

# The Flower Songs of Nezahualcoyotl

ANCIENT NAHUA (AZTEC) POETRY



*Nezahualcoyotl. Codex Ixtlilxochitl.*

## INTRODUCTION

### THE FLOWER SONGS OF HUNGRY COYOTE

### THE LIFE OF HUNGRY COYOTE

## INTRODUCTION

**N**ezahualcoyotl (Hungry Coyote) was considered by his peers to be the greatest poet of ancient Mexico. His compositions had vast influence, stylistically and in content. Filled with thought, symbol, and myth, his poetry moved his people's culture so deeply that after his death generations of poets to follow would stand by the *huebuetl* drum and cry, "I am Nezahualcoyotl, I am Hungry Coyote," and sing his poems and keep them alive.

Nezahualcoyotl was not only a great lyric poet, but was famed as an architect, engineer, city planner, reluctant warrior, lawgiver, and philosopher. The cultural institutions he established included a library of hieroglyphic books, a zoological garden-arboretum, and a self-governing academy of scholars and poets. He led his city-state out of foreign domination and transformed it into a wellspring of art and culture. As the seventh ruler (*tlacatecutli*) of Texcoco, a large city on the north shore of Lake Texcoco, ten miles across the water from the capital of the Aztecs, Hungry Coyote promoted a renewal of Toltec learning based on the peaceful religion of Quetzalcoatl at the very moment when the Aztec cult of sacrifice was coming into ascendancy. All the Nahuatl-speaking city-states in the Valley of Mexico looked to Hungry Coyote's Texcoco as the cultural center of their world.

The story is not a simple one and the chronicles of his life themselves are contradictory. However, the spirit of paradox is embedded in the soul of ancient Mexico.

The complex surfaces of many flower songs (*xochicuicame*) often make them difficult to understand for many people in our culture. We do not have ready categories for them and they require effort. Yet they contain many gems of universal lasting value and offer great rewards to those willing to make that effort.

### NAHUA POETS, POETRY, AND CEREMONIAL FLOWERS

Most of the flower songs that have come down to us are in two collections from the second half of the sixteenth century. Although transcribed as they were sung at that time, they clearly contain many songs and parts of songs that are much older.

The form of the flower song as it has come down to us seems to have had its beginning in the generation before Hungry Coyote. But it was his generation, and particularly he himself, who perfected the form and brought it to its greatest heights.

Hungry Coyote lived at a moment when the anonymous singer, *cuicani*, of his people's tradition, who received verses in a song quest, began to speak of personal feelings and ideas and emerged a remembered poet. In form and content Hungry Coyote was an innovator: he perfected a style that numerous other poets copied. He was also part of a poetic movement, a generation of poets and singers who were moving beyond the earlier modes of Nahua poetry.



From the older tradition come the anonymous sacred hymns, twenty of which have come down to us transcribed by Bernardino de Sahagún. While most of the sacred hymns are direct and formal, the flower songs can take off wildly in many directions from a theme. Flower songs were a channel to invoke the deity in an individual and personal way. They were also connected with the ingestion of hallucinatory mushrooms and similar substances. Poetry and art were ecstatic gifts of the gods.

Flower songs kept close to the rhythms and patterns of speech. Their poetics included the repetition of ideas in couplets or parallel form, a tendency to speak in metaphors, and the use of repeating synonyms and metonyms. Kennings were frequent, two words used together becoming a traditional metaphorical name for a third thing, such as "eagles and jaguars" meaning "warriors"; "mat and chair" meaning "authority"; or "flower and song" meaning "poetry."

The texts indicate no regular length of line or stanza, no rhyme or meter. The variety seems almost Whitmanesque. Refrains appear, change, and disappear in no strict pattern or order. Many of the poems as we have them seem long and confusing. Many seem to break into different voices in different stanzas, often in dialog, but not always. Repetitive syllables such as "Ohuaya, Ohuaya" follow verses of many of the songs. These are vocables or litanies, which have no translatable meaning but define the stanza.

Flower songs were performed to the open-hand beat of the *huebuetl* drum, each poem to a distinct cadence, the beat patterns preserved along with the poems in some of the ancient texts.

The themes of flower songs seem limited, yet they were put together in endless variations: meditations on the meaning of life and death, on the pleasures of living and loving, on friendship, on relations between the poet and the deity; lamentations on the brevity of life and fame; elegies on poetry; memorials to great leaders; celebrations of cities and the people; or verses on the ecstasies of singing and war. They were sometimes composed for a particular occasion to make a critical commentary on it.

The two prophetic poems of Nezahualcoyotl that we have only in translation by Ixtlilxochitl do not seem to be in quite the same style as the songs in the two major collections. The style is more straightforward and grammatical. However, the originals may have been more similar.

Although these poems are usually all known as "flower songs" today, to Hungry Coyote and his contemporaries, the word *xochicuicatl*, "flower song," described only one particular style among many that we usually include in the genre. *Xochicuicame* were literally songs about flowers or relating to the ceremonies of the goddess Xochiquetzal. This entire body of poetry/song became known as "flower songs" because the word "flower" and its cognates occur in them so often, not only when they are referring to flowers per se, but as symbols, metaphors, and imagery with many different implications. The Nahuatl phrase "*in xochitl in cuicatl*" meant "flower and song" literally, but figuratively meant "poetry" or "art."

There were two general categories of song and dance, *netotiliztin* and *macehualixtin*. The *netotiliztin*, "dances of joy," were the worldly dances associated with entertainment. They were performed during the fiesta parts of holidays as well as in other venues. Though they might refer to religious ceremonies, they were not a ritual part of them.

The *macehualiztin*, dances of merit, were the sacred hymns, a ritual part of religious ceremonies. The flower songs of Hungry Coyote were *netotiliztin*, "dances of joy."

There were many modes of *netotiliztin*. *Xochicuicame* (flower songs proper) and *xopanquicame* (spring songs) were spiritual and lyric. *Yaocuicame* or *cuauhtlicuicame* (warrior songs) were about heroes and hunters. *Incocuicame* or *tlaocolbucame* (orphan and suffering songs) lamented life's insecurities. Besides these were *huehuecuicame* (songs of old people), *cibuacuicame* (songs of women), and others. There were also various regional styles: Texcocan, Mexican, Otomi, Tepanecan, Acolhuan, Tlaxcalán, Huastec, and Totonac. Otomi style songs were not in Nahuatl but in the Chichimec language. Hungry Coyote wrote flower songs in Otomi as well as in Nahuatl.

Hungry Coyote's flower songs are the earliest ones that we can attribute to a known poet, except for one song by Tlaltecatzin, a poet of his father's generation. Tlaltecatzin's poem is a curious one in that it combines sex and death, while overt erotic elements and love themes are missing in all other flower songs that have come down to us. Yet there is something incoherently ecstatic in the flower songs. Moreover, there are reports that Nahua love songs were actually common. It is perhaps from this combination of the profanely secular with the sacred, from this duality, that the form of flower songs originally sprang.

While the sacred hymns were sung in and around the temples, the flower songs were performed more often in homes and in other secular venues, as well as in the house of song, the music school established as an adjunct to a temple in every Nahua city.

Poet-singers, called *cuicapicque* (songmakers) or *xochitlahtoane* (flowerspeakers), performed publicly on the many holidays and at the festivals and religious ceremonies that filled the year in the Nahua world. They also presented their works in circles of poets and musicians, which met regularly. Both nobles and commoners, women as well as men, could be song-makers. Many of the *cuicapicque* were professionals. All the noble houses had their singers who composed chants about their own glorious deeds and those of their ancestors. The religious sects also kept salaried composers who lived in the temples and created divine chants praising the gods. Besides singing their own original compositions, *cuicapicque* would perform and embroider great works by other poets. However, many of the songmakers who composed flower songs, like Hungry Coyote, were not salaried professionals. Many men who did not have the temperament of a warrior found this as a road to personal achievement and success. These independent singers received their primary payment in praise, but were also often rewarded with valuable gifts from the king or nobles for their work.

Sometimes a group of poets would perform together, each poet taking a turn with a poem on the same theme and creating a dialog. On occasion they spoke through the voices of historic or mythologic personages. The poetic dialog that resulted, the "dialog of the songs," approached theater or drama.

The poets would usually perform accompanied by a *huehuetl* drum, *teponaztli*, and sometimes a flute. The *huehuetl* was an upright drum crafted from a hollowed log two to four feet high with a diameter of twelve to eighteen inches, open at the bottom, standing on three legs cut from its base, with skin stretched across the top. It was usually carved with designs and symbols and was beaten with the hands. The *teponaztli* was a horizontal wooden drum or "gong," hollowed in the center but left closed on



both ends, flattened on top, with two tongues of different lengths cut into it. The *teponaztli* was beaten with rubber-tipped sticks. Nahua musicians also played flutes, double flutes, triple flutes, and pan pipes, using a pentatonic or five-note scale. These instruments were all six to eight inches long, usually of clay, but sometimes also of bamboo or bone.

Singing and music were part of everyone's education. In the evening after school at the *telpochcalli*, the school for the common people, both girls and boys went to the *cuicacalli*, the house of song, which stood next to one of the temples. In the Toltec conception, a city did not really exist until it had established a place for the drums, that is, a house of song. This was a singing, music and dance school, as well as a residence for the teachers, and consisted of many large rooms around a courtyard. Attendance was required of all boys and girls, who were taught separately but brought together in the courtyard for common dances. In the house of song were lodged the *huehuetl*, *teponaztli*, rattles, flutes, shell trumpets, costumes, and regalia of the dancers. Taught at these schools were primarily the sacred hymns and the dances that went with them.

During the day, before the girls and boys arrived for their studies, the house of song doubled as a dance hall for warriors and *abuilmeneque*, "pleasure women." As Friar Diego Durán, who grew up in Texcoco, describes it around the year 1570:

Let us now speak of the ordinary dance which the warriors and soldiers performed daily, during the daytime, in that same building and school of dance. They went there to dance as a pastime . . . These warriors, known as *tequihuaque*, went there and, dressed in their best, danced in fine style. When one of these men saw a harlot [sic] looking at him with a certain amount of interest, he beckoned to her and, taking her by the hand, danced with her in that dance. Thus he spent the entire [day until] evening with that woman, holding her by the hand while they danced . . . (*Book of the Gods*, 298).

He describes the rhythms as lively. "These were dances and songs of pleasure, known as 'dances of youth,' during which they sang songs of love and flirtation . . ." (*ibid.*, 295).

In contrast, Durán wrote that the sacred hymns "were sung slowly and seriously; these were sung and danced by the lords on solemn and important occasions, and were intoned, some with moderation and calm" (*ibid.*). The sacred hymns were sung or chanted both inside and outside the temples, addressed directly to specific deities. A number of sacred hymns have come down to us, twenty of them preserved by Padre Bernardino de Sahagún around 1558 to 1560 in the Florentine codex. None has any attribution of authorship. Sahagún wrote of them, "The children who went to the *calmecac* learned by memory all the verses of songs to sing, called divine songs, whose verses were written in their books in characters." The *calmecac* was a special school for children of the nobility and gifted children and prepared them to become leaders and priests. Each *calmecac* was located adjacent to a temple and closely connected with it. Instruction there was more extensive than in the *telpochcaltin*, the schools for the common people run by the clans, where the children were taught a standard curriculum and then brought over to the house of song at the temple in the evening for musical and ritual instruction.

Groups of poets and elders called *tlapizcatzitzin* (conservators) approved new compositions and taught divine songs in honor of gods. They called public meetings to teach the songs to all the people. They were still singing and dancing *macehualiztin* after the

Conquest, for Durán witnessed them. "These songs were so sad that just the rhythm and dance saddens one. I have seen these danced occasionally with religious chants, and they were so sad that I was filled with melancholy and woe" (300).

He goes on to say that, although he was fluent in Nahuatl, he really did not understand the words to the songs.

All the native lays are interwoven with such obscure metaphors that there is hardly a man who can understand them unless they are studied in a very special way and explained so as to penetrate their meaning. For this reason I have intentionally set myself to listen with much attention to what is sung; and while the words and the terms of the metaphors seem nonsense to me, afterwards, having discussed and conferred, they seem to be admirable sentences, both in the divine things composed today and in the worldly songs. (299-300)

The soil in which flower songs grew was a combination of the profane and the sacred, the social and the ceremonial.

The flower songs that we have are not about love and flirtation, like the "dances of youth." They are poems of a high seriousness, but sung to the same lively rhythms as other worldly songs. The transcribers simply might have not written down the more bawdy songs.

The friar goes on, describing the custom:

The dance they most enjoyed was the one in which they crowned and adorned themselves with flowers. A house of flowers was erected on the main pyramid. . . . They also erected artificial trees covered with fragrant flowers where they seated the goddess Xochiquetzalli. During the dance some boys dressed as birds and others as butterflies descended. They were richly decked with fine green, blue, red, and yellow feathers. These youths ascended the trees, climbing from limb to limb, sucking the dew of the flowers. Then the "gods" appeared, each wearing robes such as the idols wore on the altars—a man or a woman dressed in the guise of each. With their blowguns in their hands they went around shooting at the "birds" who were in the trees. Then the Goddess of Flowers—Xochiquetzalli—came out to receive them, took them by the hand, making them sit next to her, treating them with great honor and respect, as such divinities deserved. There she presented them with flowers and gave them to smoke, and then she made her representatives come to amuse them. This was the most solemn dance in the land, and I rarely see another one danced today unless it is by exception. . . . (296)

Now we are clearly in the realm of the *xochicuicatl*, the flower song. We have four songs that Hungry Coyote composed for the Farewell to the Flowers or for a similar festival held in the spring: "Stand Up, Beat Your Drum," "Song of Spring," "Already It Begins," and "The Flower Tree."

Among the most solemn feasts was the one called Farewell to the Flowers, which meant that frost was coming and flowers would wither and dry up. A solemn festivity, filled with rejoicing and merrymaking, was held to bid them farewell. On that same day they commemorated a goddess named Xochiquetzalli, which means "Flowery Plumage."

On this day they were as happy as could be, the same happiness and delight they feel today on smelling any kind of flower, whether it have an agreeable or a displeasing scent, as long as it is a flower. They become the happiest people in the world smelling them, for these natives in general are most sensuous and pleasure-loving. They find gladness and joy in spending the entire day smelling a little flower or a bouquet made



of different kinds of flowers; their gifts are accompanied by them; they relieve the tediousness of journeys with flowers. To sum up, they find the smelling of flowers so comforting that they even stave off and manage to survive hunger by smelling them. Thus they passed their lives among flowers in such blindness and darkness, since they had been deceived and persuaded by the devil, who had observed their love for blossoms and flowers. . . .

On this day their persons, temples, houses and streets were adorned with flowers. . . . Thus decorated with flowers, they engaged in different dances, merrymaking, festivities, and farces, all filled with gladness and good cheer. All this was in honor of and reverence for flowers. This day was called Xochihuitl, which means "Feast of the Flowers," and no other finery—gold, silver, stones, feathers—was worn on this day—only flowers. Besides being the day of the flowers it was the day of a goddess, who, as I have said, was called Xochiquetzal. This goddess was the patroness of painters, embroiderers, weavers, silver-smiths, sculptors, and all those whose profession it was to imitate nature in crafts and in drawing. All held this goddess to be their patroness, and her feast was specially solemnized by them. . . . (238)

The Feast of the Flowers was continued after the Conquest in a changed form, like so much of the old religion. The last day of the twenty-day Farewell to the Flowers was October 26, only a few days before the Days of the Dead, still celebrated today in Mexican communities with the same flowers, marigolds.

#### THE GIVER OF LIFE: THE TOLTEC DUALITY OF QUETZALCOATL

Hungry Coyote addressed many songs to the deity without ever mentioning a proper name. Instead, he (and the other Nahua poets) called Him by certain of His aspects or qualities such as Life Giver, One for Whom All Live, He Who Makes the World Live, Author of Life, Highest Arbiter, Lord of the Far and Near, Lord of the With and the By, or Inventor of Himself. These were all epithets for Tloque Nahuaque, the Unknown God, who was also the Creator, Quetzalcoatl, the "white" Tezcatlipoca.

From the time of the Toltecs, the Valley of Mexico was dominated by the clash of forces represented by the deities Quetzalcoatl and the "black" Tezcatlipoca.

Quetzalcoatl was the Feathered (or Plumed) Serpent who lives in the wind, the deity of civilization, of culture, knowledge, peace, fertility, the bringer of the arts and crafts, writing, singing, and poetry. He gave life to the first people of this fifth world and the gift of corn for sustenance. Quetzalcoatl was closely associated with Ehecatl, deity of the wind, and Tlaloc, master of rain. Tlaloc in turn was associated with Coatlicue, goddess of the earth. Quetzalcoatl had been the patron deity of the great city-state Teotihuacan, predecessor to the Toltecs.

Tezcatlipoca, "Smoking Mirror," the night sky, was the deity of destruction and death, the patron of warriors and sorcerers. Tezcatlipoca was closely associated with Mixcoatl, the old Chichimec deity of the hunt, and later with Huitzilopochtli, patron of the Aztec warrior orders. Tezcatlipoca, unlike Quetzalcoatl, demanded human sacrifice. This dichotomy played out in history as it did in myth.

In the late tenth century, under the Toltec chieftain-priest Quetzalcoatl-Topiltzin, follower of the Plumed Serpent, the city of Tula (Tollan) became a great center of a cultural renaissance in which all the arts and sciences blossomed. It was the inheritor of the

earlier culture of Teotihuacan and predecessor to Hungry Coyote's Texcoco. This cultural renaissance was destined to be short-lived.

There were two distinct groups among the Toltecs of Tula: the Nonoalcas, who were blood descendants of Teotihuacan and followers of Quetzalcoatl, and the Tolteca-Chichimecas, who were the newly acculturated groups, wanderers from the north only recently come into contact with civilization, followers of Tezcatlipoca.

According to the legendary history as described by Nezahualcoyotl's descendant Ixtlixochitl and other early chroniclers, a struggle developed between the chieftain Quetzalcoatl-Topiltzin and Tezcatlipoca-Huemac, the high priest of the Toltec warrior orders. Quetzalcoatl-Topiltzin was a Nonoalca and Tezcatlipoca-Huemac was a Tolteca-Chichimeca.

Quetzalcoatl-Topiltzin tried to lead the people of Tula to reject the deities of militarism and sacrifice and instead pay peaceful homage to the Feathered Serpent. But Tezcatlipoca-Huemac grew jealous and demanded human sacrifice. A mortal struggle ensued.

Rejecting civil war, Quetzalcoatl-Topiltzin yielded the city to Tezcatlipoca-Huemac, leading his followers out of Tula, disappearing into exile toward the east, toward Tlillan Tlapallan, "land of the red and black," where according to the legend, he became the morning star, the planet Venus, and from where he would return someday to reclaim his throne. According to another version, he led his followers to Yucatan and built Chichen-Itza.

Without Quetzalcoatl-Topiltzin the city of Tula lost its cohesion, spirit, and will. When attacked by new waves of Chichimec bands, it succumbed. Tezcatlipoca-Huemac met with a violent death. Bands of Toltec refugees scattered to the shores of Lake Texcoco and many other places in the Valley of Mexico, farther south to the land of the Mixtecas and beyond. Tula in its heyday was soon looked back on as a golden age.

When Xolotl and his Chichimec band established control over the region, Xolotl took a Toltec princess as his wife. By mixing his family with Toltec descendants, Xolotl's lineage became Toltec. The ruling lineages of every province and city in the valley of Mexico soon all vied to connect their family lines with those of the Toltecs. This connection became an essential credential to power. With the blood connection came the infusion of Toltec culture and values.

But the dominant Toltec culture that the Valley of Mexico inherited was the legacy of Tezcatlipoca, not Quetzalcoatl. When a new ruler was sworn in, it was to Tezcatlipoca that he took his oath of faith, and from whom he asked guidance. The Feathered Serpent's cult continued in a lesser capacity, often in disguise, as "the white Tezcatlipoca."

So it was in the time of Hungry Coyote. That is why the name of Quetzalcoatl never appears in any of his songs, yet underlies every verse.

However, according to Toltec cosmology, all divinity proceeds from Omeyocan, "The Place of Duality." So while Quetzalcoatl and Tezcatlipoca were antagonists, opposites, light and dark, they were also associated with each other; they were part of each other.

Before this world there were four previous worlds created and destroyed, according to the myth, and Quetzalcoatl and Tezcatlipoca took turns as creator and destroyer.



Tezcatlipoca had four aspects, which corresponded to the four directions and also to different deities. The "black" aspect was the original Tezcatlipoca, the night sky; the "red" Tezcatlipoca was Xipe Totec, god of spring; the "blue" Tezcatlipoca was Huitzilopochtli, tribal god of the Aztecs, deity of the sun; and the "white" Tezcatlipoca was Quetzalcoatl. Thus Tezcatlipoca was both destroyer and creator.

### A LEXICON OF FLOWERS

To understand the concept and function of flower songs, we need to look more deeply at the special meanings that flowers had for the Nahuatl people in Hungry Coyote's time.

Xochiquetzal (Flower Quetzal), goddess of flowers and love, was the first wife of Tlaloc, deity of rain. It should be no surprise that flowers were associated with life-giving water, particularly in a place where the sun could be brutal. Xochiquetzal, however, was kidnapped by Tezcatlipoca and made his wife. (Tlaloc got over it and found another wife.) She was also associated with a male counterpart, Xochipilli, "prince of flowers," deity of summer, patron of love, dance, and games. He was sometimes associated with the "red" Tezcatlipoca. Xochiquetzal and Xochipilli were the patrons of the "floating gardens" of Xochimilco at the east end of Lake Texcoco.

Xochiquetzal was also connected with Xochitl (Flower), one of the twenty calendric day signs, the twentieth sign, the last day of every month. Xochitl was associated with masters and craftsmen. Xochitl people, according to the astrology, tended to be clean, diligent, hard-working, and to make a living with the skill of their hands. Men born under it were likely to be workers in "crafts that imitate nature" such as painters, metalworkers, weavers, sculptors, or carvers. Women born under it were likely to be weavers, embroiderers, fine home decorators, well-adorned dressers, and skilled at decorative presentation as cooks.

Poems or songs were "necklaces of flowers." Poetry was also "the floral drum." The beauty of a song was "upright flowers." The places where poets and singers met were the "houses of the flowers," "arbors of the precious flowers," "flowery patios," or "mats of flowers."

The Nahuatl had four after-death lands, three of them lush garden paradises: Tamoanchan, the western "flower land" for women who died in childbirth; Tlalocan, the tropical "place of the flowering tree" for those who died by water; and Tonatiuhichan, the florid garden of dawn for those who died in battle. Mictlan, the fourth after-death land, was flowerless, shadowy, and chill, located in the north; there the dead who had not earned a place in one of the paradises underwent a series of trials leading to final peace and dissolution.

The word "flower" was also redolent with associations of war and sacrifice. "Flowery death" meant death in war. The "flowers" were the warriors whose lives were so brief and precarious, the captives, the sacrificial victims. Prisoners were "flowers of the battle," "precious flowers of the jaguar," "flowers of war," "flowers of the eagle," or "flowers of the shield." Battles were "flowers of the heart of the plain," "fragrant flowers of the jaguars," or "flowers of battle." To say that "the flowers of war intoxicate me," meant "the fervor of war excites me." "Paper flowers" were insignia worn by the gods and by sacrificial victims. The human heart was spoken of as the "flower of God," or "flower of the heart."

## AUTHORSHIP AND TRANSMISSION

The vast majority of the Nahuatl songwriters were anonymous, but about forty Nahuatl poets have been identified (primarily by Garibay and León-Portilla), most of them nobles. Hungry Coyote is the author of some thirty-six to forty-one songs (depending on how one counts), the most by far of any Nahuatl poet. Tecayehuatzin is the author of nine, Ayocuan three. We have two songs, or fragments, by at least sixteen other poets.

The poems that were written down in Spanish script in the sixteenth century are transcriptions of songs as they were sung and chanted at that time. The singers of that era quoted earlier poets—the great classic poets of the culture—in their poems, often incorporating, developing, and expanding the earlier songs. Much of the poetry of Nezahualcoyotl has come down to us as quoted fragments and lyrics embedded into the songs of these later poets and singers. Nezahualcoyotl appears as a speaker in various dialog poems.

Many of the attributions of authorship are by internal evidence. The scholar A. M. Garibay was the first to interpret the “I am” formula as an indigenous Mexican convention indicating signature or authorship. In the example of Hungry Coyote, his interpretation is based on the word “niNezahualcoyotl,” which occurs frequently and means literally, “I Hungry Coyote.” According to this interpretation, in the context of the poem it means “This is a poem by Hungry Coyote” or “I am performing a poem of Hungry Coyote’s.” It might also mean, “I am performing a poem inspired by, or in the style of, Hungry Coyote.” It could also indicate that the singer is calling down Hungry Coyote’s spirit. The texts as we have them do not always make this clear, so there is much room for debate over what is and what is not a poem by Hungry Coyote, or where one begins and ends.

Just the mention of Hungry Coyote’s name in a poem obviously does not make it his. There are also poems addressed to Hungry Coyote by other poets, and poems about Hungry Coyote. The scholar John Bierhorst denies the interpretation of signature entirely and does not accept the attribution of any classical Nahuatl poems to any particular poet; he sees the “I am” formula as meaning that the singer is calling down a spirit.

While modern scholars may dispute the attribution to Hungry Coyote of any particular poem, it is clear that the ancient Nahuas themselves considered Hungry Coyote to be their greatest classical composer of songs, and that the later Nahuatl poets thought they were singing his songs or singing in his style. The acceptance of these songs as representative of at least the spirit of Hungry Coyote’s work brings us as close to the truth as the mists of time will permit.

I have tried to include a representative selection of the flower songs in this collection.

## DRUM ACCOMPANIMENT AND VOCABLES

The poems were originally performed accompanied by the large two-tone *huehuatl* drum. The beat patterns for a number of poems are preserved in the texts.

Code: to = low tone stressed  
ti = high tone stressed  
co = low tone unstressed  
qui = high tone unstressed



For example, below are the cadences and codas for the five sections of "Song of Hungry Coyote," *Cantares Mexicanos* #46.

Section # 1: Totoco totoco tico totoco totoco.

At the end: tico titico titico tico.

Section # 2: Quititi quititi quititi quititi.

At the end: tocoto tocoti tocototocoti.

Section # 3: Tico tico tocoto.

At the end: ticoto ticoto.

Section # 4: Toto tiquiti tiquiti.

At the end: tocotico tocoti tototitiqui tototitiquiti.

Section # 5: Toco toco tiqui tiqui.

At the end: tocotico tocoti.

In many of the songs, each stanza ends with repeated vocables, syllables without meaning outside of the rhythm of the song. They give structure to songs where lines and stanzas have widely varying lengths. Vocables will be indicated by italics.

#### THE NAHUATL LANGUAGE

Nahuatl was the language of those Mesoamericans commonly known today as "Aztecs." However, the word "Aztec" properly refers to only the inhabitants of the city-state Tenochtitlan, while Nahuatl was the *lingua franca* of the entire Valley of Mexico, comprising many city-states, stemming back to the fabled Toltec city Tula and probably to Teotihuacan.

Today Nahuatl-speaking people are still one of Mexico's largest indigenous groups, numbering over one million spread over the central parts of the country. Nahuatl-speaking people are also now commonly referred to by researchers as "Nahuas."

Many dialects of modern Nahuatl are quite different from the language of Hungry Coyote, although some are surprisingly similar. The shape of the modern language was of course strongly influenced by centuries of proximity to Spanish.

The language of these poems is far more complex than conversational Nahuatl. It is considered an esoteric language.

Word order is very flexible in Nahuatl. Secondary elements in a sentence often have only a loose connection with the core, through proximity rather than through syntax. That results in Nahuatl's having an expansive ambiguity and evocativeness, rather than the linear logic we are accustomed to in English.

Nahuatl creates long sentence-words by joining two or more roots of verbs and/or nouns, then affixing particles to provide other information. Thus subject, verb, and object all become part of the same sentence-word.

## SIMPLIFIED GUIDE TO NAHUATL PRONUNCIATION\*

Vowels as in Spanish

Consonants as in English, except:

x = /sh/

z = /s/

qu before e or i = /k/

qu, cu, uc before a or o = /kw/

h is a glottal stop

tl is voiceless, with the same point of articulation as for /t/, but with air released at the sides

tz = /ts/

ll = /l/, not as ll in Spanish

uh, hu = /w/

Stress on the penultimate syllable.

## LINGUISTIC GUIDE TO NAHUATL PRONUNCIATION

	<i>phoneme</i>	<i>alphabetic representation</i>
<i>vowels</i>	/a/, /ā/	a
	/e/, /ē/	e
	/i/, /ī/	i, y, j
	/ó/, /ō/	o, u
<i>consonants</i>	/p/	p
	/t/	t
	/k/	c, qu
	/ʔ/	h ( <i>usually not written</i> )
	/tʰ/	tz
	/tʰ/	tl
	/ch/	ch
	/kʷ/	cu, uc, qu
	/s/	c, ç, s, z
	/sh/	x
	/m/	m, n
	/n/	n
	/l/	l
	/w/	uh, hu, u, v, o
/y/	y, i, j	

\* This pronunciation guide and all that follow utilize the systems of linguistic notation found in *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary*, 11th edition. For sounds not included therein, we have used the International Phonetic Alphabet.