# The Poetic Imaginary in the Popular Literature of Guatemala

Celso A. Lara Figueroa

*Why read Homer in Greek when he walks alive, guitar slung over his shoulder, across the American desert?*

—José Martí

## Introduction

Within the fertile field of Guatemalan folkloric literature, poetry has been the genre that has sparked the least interest among researchers of popular culture. Only a few scattered incursions have been made, with no serious attempts at systematization (1), with the exception of the work by Carlos Navarrete on national ballads and *corrido*s (2). However, this clear lack of interest in recovering and analyzing it does not justify the oft-repeated claim in scholarly literary circles that Guatemala lacks a folkloric poetic tradition. A cursory examination of the corpus of poems presented here refutes such an assertion.

One need only search through the countryside and the marginal areas of the nation's cities to encounter poets and singers who, like true popular troubadours, pass down orally all the aesthetics and protest of their people. I must point out that this flower of Guatemalan folkloric poetry is not the result of a systematic compilation. These are isolated recordings, collected alongside the long-term research on folkloric tales being carried out by the Centro de Estudios Folkloricos [Center for Folkloric Studies] (3).

The very villages, hamlets, and towns where the storytellers live served as our field laboratory. It was there that this traditional poetry was recorded, both from popular bards and from storytellers who shared the same poetic quality (4).

For future study, this material remains archived and cataloged in the oral literature and ethnomusicology departments of this academic unit (5).

**Folklore and Popular Poetry**

If we assume that in a society divided into social classes, culture is ultimately determined by economic causes, and that, as a result, each class generates a particular type of culture, then it is valid to argue that all culture is class culture (6). Therefore, in any class-divided society, two cultures are present: the culture of the dominant classes and the culture of the dominated classes, which is potentially democratic and revolutionary (7).

Within the framework of the capitalist mode of production, the dominant classes—holders of the material means of production—impose their own cultural patterns on the rest of society, presenting them as universal culture. In this context, folklore emerges as the most authentic expression of the popular classes, to such an extent that it encapsulates their own worldview and conception of life, within which unique cultural forms are born in direct opposition to the supposedly universal official culture (8).

Folklore must therefore be understood as a culture that challenges the values represented by the culture of the dominant classes, to which the subordinate culture opposes its own values (9).

This act of challenging, which may be conscious and explicit or unconscious and implicit, is objectified in folkloric phenomena at various levels (10), among which the following stand out: direct challenge through rebellion against the status quo; direct challenge while still accepting the status quo; and implicit challenge by mere presence (11).

In the first two cases, the folkloric phenomenon takes on an explicit form of rebellion against the values of the dominant classes. It is a direct and immediate challenge, as can be seen—for instance—in traditional protest songs, popular tales and legends, and certain forms of folkloric theater (12). Implicit challenge by presence includes those folkloric documents that, merely by existing, stand in contrast to the documents of the hegemonic culture. These are contrasting elements that, within the same space, are disseminated by that dominant culture as the only valid ones (13).

These traditional forms of popular culture, positioned in opposition to the so-called universal culture of the dominant classes, undermine—by their very existence—the supposed universality of hegemonic culture. For example, traditional medicine stands against and challenges

the values of academic medicine; the mere existence of witchcraft and magic denies the universality of Judeo-Christian religion, which has been imposed as such by the hegemonic classes. In short, as Lombardi Satriani points out, the challenge within folklore develops in a growing gradation from implicit to explicit forms (14). When folklore is understood in this way—as a collective creation and the culture of the dispossessed classes—it becomes clear why it serves as a refuge for the best traditions of struggle, resistant to foreign cultural penetration, and acts as a barrier to imperialism and the impositions of national oligarchies. Furthermore, folklore is not something born overnight; it is the product of a long historical process that has deepened social class divisions until it has become the exclusive and dialectical heritage of the exploited classes—shaped by their social development and strengthened by the democratic and revolutionary struggle they themselves drive.

Likewise, folklore is a crucible of aesthetic expressions that stand in contrast to the norms maintained within the hegemonic classes. Popular literature (15) illustrates this well. Like a deep river, it flows alongside academic and individual literary creation, which is the product of the intellectualism of the dominant culture. In contrast, folkloric literature—non-academic and collectively embraced—presents itself bearing distinct and independent values through poetry, tales, legends, myths, and other expressions of profound aesthetic meaning. In other words, it is the true artistic creation of the subordinate classes.

It is in folkloric poetry and song where the aesthetic values of the dispossessed classes—those that challenge the dominant order—are best expressed. Antonio Gramsci believed as much, stating that the distinctive feature of popular poetry within the framework of a nation and its culture is not its artistic merit nor its historical origin, but rather its way of conceiving the world and life, in contrast with official society (16). In this, adds Gramsci, lies the collective nature of folklore.

Both folkloric song and poetry—inseparable from daily life—are laden with symbolism, driven by deep social emotions that reveal the character of the society in which they live (17). It is, then, the people themselves who decide on their continuation or extinction, adapting poetry and song to the historical moment in which they live.

Therefore, the dialectical connections between popular poetry and the broader sociocultural framework should not be overlooked. These connections ultimately give a particular poem or song a precise place and a dense charge of meaning, embodied in countless protests which, as Lombardi Satriani affirms, can be "silenced" in the sphere of real-life relations and transferred to the literary space, if not veiled through symbolic language (18). In other words, popular literature carries collective emotions that cannot be expressed in the realm of objective reality without the risk of being repressed at all levels—as is currently the case in Guatemala and other Central American countries. As such, "denunciation and protest—present in popular poetry and song—develop within the realm of the imaginary; rage is released through fantastical protest" (19).

Folkloric poetry, then, constructs its own space—rich in symbolism and therefore implicit—where the challenge to the values of the hegemonic classes becomes clearly evident. Given the barriers that popular literature faces in expressing itself naturally under the control of dominant classes, it is no surprise that poetry has sought out and established alternative channels for conveying its message. Popular poetry carries symbolic and aesthetic messages that are infused with meaning as they pass through the historical processes that shape them. That is to say, the traditional form may remain (such as couplets, romances ballads, short romance ballads, ten-line stanza, *corridos*), but their meaning shifts according to the historical context and the people to whom they belong (20).

**Characteristics of Folkloric Poetry**

Folkloric poetry includes all traditional literary expressions that use verse as their mode of expression. Within the oppressed classes, it serves a broad and active social life. It is not individual poetry. As Bruno Jacovella points out, "it is poetry not read alone, but sung on certain dates and occasions, before an audience or in chorus" (21). This is why one of the predominant characteristics of popular poetry is that its dissemination depends on singing. However, recitation also plays a valuable role in its preservation—as in the case of the couplets, and certain ten-line stanza, romance ballads.

Thus, "folkloric poetry includes all those forms, categories, or values that have been embraced by the people to such an extent that they are remembered, sung, or

recited without the aid of writing or printing" (22), and it includes—through complete examples or fragments—the three major categories of Western poetry: epic, lyric, and dramatic.

In short, as Palmer Hudson states, poetry is a shared heritage of humanity (23).

Moreover, the forms and structures of folkloric poetry respond to the idiosyncrasies of each person, depending on "the genius of their language and the nature of their poetic tradition" (24). That is, they are shaped by the habits and needs of popular singers and poets.

However, folkloric poetry still follows rules regarding meter, rhyme, and stanzas, which, "though empirical and not scholastic, are nonetheless well defined, and allow for the establishment of formal criteria" (25).

Based on these criteria, many classifications have been attempted (26).However, for the purposes of this work, the criteria put forth by Bruno Jacovella for adult poetry (27) will be used as a foundation—though modified—while emphasizing that any deeper study would require broader and more rigorous criteria.

**Lyric Poetry**: Couplets and ten-line stanza..

**Narrative or Epic-Lyric Poetry**: Romance ballads and *corridos*.

## Origin of Folkloric Poetry

Popular poetry and song stem from the creation of a literate or illiterate individual. It is through various folklorization processes—shaped by historical developments—that these works have acquired a collective character and have come to be considered common heritage among the popular classes. This perspective bypasses the debates sparked by the pre-Romantics of the 18th century concerning the authorship of traditional poetry (28). Thus, folkloric poetry and song originated both within the dominant strata and from the very heart of the subaltern classes, as demonstrated by Lombardi Satriani and Margit Frenk Alatorre (29). The historical process itself has endowed these expressions with new content, new functions, and new meanings in line with societal development (30). This is why Gramsci so clearly defined folkloric poetry and song as "those not written by the people nor for the people, but adapted by them because they align with their way of thinking and feeling" (31).

The type of folkloric poetry presented in this study originated during the feudal period (the

Middle Ages, especially the 11th to 14th centuries) and at the dawn of capitalism (15th and 16th centuries) in central Europe.

Between the 11th and 15th centuries, as Marx points out, although there were substantial economic differences between the countryside and the city, between serfs and lords, there was also cultural exchange and interplay between these opposing classes (32).

Hence, troubadours, *trouveres*, and *minstrels* sang their love songs and epic tales not only in the public squares and markets of towns and villages but also in the castles of the nobility.

Folkloric poetry emerged almost simultaneously in various European countries. However, given the scope of this essay, the focus will be on the flourishing of popular poetry in Spain.

The roots of traditional Spanish poetry lie in the heritage of both Arab and Christian peoples who inhabited the Iberian Peninsula before and during the Middle Ages. The *jarchas mozárabes*, for example—early medieval poems recently discovered—offer insight into what Hispano-Musical lyricism might have been during the medieval period (33). According to Margit Frenk Alatorre, by the 10th century there already existed in Spain a genuine popular poetry recited by people "of low and servile condition," essentially illiterate rural folk (34). The author adds that from that point onward, it became collectivized poetry, imposed upon the individual in the creation and recreation of each song.

At the same time, the dominant feudal classes adopted these "rustic little songs" into their own aesthetic sensibilities and cultural norms. Thus, in the Neapolitan court of Alfonso V of Aragon, during the 13th century, one finds the first documented evidence of an appreciation for the poetry of the subaltern classes. And in Castile and León, Alfonso X, *El Sabio*, during the same century, “orders and commands” the compilation of the songs of his time, forming the *Cantigas de Santa María* songbook.

This stage of recognition—and therefore written documentation—of Spanish popular poetry extends until 1580. But its true golden age begins in the 15th century, in the court of the Catholic Monarchs and in the palace of the Dukes of Alba (35).

Moreover, within the subaltern classes, hundreds of poems and songs from the folkloric tradition of the 15th century have been directly

documented—thanks in part to figures like Juan de Mal Lara (1524–1571), a disciple of Erasmus. And indirectly, this legacy is revealed through comparisons between Golden Age literary texts and the current folkloric songbook, particularly among Sephardic communities in the East and in Africa, who have preserved, almost unchanged, the songs their ancestors sang before their expulsion from the peninsula in 1492 by the Catholic Monarchs (36). It can thus be concluded that current Hispanic and Latin American folkloric poetry has its direct roots both in the learned poetry of the courtly *cancioneros* of the hegemonic classes and in the poetic literary production of the subaltern classes of the 15th and 16th centuries. By that point, a well-defined social system already existed, dividing society into classes—allowing for the coexistence and interaction of two types of poetry: popular and learned. After 1492, with the expulsion of the Jews, the unification of Spain, and the discovery of the New World, both forms would be transplanted to the Americas almost unchanged in essence.

Popular poetry took root from the very moment the colonizers and conquistadors set foot in the West Indies. Bruno Jacovella asserts that much of the romance ballads,, short romance ballads, and lyrical forms of Hispanic poetry—such as the couplets—"came to the Americas just as they were from Spain"; and to prove it, it suffices to note that the same themes appear in countless variations across the continent (37).

It has become almost cliché to mention Bernal Díaz del Castillo, who recounts how, during the conquest of Mexico, the conquistadors recited romance ballads and other forms of popular literature (38). During the long period of Spanish colonization, poetry was disseminated both orally and through *pliegos* and collections of "varied poetry," as well as songbooks brought over on ships, consigned to the palaces and viceregal cathedrals. The pre-Columbian native population was unfamiliar with fixed forms of versification, yet they exhibited a keen sensitivity toward subjective literary and aesthetic expression as evidenced by the songs of Netzahuacóyotl in Mesoamerica and the literary manifestations from the Andean region.

Once the exploitative economic system was established in the Americas—adding an ethnic variable to class division—Hispanic-origi n poetry adapted and transformed in content, though not in form, and acquired new meaning. In short, it became Americanized through gradual processes of

folklorization and adaptation by the oppressed classes (39), ultimately forming the dialectical cultural synthesis that defines Latin American folkloric poetry today.

To return to Gramsci: the origin of poetry and song is not the central issue. What matters is their incorporation into the cultural heritage of the dispossessed classes. Today, six centuries later, this poetry remains alive, running parallel to the production of the dominant classes and challenging their values.

**Folkloric Poetry of Guatemala**

Our traditional poetry shares a common ancestry with that of the rest of Latin America. However, in Guatemala, more than four hundred years after its initial arrival and its dialectical coexistence with the sensibilities of pre-Alvarado literature—the poetic language tends to be symbolic and deeply cosmogonic in feeling. The limited research conducted on popular poetry in Guatemala does not allow for definitive conclusions about its characteristics.
However, at the level of hypothesis, the following can be proposed:

Although folkloric poetry is present throughout the country, Guatemala's eastern region offers its richest and most authentic expression, for concrete historical reasons. In this area, very archaic forms of Hispanic-origin literature have been preserved. In the western region where there is a high percentage of Indigenous population, although poetry remains alive, it does not reach the same level of diffusion as in the east of the country.

Its primary vehicle of transmission is the Spanish language. Very few versions of Hispanic-origin poetic forms have been recorded in Indigenous languages. Even among the Indigenous population, Spanish predominates as the medium for poetic expression.

Apparently romance ballads, short romance ballads, corridos, couplet, and ten-line stanza (40) are the poetic forms most prevalent in Guatemala.

Although poetry is inseparably linked to music and song, in Guatemala the most common mode of dissemination appears to be recitation (41), although many sung versions of *romances*, *corridos*, and short romance ballads have also been documented.

In addition to oral transmission, Guatemalan poetry is also preserved in printed sheets sold or exchanged in towns and cities on market days.

It is a tradition maintained by specialized poets. It is performed at gatherings such as *acabo de novena* or *nueve días* (nine-day mourning rituals), and for entertainment particularly in bars and taverns (those that still lack jukeboxes), where poets are invited to delight the drinkers. One example is Don Carlos Orellana, a troubadour *par excellence*, who sings "by the day" at the Cantina Yoli in the hamlet of El Apersogadero, in the department of Santa Rosa. In terms of content, our popular poetry functions as a critique of the values of dominant culture, especially through the *corridos*, ten-line stanza, and couplet, operating on many levels.

Nevertheless, until further in-depth research is conducted into this traditional phenomenon, no definitive conclusions can be made.

**Sample of Folkloric Poetry from Eastern Guatemala**

The eastern region of Guatemala, owing to its unique social, ecological, and human characteristics (42), preserves in its hamlets, villages, and cities (*latu sensu*) a rich variety of folkloric poetry of Hispanic origin. A brief yet meaningful sample is presented here. Upon examination, one can infer the immense aesthetic and literary value of this poetry—an authentic expression of the eastern Guatemalan peasantry, imbued as well with elements that question the *status quo*.

The inversions present in romance ballads and ten-line stanza critique the values of dominant culture by their very structure. Their mere presence challenges Guatemala's scholastic literary canon, both in theme and in form. couplets 3, 8, 9, and 10 are folkloric phenomena that offer accepted critiques. Couplet 13 and the *corrido* are clearly rebellious elements of resistance (43). To all of this is added their significant historical value. In addition to entertaining, wooing, and expressing the deepest sentiments of their class, this poetry also denounces and accuses, serving as a literary reflection of objective reality.

## Folkloric Lyric Poetry

### The couplets

The couplets is one of the most widely spread lyric poetry genres in Spanish-speaking countries. On this subject, Manuel F. Zárate observes that no other vehicle has been as vital for the people to express their woes and emotions as lyric poetry. Similarly, Samuel Feijóo points out that through the couplet, the poet sings very freely, unbound by any ambition other than to please and to

connect. Paulo de Carvalho-Neto and Alfonso Carrizo, in turn, have highlighted its significance in Ecuador and Argentina, respectively (44).

Thanks to its versatility and structure, the couplet reflects the social context from which it emerges. In the voices of folk poets, couplets give rise to love, landscapes, celebrations, tears, satire, and death. Every emotion fits within its short four lines of eight syllables each.

Of true Hispanic lineage, the origin of the couplet is, according to Francisco Rodríguez Marín, “quite obscure.” Nevertheless, its earliest expressions appear in the latter half of the 16th century (45). And though it was born and roamed the roads of Spain for a time, it was brought to the New World by the colonizers. Here it grew and transformed. As Samuel Feijóo aptly notes, the couplet “traveled across the Americas through taverns and village fairs, market stalls and little theaters, in the form of songs with diverse tones, becoming more and more independent (from the Spanish form)” (46). Alongside the ten-line stanza, the couplet is sung and recited following a fixed metric, rhyme, and structure (47).)

The following are couplets collected in eastern Guatemala (48). All of them are framed within the scheme of the American couplet of Hispanic roots.

**Love couplets**

**Conquest**

**1**

*Pretty one, your lips are gold,*
*your wings of crystal shine,*
*yell me how your love unfolds,*
*Is it sold or underlined?*

**2**

*Yesterday I passed your door,*
*you threw a lemon down.*
*it hit the ground, but juice, for sure,*
*landed in my heart to drown.*

**3**

*Saint Peter had a girlfriend,*
*Saint John stole her away;*
*if saints do such things,*
*Why shouldn’t I someday?*

**4**

*I’m a chili, full of fire,*
*a crowned plum, proud and bright;*
*I heal the heart’s desire,*
*When love brings sleepless night.*

**Disdain**

**5**

*Why love in endless spins,*
*mad and turning like a wheel?*
*You die for her, yet she begins,*
*to love someone else for real.*

**Ingratitude**

**6**

*Ungrateful like a palm tree,*
*false like flattery’s tone*
*You could’ve just told me,*
*"I don’t love you, leave me alone."*

*A Guastatoya I must go,*
*But soon I will return,*
*To stop the one who hurt me so,*
*with love I didn't earn.*

**Self-Interest**

**8**

*Women these days are plastic-made,*
*all shiny, fake, and thin,*
*they stretch and pose the married way,*
*as soon as husbands come in.*

**Lascivious**

**9a**

*Of all the beasts I'd like to be,*
*a mosquito's what I'd choose,*
*to sneak a little bite on thee,*
*in* spots you never'd lose.

**9b**

*If I could pick from every beast,*
*I'd be a sly young deer,*
*to nudge my antlers, to say the least,*
*where nature makes things clear.*

## Couplets of various themes

**Mischief**

**10**

*At Madrevieja's crossing place,*
*It's best to catch a ride for school teachers in warm embrace,*
*with loaders by their side.*

**Death / Muerte**

**11**

*Death sat one day upon the beans,*
*crunching stale tortilla flat —*
*Trying hard by any means,*
*to gain a little fat.*

**The Devil / Diablo**

**12**

*Four long years the devil strolled,*
*through Jerez and Mita wide,*
*and all he learned to say, truth told,*
*was booze, tobacco, bride.*

**Racial satire**

**13**

*Behind my ranch, a coal sack sways,*
*where I hang my underwear —*
*For you, black rascal, just in case,*
*to find it hanging there.*

**Animals**

**14**

*Look at that ugly hen*
*to lay a single egg,*
*she cackles and cackles*
*like it's something big.*

**Ten-line stanza**

In Guatemala, no researcher before the author had documented the existence of ten-line stanzas within the country's poetic folklore. These first findings confirm their presence in both rural and urban areas (50). Their discovery is not only significant for Guatemalan folklore but also enriches the broader landscape of Hispanic American popular poetry.

To summarize its history, the ten-line stanza, also known as the *espinela*—has scholarly origins. Created by the poet

Vicente Espinel (1550–1626), it was immediately embraced by learned poets of the Spanish Baroque, such as Luis de Góngora, Saint John of the Cross, and Saint Teresa of Ávila. Through a long process of folklorization, the ten-line stanza became part of the cultural heritage of the lower classes and spread widely not only in Spain but also across many Latin American countries (51).

The folkloric ten-line stanza has a fixed structure, defined as a system of four *tenths* that develop the theme of a preceding *redondilla* (or couplet), which they expand upon (*glosan*). In Guatemala, this structure has been found in the eastern and southern coastal regions, from which the following examples are drawn.

In our country, popular poets refer to ten-line stanzas as "short ten-line verses" when recited. When sung, they are called *tonadas*.

They are performed in cantinas and taverns, as well as at social gatherings, and are a favorite material for popular troubadours giving serenades, which explains the common focus on themes of love.

**Text 1** was recited without any musical accompaniment by the poet Juan González in the department of Zacapa. **Text 2** was a loose sheet purchased at the market in the city of Escuintla. Though not explicitly stated, it is evident that both are meant to be sung.

The ten-line stanzas collected so far refer to secular themes. It appears that religious themes (God and the saints) have disappeared from oral tradition and have been absorbed into *literatura de cordel* (chapbook literature), (52).

**DO YOU REMEMBER, DEAR GIRL, THAT TIME (53)**

*Do you remember, sweet girl,*
*the time when you adored me?*
*Do you recall that you swore*
*to love me for all your life?*
*Don't think I left with delight,*
*or joy in my heart, believe me*
*I trusted your solemn vow*
*as it passed through your sweet lips.*
*I know well that you loved me*
*Do you remember that time?*

*Do you remember those years*
*when you were still just a bud,*
*and a little bird would come*
*to sip honey from your lips?*
*I am the same nightingale*
*you once waited for with love.*
*If perhaps you have forgotten,*
*I am here now, full of feeling,*
*to recall those olden days*
*when your love you freely gave.*

*I was the one who first lit*
*the flame of that love you felt.*
*Remember how you once loved me*
*with the fullness of your*

*soul.*
*I have borne, with patient calm,*
*the silence that you imposed,*
*for you swore that your own love*
*was no false or fleeting thing.*
*Don't forget your sacred pledge—*
*Do you recall what you did?*

*I am that pinewood torch*
*that first set the hearth on fire.*
*The kindling may have burned out,*
*but the embers still remain.*
*And if a cloudy time comes,*
*casting doubt in your clear mind,*
*remember that sweetest joy*
*that once dazzled all your thoughts,*
*and the kiss that sealed your vow—*
*Do you recall how it shined?*

## Narrative or Epic-Lyric Poetry

### The Romance

It is perhaps the most studied poetic form among Spanish speaking peoples. Ramón Menéndez Pidal defines the *romance* as "short epic-lyric poems sung to the sound of an instrument, either in choral dances, or in gatherings for recreation or shared work" (54). Although not originally from Spain, the *romance* took on very particular characteristics on the Iberian Peninsula, quite different from the narrative songs that emerged in other European countries.

The oldest romances, according to Menéndez Pidal, date back to the 15th century and some even to the 14th. They are therefore directly linked to medieval heroic poetry, a genre of great aristocratic prestige, which narrates historical events. That is why the *romance* is considered "the epic-lyrical song that most enlivens the imagination of peoples across both the northern and southern hemispheres" (55).

The *romance* crossed from Spain to the Americas with the conquistadors and ceased to be Spanish through the process of folklorization. "It adapted to local customs, absorbed regionalisms of both content and form, and ultimately became a true cultural asset of the people who adopted it as their own, forgetting its ancient European lineage" (56).

In Guatemala, the *romance* has been studied and documented in considerable detail (57).

This selection, therefore, is limited to presenting a few new romances not previously recorded in the collections of Carlos Navarrete.

## NEW GUATEMALAN ROMANCES (58)

### 1

### The Newlywed

- *I am the newlywed bride,*
  *and no one shall know my joy.*
  *My husband has*

*abandoned me,*
*choosing freedom*
*over love.*

- *Kind sir, have you by chance*
  *laid eyes on my dear husband?*
- *Madam, give me a sign*
  *perhaps I'll recognize him.*
- *My husband is well-groomed,*
  *he has a Frenchman's bearing,*
  *and stitched into his sleeve cuff*
  *is the name 'Isabel.'*
- *From the clue you have given,*
  *your husband is surely dead.*
  *A traitorous Frenchman killed him*
  *at the doorstep of an inn.*
- *Now I dress in mourning black,*
  *I give up my browns and grays,*
  *and I glance into a mirror*
  *what a lovely widow I make!*

**2**

**Count niño**

*Count Niño rose that morning*
*on the feast day of Saint John,*
*to give his horse some water*
*at the edge of the Pululá.*
*And sitting on a stone,*

*"While my horse drinks,"*
*he said,*
*"I'll sing a little song,"*
*and to the girl he called ahead:*

*"Come here, my darling beauty,*
*and hear the sirens' song from Pululá."*
*"But those are not sirens,*
*nor is it their singing,"*
*said she,*
*"that is Count Niño,*
*who has come here to find me."*

*"Well, if that is Count Niño,*
*then we shall have him slain."*
*"If they kill my Count Niño,*
*then I shall not remain*
*we must be buried together,*
*one at the churchyard gate,*
*the other before the altar*
*to seal our sorrowful fate."*

***The Spotted Bull***

*Bring me out that spotted bull,*
*son of the dusky cow,*
*I want to test my luck with him*
*in front of my lady now.*
*And if this bull should kill me,*
*don't bury me in sacred ground*
*bury me in open pasture*
*where cattle roam all around.*
*And on my grave, place a marker,*
*painted red with heavy tone,*
*so when a passerby reads it*
*they'll know I died alone.*
*I didn't die of fever,*
*nor from a side ache's blow;*

*I died from the mighty goring*
*that the painted bull bestowed.*

**Short romance ballad**

These can be identified as the kinds of *romances* children sing during their games and play circles. In Guatemala, they are very numerous in the world of childhood (59).

Here are two short romance ballads(60), of which *Hilitos de Oro* is documented here for the first time. While *Señor Don Gato* had already been collected by Navarrete in Guatemala, the three versions presented here

confirm once again its relevance as shared cultural heritage.

### *Hilitos de oro*

*Golden, golden little thread,*
*my sorrows come and go,*
*and as they pass me by,*
*the Moorish king wants to know*
*how many daughters I have in tow.*

*Whether I have them or not*
*is no business of the king;*
*of the bread I eat, they'll eat,*
*of the wine I drink, they'll drink.*

*Now I leave, quite offended,*
*headed for the royal court.*
*Come back, come back, good sir,*
*don't be rude or fall short.*
*Of all the daughters I have,*
*choose whichever one you adore.*

*This one smells of violets*
*She can fetch my sandal near.*
*This one smells of jasmine*
*She can darn my sock, my dear.*

### Señor don gato

*Sir Don Cat was seated*
*on his golden chair with pride,*
*when he saw Miss Lady Cat*
*walking by with a noble stride.*

*To kiss her he leapt down*
*but fell from off the roof*
*he broke ten of his ribs*
*and one arm hung quite loose.*

*Now poor Sir Don Cat is dead,*
*and they carry him to rest,*
*between four hungry buzzards*
*and a mouse in priestly vest.*

Finally, regarding both the romance and *short* romance ballads, it is worth emphasizing that in eastern Guatemala and the southern coast, these poetic forms are still very much alive. The people know them as *corridos* or *long verses*, and they are either sung or chanted, often with guitar accompaniment. They are recited, written down (as with the version of *Señor Don Gato* reproduced above), and passed on through loose-leaf prints sold in churchyards and markets.

### Corrido

Directly derived from the *romance* form, the *corrido* is another genre of narrative folk poetry with deep roots throughout the Americas. It is a lively form of popular singing, with upbeat rhythms, that recounts events, love affairs, feats, and topics of contemporary relevance (61).

The *corrido* strongly reflects the subversive elements voiced by the lower classes, since its literary core lies in contemporary events: injustice, repression, and violence are some of the common themes found in Guatemalan *corridos* throughout the country's history, beginning with the Spanish conquest (62).

The historical *corrido* reproduced in this

collection, with clearly popular roots, challenges and criticizes Guatemalan society during the years 1865–1870. (63) The mere existence of this document speaks to the deep roots of this poetic form in Guatemala. Its content also makes it a valuable source for studying the modern and contemporary history of our country.

## The Popular Singers

The poetry described above is brought to life and continually renewed by *cantores* (folk singers) and popular poets who travel through markets, festivals, and wakes, singing and telling stories. They combine their daily toil and labor with their artistic expression.

These poets' true folk troubadours sing accompanied by guitar in the eastern region of the country. They learn and transmit their poetic knowledge orally, though some singers, when their education allows it, carefully preserve their poetry in notebooks or learn it by reading loose-leaf sheets they occasionally buy at markets.

In eastern Guatemala, the *popular poet* is highly appreciated. Young people seek them out for serenades, adults invite them for the last night of a *novena* (a nine-day prayer), and the sons of Bacchus (the drunkards) call on them in cantinas. In short, they accompany the people in their labor, their joy, and their sorrow.

Finally, it is worth noting that all the examples presented here are products of the literary genius of these popular troubadours. Their lives and the importance of their art call for deeper research.

Sir Don Cat was sitting
on a golden chair so grand,
he wore silk stockings
and fine shoes from a distant land.

His compadre came and asked him
if he'd like to take a wife
a Moorish cat up on the roof
was prancing full of life.

The cat, eager to see her,
fell right off the edge with might
he broke three of his ribs
and one arm bent out of sight.

Come quickly, bring the doctor!
Surgeons, bleed him now!
Sir Don Pedro ordered
they kill a hen somehow,
to cook him up a rich broth
first thing the next day.

But when dawn arrived again,
Don Cat had passed away.
The mice, so full of cheer,
dressed in red to dance and play.

Written by José Rolando Morales

## THE WOMAN I WANT

(To be sung to the rhythm of a *son*)

If one wishes to sing, let it be to the music's tone.

I can't find a woman I like
I'm not looking for a

beauty,
but one who's kind and steady,
without a yappy little dog.

I've traveled the world entire [with strict and careful intent] [in search of a woman, meant]
to settle down and inspire.
I've searched with such desire though not with my parents' blessing, without my mother's expressing approval of love's little tryst. [But out of all I've kissed,] [no woman have I liked.]

I don't look for one with money, nor a lady of the mill, [nor someone with a store or till] or who owns a yard so sunny.
I want a poor girl, honey one who's wise and good at heart. She can be native, not high-class smart, but gracious with dignity shown; [if she suits me alone,] [I don't care if she's not pretty.]

I want her to be faithful [in loving and in care,] a woman strong and fair with a temper calm and graceful. She must be sweet and tasteful, not a gossip, nor unstable modest, kind, and capable, a woman who's virtuous in all. Not a beauty in the hall, but rather passably lovable.

A woman without equal [is what I ask from God,] [and I will treat her well,] according to the role I'm given. There'll be no cause for offense [not to her or her family dear,] [and I will always make clear] [that I'll keep searching with sense,]
[for one without a defense] like a barking little mutt near.

**References**


1. Merle Simmons indica en su bibliografía de la poesía tradicional americana que Guatemala "*has produced no important investigations in the field of popular poetry and song*".
   Merle E. Simmons, *A Bibliography of the Romance and Related Forms in Spanish America*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1963, p. 195.
   Algunas muestras de poesía han aportado autores como Adrián Recinos, "Algunas observaciones sobre el Folklore de Guatemala", *Journal of American Folklore*, Vol. 29, 1916, pp. 559–566; Carlos Navarrete, "Notas para un estudio del corrido en Guatemala", *Tlatoani*, Nos. 8-9, 2a época, 1954, pp. 19–23; Ana Consuelo Vivar Rosales, *Folklore Infantil de Guatemala*, Guatemala: Facultad de Humanidades, Universidad de San Carlos de Guatemala, 1973; y J. Gonzalo Mejía Ruiz, "Aportes para el estudio de la poesía popular de Guatemala", *Tradiciones de Guatemala*, No. 3, 1975, pp. 101–104.
2. Carlos Navarrete, "El Romance y el corrido en Guatemala", *Universidad de San Carlos de Guatemala*, No. LIX, Guatemala, enero–abril 1963, pp. 181–254.
3. Celso A. Lara F., "Cuentos y cuenteros populares de Guatemala", en *La Tradición Popular*, No. 11, 1977, pp. 2–19.
4. La recopilación de esta muestra de poesía popular se debe al autor y a José Ernesto Monzón, investigador del Programa Específico de Investigaciones de la Rectoría de la Universidad de San Carlos de Guatemala, asignado al Centro de Estudios Folklóricos.
5. En los archivos del área de etnomusicología, el material se codifica como GUA-16 al GUA-24, GUA-62 y GUA-63. En los archivos del área de literatura oral: LIOV-Fon. 475 al 482, LIOV-Fon. 645, 652 y 653, LIOV-Fon. 687 al 696 y LIOV-Fon. 701.
6. Cfr. K. Marx y F. Engels, *La Ideología Alemana*. Montevideo: Ediciones Pueblos Unidos, 1968, pp. 50–52; y Antonina Kloskowska, "El concepto de cultura en Carlos Marx", en *Cultura, Ideología y Sociedad*, La Habana: Editorial Arte y Literatura, 1975, pp. 15–41.
7. Vladimir Ilich Lenin, "Notas críticas sobre la cuestión nacional", en *La literatura y el arte*, La Habana: Instituto Cubano del Libro, 1974, pp. 99–112.
8. Cfr. Antonio Gramsci, "Observaciones sobre folklore", en *Literatura y Vida Nacional*, México: Juan Pablos Editor, 1976, pp. 239–245; y L. M. Lombardi Satriani, *Apropiación y destrucción de la cultura de las clases subalternas*, México: Editorial Nueva Imagen, 1978, pp. 39–51.
9. Lombardi Satriani, *op. cit.*, 1978, p. 13.
10. Para mayor amplitud en relación a los diferentes niveles de impugnación del folklore, véase L. M. Lombardi Satriani, *Antropología Cultural*, Buenos Aires: Editorial Galerna, 1975, pp. 129–178.
11. Cfr. *Ibid.*, pp. 129–130.

12. Claros ejemplos los constituyen los corridos presentados por Carlos Navarrete sobre la Revolución de Octubre de 1944 (*Cfr. Navarrete, op. cit.*, 1963, pp. 218–223); los corridos recogidos por el autor del presente ensayo sobre la masacre de Panzós el 29 de mayo de 1978; los corridos y canciones populares dedicados al padre Rutilio Grande, asesinado en El Salvador en 1978, recogidos por el Departamento de Letras de la Universidad "José Simeón Cañas" de El Salvador; y las loas y desafíos con valor impugnador recogidos por J. Gonzalo Mejía Ruiz, docente de la Universidad de San Carlos de Guatemala. Para la medicina popular, cfr. Saúl Enrique Hernández Barillas, *Aspectos socio-culturales en el manejo del embarazo por comadronas empíricas*, Guatemala: Universidad de San Carlos de Guatemala, Facultad de Ciencias Médicas, 1979.
13. Lombardi Satriani, *op. cit.*, 1975, p. 158.
14. Ibid, p. 129.
15. Popular literature is understood to be all artistic folkloric phenomena through which the working classes transform their miserable socioeconomic conditions into literary and artistic reality. It should be conceived as manifestations of oral culture. Due to their high philosophical, aesthetic, lyrical, dramatic, and spiritual value, they can be considered traditional expressions of high artistic quality. Four genres make up literary folklore: literary folklore in verse, literary folklore in prose, folk theater, and paramyological expressions.
16. Antonio Gramsci, *op. cit.*, p. 245.
17. Joaquín Díaz, *Palabras en la canción folklórica*, Madrid: Taurus Ediciones, 1971, pp. 23–24.
18. Lombardi Satriani, *op. cit.*, 1978, p. 122.
19. *Ibid.*, p. 123.
20. Bruno C. Jacovella, "Las especies literarias en verso", en *Folklore Argentino*, Buenos Aires: Editorial Nova, 1959, p. 119.
21. *Ibid., p.123.*
22. Arthur Palmer Hudson, "La poesía folklórica", en *Folklore Americas*, Vol. X, Nos. 1–2, Florida, junio–diciembre, 1950, p. 4.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 6.
24. *Ibid.*
25. These rules are, in brief, the following: a) Adherence to the meters of minor art and to stanzaic regularity. Of more than eight syllables. b) A rhyme is carefully observed: consonance or assonance; therefore, and as a result of the above, the number of poetic forms is quite limited. The author emphasizes that "everything new is included within the received paradigms and assimilated to the closest traditional pattern." Bruno Jacovella, op. cit., pp. 113-116, and Cf. Palmer Hudson, op. cit., pp. 16-19.
26. The best and most important attempts are those of Bruno C. Jacovella, op. cit., pp. 124-131; the accurate classification criteria of Olga Fernández Latour de Botas (See Folklore y poesía argentina. Buenos Aires: Editorial Guadalupe, 1969, pp. 40-52); and the typological classification proposed by Paulo de Carvalho-Neto (See Folklore poético.

Quito, Editorial Universitaria, 1966, pp. 151-153). The other classifications are based on the three genres of academic poetry, namely: lyric, epic, and dramatic.

27. Bruno C. Jacovella, *op. cit.*, pp. 122–129.
    Sobre los conceptos de poesía lírica y poesía narrativa o épico-lírica, véase Paulo de Carvalho-Neto, *op. cit.*, pp. 33 y 41.
28. For further information on this point, see Giuseppe Cocchiara, *Storia del folklore in Europa*, Torino: Editore Boringhieri, 1971, pp. 115–135 y 245–250.
29. Cfr. Lombardi Satriani, *op. cit.*, 1975, pp. 171–178; y Margit Frenk Alatorre, *Entre folklore y literatura*, México: El Colegio de México, 1971, p. 517.
30. Roberto Díaz Castillo, “El folclor y la investigación folclórica: un problema ideológico”, en *Casa de las Américas*, Año XIX, No. 110, La Habana, septiembre–octubre, 1978, p. 20.
31. Antonio Gramsci, *op. cit.*, p. 245.
32. Karl Marx, *El Capital*, tomo I, México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1973, pp. 608–609 y p. 628.
33. See Manuel Alvar, *Antigua poesía española lírica y narrativa*. Mexico: Editorial Porrúa, 1974. Margit Frenk Alatorre also notes that Arab poets of the 11th and 12th centuries composed poetic forms in Arabic that ended with a small stanza in the Romance language, which was a copy or imitation of songs circulating in oral tradition. This type of poetry is called *muwassahas* (Frenk Alatorre, *op. cit.*, p. 6). Regarding the importance of the Mozarabic *jarchas*, see Manuel Alvar, *Poesía tradicional de los judíos españoles*. Mexico: Editorial Porrúa, 1971.
34. Margit Frenk Alatorre, *op. cit.*, p. 10.
35. *Ibid.*, pp. 10–13 and p. 21. Also see Ramón Menéndez Pidal, *Flor nueva de romances viejos*. Madrid: Espasa-Calpe, 1969, p. 34, and Manuel F. Zárate and Dora Pérez de Zárate, *La décima y la copla en Panamá*. Panama: Editorial La Estrella de Panamá, 1952, p. 14.
36. Manuel Alvar, *op. cit*. 1971.
37. Bruno C. Jacovella, *op. cit.*, p. 116.
38. Ramón Menéndez Pidal, *Los romances de América y otros estudios*. Madrid: Espasa Calpe, 1958, pp. 14–16. The author adds: "surely in the memory of each captain, each soldier, each merchant, there was something of the then immensely popular Spanish ballads" (*Ibid.*, p. 16).
39. On processes of folklorization, see Celso A. Lara F., *Contribución del folklore al estudio de la historia*. Guatemala: Centro de Estudios de Folklore, Universidad de San Carlos de Guatemala, Editorial Universitaria, 1977, pp. 45–50, and see also Lombardi Satriani, *op. cit.*, 1975, pp. 140–141.
40. The collected décimas have the following classification codes in the oral literature archive of the Centro de Estudios Folklóricos: LIOV-Fon. 475 to 482, and in the ethnomusicology archive: GUA-16 to GUA-23. For further detail, see *infra*.
41. Ricardo Estrada notes, in relation to the romance, that the *cuarteta* has no music. According to his informant, it is "just for speaking" (quoted in Carlos Navarrete, *op. cit.*, 1963, p. 184). Navarrete himself observes that in some regions of Guatemala romances are

recited like plain spoken pieces learned from elders, though in other parts of the country they are sung (*Ibid.*, p. 184).

42. For an understanding of the characteristics of eastern Guatemala, see Dirección General de Cartografía. *Diccionario geográfico de Guatemala*. Volumes I and II. Guatemala: Tipografía Nacional, 1961; Alfredo Guerra Borges, *Geografía económica de Guatemala*. Guatemala: Editorial Universitaria, 1969; and Antonio Erazo Fuentes, *Ensayo de regionalización de las modalidades de la información social guatemalteca*. Guatemala: Universidad de San Carlos de Guatemala, Faculty of Economic Sciences, 1978, especially pp. 35–38.
43. One of the most eloquent examples of rebellious protest housed at the Centro de Estudios Folklóricos is a set of *corridos* denouncing the massacre of peasants in the municipality of Panzós, Izabal, on May 29, 1978, carried out by the Guatemalan army. These were collected in the departments of Zacapa and Santa Rosa by researchers from the Center. Classification code: LIOV-Fon. 687 to 696.
44. See Manuel F. Zárate and Dora P. de Zárate, *op. cit.*; Paulo de Carvalho-Neto, *Cancionero general de coplas ecuatorianas*, in *Journal of Latin American Lore*, Vol. 1, No. 1, California, 1975, pp. 35–77; and Samuel Feijóo, "El cantar de Juan sin nada" in *Signos*, Havana, Year 6, No. 1, January–April, 1975, pp. 11–42. On the significance of the *copla* in Ecuador, see Paulo de Carvalho-Neto, *La imagen en las coplas del folklore ecuatoriano*, in *Estudios Filológicos*, No. 5, Valdivia, 1969, pp. 229–255, and *El folklore de las luchas sociales*. Mexico: Siglo XXI Editores, 1973, pp. 138–189.
45. For more information on the origin of the *copla*, see Antonio Sánchez Romalero, *El villancico*. Madrid: Editorial Gredos, 1969, pp. 315–381, and Samuel Feijóo, *op. cit.*, pp. 11–15.
46. Samuel Feijóo, *op. cit.*, p. 17.
47. The *copla* is a composition of four octosyllabic lines with assonant rhyme. For a more precise discussion of its metrics and structure, see Bruno C. Jacovella, *op. cit.*, p. 120.
48. The *coplas* in this sample were recorded in villages and hamlets in the departments of Zacapa, Chiquimula, El Progreso, Jalapa, and Jutiapa (in eastern Guatemala); in Escuintla and Suchitepéquez (on the southern coast); and in the department of Guatemala. Classification codes: LIOV-Fon. 482, 645, and 653.
49. The themes of these *coplas* are found throughout Latin America. This is demonstrated by the collections of Paulo de Carvalho-Neto for Ecuador, Vicente T. Mendoza for Mexico, Manuel and Dora Zárate for Panama, Luis Felipe Ramón y Rivera for Venezuela, and Alfonso Carrizo for Argentina, among others.
50. The *décimas* were collected in the departments of El Progreso, Jutiapa, Jalapa, and Santa Rosa. See *supra* note 40 for archive classification codes. It is reiterated that these archived *décimas* are the first to be recorded in Guatemala, thus holding considerable folkloric and historical value.
51. The dissemination of the *décima* throughout Latin America is significant. Consider, for instance, the collections of Vicente T. Mendoza for Mexico, Francisco and Dora P. de

Zárate for Panama, Luis Felipe Ramón y Rivera for Venezuela, Dirk Koorm and José Peñin for Colombia, and Samuel Feijóo for Cuba, among the most important compilations.

52. J. Gonzalo Mejía Ruíz, *op. cit.*, pp. 101–104.
53. For an analysis of the *décima*'s structure, see Manuel F. Zárate, *op. cit.* In Text 1, the redondilla or *copla* upon which the poet based his gloss is missing. That *copla* is as follows: *Do you remember, girl, that time / when you gave me your love? / Do you remember how you made / your solemn vow to me?* Much could be said in an analytical study. However, the most important point is that this Guatemalan *décima* has a variant in a Panamanian one (Manuel and Dora Zárate, *op. cit.*, p. 410). The differences in the Guatemalan version are purely formal, not structural. This influence is highly plausible since the entire *décima* tradition stems from a common root: the shared Hispanic heritage, which endures despite the passage of time. Each variation emerges according to the needs of its respective country. For a broader understanding of the *décima*, see Vicente T. Mendoza, *La décima en México*. Buenos Aires: Instituto Nacional de la Tradición, 1947, pp. 5–85, and *Glosas y décimas de México*. Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1957, pp. 7–36.
54. Ramón Menéndez Pidal, *op. cit.*, 1969, p. 9. The *romance* is one of the most thoroughly studied genres in the Americas. Consider the monumental collections by Ramón Menéndez Pidal (*op. cit.*, 1958), and those by Pilar Almoina de Carrera for Venezuela, Inés Dolz Henry for Chile, Raquel Barros and Manuel Dannemann also for Chile, Emilia Romero for Peru, and the excellent work of Carlos Navarrete and Clementina Díaz y de Ovando for Mexico.
55. Ramón Menéndez Pidal, *op. cit.*, 1969, p. 39.
56. Olga Fernández Latour de Botas, *op. cit.*, p. 53.
57. See Carlos Navarrete, *op. cit.*, 1963, pp. 185–198.
58. The traditional form of the *romance*, which is the format used in those presented here, is a string of sixteen octosyllabic verses with assonant rhyme, the same used in medieval *chansons de geste*. These *romances* have unique characteristics, which are omitted here due to space limitations.
59. See the excellent work of Ana Consuelo Vivar Rosales, *op. cit.*, where numerous *romancillos* appear within children's folklore.
60. The structure of these *romancillos* is very archaic, as they are composed in dialogue form. It is worth noting that both versions of *Señor Don Gato* are sung in the final stanza. Classification code: LIOV-Fon. 701.
61. For more information on the *corrido*, see Merle E. Simmons, *The Mexican Corrido*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1957; Vicente T. Mendoza, *El corrido mexicano*. Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1974; and Daniel Castañeda, *El corrido mexicano*. Mexico: Editorial Surco, 1943.
62. See the *corridos* presented by Carlos Navarrete, *op. cit.*, 1963, pp. 218–223, and those mentioned in note 43.

63. Manuscript donated to the author by Arturo Taracena Arreola. It belonged to the late Guatemalan bibliographer. The piece concerns the political events that unfolded in 1865 following the death of Rafael Carrera and the presidential succession of Vicente Cerna, whom the people mockingly referred to as *huevo santo*. The *corrido* ridicules the conservative regime and already hints at the liberalism that would come to Guatemala in 1871. For further information on this historical period, see the descriptively oriented work of Luis Beltranena Sinibaldi, *Fundación de la República de Guatemala*. Guatemala: Tipografía Nacional, 1971. For historical analysis, see J. C. Cambranes, *Desarrollo económico y social de Guatemala: 1868–85*. Guatemala: IIES, 1975.