

Mariachi: The Origin of the Word

Dr. William K. Ricketts

The origin of the word Mariachi has been the subject of a number of scholarly articles, as no consensus—scholarly or folk—currently exists regarding its etymology and provenance. Because the development of Mariachi music is very likely closely related to the derivation and development of the terminology that is associated with it, exploration of the latter is considered appropriate and indicated. For the purposes of this article, four of the positions adduced in the literature have been chosen for inclusion here and provide guidance for further discussion and exploration of this part of the Mariachi literature.

The Coca Indians

According to (Clark, 1996; Rafael, 1982; Sonnichsen, 1986), the term Mariachi is derived from the language of the Coca Indians, a pre-Columbian Mexican indigenous tribe. The Cocas originally inhabited an area of central *Jalisco*, but when Mexico became colonized by the Spaniards the Cocas migrated to a small valley surrounded by mountains. The Cocas named their new home “*Cocolan*,” and it has been suggested that the term Mariachi is associated with that region (Schmal, 2004).

According to Jáuregui (2008), Tapatío scholar José Ignacio Dávila Garibi was one of the first to suggest that the origin of the word Mariachi was to be found in the Coca language. However, Jáuregui (2008) writes, that despite more than a half-century of research, Dávila Garibi’s efforts did not find definitive documentation to support his hypothesis (p. 53).

Renowned linguist Ignació Guzmán Betancourt, provided a definitive response to Dávila Garibi’s theory. Guzmán Betancourt stated:

Investigaciones posteriores han revelado que los argumentitos empleados por este erudito filólogo para demostrar el origen Coca de la palabra [Mariachi] eran endebles y, en gran medida, artificiosos. Sus esfuerzos por rescatar los vestigios del idioma Coca, extinguido probablemente desde

finis del siglo XVI, fueron en suma notables y muy dignos de encomio, pero con escasos y aun dudoso resultados. Por consiguiente, el hecho de remitir con seguridad el origen de determinado vocablo [...] a una lengua escasamente conocida, constituye un acto de audacia, si no de deliberado afán por obtener cualquier género de resultados, siempre y cuando éstos cumplan determinadas finalidades previstas de antemano. (Guzmán Betancourt, 1992, p. 38; Jáuregui, 2008, p. 54)

Subsequent investigations have shown that the arguments used by this scholarly philologist to prove the Coca origin of the word [Mariachi] were weak and largely artificial. His efforts to uncover the remains of the Coca language, probably extinct since the late sixteenth century, were in short, notable and very commendable, but with minimal and even doubtful results. Therefore, the fact of referring with security to the origin of a given word [...] a little known language, is an act of audacity, if not a deliberate attempt to obtain any kind of results, provided that they meet certain goals planned in advance (author’s translation).

The Cora Indians

The Cora Indians are also mentioned in articles as another possible source for the etymon of the term “Mariachi” (Martinez-Avila, 1997, Schmal, 2004). Today numbering around 15,000 people, the Coras inhabit the areas of *Nayarit* and the northwestern border of *Jalisco* (Schmal, 2004). Martinez-Avila, (1997, p.3) suggests that the term “Mariachi” was used by the Cora Indians to refer to the type of wood used in the construction of early Mariachi musical instruments and the *tarima* or platform on which the dancers and musicians performed. It has also been recorded that in the language of the Coras, there are many words ending with *chi* (pronounced *chee*). One translation of the word “Mariachi”, when analyzed as the three-part *ma’ ría’ chi’* was rendered “[a certain] tree.” Mention is also made in the literature of an indigenous language

Mariachi: The Origin of the Word

posited as an alternative source for the term Mariachi. “Pinutl,” an extinct language utilized in northern Jalisco and Colima, is mentioned in the liner notes accompanying *The Earliest Mariachi Recordings 1908-1938, Volume 1*. The album notes are credited to “Philip Sonnichsen with help from Jon Clark, Hermes Rafael, & Hermes Nicolopulos” (Sonnichsen, 1986).

The Spanish Influence

Stanford (1972) uses the adage in Spanish, “*toda mujer es María*,” literally “every woman is Mary,” to offer an explanation of the origin of the word Mariachi (p. 73). He says that this Spanish expression can be interpreted in two ways: “Saint Mary (Virgin Mary) represents everything that is womanly” or “that every woman is Mary” (p. 73). Both interpretations have been used as possible sources for the origin of the term Mariachi. The first example is a quasi-religious explanation referring to the veneration of the Virgin Mary. The Spanish word *María*, for Mary, is affixed with the “*chi*” sound from the Cora Indian language, thus producing the word Mariachi (Martinez-Avila, 1997). This musical homage to the Virgin Mary is a reflection of the importance of religion in the lives of the indigenous population (p. 5). The second interpretation involves the Spanish phrase and centers on the idea “that every woman is Mary.” Stanford (1972) interprets this statement as a literal truth, suggesting that “*María de-* may be a preface to any woman’s name, as in *María de Antonia, María de Isabel*, et cetera” (p. 73). Stanford continues his reasoning by noting the text content of numerous Mexican songs referring to a woman named Mary. He surmises that this “singing of Mary” is so prevalent that the ensemble name Mariachi is derived from its widespread usage (p. 73). Stanford (1972) argues that “*María* plus the diminutive *-che/-pe* from the *Náhuatl* language of the Aztec tribes” is the origin of the word Mariachi (p. 73).

The French Connection

Yet another relatively standard hypothesis found in the Mariachi literature is that the term “Mariachi” is derived from the French word *mariage*, meaning marriage (Stanford, 1972; Toor, 1947). This tentative explanation has been challenged by a number of sources. Historian Edgar Gabaldón Márquez, in his book entitled *Historias Escogidas del Mariachi Francisco Yáñez Chico* (Translation: *Selected Stories of Mariachi Francisco Yáñez Chico*) (Gabaldón Márquez, 1981; Jáuregui, 2008), states:

Es bastante probable [...] que el mariachi, con ese nombre, y su variante de mariache [...] sea anterior a la época del atentado imperialista de don Luis Napoleón Le Petit (1808-1873) contra México, en 1863. (Gabaldón Márquez, 1981, p. 553; Jáuregui, 2008, p. 53). It is quite probable (...) that the mariachi, with this name and its variant mariache (...) (existed) prior to the time of the abortive imperialist attack by Louis Napoleon, the Younger (1808-1873) against Mexico in 1863. (author’s translation).

A second example that refutes the French etymology proposal is documented in a letter by a Catholic priest named Cosme Santa Anna. In this letter Cosme Santa Anna refers to the native music using the word Mariachi. Written in 1852 this letter predates the French occupation (1862 to 1866) in Mexico (Martinez-Avila, 1997). The letter from the priest is addressed to the archbishop and it expresses the priest’s concerns about what he feels is disorderly conduct on the part of the townsmen during the public celebrations on Holy Saturday. He writes:

Al acabarse los divinos oficios en mi Parroquia en el sábado de gloria encuentro que en la plaza y frente de la misma iglesia se hallen dos fandangos, una mesa de juego y hombres que a pie y a caballo andan gritando como furiosos en consecuencia del vino que beben y que aquello es ya un desorden muy lamentable: sé que esto es en todos los años en

Mariachi: The Origin of the Word

los días solemnísimos de la resurrección del Señor y solo que ya sabemos cuántos crímenes y excesos se cometen en estas diversiones, que generalmente se llaman por estos puntos mariachis ... Donde se hallaban los fandangos, pedí los instrumentos y me los dieron, supliqué a los que jugaban naipes que dejaran de hacerlo y se abstubieron y luego también rogué que se levantara del suelo a un infeliz que se hallaba tirado ahogado en vino, y lo levantaron. (Meyer, 1981, pp. 41-42; Jáuregui, 2007, p. 36)

At the end of the Divine Offices in my parish on Holy Saturday, I find that in the plaza and in front of the church itself there are two fandangos, a gambling table, and men who, on foot and on horseback, are yelling furiously as a consequence of the liquor they drink, and all that is a lamentable disturbance: I know that this occurs every year on the most solemn days of the resurrection of the Lord, and we already know how many crimes and excesses are committed in these entertainments, that are generally called in these parts mariachis ... [Then I went to the place of the fandangos], I asked for their instruments and they gave them to me, I asked the ones playing cards to stop and they did, and then I also begged them to lift up a poor fellow who was stretched out on the ground drowned in liquor, and they lifted him up. (Meyer, 1981, pp. 41-42; Sheehy, 2006, p. 15, translated by Sheehy; Jáuregui, 2007, p. 36)

This remarkable letter dated May 7, 1852 was contained in an article entitled "The Origins of the Mariachi," written by Jean Meyer and published in October, 1981 in the magazine *Vuelta* (Jáuregui, 2008).

References

- Clark, J. D. (1996). *The Latino encyclopedia, Mariachi*. Retrieved May 21, 2007, from http://www.sobrino.net/mer/entry_on_the_word_Mariachi.htm
- Gabaldón Márquez, E. (1981). *Historias escogidas del Mariachi Francisco Yáñez Chico* Selected studies of Mariachi Francisco Yanez Chico]. J. M. Castañón (Ed.), México.
- Guzmán Betancourt, I. (1992). *Mariachi: en busca del étimo perdido* [Mariachi: in search of the lost etymon] Estudios Jaliscienses, El Colegio de Jalisco, Guadalajara, 9: 36-52
- Jáuregui, J. (2007). *El Mariachi: símbolo musical de México* [The Mariachi: Musical Symbol of Mexico]. Mexico: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, Taurus.
- Jáuregui, J. (2008) *Immo pectore: Apostillas a "El Mariachi"* [Notes on "El Mariachi"] Istor: revista de historia internacional: Año, 9, Número, 34: 50-88. Retrieved February 15th, 2008, from www.istor.cide.edu/archivos/num_34/dossier3.pdf
- Martinez-Avila, C. (1997). *Marvelous Mariachi*. *Hispanic* 10 (11): 28-31.
- Meyer, J. (1981). *El origen del Mariachi* [The origin of Mariachi]. México: *Vuelta*, 59: 41-44. Retrieved February 18th, 2008, from <http://www.letraslibres.com>
- Rafael, H. (1982). *Origen e historia del Mariachi* [Origin and history of the Mariachi]. México: Editorial Katún.
- Schmal, J. P. (2004). *Sixteenth century indigenous Jalisco*. Retrieved March 14, 2010, from http://www.houstonculture.org/mexico/jalisco_indig.html
- Sheehy, D. E. (2006). *Mariachi music in America: Experiencing music, expressing culture*. New York: Oxford University Press, Inc.
- Sonnichsen, P. (1986). *Liner Notes. The earliest Mariachi recordings 1908 -1938, Volume 1. Album 9051*. El Cerrito, CA: Arhoolie Folklyric Records.
- Stanford, T. (1972). *The Mexican son. Yearbook of the International Folk Music Council* (4), 25th Anniversary Issue, Retrieved May 18, 2010, from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/767674>
- Toor, F. (1947). *Treasury of Mexican Folkways* New York: Crown Publishers.

Dr. William K. Ricketts is currently director of bands at Southside High School in San Antonio, Texas. Dr. Ricketts is also adjunct instructor of percussion at St. Phillip's College, Palo Alto College, and San Antonio College in the Alamo Community College District. In addition, Dr. Ricketts teaches music appreciation and jazz appreciation classes at Concordia University.