

The Poetic Hearts of Mayan Women Writ Large

Ambar Past's introduction to Incantations appears elsewhere on this site under the title "She of Great Writing, She of the Glyphs." For information on how to obtain this extraordinary handwrought book, check the workshop's web site:

<<http://www.tallerlenateros.com>>www.tallerlenateros.com, or write:

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By **DINITIA SMITH**

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The Mayan women of the Chiapas highlands in southern Mexico are extremely poor, and many, especially the older women, are illiterate. The poorest own only a few blankets, articles of clothing and utensils. But what they do have is poetry, much to the surprise of Ámbar Past, an American-born Mexican poet who first encountered the Mayan women 30 years ago.



Mike Falco for The New York Times

The poet Ámbar Past with a copy of "Incantations," a book of poetry by 150 Mayan women that she helped shepherd and which has been translated into English and Spanish.

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Suzy Allman for The New York Times

Ámbar Past's collection of handmade books and magazines from Chiapas, Mexico.

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Ámbar Past's collection of handmade books and magazines from Chiapas, Mexico.

Ms. Past, 55, came to Chiapas in 1973 as a self-described hippie and renegade housewife, escaping an unhappy marriage. She stayed with some Mayan women and taught herself Tzotzil, one of the local Mayan languages.

As she listened to the women, Ms. Past said she realized that they sometimes spoke in poetry, in couplets and in gleaming metaphors.

"I was so deeply moved hearing in these mud huts these breathtakingly beautiful verses, sometimes echoing verses and phrases spoken or written 500 years ago," she said. Some words resembled ones in the Popol Vuh, the Mayan creation story.

"They live with no comfort," Ms. Past said during a visit to New York in April. "Yet poetry is an essential part of their daily life."

Now after 30 years' work, 150 Mayan women from Taller Leñateros (Woodlanders' Workshop), a paper- and book-making collective founded by Ms. Past in 1975 in the Chiapas city San Cristóbal de las Casas, have produced what may be the first book of Mayan women's poetry created almost entirely by them, and translated into English.

The book, "Incantations," is a weirdly beautiful volume made from 295 pages of recycled and handmade paper with silk-screened illustrations. The cover is a three-dimensional rendering of the face of Kaxail, Mayan goddess of the wilderness, in recycled cardboard mixed with corn silk and coffee. Her eyes are excised and she

stares out with an eerie power. (It was designed by Gitte Daehlin, a Norwegian artist living in the nearby state of Oaxaca.)

"Incantations" contains spells and hymns tape-recorded by the women and by Ms. Past, who transcribed and translated them from Tzotzil into Spanish and English. As members of a collective, the women share labor and profits.

Robert M. Laughlin, a curator of Mesoamerican and Caribbean ethnology at the Smithsonian Institution who has published two Tzotzil dictionaries, said of "Incantations": "There is very little publication about Mayan women's lives in their own language, and this gives a whole view of the culture that's been unknown before." (Mayan men in Chiapas also incorporate poetry into some of their formal and religious discourse, but that group has been well studied, Mr. Laughlin said.)

The Olmec and the Maya were among the first literate societies in the Western Hemisphere. Evidence of Mayan writing goes back to the first century A.D. Murals and ceramics from the height of Mayan civilization, A.D. 600 to 900, depict male scribes holding pens and brushes, making "Incantations" even more significant.

There are four surviving Mayan codices, bark-paper books that unfold like accordions, dating from the Spanish conquest in the early 16th century. Spanish bishops ordered other books burned.

Ms. Past first became interested in Mayan weaving, which is often highly symbolic, and in traditional natural dyes. She became aware of the women's poetry in 1975, when an epidemic swept through Magdalenas village, close to where she lived. She said that she went to San Cristóbal, the nearest large city, for help, but no doctors came. Many children died, she said.

In the cemetery, she said, she saw a woman carrying her dead baby lying on a board and wrapped in a shawl for burial. The mother offered her dead child a last sip of Coca-Cola and uttered a prayer, which Ms. Past still remembers:

*Take this sweet dew from the earth,
Take this honey.
It will help you on your way.
It will give you strength on your path.*

One reason "Incantations" took so long to create, said Ms. Past, who became a Mexican citizen in 1985 and has published 10 books in Mexico, is that some incantations last for days. She transcribed hundreds of hours of tape, from which she culled essential verses. In fabricating "Incantations," the women soaked recycled

paper with palm fronds, making a pulp in a blender, dyeing it black with soot and campeachy wood. Mayan men helped with the offset printing.

The poems in "Incantations" incorporate ancient metaphors with the harshly contemporary. One poem, by Xpetra Ernánides, is "Witchcraft for Attracting a Man":

*I want him to come with flowers in his heart.
With all his heart,
I want him to talk to my body.
I want his blood to ache for me
when he sees me on the way to the market.*

Another, by Petra Tzon Te' Vitz , is "Lullaby":

*Go to sleep little baby, go to sleep.
Your daddy's drunk
and if he hits me,
I'm running to the woods.*

Tonik Nibak has an angry piece, "Hex to Kill the Unfaithful Man":

*Let 13 Devil Women, 13 Goddesses of Death,
snuff out his name.
Let a wind that starts in his head, in his heart,
blow his candle out.
Let him die on the road.
Let him be run over by a car.
By a bicycle.
Break his leg.
If he dies, I'm going to be laughing.*

The first edition of "Incantations," Tzotzil translated into Spanish, was in 1998.

So far, 1,850 volumes of the English edition are printed. The first 200 numbered copies cost \$200 each, and half have sold, Ms. Past said. Another 1,650 are being bound, and will sell for \$100.

The workshop also publishes a literary magazine, La Jícara (The Gourd), which, Ms. Past said, has been called "the most beautiful magazine in Mexico." The magazine is mainly in Spanish, but has an English section and always contains literature in Amerindian languages.

In 2002 the collective published "Mayan Hearts," two books of Tzotzil metaphors translated by Mr. Laughlin into Spanish and English. That book's thick black cover is made of agave fibers with a heart cut out to reveal red endpaper.

"I am in love/ My heart aches," one line reads.

"You perfume my heart/ you give me pleasure," says another.