

“Mam” and “Guepy”: Two Valley Zapotec poems

*Poetry and Spanish translation by Felipe H. Lopez
English translation and Introduction by Brook Danielle Lillehaugen*

ABSTRACT: This work consists of two poems written in San Lucas Quiaviní Zapotec, a Valley Zapotec language spoken in the state of Oaxaca, Mexico. The poems are presented with English and Spanish translations, notes about the poet and translator, explanation of the translation process, and culture information.

KEYWORDS: poetry, Zapotec, Oaxaca, indigenous language, translation, migration

The poetry presented here is written in San Lucas Quiaviní Zapotec, a Valley Zapotec language spoken in the state of Oaxaca, Mexico.¹ The poetry is the work of Zapotec writer and scholar Felipe H. Lopez, who migrated to the United States from Oaxaca at sixteen years old and now lives a life on both sides of the border. The content of his poetry reflects the experiences of an indigenous migrant. Questions of identity, connection, distance, and loss wind through the poetry, which relates the lives of indigenous migrants trilingually, in Zapotec, English, and Spanish—the languages of the Zapotec migrant community. The Spanish translations presented here are done by Lopez himself and the English translations are done by me in close consultation with Lopez. I work directly from the Zapotec in creating my translations. As Lopez is trilingual himself, I consult with him on the translations, both in the process and regarding the final product.

Readers may be familiar with Isthmus Zapotec poetry, such as that of Natalia Toledo (e.g. Toledo & Sullivan 2015), Irma Pineda (e.g. Pineda 2013), Víctor Terán (e.g. Terán & Shook 2015) and Víctor Cata (e.g. Cata 2010). The Zapotec language family is large and diverse, and belongs to the larger Otomanguean family. Isthmus Zapotec languages, while related to Valley Zapotec languages, are not mutually intelligible. They are distinct, related languages—like French and Spanish. The modern written literary culture in the Valley of Oaxaca is not as active as it is within the Isthmus of Oaxaca, with a handful of exceptions, including, but not limited to, poetry from a student collective in San Lucas Quiaviní (Chávez Peón et al. 2009), Chávez Santiago’s translation of Aesop’s Fables into Teotitlán del Valle Zapotec (Toledo 2015), and works by writer Gabriel Martínez, who won an award for his Valley Zapotec writing in Francisco Toledo’s *Premios CaSa de literatura en zapoteco* in 2016. Thus, the

poems presented here are an important contribution to the modern written literary movement in Valley Zapotec; they are, as far as we know, the first poems in a Valley Zapotec language published with translations in both Spanish and English.

The poet. At the age of 16, Lopez migrated to Los Angeles, California, speaking no English and little Spanish. By 2007 he had earned his Ph.D. in urban planning from UCLA. In 1992 he began collaborating with linguists on the documentation of his language and working on language valorization and preservation work. He is the co-author of a trilingual Zapotec-Spanish-English dictionary (Munro & Lopez et al. 1999). He has taught language classes on Valley Zapotec at the University of California, San Diego and at UCLA, using a textbook for which he is the co-author (Munro et al. 2006). His Zapotec short story *Liazza chaa* ‘I am going home’ was awarded the 2017 *Premios CaSa* prize for Zapotec literature. He is currently working on a book of Zapotec poetry.

The English translator. Lillehaugen is a linguist who specializes in Valley Zapotec. She has been learning from speakers of Zapotec languages since 1999. Her research profile includes technical grammatical description (e.g. Foreman & Lillehaugen 2017, Anderson & Lillehaugen 2016) as well as collaborative language documentation and revitalization projects (e.g. Lillehaugen 2016).

Cultural note regarding poem *Guepy*. *Guepy* means ‘bellybutton’ and can be used to refer to the umbilical cord (Lillehaugen et al. 2016) in San Lucas Quiaviní Zapotec. After a child is born, the umbilical cord is wrapped in a cloth and buried in the yard of the home where the child was born.

Mam - Grandmother - Abuela

Mam	Grandmother	Abuela
Gwaa ydo gucaldia— gutiyai, e? Ladizyi cha. Zicya. Xini gucalde guecya? "Chinezac Dyoz liu," naëb, blat laza.	I went to church to get blessed— had I died? I'm only going to the Other Side. I'll be back. Why did they bless my head? "God be with you," she said, and my heart was empty.	Fui a la iglesia a ser bendecido— ¿habré muerto? Solo voy al otro lado. Regresaré. ¿Por qué me llevan a bendecir? "Dios esté contigo," me dijo, vacío quedó mi corazón.

Guepy - Origin - Origen

Guepy	Origin	Origen
Cali bsanu xquepyu? Ricyi na lazhu. Ricy gyicyu. Xauzanu cabez liu! Lazhbuny queuty rcazdyiri liu, rseinyziu rcazri.	Where did you leave your umbilical cord? That is where your pueblo is. That is where you will return. That is where your parents wait for you! Away from there, they don't want you, they only want your labor.	¿Dónde dejaste tu ombligo? Allí es tu pueblo. Allí regresarás. ¡Allí te esperan tus padres! En tierras ajenas no te quieren, solo tu trabajo quieren.

E N D N O T E

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