

# Narrative Transculturation in *Legends of Guatemala*

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**Abstract** The notion of “narrative transculturation” is postulated by Angel Rama and it is widely used in the literary analysis. This article, through textual analysis methodologies, tries to approve the hypothesis that *Legends of Guatemala* meets all the phases of narrative transculturation indicated by Angel Rama: the language, the narrative structure and the worldview. In short, in the language, Asturias changes and recombines some words of the indigenous language, transforming them into Spanish. In the narrative structure, the use of enumeration, repetition and onomatopoeia is very frequent, which is also one of the characteristics of Mayan works. As for the worldview, Asturias talks about the Mayan-Quiche myth and its combination with the Catholic religion, creating a mythical-magical atmosphere. All these three phases show the miscegenation between two cultures. This style also has a long-lasting influence on Asturias’ works and makes him one of the precursors of the famous technique “magical realism.”

**Keywords** Miguel Angel Asturias; *Legends of Guatemala*; Narrative transculturation

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## Introduction

The notion of “transculturation” was postulated by the Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz in the year 1940, in his book *Cuban Counterpoint of tobacco and sugar*. This term describes what happens when a society is subject to another, the cultural elements are not lost but rather manage to preserve themselves and merge with the dominant ones through a gradual and dynamic process. In 1982, Angel Rama transferred it to the literary field and proposed his theory in *Narrative Transculturation in Latin America*.

This article focuses on the figure of Miguel Angel Asturias (1899-1974),

winner of the Nobel Prize, who is a Guatemalan writer, journalist and diplomat. *Legends of Guatemala*, his first book, laid out the foundation for his style in his future literary creations and occupied a fundamental place in Latin American literature.

Until now we can find a large amount of studies on his famous novels. However, it seems that his first book deserves more attention from researchers since many of the elements incorporated in *Men of Maize* can find their origins in *Legends*. Therefore, this article is intended to make a textual analysis of this book, testing the hypothesis that *Legends of Guatemala* meets all the phases of transculturation indicated by Angel Rama. According to him, the process of transculturation affects three main aspects of culture, which are “the language, the narrative structure and the worldview” (Rama 47).

### **Narrative Transculturation as a Concept to Identify Latin American Literature**

In relation to expressing the notion of transculturation, it is worth reproducing Malinowski’s quote:

To describe such a process, the Latin-rooted word of transculturation provides a term that does not contain the implication of a certain culture towards which the other has to tend, but rather a transition between two cultures, both active, both with contributions, and both cooperative to the advent of a new reality of civilization. (Malinowski XII)

According to Rama, the culture has a quality of “plasticity,” which means the ability to absorb foreign elements and incorporate novelties. This does not imply that one culture imposes itself on another, but after a selection process, itself chooses determinate elements to promote its tradition and, at the same time, invents innovative components that can contribute to its development. As Schmidt-Welle states,

Transculturation presupposes, then, historical processes of mutual influences and changes in both subjects, in both societies or cultural spheres that participate in this dialogue. It is distinguished by its dynamism that includes processes of cultural translation on both sides. (Schmidt-Welle 50)

From the time of the Conquest to the present time, the indigenous and Spanish cultures meet in several areas, which, specifically, according to Rama, belong to Indo-America which is characterized by “the Andes mountain range, temperate

and cold zones, strong indigenous composition, agriculture and mining, Hispanic domination and the Catholic religion” (Rama 69).

The two cultures (the Mayan and the Hispanic one) are intertwined, enabling them to coexist and achieve another culture, which is hybrid and mestizo. Intellectuals, who are always seeking an identity for the new nations, are using literature as a weapon to demonstrate their “independence, originality and representativeness” (Rama 17).

As mentioned above, according to Rama, in literary works, transculturation is reflected in three levels of culture: language, narrative structure and worldview. First of all, language has always been an important instrument to gain independence and originality. During Modernism, there were two main strands: the writers of the first one wrote according to the criteria of Spanish to incorporate their creations into the European market while those of the second strictly reproduced the local dialects.

It is clear that the second one succeeded with the appearance of the regionalism around the 1910s. In the works of that time, a mixture of the cultured language of Spanish and the use of local dialects was appreciated in order to provide credibility. However, sometimes it was so difficult to understand the lexicon for a reader who did not live in those areas portrayed that a glossary had to be included at the end.

As Antonio Candido points out in his essay “Literature and underdevelopment,” at that time, in society there was a pleasant awareness of backwardness: writers were very distant from the lower class, for which they not only could not, but also did not, want to approach their language.

With the passage of time, their heirs realized the cultural weakness and tried to change the style: a union was made between the narrator and the character, in order that they remained in the same linguistic framework. In regionalist literature, the character usually uses a language that represents the popular, the oral and the dialectal, while the narrator relates their tales in standard Spanish. The distance between these two languages is very evident.

However, in transculturation literature, the narrator tends to use the same language as the characters, putting himself on the same linguistic level. According to Angel Rama, the use of regional language constitutes a way of representing the originality:

In the case of writers from regionalism, placed in a trance of transculturation, the lexicon, prosody and morphosyntax of the regional language, appeared as the preferred field to prolong the concept of originality and representativeness, solving at the same time, unitarily, literary composition, as recommended by

the modernizing norm. (Rama 50)

Secondly, it's important to mention the narrative structure. When the twentieth century arrived, the influence of the Avant-garde was apparent. This movement nurtured the cosmopolitan narrative and within it, highlighted the fantastic aspect, which later became one of the main genres in literary creations and exerted a strong influence on Latin American literature. Faced with this situation, the regionalist writers resorted to the oral sources of popular narration and sought "a recovery of the structures of oral and popular narration" (Rama 52). This type of literature annulled the multiplication of narrative resources and reproduced the literal spoken discourse of its inhabitants.

For example, referring to Guimaraes Rosa's fiction, Rama also pointed out that the two aspects of language and narrative structuring can be united as one:

At these two levels, the literary operation is the same: starting from a popular language and narrative system, deeply rooted in Sartaneja's life, which is intensified with a systematic investigation that explains the recollection of numerous lexical archaisms and the discovery of the varied points of view with which the narrator elaborates the interpretive text of a reality. (Rama 54)

In conclusion, this response, given by regionalism, offers the possibility that the external and internal cultures meet and mix, generating a new form of narrative structuring.

The last level of transculturation is what is called "the worldview." In this process, the incorporation of myth in literary works stands out. The myth was taken up by the psychoanalysts of the twentieth century, including Sigmund Freud, Otto Rank, Carl Jung. According to Eliade:

Instead of treating, like his predecessors, myth in the usual sense of the term, [...] he has accepted it as it was understood in archaic societies, where myth designates, on the contrary, a "true story" and, what it is more valuable, because it is sacred, exemplary and significant. (Eliade 9)

In this context, influenced by French thought and surrealism, we can find master writers of this level such as Asturias, Carpentier and Rulfo. The first of them will be studied in this essay.

### **The Narrative Transculturation in *Legends of Guatemala***

In this section, we will apply the theory of narrative transculturation to *Legends of Guatemala*, knowing that these legends present us with a hybrid world between the indigenous and the western culture. Although the stories written by Asturias are based on the legends of the Maya-Quiche civilization, they also introduce cultural elements from the Hispanic Guatemala. This is due to two main reasons: on the one hand, his childhood offered him the opportunity to have direct contact with the indigenous people. On the other hand, later in Paris, he identified with his “ladino” condition and this made him look more deeply into that mestizo culture.

First of all, it is worth mentioning the letter of Paul Valery, translator of *Legends* into French:

What a mix this mixture of torrid nature, of confused botany, of indigenous magic, of theology of Salamanca, where the Volcano, the friars, the Poppy-Man, the Merchant of priceless jewels, the bands of Sunday Parakeets, the master magicians who go to the villages to teach the manufacture of fabrics and the value or Zero, make up the most delirious of dreams! (Asturias 9)<sup>1</sup>

From this quote it can be affirmed that in *Legends of Guatemala*, Asturias presented his transculturation ideology. The legends are already a hybrid literary product, since Asturias mixed narrative techniques from surrealism, whose French origin is indisputable, with the ancient popular legends of the Maya-Quiche civilization.

This character can be seen in the first story of the collection, entitled “Guatemala”:

The Cuckoo of Dreams makes us see a very large city -a clear thought that we all carry inside-. A hundred times bigger than this city of painted houses in the middle of the Rosca of San Blas. It is a city made up of buried cities, superimposed, like the floors of a tall house. Floor over floor. City on city. (Asturias 12-13)

These words describe that Guatemala City was built on the ancient civilization of the Mayans and therefore carries with it that heritage, which has become the basis for the formation of a mestizo society. It is a place where a hybrid space is generated between the past and the present, between the Mayan culture and the modern

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1 All the citations of *Legends of Guatemala* are my translation. The original text is in Spanish.

one. According to Mario Roberto Morales, “this palimpsest vision, of cultural hybridization, of cultural superimpositions, is basic to understand the hybrid nature of Asturias” mestizo subject” (Morales 233).

This legend, along with the second one, entitled “Now that I remember,” serves as an introduction to the entire series. Therefore, analyzing it from the perspective of transculturation, in this work, although there are also clashes between two cultures, emphasis is placed on the results of the coexistence of the white and the indigenous: the hybridity of the Guatemalan culture.

The story offers us a narrator, “El cuco de los sueños (The cuckoo of dreams),” who is the one who “is spinning the stories.” According to Barahona, “the Cuco, as agent, unfolds the dreams and unconscious of a collective memory, an encompassing effort that requires serious consideration pertaining to the aftermath of colonialism” (Barahona 28).

In the first legend, the author begins with the presentation of Guatemala. This city has a magical characteristic, since different characters from traditional legends can be found:

The tattoo girl rounds by Casa-Mata. The Sombreron walks through portals from one end to the other; it’s rubber Satan who jumps and rolls. And the Cadejo shows up on the meadows, stealing girls with long braids and making knots in the manes of horses. (Asturias 12)

Reading the stories that follow this introduction, it can be affirmed that these words refer to “The legend of the Tattoo Girl,” “The legend of the Sombreron” and “The legend of the Cadejo.” In these stories, Asturias combines the religious characters of the colonial era and the legends of oral tradition, creating a new explanation of these magical figures, full of imagination and fantasy.

Later, the memory of the past begins with the mention of the great Mayan Capitals such as the city of Quiriguá, Tikal, Palenque and Copán. Likewise, the narrator also named the mythological places: Xibalbá, Tulán, Iximché and Atitlán. Following the footsteps of the cuckoo, we arrive at the first cities founded by the Spanish conquerors. Through these descriptions, it can be concluded that in Guatemala there is a combination of history, indigenous myth and Hispanic culture, which makes this country a perfect place for fusion and miscegenation.

According to Arango, “the poetic essence of Guatemala rises, through the *Legends*, to the highest category of art in a process of interiorization that is the first step towards a deeper awareness of the country’s problems” (Arango 476).

After the presentation, we enter the second tale, “Now that I remember.” The narrator of this legend is called “Cuero de oro (Leather of gold),” he tells his experience to two sorcerers who are afflicted with a goiter, Don Chepe and Niña Tina, in order to gain their trust so that they can tell him about the legends of Guatemala, spun by the cuckoo of dreams.

If we say that the first introduction of this book is a presentation of the hybridity of Guatemala’s past and present, the second is the sacred story of a mythical character: Kukulcan. The story unfolds through the conversation between Leather of Gold and the two men with a goiter.

The first time the two sorcerers speak is when they shout “¡Titilganabáh! ¡Titilganabáh!” This word, as Asturias himself explains in the Appendix, is an arbitrary spelling of three words Titil, Gana and Abah, which means “shaving for the leaders” (Arias 623). This is when the two sorcerers discover that Leather of Gold is actually the transformation of Kukulcan, who is a Mayan deity, who has the shape of a feathered serpent and is called Quetzalcoatl in Nahuatl.

When they recognize their leader, they start to relate the legends of Guatemala. In the text it says: “but you need to remember that I have come here to hear legends about Guatemala and it doesn’t make sense to me that your Mercedes fall silent in one piece, as if the mice had eaten your tongues” (Asturias 27).

Arturo Arias, when analyzing the descriptions of these two men with goiters, reached the conclusion that they, although they had Mayan heritage, are “ladinos” (Arias 633). As narrators of the legends of Guatemala, they not only represent the Mayan-Quiche identity but also that of the mestizo. For this reason, it can be affirmed that this storytelling is the result of transculturation, since there was a reworking of the Spanish tradition and elements.

These narrators are representatives of a collective memory, who, through these legends of oral tradition, transmit to the readers the heritage of their culture and their own identity. In addition, in these legends, there is the presence of three aspects of transculturation that we already highlighted in the section of Rama’s proposal: language, narrative structure and worldview, which will be the main topic of the rest of this essay.

## **Language and Narrative structure**

### **Language**

As already indicated, according to Rama, one of the most important elements of transculturation is language. The one that is used by Miguel Angel Asturias presents two simultaneous characteristics: on the one hand, as a writer of the Avant-garde,

he seeks the renewal of language and verbal freedom; on the other hand, since he was the translator of ancient Mayan works, the Guatemalan was strongly influenced by these texts. In one of his essays, Martin Lienhard pointed out the following characteristics of the ancient Maya, which, without doubt, are all present in *Legends of Guatemala*:

As in other archaic cultures, the *prosody* of ancient Mayan texts is characterized by the *repetition* of words or entire phrases, parallelisms of all kinds and the importance of *enumerations* or *lists* of objects or beings of one or more classes.<sup>1</sup> (Lienhard 546)

According to Jexson Engelbrecht, there is still a debate about the use of language in *Legends*: “many critics, such as the aforementioned Lienhard, maintain that the language used by Asturias for the speech of the indigenous people was not adequate to represent that marginal community” (Engelbrecht 147).

However, others argue that the objective of Asturias does not lie in reproducing the local speech of the indigenous verbatim but rather in providing, through the incorporation of this syntax and the lexical types, an opportunity for readers to get to know the indigenous culture. It is a transculturated and heterogeneous literature, which implies an artificial construction and entails a degree of perversion of the original cultures. Regarding this point, it is worthwhile reproducing the quote of Morales:

The linguistic hybridizations, typical of the literate city, serve, then, to express -again, paradoxically- the oral village. And this is the way in which literate Latinity includes Mayan and indigenous otherness as a basic component of its identity: it appropriates itself in the best way it can do, and assumes it in the only way it knows how: through the creative appropriation of the hegemonic code of the West. (Morales 116)

The use of local dialects and languages is valid in this master book of Asturias. For example, the mentioned “Tilganabáh” in “Now that I remember” is a word from the local language of the indigenous people and does not make sense in the Spanish of today. In addition, Asturias used the spelling of “Cuculcán,” which, in the original text of the *Popol Vuh*, was “Kukulcán.” However, Asturias made it Hispanic because in this way it would be closer to the use of Castilian.

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1 The italics are in the original text.

### The Union Between Language and Structure

According to Angel Rama, the literary structure is closely linked to the language, which is clearly reflected in *Legends of Guatemala*. The language that Asturias used for *Legends* is closely related to oral tradition. In the beginning, Asturias wrote a dedication: “To my mother, who told me stories.” (Asturias 10), which reflected its character of oral tradition. Furthermore, according to the critic Giuseppe Bellini,

the book was structured through an initial oral narration: the author affirms that he was telling the legends to his friends in the meetings they held in Paris and that only at a later time did he give written form to the product of his fantasy. (Bellini 860)

When speaking of the character of this oral tradition, it is necessary to mention its possible connection with the work of Ricardo Palma, *Peruvian Traditions* (1883). Both books share an attention to forgotten legends and the recovery of popular literature that is passed down from generation to generation. The example is given by “Legend of the Cadejo,” which, according to Bellini, reminds him of “El alacrán de fray Gómez” from the Peruvian, especially the beginning part (Bellini 862).

However, the work of Asturias is no longer a mere Costumbrist description but highlights in it the incorporation of historical elements from the colonial past and the subsequent process of transculturation. They are rewritings of ancient legends, in which the fusion between past and present stands out.

The reiteration is one of the characters presented from the beginning of the *Popol Vuh*. In *Legends* this use is constant. For example, in “Legend of the Tattoo Girl,” Master Almendro divides his soul between four paths so that it goes to four extremities of the sky. Then the following question is repeated:

“How many moons did the roads spend on walking?  
How many moons did the roads spend on walking?” (Asturias 43)

One of the explanations of these reiterations would be that the narrator wants to highlight the long margin of time that the march of these four little pieces of the soul has lasted, since according to the *Popol Vuh* and the Mayan calendar, it is believed that a year has four hundred days and to calculate them, they use the moons they have seen. On the one hand, these repetitions are a way to manifest the narrative structure; on the other, the use of the moon is also a reflection of the Mayan culture. We will talk more about this element in the worldview part.

In “The Warlocks of the Spring Storm,” when describing the events, the narrator repeats several times the phrase “si sería parte de su sueño (if it were part of his dream)”:

Something happened. The trees almost fell from their hands. The roots do not know what passes through their fingers. If it were part of his dream. Sudden shaking accompanied by underground noises. And all hollow around the sea. If it were part of his dreams. And all deep around the sea.

[...]

Something happened. The trees almost fell from their hands. The roots do not know what passes through their fingers. And from the contraction of the roots in the tremor, the looms are born. If it were part of his dreams. (Asturias 124-125)

Comparing these two paragraphs, it is not difficult to realize that for the narration of these events, Asturias followed an almost fixed structure. The vacillation between reality and dream intensifies the effect of supernatural phenomena.

Likewise, reiterations are used to highlight myth and collective memory, especially in rituals. In order to exemplify this aspect, it is necessary to quote a paragraph in “Now that I remember”:

clutching one hand with another, I dance to the beat of the vowels of a cry A-e-i-o-u; A-e-i-o-u; And to the monotonous beat of the crickets.

A-e-i-o-u! Lighter! A-e-i-o-u! Lighter! There is nothing! There is no such thing as me, who is dancing on one foot! A-e-i-o-u! Lighter! U-o-i-e-a! More! Criiii-criiii! More! Let my right hand pull my left until I split in two -aeiou- to continue dancing -uoiea-split in half-aeiou-, but holding hands – Criiii... criiii! (Asturias 25)

There is no doubt that these transcriptions of the lyrics are meant to be read aloud, and through these onomatopoeias, Asturias outlined vividly the scene of the indigenous ritual. It is not difficult to discover that in this quote, what they are singing are Latin lyrics instead of a strict reproduction of the Mayan language. However, they are also mixed with some letters that have no meaning in Spanish. This fusion of languages is one of the best evidences of a transculturated society.

### **The Narration Structure**

It should be recognized that these stories do not follow the traditional structure of

the legends, since Asturias uses very few lines to narrate the plot and the rest are poetic descriptions of the landscape or custom.

In the legends, Asturias uses lyrical elements to describe nature, which manifests a primitive thought of the indigenous people. According to Gracia Morales Ortiz,

this happens because, for the “primitive” mentality, language has a magical significance: the Saussurean theory that links the signified and the signifier by means of an arbitrary convention would not be accepted; for them “the word” is, in some way, “reality.” (Morales Ortiz 109)

This excerpt is taken from “Legend of the flowery place” as an example:

The impetus and force with which the Volcano ripped through the clouds heralded a powerful army marching over the city. The crater is appreciated cleaner and cleaner. The twilight left on the rocks of the distant coast a little of something died without a rumble, like the white masses, a moment ago motionless and now prey to agitation in the collapse. (Asturias 59)

In this fragment, Asturias uses the metaphor to describe the arrival of the conquerors, which causes the volcano to announce the alarm through natural phenomena. This is related to the primitive thought, with its belief in natural forces, which we will develop in the next section.

If we maintain that in other legends miscegenation is found in thematic aspects, in “Legend of the flowery place” the description of indigenous elements through Spanish-style prose is remarkable. Here is an excerpt as an example:

It’s him! Don’t you see his blood-red chest and his arms green like vegetable blood? It’s tree blood and animal blood! It’s bird and tree! Don’t you see the light in all its nuances on his pigeon body? Don’t you see his long feathers on the tail? Green blood bird! Red blood tree! Kukul! It’s him! It’s him! It’s him! (Asturias 58)

According to Meneses, “the intermingling of phrases of totally Spanish origin, with onomatopoeias, the heat and Maya-Quiche vivacity, occurs very frequently within the same paragraph” (Meneses 37).

On the other hand, in *Legends of Guatemala*, the surreal and the oneiric elements converge in the images, sounds and songs of the rituals. The main text

vindicates this oral habit through the use of the description of the environment and onomatopoeia, which is one of the characteristics of the surrealist style. When talking about this aspect, many critics highlight the following paragraph (“Legend of the Volcano”), as the maximum representative of this oral style:

Ahead, a peal circled the spaces. The bells among the clouds repeated his name:

¡Nido!

¡Nido!

¡Nido!

¡Nido!

¡Nido!

¡Nido!

¡Nido! (Asturias 34)

The description by Asturias vividly presents us with the call that surrounds the trees, leaving lasting echoes. As René Prieto states, “this use of the apostrophe is a tool used by surrealists” (Prieto 826).

In addition, the aforementioned song “a-e-i-o-u” also shows us the sacrificial prayer of the indigenous people. These forms reflect the worldview of people, especially its unconscious part; for example, this quote mentions the lyrics that are sung along with the dance:

Hail, Beauties of the Day, Giant Masters, Spirits of Heaven, of earth, Givers of Yellow, Of Green, Givers of Daughters, of Sons, Turn to us, spread green and yellow, give life, existence to my children, to my offspring! May they be begotten, may your sustainers be born, your nourishers, may they invoke you on the road, on the path, on the edge of the rivers, in the ravines, under the trees, under the vines! Give them daughters, sons! Let there be no misfortune or misfortune! Let the lie not enter behind them, in front of them! (Asturias 23)

According to *Popol Vuh*, when the sun rises, Mayan people sing similar songs to ask the gods for descendants.

## **The Worldview**

### **The Use of Myth and Mayan-Quiche Beliefs**

As Jose Carlos Rovira Soler and Eva Valero Juan point out, myth is a content that

has been part of Latin American literature since the Colony:

The great myths, the canonical ones of the first indigenous textuality, and the smaller ones, in orality or folklore, were articulated very soon as a “culture of the vanquished” and were penetrated into a literary tradition, until they became one of the structures of the same, with timidity throughout the Colony, with audacious expansion from the 19th century and with almost aesthetic insolence from the 20th century. (Rovira Soler y Valero Juan 10)

The myth is an element of great importance to witness the narrative transculturation of Miguel Angel Asturias. As mentioned above, both in the process of “narrative structure” and that of “worldview” the presence of myth is found. This genre, transmitted orally from generation to generation, evidences the collective memory of the Maya-Quiche civilization. As Volek confirms, “the autochthonous myth realizes the tendency of modern narrative to interpret contemporary everyday life in terms of an underlying myth, because in these “primal” societies the mythical worldview is everyday reality” (Volek 20).

This is largely due to the tales told by his nanny. These legends, for Asturias, are a memory of his childhood and an element with which he expresses his love for his people. In addition, the myth used by Asturias is not a mere description of the past but a reworking of its history, mixing native and western elements. As Solares-Lavarre states:

instead of establishing itself as a primeval episode, the myth becomes plot and reconstruction, a history of rescue and renewal with which the Hispano-American culture participates in the artistic and ideological dialogue of the world. (Solares-Larrave 681)

The use of myth is a response that traditional Latin American culture gave to the strong influence of the technological process, using something autochthonous and original. In this way, taking advantage of cultural plasticity, the indigenous and the Hispanic cultures are united and then formed a new and hybrid literature. According to Francisco Solares-Larrave, the myth that Asturias incorporated into the legends can be called “critical myth,” since it is “a text full of images that combine elements of a rhetoric that could be called traditional, with objects that contain a semantic load associated with technological progress, the city and modernization” (677).

The collection begins with the mention of the mythological cities in

“Guatemala,” which reveal their link with its mysterious past. In these places, many scenes of the Maya-Quiche civilization can be seen, highlighting their customs and clothing. For example, in “Guatemala,” the belief about trees is presented:

there is a belief that trees breathe the breath of the people who inhabit the buried cities, and for that reason, legendary and familiar custom, in their shade are advised those who have to solve cases of conscience, lovers relieve their grief, the pilgrims lost on the road are oriented and receive inspiration from poets. (Asturias 12)

As mentioned above, the myth that Asturias incorporated comes largely from the *Popol Vuh*. Perhaps the most representative example is the mention of the nahual in “Legend of the Volcano,” which is a protective spirit, embodied in an animal, and it can be compared to the Guardian Angel of Catholics. All children will obtain a nahual to accompany them from birth. It is conceived as an alter ego of the person and their lives are linked.

For example, if something happens to your nahual, like getting sick or dying, the same person will also suffer. In this legend, when the companions of Nido see the portraits in the water, they are so afraid that they cannot talk anymore. The protagonist Nido uses this concept to calm them down:

They are our masks, behind which our faces are hidden! They are our doubles, with which we can dress up! They are our mother, our father, Mount on a Bird, which we kill to gain the land! Our nahual! Our native! (Asturias 31)

In addition, as Anabella Acevedo Leal points out, in “Legend of the Tattoo Girl,” there is an implicit mention of this belief: “the presence of Master Almendro could be understood as the protective spirit of the Tattoo Girl, that is, her nahual, in the indigenous tradition” (Leal 726). The Tattoo Girl is the slave who the Merchant buys with a piece of the Master’s soul and when she faces execution, the Master uses his magic to save her from death.

In relation to this story, it is also worth noting the use of the number three, which is very important according to the Mayan-Quiche myth: as for the genesis, as recorded in the *Popol Vuh*, the gods make three attempts to create the human beings. The first time they use mud but they fail with the arrival of the rain. The second time they change to wood and this time they are not able to create the being they want to because they do not have hearts or feelings so that they don’t know how

to thank and obey the gods. The last time is with grains of corn and in this way the first inhabitants of the earth are created. Also, according to Eric Thompson, in some cases god number three refers to the rain deity. In other cases, as this number has an aquatic connotation, it can also be that of the storm (Thompson 144, 277).

In “Legend of the Volcano,” when speaking of the first inhabitants of the Land of Trees (that of the Quiches), this number is mentioned: “six men populated the Land of Trees: the three who came in the wind and the three who came in the water, although only three were seen” (Asturias 29).

In the same story, respect and admiration for nature are also emphasized. As is well known, the Mayans consider corn to be a representative of natural and agricultural force. The quote that I present below expresses the thought of the first inhabitants, showing that they know how to appreciate the blessings of nature:

the three who came in the water, mitigated hunger without separating the good fruits from the bad, because the first men were given to understand that there is no evil fruit; all are blood of the earth, sweetened or soured, according to the tree that has it. (Asturias 30)

The force of nature has a protective power for the Mayan civilization, which is reflected in “Legend of the Tattoo Girl.” This legend shares its similarity with the Chimalmat version, which is a Quiche goddess. The Merchant refuses to make the deal with the Master because he wants to use the piece of the Master’s soul in exchange for the most beautiful slave. However, he never manages to “enjoy” her since he is thrown into the abyss by the roots of a tree. The power of nature here acts as a protector and executes the punishment for those who violate the norm.

Likewise, according to René Prieto, other details in this legend also reflect the Mayan belief: Master Almendro divides his soul into four paths (white, red, green and black). According to the *Popol Vuh*, these roads lead to Xibalbá. It is the underworld, a damp place with the power of reproduction and fertility, but at the same time, a horrible place of decay and disease. Therefore the Mayans fear and, at the same time, respect this place. Before you get there, there are these four paths that intersect. To attract travelers, they will be told that the black path is that of the king, that of the leader, as mentioned in “Now that I remember”:

Dancing like crazy I hit the black road where the shadow says: “The king is this way and whoever follows the king will be!” There I saw on my back the green road, on my right the red and on my left the white. Four roads intersect

before Xibalbá. (Asturias 25)

In “The warlocks of the spring storm” it is reiterated that one arm of Juan Poyé is missing, so that is why his action always passes to his “cristalino brazo de la cerbatana (crystalline arm of the blowpipe)” (Asturias 123). This reference can be related to a story from the *Popol Vuh*: that of the twin gods Hunahpú and Ixbalanqué, who decide to defeat the false god Vucub-Caquix and two of his children, which would be the prerequisite for the birth of the new human being and the new era.

In this legend, the weapon used by Hunahpú is the blowpipe and during the fight, it cuts off Vucub-Caquix’s arm. Based on this legend, it can be deduced that in this story, the character Juan Poyé refers to the twin gods at the time of genesis. He also loses an arm and always has to pass his action to his “crystalline blowpipe arm” and uses it to fight against the first natural phenomena such as flood and fire. At the end the first rains and navigable rivers are born.

In these stories, the conflict between life and death is frequently found, which is the central theme of the narration of the *Popol Vuh*. For example, in “Legend of the Volcano,” the eruption of the two volcanoes condemns many beings to death, including companions of the protagonist Nido. After that destruction comes the rise of a new town. Life and death form a circle, which makes the world eternal.

On the other hand, with “Legend of the Cadejo” and “Legend of the Sombreron,” the author presents us with the origin of these two mythical animals and it is very interesting that both have a close relationship to the clergy, that is, to the Christian religion.

The Cadejo is the transformation of the braid of Madre Elvira de San Francisco while the Sombreron is a rubber ball that seduces a monk. In these legends, Miguel Angel Asturias, taking the traditions of collective memory, is trying to make a discursive and aesthetic experiment without stopping to think about the manifestation of identity.

In his legends it is common to find the presence of magic and it is here where the mythical-magical aspect of the indigenous world is incorporated, since for them, dreams and myths present another type of reality. Regarding this point, it is worth quoting the words of Asturias himself:

It is a story that takes place on two planes: one of reality and the other unreal. But with the indigenous, when he speaks of the unreal, with so many details of his dream, of his hallucination, all these details converge to make the dream

and the hallucination more real than reality itself. That is to say that one cannot speak of this magical realism without thinking about the primitive mentality of the Indian, about his way of appreciating the things of nature and about his deep ancestral beliefs. (López Álvarez 167-168)

At the end of “Legend of the Flowery Place,” the formation of another volcano also implies a mythical scene, since according to Mayan belief, many natural phenomena, such as clouds, lightning, hail and earthquakes, are magical creations and some sorcerers have that ability to freely use that magic.

In short, through this language in which Spanish is mixed with Maya-Quiche aspects, in addition to showing the language identity, Asturias also introduced the mythical elements of this people, which constitutes another way of showing its uniqueness and yet more evidence of transculturation.

### **The Religion**

Another important element of the transculturation processes is religion. With the arrival of the conquerors and the priests, the Mayan beliefs underwent many changes. In the first part of the introduction, that is, in the aforementioned “Guatemala,” Asturias already presented this essential aspect. According to Alfred Fraser,

The greater part of Asturias’ attention, in his evocation of Colonial Guatemala, is given to a description of its religious facet, at a time when the former warrior-colonists spend more time in amorous exploits, and the missionary priests had already been able to establish churches and recruit followers. (Fraser 17)

What best exemplifies this aspect is the god Quetzalcoatl. This notion had been implanted since the arrival of the missionary Bernardino de Sahagún, who, in order to transplant Christianity in the Latin American continent, tried to recover the image of this god from the Mayan religion by assimilating it with the Christian god. As Arias affirms, “the notion of Quetzalcóatl inherited by Asturias, then, had already passed through a doubly deforming Christian sieve” (Arias 632).

As a result, the Mayan religion and Catholicism were integrated and a hybrid religion was formed. In *Legends*, a renewal of the myth can be seen through the incorporation of Catholic elements. As states Giuseppe Bellini:

Substrates of indigenous beliefs emerge in the truths of the new religion in an amalgam that is perpetuated over time in the form of renewed myth. Thus, in the legends of Cadejo, La Tattoo Girl, El Sombrerón, the diabolical presence is insinuated and a disturbing and hidden world is shaking everything. (Bellini 862)

The first legend that deserves to be studied is entitled “The Legend of the Volcano,” in which the rise of a new town is described. In front of six Quiche men, two volcanoes erupt and destroy everything. After that day that lasts many centuries, the protagonist feels “the desire to walk towards an unknown country” and then “sees a saint, a lily and a child” (Asturias 34). And it is the saint who orders Nido to build a new city.

Here we can see the conflict between two religions: Catholicism and the divinities of the ancient Mayan-Quiche culture. The volcanoes are named after gods in Quiche myth: Cabrakán (god of the earthquake) and Hurakan (the giant of the wind). The ancient civilization was destroyed by the forces of deified nature and these elements related to Catholicism mentioned above play the role of assistance to achieve rebirth. That desire to walk towards an unknown country can be understood as an insinuation of the emergence of a new world, which represents the miscegenation of the two cultures, since it has its roots in a Quiche man but also includes the beliefs of the saint. This story points us to the origins of Guatemala. This country, after the conquest, is like the new town of history that achieved a renaissance. It is a brand new country, highlighting its hybrid and mestizo character.

“Legend of the Cadejo” is another story that can testify to transculturation in the field of religion. This legend narrates the experience of Mother Elvira of San Francisco. As Asturias himself informs us in the note, she was one of “the four nuns who founded the convent of Santa Catalina in Guatemala around 1606” (Asturias 53). The incorporation of real characters makes the magical legends more believable. In addition, in a certain sense, it can be testified that these stories represent a collective memory of the country’s history.

In this legend, many Catholic elements are mentioned and described through a surreal tone:

the nuns—itinerant rose bushes—cut the roses for each other to adorn the altars of the Virgin, and from the roses sprang the month of May, a web of aromas in which Our Lady fell prisoner trembling like a fly of light. (Asturias 39)

According to Morales, here “surrealism is used to express Catholic veneration through a baroque style that recalls the Spanish literary tradition” (Morales 592).

After the metaphorical presentation of the life of the novice, the confrontation between two religions is exposed: on the one hand, Mother Elvira, representative of Catholicism and Western culture; on the other, the poppy-man, image of the Maya-Quiche world. The novice’s braid is a great seduction for the poppy-man and through magic, he makes her unable to move and presses her for the wedding. When she regains her consciousness, she immediately runs away and cuts her braid.

Finally, the union between the poppy-man and the demon braid gives rise to the legendary animal: the Cadejo. It can be considered that this mythological creature is one of the fruits of miscegenation, the result of the struggle between two religions.

The same thing happens in “Legend of the Sombreron.” The protagonist is a monk, who has a “religious zeal and holy fear of God” (Asturias 50). He is hooked by a rubber ball that knows how to sprout and he keeps playing with it all day until he forgets his sacred work. One day, a woman appears with a sad child because he has lost a ball, which they say is the transformation of the devil. For this reason, the monk resists his fascination with the ball, throws it far away and the latter falls outside the convent and transforms into the black hat on the boy’s head.

Being a story set in colonial times, this legend focuses on Christian aspects. The demon of Mayan origin has the power to attract the attention of the monk and the emergence of this legendary character takes place in the convent, where the Christian religion is institutionally practiced.

In the last legend, “Cuculcán,” many divine characters appear. Cuculcán himself, as mentioned above, is the most important deity in the Mayan religion. It has its equivalence with the Jesus Christ of Christianity. In addition, there are also other gods such as Yai, Chinchibrín, La Abuela de los Remiendos. They share a common origin: the Place of Abundance, which is the Edenic gardens of the Mayan genesis.

## **Conclusion**

In *Legends of Guatemala*, we approach the possibility of a literature in which the process of narrative transculturation is fulfilled at the three levels indicated by Rama. Elements of oral tradition were incorporated, highlighting onomatopoeia, repetition and parallelism. Surrealism and the Maya-Quiche mythology converge in images, sounds and songs, presenting another type of reality.

Asturias was the one who found another path in the avant-garde movement.

While other intellectuals try to incorporate European elements to seek a literary renovation, the Guatemalan takes advantage of popular literature and finds another solution to the problem of identity. He becomes the spokesman for a mestizo society, giving attention to the indigenous factors of the ancient Maya-Quiche culture, especially the adaptation of the myths from the *Popol Vuh*.

In this work, through the use of transculturation and different strategies, a certain overcoming of simple and superficial realism can be appreciated. Therefore, this work left a lasting influence on the later works of Asturias as well as on other authors of Spanish-American literature. The incorporation of the Mayan-Quiche culture and the surrealist style were also reflected in his most important work, *Men of Maize*.

As for the influence of Asturias on other writers working within the same lines, it is worth mentioning Carpentier, Arguedas and Rulfo. They are considered precursors of a style that in the sixties of the twentieth century would come to be known as “magical realism,” where we find figures such as Gabriel García Márquez.

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