192).

2 "Let us listen only to what Caramuel says regarding the *décima*: 'The ingenious and learned poet Espinel invented a new genre of *décimas* that everyone approves of and that has already been accepted with universal consent.'" (Op. cit., pp. 208-9).

Although this form originated in the cultured world with specific fixed rules that characterize it ³(16th–17th centuries), it soon made its way into the popular realm, where it was enthusiastically embraced due to its suitability for short poetry and, in some cases, for singing. Its popularity remains widespread across the Spanish-speaking world.

II

In Guatemala, there is an abundant body of popular literature, one of its fertile fields being religious themes.

Let us clarify what is meant by religious themes. While Guatemala's popular culture does produce strictly religious literature—focused on "reconnecting" with the divine, exploring its mysteries, expressing religious experiences, and occasionally delving into asceticism or even mysticism—these are not the most common motifs.

The people's known fondness for religious "festivities" combines the profane with the sacred. There is an enthusiasm for the splendid liturgy of Catholic worship, rich in music and ritual actions.⁴ This fondness extends to adorning non-liturgical ⁵ communal prayers, decorating the temple, and other activities. The emotional intensity peaks in processions, where the community channels its enthusiasm into profane displays such as theater, dance, fireworks, decorations, and food. These profane manifestations, infused with a religious sense and occurring around fundamentally religious events, are referred to as having a "religious

- 3 "It seems that the inventor of the *décima* wanted to establish as a general rule that upon reaching the fourth verse, a full stop should be made." It is well known that this rule has not been strictly followed, especially in theater. (Op. cit., pp. 208-9). The fundamental characteristics of the *décima* can be summarized as follows: a combination of ten eight-syllable verses arranged in two stanzas with the following rhyme scheme: *abbaaccddc*.
- 4 It could very well be that one of the determining factors in the current phenomenon of abandonment of the Catholic Church and conversion to other denominations is the abrupt departure from the traditional forms of the Catholic Church.
- 5 Examples of this can be found in the ancient songs (very different from hymns) about the mysteries of the rosary, the songs of the novenas, the *sones de Pascua* (Easter tunes) played during the recitation of the Hail Mary's mysteries, etc.

theme," not because of their nature but due to the context in which they arise. The term "theme" should be interpreted broadly.

Nevertheless, the poems presented here have a stricter religious sense.

Religious-themed popular literature often includes "*décimas*," anonymous poems of one or more stanzas that rarely conform to the characteristics of the traditional *espinela*.

To celebrate the religious "festivities" mentioned earlier, the *cofradías*, brotherhoods, or organizing associations are compelled to raise funds to cover expenses. One way to achieve this is through *décimas*.

A sheet of paper is printed with an image (engraving, photogravure, etc.) of the saint being honored. Beneath the image, a related poem is placed, followed by an invitation, a request for contributions, or a program in prose, ending with the names of the event's leaders (stewards, presidents, etc.). This sheet is distributed, and money is collected in return.

Initially, this sheet was called a **convite**, and several sheets with this title have been found in the consulted materials. The curious shift occurs when the *convite* becomes identified with the *décima*, evidently the most commonly used form, to the point of giving the *décima* a special significance. The *décima* attracts the public's attention and becomes the most important part of the sheet. Eventually, the *convite* ceases to be called **convite** and is instead referred to as a **décima**. This evolution has reached the point where, in the Sánchez & de Guise printing house, where research was conducted, there exists a catalog of **décimas**⁶ that are actually programs and *convites* of festivities, in which not a single "*décima*," strictly speaking, appears. Instead, other poetic forms are present. This shift represents an intriguing semantic displacement.

These poems, as indicated by the informant, are brought by the interested parties when placing the print order⁷, which implies a popular anonymous origin. An anecdote illustrating the process of seeking and

6 No. 21. *Décimas*: It is likely that one of the reasons for the semantic shift is the need to differentiate the *convite* (*décima*) from the *convite* (procession).

7 The verses that are printed are of two types:

a) Stanzas of hymns.

(Songs consisting of stanzas—sung by the musician, the singer, or a choir—and a chorus repeated by the people between stanzas. Some are international, others of a cultivated nature, and others of popular origin. All these hymns are within the people's domain and are in the process of extinction due to Church reforms.)

b) Popular poems.

acquiring these "*décimas*" is shared by Margarita Carrera de Wever in her *Corpus poeticum de la obra de Juan Diéguez* ⁸. In the "*Breves noticias sobre la vida de Juan Diéguez*," she cites Ramón Uriarte:

"And there were those who, after reading the heartfelt stanzas *A mi gallo*, *El pensamiento de una tarde*, and *El cisne*, dared to approach him to request a *décima* for the *convite* of the '*rezado de concepción*,' or some *quintillas* to congratulate their sweetheart! One day, he said to me with a bitter smile, while entertaining one of those ridiculous requests:

'You see, my friend; they take me for a mere rhymester.'" (pp. 117-26) ⁹

III

Here are some examples taken from the *décimas* we have found:

a) *Oración* (Prayer)

*Oh San Antonio Glorioso,
De España luciente estrella,
De pobreza perla bella,
Del saber padre dichoso,
De castidad lirio hermoso,*

Oh Glorious Saint Anthony,
Radiant star of Spain,
Beautiful pearl of poverty,
Joyful father of wisdom,
Lovely lily of chastity,

*Tú eres de la Italia faro,
De la verdad doctor claro:
Tú eres sol que en Padua brillas,
Las grandes maravillas
Que allí produjo tu amparo.*

You are Italy's beacon,
A clear doctor of truth:
You are the sun that shines in *Padua*,
The great wonders
That your protection produced there.

(Petición de limosna para la fiesta de San Antonio de Padua, parroquia de San Sebastián. Antigua Guatemala, May 1936. Tipografía Azmitia.)

8 Margarita Carrera de Wever, *Corpus poeticum de la obra de Juan Diéguez*, Guatemala: Universidad de San Carlos, 1959.

9 The emphasis is mine.

ANTIGUA GUATEMALA-
MAYO DE 1936.

Apreciable Señor:

Con autorización del Señor Presbítero Don Juan
Cecilio Cuéllar, Cura Párroco de la Párroquia de San
Sebastián.

- La Pía Unión Central Antoniana -
de esta ciudad: como todos los años tiene el proyecto de
celebrar su magna fecha con la mayor solemnidad po-
sible, para aquel nuestro Glorioso Tíamaturgo

SAN ANTONIO DE PADUA

Como Ud. no lo ignora todos los actos religiosos oca-
sionan fuertes gastos y es por ello que recurrimos a nuestro
católico Pueblo Antiguano solicitando de él y especialmente
de Ud. su valiosa colaboración; co'aboración que es nues-
tro Hacedor quien repondrá con creces el sacrificio pecu-
niario que por él haga.

En virtud de la cordial acogida a esta nuestra peti-
ción rogamos a Ud. entregar el próximo domingo 31 del
corriente su valioso contingente a la comisión designada
por esta Sociedad y que lleva las credenciales respectivas

Juan Cecilio Cuéllar.
Presbítero.

Diego Armas C. Nicolás Orizábal G.
Presidente. Vice-Presidente.

Sofío Porras hijo. José C. Andrade.
Secretario. Tesorero.

Roberto Fernández.
Pro Secretario.

Note: Oportunamente circularán los programas respectivos.



ORACIÓN

Oh San Antonio Glorioso,
De España luciente estrella,
De pobreza perla bella,
Del saber padre dichoso,
De castidad lirio hermoso,

Tú eres de la Italia fero,
De la verdad doctor claro:
Tú eres sol que en Padua brillas
Con las grandes maravillas
Que allí prodiga tu amparo.

This example is taken from a *décima* in our archive. Among those published here, it is the only poem that follows the specifications of a *décima*: ten octosyllabic verses arranged in two stanzas with the rhyme scheme a b b a a c c d d c.

b) A Jesús sacramentado (To Jesus Sacramented)

*Bendecidnos hoy Señor,
os rogamos hoy rendidos,
hijos somos redimidos
de culpas por vuestro amor...*

Bless us today, Lord,
we humbly pray to you,
we are redeemed children
from sin by your love...

*Bendecid a los que mueren
y os invocan a porfía,
endulzadles su agonía,
dándoles tu bendición.*

Bless those who are dying
and call upon you persistently,
sweeten their agony,
granting them your blessing.

(Invitación a la festividad del Corpus Christi, Concepción Cerro Gordo, July 1946, Tipografía Sánchez & de Guise).

These are two quatrains missing the two intercalated lines, as Sebastián Bertina mentions, to form a *décima*.¹⁰

c) Convíte

*Bueno es estar con Jesús
No hay que apartarse jamás,
Porque el Redentor da luz
¡Hace el bien... y más y más!*

It is good to be with Jesus
We must never turn away,
For the Redeemer gives light
Does good... and more and more!

*Vino al mundo a hacer favor
Sin ver las ingratitudes
Que en premio de sus virtudes
Le dio el pueblo engañador.*

He came to the world to bring favor
Without seeing the ingratitude
That, as a reward for His virtues,
The deceitful people gave Him.

*Ante crueles desengaños
Y en medio de su inocencia
Muere a los treinta y tres años
Este mártir de la ciencia.*

Amid cruel disillusionments
And in the midst of His innocence,
He dies at thirty-three years,
This martyr of science.

*Perdónalos, Padre mío,
Le dijo con claridad
Aquel Dios de la humildad
Ante el enemigo impío.*

"Forgive them, Father of mine,"
He said clearly,
That God of humility
Before the impious enemy.

*Es la transfiguración
Lo que se va a celebrar
Y es preciso cooperar,
Para darle animación.*

It is the Transfiguration
That we are going to celebrate,
And it is necessary to cooperate
To give it animation.

*Es una fecha muy grata
Y fiesta salvadoreña
Que ya va siendo halagüeña
A los hijos de Zacapa.*

It is a very pleasant date
And a Salvadoran festivity
That is already becoming promising
To the sons of Zacapa.

*En las fechas escogidas
De las fiestas conmovedoras,
Les quedan agradecidas
Sus atentas servidoras.*

On the chosen dates
Of the moving festivities,
Grateful remain
Their attentive servants.

(Invitación en la que sólo aparece el poema. Zacapa. August 6th 1923.
Tipografía Sánchez & de Guise).

If these seven quatrains are examined with the characteristics of example b), they share the same features as example b: the absence of the intercalated verses between the quatrains to form décimas.

In the sixth stanza, there is a reference to the patronal feast of San Salvador (the Feast of the Savior of the World), which is celebrated on August 6th, the day of the "Transfiguration of Jesus."¹¹ In the fifth stanza, the collection for the feast is mentioned.

d) A María (To Mary)

*¡Oh María, tus glorias yo cante!
¡Oh María, yo ensalce tu nombre,*

Oh Mary, I sing your glories!
Oh Mary, I exalt your name,

11 Cfr. Valentín Sánchez Ruiz, *Misal completo, latino-español*, Madrid, Apostolado de la prensa, 1954, p. 972.
José Mata Gavidia, *Anotaciones de Historia Patria Centroamericana*, Guatemala, Cultural Centroamericana, 1953, p. 195.

*¡Lo repitan el ángel y el hombre!
¡Oh María, y no cesen jamás!*

Let angel and man repeat it!
Oh Mary, may it never cease!

*De un invierno en los rigores
Caminando noche y día,
Sois purísima María,
¡Tierno imán de mis amores!*

Through winter's harsh rigors
Walking night and day,
You are purest Mary,
Tender magnet of my love!

*Sírvanos de guía y luz
En nuestra necesidad
La inagotable bondad,
La inmaculada María.*

Be our guide and light
In our need
Your inexhaustible kindness,
Immaculate Mary.

*Sea toda nuestra alegría,
todo nuestro consuelo,
La medianera en el Cielo,
La inmaculada María.*

May all our joy,
All our comfort,
Be the Mediatrix in Heaven,
Immaculate Mary.

*Se acabarán bien se ve,
Nuestras penas y dolores,
Teniendo por protectora
A la inmaculada María.*

Surely, it will end,
Our sorrows and pains,
Having as our protector
The Immaculate Mary.

(Invitación y petición de limosna para la fiesta de la Virgen de Lourdes, —June 3rd—. Jutiapa, May 1926, Tipograpfia Sánchez & de Guise).

The transcribed text offers us a combination of quatrains with verses of varying meter. The first stanza is a quatrain. The second and third are quatrains, while in the fourth, the first two verses are nonasyllabic, and the last two are octosyllabic. The last verse is another nonasyllabic one in a series of octosyllables.

e) A María (To Mary)

*¡Oh! Virgen de Concepción
Toda eres bella
¡Oh! pura doncella
¡Oh! madre de Dios.
Del alma contento,
Del mundo alegría,*

Oh! Virgin of Concepción
You are entirely beautiful
Oh! pure maiden
Oh! Mother of God.
The joy of the soul,
The world's delight,

*Divina María,
Delicia de Dios.
Tú llenas mi alma,
De grata ventura,
De inmensa dulzura,
¡Oh! madre de Dios.*

Divine Mary,
Delight of God.
You fill my soul,
With pleasing bliss,
With immense sweetness,
Oh! Mother of God.

*Protege a tus hijos,
¡Oh! madre amorosa,
¡Oh! madre piadosa,
¡Oh! madre de Dios.*

Protect your children,
Oh! loving mother,
Oh! merciful mother,
Oh! Mother of God.

*Consuelo del triste,
Del pobre riqueza,
Tu amor embeleza,
¡Oh! madre de Dios.
¡Viva María!*

Comfort for the sorrowful,
Riches for the poor,
Your love enchants,
Oh! Mother of God.
Long live Mary!

("Décima" en la que únicamente aparece el poema. Comalapa, December 8th 1924, Tipograffa Sánchez & de Guise).

In this case, there is a combination of hexasyllabic and pentasyllabic verses, except for the first one, which is an octosyllabic verse. The line that appears typographically separated does not seem to be a verse of the poem.

f)

*La fiesta de Rabinal,
Que siempre ha sido lucida,
Es la que hoy os convida
Cristianos en general.*

The festival of Rabinal,
Which has always been splendid,
Is the one that today invites you
Christians in general.

*Aquí se hará; Dios mediante
Y con toda seguridad,
El veintidós del entrante
¡Nuestra hermosa festividad!*

It will be held here; God willing
And with complete certainty,
On the twenty-second of the coming
Our beautiful festivity!

*Así pues: todo noble cristiano
De puro y fiel sentimiento
No pierda un solo momento,*

Thus: every noble Christian
With pure and faithful feeling
Should not waste a single moment,

Su óbolo en ofrecer.

Offering his obolus.

*Teniendo bien entendido,
Que aquella Virgen hermosa
Con mano siempre amorosa
Le debe corresponder.*

Fully understanding,
That that beautiful Virgin
With her always loving hand
Should respond to him.

("Invitación a los devotos del Patrocinio de la Santísima Virgen cuya fiesta tendrá lugar el 22 de noviembre". Rabinal, October 1925, Tipografía Sánchez & de Guise).

Now we are facing four irregular quatrains with dominant octosyllables. The ninth verse is a decasyllable, and the rest of the irregular verses are monosyllables in the second stanza and a heptasyllable in the first.

g) *Invitación* (Invitation)

*Nuestra Señora Santa Ana
Invita con devoción
A todos cristianos justos
Con una corta limosna
Para su celebración.*

Our Lady Saint Anne
Invites with devotion
All righteous Christians
With a small donation
For her celebration.

*El día veintiséis de julio
Espera en su templo
Nuestra Señora Santa Ana
A que ocurra con reverencia,
Y esta Santa desde el cielo
Les dará su recompensa.*

On the twenty-sixth of July
She awaits in her temple
Our Lady Saint Anne
For those who come with reverence,
And this Saint from heaven
Will grant them her reward.

*Y que de todos vuestros devotos
Que amáis con anhelo
Ocurramos todos sus hijos
A gozar de su portento.*

And that all your devout ones
Who love with longing
May we all come, her children,
To enjoy her miracle.

(Invitación que se hace a los vecinos de Piedra Parada para los Maitines del 17 de noviembre próximo, dedicados a la Virgen y reina Santa Catarina. Piedra Parada, September 1926, Tipografía Sánchez & de Guise).

The first stanza is a heterometric quatrain, the second is isometric, and the third is again a heterometric stanza. The first has heptasyllabic

and nonasyllabic verses, while the last contains decasyllabic verses and one nonasyllabic verse. The entire poem asks for alms and describes the favors of the saint towards the benefactors. In the last stanza, "Maitines" is mentioned, which is likely referring to the origin of the celebration: the canonical hour in which the first commemoration of the saint was held in the early hours of the morning. From this comes the name of the people in charge of the celebration: "maitineros."

h) Santa Rosa de Lima

<i>Rosa de sin par belleza</i>	Rose of unmatched beauty
<i>Que esparces celeste aroma</i>	That spreads a heavenly fragrance
<i>Blanca y nítida paloma</i>	White and pure dove
<i>Revestida de pureza.</i>	Clad in purity.

("Décima" en la que sólo aparecen los cuatro versos. Santa Rosa, 30 de agosto de 1927, Tipografía Sánchez & de Guise).

It is a clear quatrain of praise to the Saint.

i)

<i>Aquí nos tienes, Madre Nuestra</i>	Here we are, Our Mother
<i>Humillados pidiéndote de Hinojos,</i>	Humbly asking on our knees,
<i>Una mirada de tus lindos ojos</i>	A glance from your beautiful eyes
<i>Que inflame con tu amor los</i>	That sets our hearts on fire with
<i>corazones.</i>	your love.

<i>Te veneramos Rosa de Santa</i>	We venerate you, Rose of Santa
<i>María,</i>	María,
<i>Tú eres nuestra paz, dicha y</i>	You are our peace, joy, and comfort,
<i>consuelo,</i>	
<i>Amarte a ti es poseer el cielo,</i>	Loving you is to possess heaven,
<i>Es gozar de la gloria desde aquí.</i>	It is to enjoy glory from here.

(Invitación a la festividad de Santa Rosa de Lima, Santa Rosa de Lima, agosto de 1941. Tipografía Sánchez & de Guise). Esta es una alteración de un alabado A Jesús Sacramentado:¹²

<i>Aquí estoy, mi Jesús, aquí me tienes</i>	Here I am, my Jesus, here you have me
<i>Humillado, pidiéndote de hinojos</i>	Humbly asking on my knees
<i>Una mirada de tus dulces ojos,</i>	A glance from your sweet eyes
<i>Que inflames con tu amor mi corazón.</i>	That sets my heart on fire with your love.
(...)	(...)
<i>¡Te amo, Jesús, con toda el alma mía!</i>	I love you, Jesus, with all my soul!
<i>Tú eres mi paz, mi dicha y mi consuelo,</i>	You are my peace, my joy, and my comfort,
<i>Amarte a Ti es poseer el Cielo,</i>	Loving you is to possess Heaven,
<i>Es gozar de la gloria desde aquí.</i>	It is to enjoy glory from here.
(...)	(...)

(*Cantos Sagrados* pp. 8-9).

The verses of the first stanza (chorus) have been altered to adapt them to Santa Rosa. The first verse has been turned into a nonasyllabic one, the other two verses retain the hendecasyllabic form, although the fourth loses the rhythm of the quatrain. In the second stanza, two verses have been altered, with the first one of the quatrain becoming a thirteen-syllable verse.

This type of alteration does not constitute plagiarism. A poem that belongs to the people has been taken, so the one who altered it used its

12 Cfr. Victoria Sánchez de De la Rosa, *Cantos Sagrados*, Guatemala, Sánchez & de Guise, no date, pp. 8-9.
 Celestino Fernández, *Nuestro Circular*, Guatemala, 1949 (sin editorial) p. 168.
 In this book, it appears with the title: " Aquí estoy, mi Jesús " and is dedicated to the Eucharistic sacrament.
 (?), A remembrance of the holy mission of the Franciscan fathers, San Salvador. Printed by San Antonio, 1959. It appears with the title " Aquí estoy, mi Jesús " and dedicated to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. The example shows how deeply the alabados have penetrated popular culture, to the point that the people consider them part of their culture and modify them according to their needs.

property, the property of the community. It was simply adapted to new circumstances. This is characteristic of popular literature.

The same two stanzas, copied above, appear in another "*décima*" titled *A Jesús Sacramentado*, which invites to the Corpus Christi festivity in the same town of Santa Rosa de Lima in May 1941. (Printed by Sánchez & de Guise).

Finally, we cite a "*décima*" in prose. It is an example of how, independently of the fertile poetic form (the *décima*), the invitation (printed) has come to be the quintessential "*convite*" of the *décima*.

j) *Décima*

*A la eximia patrona de este pueblo, la virgen Santa Lucía,
como un homenaje de amor y devoción en el día de su fiesta titular.*

To the distinguished patroness of this town, the Virgin Santa Lucía, as a tribute of love and devotion on the day of her feast day.

(Santa Lucía Cotzumalguapa, 1960, Tipografía Sánchez & de Guise).

A vast field of study is presented to our eyes: the popular poetry created in Guatemala.

We have mentioned only the poetry written in "*décimas*." These *convites*, whose name signals a strong cultivation of the *décima* in poetry. These *convites* have undergone a severe evolution: from *espinela* to quatrains and other forms, until concluding, in 1960, with the *décima* in prose. We must not forget, either, the "*décimas*" that do not present literary creation. The ones that are used to announce the celebration in the most prosaic language. Nor the limping verses that speak to us of rapid revisions made to satisfy urgent demands. This fact demands a careful analysis. Behind it all, the people rejoice, groan, pray: live.

Informants:

María Victoria Sánchez de De la Rosa, owner of the printing press Sánetez & de Guise, 8a. Av. 12-58, zona 1. I owe her the information related to the printing process. I thank Mrs. Sánchez De la Rosa for allowing me to consult her catalogs and for her enthusiastic collaboration. (Feb. 3, 1975).

Mr. Ramiro Araujo, altar maker, from Guarda Viejo. I owe him the information related to the function of the *décimas*. Interviews conducted throughout 1973.

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