



Chants in latin: an indigenous vocal practice¹

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INTRODUCTION

The presence of Latin liturgical chant in a country that has been exposed to Roman Catholicism for almost five hundred years is no surprise. Nevertheless, the fact that singing in Latin still represents a living religious and musical practice more than forty years after the Second Vatican Council,² may well arouse some interest. Even more so when one considers that in many parts of Guatemala the Roman Catholic liturgy has already undergone yet another linguistic transformation, this time from Spanish into the various Mayan languages.

The point is that in Guatemala Latin in general and Latin chants in particular have no longer been part of liturgical contexts since, at the latest, the early seventies of the twentieth century.³ Such chants are still practiced, however, in contexts linked to indigenous religious institutions such as religious brotherhoods or the practices of shaman-priests⁴ whose ties to the Catholic Church are, where they exist, quite loose.

SOME HISTORICAL DATA

It can be said that the Central American tradition of singing in Latin had begun with the disembarkation of a small army headed by

Hernán Cortés on the coast of Veracruz on the Good Friday of 1519 when Fray Bartolomé de Olmedo, accompanied by some soldiers, proceeded to sing a "Oficio de Tinieblas gregoriano" (José Antonio Guzmán Bravo 1986: 79). In the following decades musical expressions of different kinds played an important role among the methods that the religious orders, the Franciscans and Dominicans above all, used in the religious conversion of the indigenous people from the religion.⁵ It is also well known that the guild, a colonial institution erected to carry out the cult of the Catholic Saints, was key in the transformative propagation of pre-Hispanic religious beliefs and practices.⁶



¹ This article is the translated and expanded version of a paper in English that the author presented in 2001 in Rio de Janeiro during the 36th World Congress of the International Council for Traditional Music (ICTM). It is based on ethnographic work also carried out in 2001 in Nebaj and Chajul (Quiché), as well as on bibliographic studies done before and after that date.

² The Second Vatican Council, which lasted from 1962 to 1965, initiated, among other things, the reformation of the liturgy and the revision of the Missale Romanum. It subsequently sanctioned the use of the mother tongue at Mass to facilitate the active participation of the parishioners. Indeed, in the post-conciliar period vernacular languages have become the primary liturgical language almost everywhere in the world.

³ Nevertheless, in his brief "Sacramentum caritatis," published in March of this year, Pope Benedict XVI has recommended the reintroduction of Latin and Gregorian chant into the Catholic Mass, although, it seems, for the time being, mostly at Masses celebrated during large international gatherings of Catholic parishioners. The reason for this reintroduction is, according to the text, to highlight "the unity and universality of the Church".

⁴ On the use and definition of the term "priest-shaman" see Barbara Tedlock 1992: 52-53.

⁵ For more details about the simultaneous musical education and religious indoctrination of indigenous people, especially children belonging to the local nobility, see Lourdes Turrent 1996: 122 onwards.

⁶ See for example Flavio Rojas Lima 1988.

The above is also true in the case of the Guatemalan highlands, it is shown by the polyphonic music codices of the 16th and early 17th centuries, and the numerous manuscripts of plain chant kept in the local guilds of some villages located in the Cuchumatanes huehuetecos, where they were "rediscovered" by Maryknoll fathers at the beginning of the sixties of the last century (Robert Stevenson 1964: 345). Undoubtedly, the findings of polyphonic music from the beginning of the colonial period have awakened more musicological interest; however, it has been mainly the practice of plainchant, that is, of monophonic religious chant in Latin, which has been transmitted and transformed in some indigenous communities up to the present.⁷

ETHNOGRAPHY

Even today, the confraternity represents one of the main contexts for the transmission of Latin chants; it is above all during the processions in which the images of the saints are carried through the streets of the village that they are performed. However, they are also sung at vigils and funeral rites, in church and in rituals performed in front of altars and sacred places.⁸

The performers are recognized specialists, able to read the texts, memorize the melodies and know the appropriate songs for each specific occasion. They are always men; moreover, it is a profession carried out at present generally by men who are already quite old. Some of them are commissioned to render their services for a determined period of time while others are hired whenever the occasion requires their presence.

In Momostenango, Totonicapán, singing and praying in Latin is one of several trades in which a shaman-priest can specialize after having completed his basic training in the handling of calendars (Tedlock 1992: 74).

The chants can be performed by one or several people. Tedlock speaks of the hiring of a single *ajbix* for rituals performed at specific moments of the apprenticeship of Momostenango priest-shamans (ibid. 62; 66)⁹, Rojas Lima also of the position of a single singer associated with the hierarchical structure of the guilds of San Pedro Jocopilas in El Quiché (1988: 153, 157) and Oliver La Farge found as early as 1932 in the processions of the patronal feast of Santa Eulalia, Huehuetenango only one man who held the position of "maestro cantor" (1994: 114 onwards). In contrast, Charles Wagley, who conducted ethnographic research in Santiago Chimaltenango, Huehuetenango between 1937 and the late 1940s, found in "all the important festivities and processions" Latin chants sung by four "principal singers" plus an apprentice (1957: 239-240).¹⁰

Among the Ixil two-singer ensembles seem to represent a certain norm; this is not only indicated by my own ethnographic data, but also by recordings made in 1992 and, maps back in 1964, in the area.¹¹ This number is further



⁷ However, it is worth mentioning the example of Santiago Atitlán where until very recently there was a tradition of Latin chants in three voices, sung in a homophonic manner. Indeed, despite a recent change from Latin to Spanish lyrics, the musical structure of these chants, which were and still are performed during Holy Week in the local church, does not seem to have been altered (Linda O'Brien-Rothe, personal communication). We do not exclude that similar polyphonic practices would still be found elsewhere in Guatemala as well.

⁸ See Tedlock 1992, Glen A. Horspool 1982: 100-105.

⁹ In any case, one of his photographs obviously taken in the course of a ritual shows the presence of two singers in the same place (ibid., 63).

¹⁰ As Wagley does not provide any information on the manner of singing, there is some possibility that these were also polyphonic and not monophonic chants, comparable to the chants of Tinieblas in Santiago Atitlán, performed by three "Sacristanes". (See Footnote 7).

¹¹ See INGUAT/Casa de la Cultura de Nebaj 1995 and Jacques Jangoux 1969/1973 respectively.



reflected in two terms of colonial origin that seem to denote a distinct status and function of the two singers: "choirmaster" on one hand, and "fiscal" or "staff officer" on the other¹²; the latter being the singer carrying a staff crowned with small bells.¹³

According to Sebastián Ceto, a "maestro de coro" resident of Nebaj, in the past, they used to sing sometimes with the accompaniment of a harp, and Wagley also mentions the presence of musical instruments - in this case a marimba - during the performance of the chants in Santiago Chimaltenango (1957: 239-240).¹⁴

Latin chants are transmitted by two means: by writing and by orality. In this sense, they represent, like certain dances, examples of indigenous expressive traditions that use the two means in a complementary way. In the case of the chants, the texts and the indications of their place in the order of the ecclesiastical year are transmitted in written form, while the melodies are transmitted orally.¹⁵

There are two types of written sources, both considered as legacies of the ancestors: original books and copies of them. Sometimes the originals belong to the singers themselves, at other times they are only in their possession for a limited time. The original that the aforementioned Sebastián Ceto kept on the altar erected in his house, indeed belonged to the confraternity whose principals commissioned him for the service. He treated this book - a two-volume "Missale Romanum" dated 1879¹⁶ - with great respect, but for the realization of the chants he used numerous copies made by hand.

LATIN AS A MEANS OF COMMUNICATION

For centuries Latin fulfilled two basic functions in the Roman Catholic Church: that of a secular language and therefore a *lingua franca* of the clergy, and that of a ritual language, that

is, the official language used in liturgical contexts. Of the two functions Latin has maintained the second in the indigenous religious sphere of today. That is, chants and prayers in Latin continue to be performed whenever ritual communication with supernatural powers requires it. However, apart from Latin there are other linguistic and sonorous forms in that sphere that serve the same purpose: vernacular prayers and

¹² At the beginning of the Colony, positions such as cantor, chapel master or steward were often occupied by graduates of the schools attached to the monasteries (Turrent 1996: 156 onwards).

¹³ In Chajul, this differentiation also corresponds to a housing differentiation: the "choirmasters" resided in Cantón Iloom, the "fiscals" in Cantón Chajul.

¹⁴ Linda O'Brien-Rothe in turn reports the occasional accompaniment of Latin chants by a violin in contexts linked to the cult of the dead in Santiago Atitlán (personal communication). It is worth noting, however, that the presence of musical instruments does not necessarily signify the type of musical interaction between chant and instruments that is commonly associated with the term "accompaniment". For example, towards the end of Jangoux's recording of two singers during a procession in honor of the Patron Saint of Nebaj (1973), one suddenly hears a marimba and a flute that were not present before and that obviously played independently of the singing (and possibly independently of each other as well). In fact, the simultaneous performance of different "musical texts" by different ensembles in the same place is a phenomenon that is very frequently encountered during processions and festivals even today, however, it is a phenomenon whose meaning can easily escape the untrained observer. On the other hand, instrumental accompaniment even of Gregorian chant was not and is not unusual.

¹⁵ Although some singers interviewed have songbooks with the melodies written down, and although they are well aware of the function of such notation, I did not find anyone who knew how to decipher them. Without wishing to deny their importance, it is not the place here to enter into a discussion on the question of how this fact influences the faithful transmission of the melodies encoded in those notations. For the present essay it is enough that the singers themselves affirm that they are performing the chants in the same way as their ancestors.

¹⁶ Among the other liturgical books that I managed to see and identify, a Roman Breviary of 1892, of almost the same antiquity then, stands out. It belonged to Gaspár Marcos Lainez, another choirmaster from Nebaj.

"presentations",¹⁷ prayers and hymns in Spanish, in a certain way instrumental music as well. The question is then how the different forms of communication relate to each other in this area. In order to give an answer, it is worth taking into consideration certain aspects of traditional indigenous theology.

In traditional belief, supernatural beings can be classified by means of a scheme containing three main categories: *God world*, *God animas*, and *God heaven* (Garrett Cook 1986: 140).¹⁸ Each of the three is composed of a multitude of beings: to the category of *God world* belongs spirits ("worlds") associated with a wide range of natural phenomena; *God animas* in turn comprises the totality of the souls of ancestors; *God heaven* finally is a set of beings composed of God, Jesus Christ and the Catholic Saints, manifesting themselves in the sun, stars and atmospheric phenomena, also on earth, in churches, chapels and images (ibid., 141 onwards).

Theologically, the boundaries between the three categories are not rigorously drawn; on the contrary, there are numerous overlaps and relationships between them. Nor does ritual practice classify the elements it uses in a rigid way; often the different linguistic and sonorous forms are manifested successively or simultaneously in the same event. As the "steward" Gaspar Marcos Láinez de Chajul says when referring to the rezadores who pray in Ixil: "They only pray, we sing with the book. One part is putting copal [and praying], another part is us. We are both. In the same place."¹⁹ Still, there are certain distinctions that seem to correspond to the theological structuring of the supernatural world. One of these is in the appropriate manner of addressing the representatives of the three categories. Thus, chants in Spanish such as the Lord's Prayer or the Hail Mary are often

considered particularly apt modes of communication with the sphere of Tiox or God heaven, but less appropriate for directly addressing the owner of a hill or soul of an ancestor.²⁰ On the other hand, prayers invoking ancestral spirits or worlds are usually in vernacular language, though not in their everyday form, but in recited and poetically structured form.²¹

On one hand Latin does not seem to be conceived as a foreign language by the singers but simply as the appropriate linguistic mode for ritual offerings to the Saints. It is appropriate and not foreign because the ancestors already used it in such a way. On the other hand, it is obviously a foreign language and that not only for laymen, but also for specialists in its use. "They cost a lot" one of them once explained to me. What they understand about Latin texts is the appropriate selection for the religious occasion,



¹⁷ "Presentations" are supplications in which the priest-shaman, who acts as intermediary, exposes the name of the petitioner, his kinship and place of origin, the supplication itself and the reasons why it should be attended to by the supernatural addressee (Horspool 1982: 102).

¹⁸ Cook proposes this scheme based on data obtained primarily in Momostenango. Tedlock, who investigated in the same town, refers to the three categories by means of a slightly different and more vernacular terminology: Mundo (World God), Nantat (Soul God) and Tiox (Sky God) (1992: 41).

¹⁹ Someone who very early, that is, in the second half of the sixteenth century, observed such syncretism in the field of chant, was the Dominican Diego Durán: "And it is certain that I am not lying, that I have heard on such days [i.e. feast days] singing in the areito some songs of God and of the saint, and others mixed with their metaphors and antiquities that the devil taught him and only he understands them" (1967: 235). (1967: 235)

²⁰ The fact that there are repertoires of chants in vernacular language such as the Songs of Faz-de-la-Tierra (bix rxin Ruch'lew in Tz'utujil) of Santiago Atilán (see Linda O'Brien-Rothe 2006, 1975) that address, among other supernatural beings, also certain Saints, does not represent, of course, any contradiction.

²¹ A series of such prayers in K'iche' are reproduced in Tedlock 1992: 222 onwards.

the right moment of their realization in the course of a procession or a ritual and their function of communication with and offering to the sphere of Tiox. It is this understanding and, once again, the idea that they were already performed in such a way by the ancestors, that gives meaning to Latin, even if it remains as a language in itself generally incomprehensible and, in a particular way, esoteric.

LATIN, LANGUAGE OF "TRADITIONAL AUTHORITY".

Recourse to the authority of ancestors is, of course, precisely the attitude expected of representatives of cultures commonly defined as "traditional". However, even there, there are obviously differences in the degree and scope of such recourse. Maurice Bloch (1974) has devoted more than thirty years an essay to the ways in which such differences are revealed through the use of different forms of verbal communication in the political and religious spheres.

Bloch's argument is that the high formalization of language, which generally characterizes the linguistic resources used in religious or ritual contexts, is nothing more than the ultimate expression of traditional authority that seeks to annihilate any semblance of the individual speaker's own verbal creativity. In other words, consciously or unconsciously, the speaker, by anchoring himself in a rigid and preconceived language, projects the idea of a power that surpasses his own individuality and that of his listeners. It is this idea that gives specific weight and force to "his" argument. To demonstrate the operation of such a formalization Bloch sets forth a scheme of gradual differences that takes as its starting point everyday language to end at the other end in musical expressions that are no longer vocal but instrumental. By means of this scheme he

describes an opposite movement of gradual loss of freedom of individual expression and of "propositional force" and discursive - indeed: dialogical - capacity of speech on the one hand and of increasing rigidity and increasing "illocutionary" or "performative force" of language on the other (ibid., 67). An important step in this process of increasing formalization is the one that leads from speech to song, that is, from spoken words to sung words; a step that means, according to Bloch, the fixation of two more parameters of language: intonation and rhythm.

In the *continuum* of linguistic formalization, Bloch provides a good instrument for an interpretative ordering of the different linguistic and sonorous forms employed in the traditional indigenous ritual contexts of Guatemala. It allows to determine the differences between these forms in terms of the scope granted to the authority of the tradition and to locate the chants in Latin within the scale of increasing formalization; beyond, for example, the partially improvised "presentations", adapted to the changing requirements of the moment.

What Bloch does not contemplate on the basis of his own ethnographic material on the Merina of Madagascar, is the presence of different languages within the same ritual complex. However, because it is a language virtually unintelligible to the singers themselves, which furthermore does not become ritual language by a gradual transformation of vocabularies and syntactic resources from everyday language but is ritual language from the beginning and nothing more than that, it is not difficult to place Latin at one end of the formalization process, in a sense at the same level as the instrumental music placed there by Bloch himself.

Nothing to do with such continuum has another aspect of the ritual languages of indigenous tradition, namely, the way their contemporary use reflects the particular colonial history of Guatemala: the forced imposition of foreign cultural elements and their adaptation to and transformation by indigenous concepts and practices.

Although some emphasis has been placed in this article on the complementarity of traditional theology and ritual practice, presumably the simultaneity of a foreign and virtually unintelligible language and a native language (even in an altered form) indicates profound differences about the religious, emotional and, to some extent, social proximity or distance governing the relationships between the living and the inhabitants of distinct supernatural spheres.

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