

UCLA

American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

A Man of Words: The Life and Lettres of a Yaqui Poet

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/95x0q9k7>

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 4(1-2)

ISSN

0161-6463

Author

Sands, Kathleen M.

Publication Date

1980

DOI

10.17953

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, availalbe at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

Peer reviewed

A Man of Words: The Life and Lettres of a Yaqui Poet

KATHLEEN M. SANDS

The land was hard and spare, lean and dry, the struggle for survival harsh. The Yaqui infant, Refugio Savala, was just one more fugitive from the genocidal war against his people. His birth was unrecorded and his life tenuous in the chaotic flight toward asylum across the Sonoran desert to the Arizona border. Yet he was one of the fortunate ones, protected by a family still whole despite dangers, still rich in the tradition and belief of the Yaqui way. That tradition was not lost to the man who grew from the refugee infant. In the seventy years following flight to safety, Refugio Savala observed and recorded the renewal of his native culture in Arizona. He quietly and determinedly wrote about what he experienced. He transformed his experience into a body of Yaqui traditional lore and personal literature which speaks to his own people and reveals the Yaqui way to the non-Yaqui world.

Refugio Savala is a person of poetic sensibilities, a man of words. In his youth, he felt a strong urge to preserve in written form the Yaqui stories he had heard, and as he matured and came to broader and more complete knowledge of his culture, his desire to become a man of letters increased. His driving interest in language, and in Yaqui perception and way of life, inspired him to attempt non-Yaqui literary forms in order to communicate his personal and cultural vision to those who might otherwise never know its existence. In the course of his lifetime, he has translated oral tales, written his versions of Yaqui legends, described

Kathleen M. Sands is an assistant professor in the Department of English, Arizona State University. She specializes in folklore and American Indian literature. Her latest work, *The Autobiography of a Yaqui Poet*, is published by the University of Arizona Press (1980).

Yaqui personalities and occupations in character sketches, recorded and analyzed ceremonial songs and sermons, composed original ballads, created a body of personal poems, and recorded his own and his family's history in a comprehensive autobiography.

In his autobiography, as in no other aspect of his literary accomplishments, the diverse forms of his literary imagination come together as he demonstrates both his growing comprehension of his culture and his expanding facility with literary forms. Unlike most Native American personal narratives, Savala's is not an "as told to" autobiography. The work is written, not oral. While written autobiographies by other North American Indians exist, they are few in number and generally less comprehensive than Savala's, and the subjects are not known for literary work within or outside the personal narrative form. One other Yaqui written autobiography exists, *A Tall Candle*¹ by Rosalio Moises; but he, unlike Savala, lived much of his life in Sonora, Mexico, and his pervasive attitude toward his culture and people is one of rejection rather than acceptance.

The autobiography came about through Refugio's participation in a complex project involving the translation and interpretation of a Yaqui Easter sermon. In 1939, anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski visited Tucson and became interested in the Yaqui Easter ceremony. He encouraged Muriel Thayer Painter to begin what became a life-long study of the ritual. Savala was away at the time, working on the railroad, but in 1947, Dr. Edward H. Spicer, a personal friend and language student of Refugio's, introduced him to Mrs. Painter and a fruitful association began. The project started with the transcription and translation of a long sermon delivered in Yaqui, which the maestro of Pascua Village had allowed to be recorded in 1941. The process introduced Savala to a method of writing Yaqui which had been developed by scholars, one more precise than the orthography used by Yaquis for correspondence. It marked new understanding of Savala's English and Yaqui; Refugio discovered his gift for interpreting his culture clearly to non-Yaquis. As Dr. Spicer explains:

The sermon is concerned, primarily, although not exclusively, with ideas and rituals which stem most clearly from Christian sources, that is, from teaching of the original Jesuit missionaries who first converted Yaquis, beginning in 1617, and acquired their own shades of meaning for Yaquis, who for more than a hundred years during the nineteenth century were not in close contact with representatives of the Catholic Church; it was these special Yaqui interpretations, which had grown up through the centuries, that Don Ignacio was deeply concerned to have made clear in the transla-

tion and which resulted in Refugio's ultimately realizing that he was getting a new education in Yaqui traditions.²

His skill in interpreting his culture was refined as Muriel Painter engaged him to translate short texts she had gathered from fifty or sixty other Yaquis: deer songs, *pascola* stories, and many others describing facets of the intricate system of Yaqui tradition and performance. This work took place intermittently over a ten year period, and during this time she suggested to Refugio that he might write his own narrative. He responded with characteristic enthusiasm and dedication and turned over portions of his manuscript at fairly regular intervals. The concern for interpreting his culture, acquired in his translation work, guided his narrative. As Mrs. Painter received more and more of the manuscript, she became discouraged by the non-standard English and stopped soliciting the work, but Refugio was not to be put off. He was intensely concerned with the telling and continued to write. Mrs. Painter accepted the remainder of the narrative but came to see it as a document of more anthropological interest than literary value. Eventually she turned it over to the Arizona State Museum Archives where it remained for ten years.

In the spring of 1974, Dr. Spicer suggested that I read and consider the merit of the manuscript. Along with the original hand-written version and the typescript taken from it, he made available fieldnotes from conversations with Refugio during his work on Pascua Village, a brief personal history he had written about Refugio in an unpublished manuscript, notes from interviews with Savala by anthropology students, the script of a radio broadcast Refugio had done in 1941, and a file of his literary work.

I read the narrative, just as he had set it down:

In the beginning of 1900 the Federal government of Mexico, sent out a decree to get rid of all the Yaquis in the state of Sonora Mexico. By reason of this order. The governor of the state started persecution and execution of the Yaqui race in many cases even *Yoris* (Mexicans) were taken just because they spoke Yaqui.

In this tribulation I was born in a little town which is Magdalena south of the Border. In 1904 August. The persecution going on. My father to avoid being taken drifted to Arizona and got work in S.P. line on Benson-Nogales branch.

My mother at home was making corn tortillas to sell among the Mexican comadres. When my mother made trip to town with my brother who is living now the raiders came and they were both taken to jail.

The manuscript was rough, very rough, but Savala was writing in his third (Yaqui, Spanish, English) language. Punctuation was inaccurate, spelling confusing in places, and word choice imprecise at times. But from the beginning the content was dramatic and detailed, the style vigorous and distinctive, the tone serious and confident. Here was a portrait of an articulate man who had participated in and observed every aspect of Yaqui culture in Arizona. These were not random sketches but a carefully selected and inter-related series of events in his own life and the life of the Tucson Yaqui communities. The text contrasted sharply with the earlier Yaqui autobiography by Rosalio Moises, *A Tall Candle*, which narrates the author's alienation from his homeland in Sonora, his family, and finally, his culture, a portrait of a wanderer who rejected his culture and could describe it only in terms of his own isolation. Savala writes from within his culture, and his is the only written record by a Yaqui of Arizona Yaqui life and the ancient traditions and rituals at its foundation. Further, the manuscript offers a unique view of railroading, for no other rail laborer has written of his experiences as a gandy-dancer.

There were serious problems in the manuscript that would have to be confronted if it were to be edited for a general public. Refugio's enthusiasm for punning and willingness to make himself the butt of his own wordplay sometimes made him appear childish and simple in the text. For instance, in describing his military training, he says, "In the rifle range I was not good I did not aim to please." Omissions from the narrative also interfered with its comprehensibility. A lengthy episode in Savala's early manhood, an affair, the loss of the child born of it, and rejection by the woman, was never mentioned, though these events had a marked influence on Savala's life. Spicer's notes made the material available, but Refugio's omission of it made the motives for subsequent action in the narrative obscure. Fieldnotes from Spicer's interviews with Savala also made it clear that in his middle years Savala was haunted by a depression so severe that it led him to consider suicide. The events that caused his anguish, though, are presented matter-of-factly, with little attention to the emotional cost of the events upon himself. He simply recounts with detachment the details of his mother's illness and death, the deterioration and ending of a second love affair, encounters with unsympathetic strangers and patronizing Anglos, and lonely journeys. The absence of emotional responses to these events and Savala's consistent reluctance to examine the events of his life might puzzle a reader unaccustomed to the reserve characteristic in Native American autobiographies. Such narratives, and Savala's is fairly typical in this respect, are not confessional in nature. Emotional content is lean, motivation

often obscure, and feelings are often summed up, as Ruth Underhill observes, in "colorless phrases as 'I liked it,' 'I didn't like it.' For one not deeply immersed in the culture, the real significance escapes."³ A further problem was posed by the last third of the text, excessively clinical in detail, about Savala's hospital and nursing-home experiences.

The most radical editing in the text is in the final chapter. As Refugio reached the portion of the narrative describing his illnesses and hospital and nursing-home care, he became less selective in the events he described.

To go to the toilet I was put on the wheel chair and helped to sit on the bowl. During the night I got dirty and all wet till a presurecap was aplied This had to be pushed in to conect with the blader inside A rubber pipe conected to drain into a bottle undr the bed This thing caused great discomfort and had no relieve of urinating This also caused a siezure that made me tremble all over like fainting All my bones and muscles sounded rattling like breaking of egg shells I was very sick.

The major guideline in condensing this material was his own intention to reach a general readership. A deteriorating narrative would not engage readers, and the length of this section, far out of proportion to the time span covered in other chapters, demanded elimination of many paragraphs and sometimes whole pages.

Toward the end of the editing process, Refugio quite unexpectedly contacted Dr. Spicer. Spicer found him in the Tucson Veteran's Hospital, paralyzed on the left side by a stroke, but lucid, vigorous, and anxious to resume their association. He expressed willingness to meet me, discuss his autobiography, and give assistance. I went to the first meeting with anticipation tempered by a sense of awkwardness that came of knowing him intimately through his narrative, but not personally. He fulfilled my expectations formed through familiarity with his life story. He was pleased to know that his autobiography would reach an Anglo audience and willing to aid me however he could. His memory was astounding. He quoted whole passages of the text without faltering and expressed real pleasure in recounting events. In subsequent meetings we verified facts, dates, and names, and clarified certain events. When I explained the extent of the editing, he assured me of his agreement, eloquently stating that the project was mine as well as his, since I had "taken it into my heart." In further meetings, he expanded the meanings of Yaqui words in the text, discussed sources of some of his literary work, and occasionally softly sang one of his own compositions.

My work with his narrative and the personal friendship which developed have made clear the scope of Refugio's literary interests and accomplish-

ments. While his personal narrative is his longest work, his other writing and translations show him a songwriter, folklorist, and poet as well as prose narrator. The breadth of his work is made apparent by the autobiography itself but deserves special attention.

Much of Savala's life was taken up in manual labor for the Southern Pacific Railroad. In the course of his work on the rails, he developed talents as a song writer and singer. It may seem strange that a Yaqui Indian would contribute to an aspect of folklore which is generally viewed as intensely American, but Savala's contribution to the folklore of American railroading is not in the tradition of John Henry and Casey Jones, or other bigger than life figures from familiar tales and songs, nor does it center on the mystique of the locomotive like "The Wabash Cannonball." As in all his writing, Savala centers on his own experience. His addition to the folklore of railroading comes from participating in it and his familiarity with a folk form he learned from his exposure to Mexican culture and folk literature, as practiced in the enclaves of Mexican Americans bordering on Yaqui settlements in Tucson.

Savala was well acquainted with the Mexican *corrido* form and often composed songs for his fellow-workers' entertainment. He recalls that he made them up in Spanish and that most of them are lost now because he never bothered to write them down. When he talks about them, he recalls with amusement the comment by the mother of one of his friends, who was obviously not taken with his talents. She said he wasn't a good singer because he made up his own songs.

The best example of Savala's use of the *corrido* is his ballad "Steel Stew," originally composed in Spanish and later translated into English. It exists in several versions, the longest, twelve verses. Unlike the usual Mexican *corrido*, it is concerned with common rather than heroic events, and it centers on the activities and implements on a track crew rather than events in the life of a single figure, beginning with focus on the train and other equipment in the first four lines:

Early that morning the train pulled out
With all the material on platform cars,
Boxes of bolts and spikes and plugs,
Rail anchors, tie plates, and angle bars.

Places and dates are unimportant to Savala's ballad, as is specific identity for the foreman. Savala is more concerned with delineation of the typical than the individual. As so often in his writing, he is caught up in action and in the very romance of the words that define the equipment the laborers handle. The actors are representative:

For us it was only fun and play,
While some of the fellows who didn't know steel
Got scared of the work and ran away.

The episode is suggestive, the setting unimportant, the characters representative types. The song is a catalogue of the tools and accomplishments the laborers took pride in, and it is vividly narrated, as in the following lines:

The burrow crane, it lifted rails
The adzing machine, it planed the ties,
The screw machine, it tightened bolts,
But still the sweat ran down our eyes.

The ballad device of repetition is also illustrated by the above lines, as it is in the refrain, "And over a mile is a long, long run."

This ballad expresses pride in expertise and endurance that is common to the American folk tradition, but it is distinctly Refugio's in its focus on everyday events and basic skills of gandy dancers. No other track laborer has provided such a record of these specialized skills and tools on which the expansion of this nation depended. Both in his song and in the detailed descriptions of track laying, mending, bridge building, and maintenance procedures in his autobiography, Refugio has recorded the vitality of railroad labor.

The same detailed perception and expression that Savala applied to his experience in railroading is present in his response to nature and the events that invest it with meaning for him. Savala's unusual capacity for vitalizing well-known legends and for creating his own poems appears to come in large measure from his immersion in the sacred flower world. Yaqui tradition is pervaded by a reverence for the mysteries of the natural world. The desert and wilderness of physical nature are significant because they bear resemblance to the sacred landscape of the mythic past, the flower world. The roots of Yaqui legend and poetry are found in the *sea ania*, the flower world, where supernatural animals, most notably the deer, abide. It is a symbolic landscape related to the original Yaqui territory in Sonora, but not metaphorical in nature, passed down in ceremony and legend from the ancient past. It is a world of preternatural marvels and imaginative events. The flower fawn who dwells under the dawn is the source of many traditional songs, and the magical wilderness of the supernatural world provides the setting for most traditional tales.

Having spent most of his youth in an urban environment, Savala's

early introduction to the traditional magic of the flower world came through his family. They were rural people from small pueblos in Sonora where they had often heard the old stories repeated. His father was an especially able storyteller. His parents knew first-hand the enchantment of the desert wilderness, but they were removed in years and miles from the indigenous environment, and though their relation of traditional tales interested Refugio, it did not move him to record them or immediately use them as inspiration for his own work. His uncle Loreto Hiami, on a year-long visit from what Refugio, with his urban United States background must have seen as a legendary land, mesmerized the boy with his tales and prompted him to begin his own retellings. In his autobiography he recalls that something within him compelled him to listen and repeat the stories to his young friends again and again. The process of absorption and repetition left the tales indelibly imprinted in his mind. From Hiami he learned most forcefully how people lived in the land of his cultural roots. He discovered the mysterious sources of Yaqui ceremony and belief, and when he was urged to write in his early manhood, the rich reservoir of his uncle's accounts, so often repeated in his own mind and to his companions, was there for him to draw on.

The greatest portion of Savala's prose writing, other than the autobiography, is concerned with the retelling of traditional tales from Yaqui oral literature. Savala's first attempts were about Yaqui life as it had been dramatized to him by Loreto Hiami. At the urging of Miss Thamar Richey, school teacher at Pascua Village, he began to write what he knew of Yaqui tradition. Learning Spanish and English for Refugio demanded his own literary expression, and by 1934 when Dr. John Provinse of the University of Arizona came to know him, Refugio had a fairly substantial sheaf of tales and sketches; though expressed in imperfect English, they captured the character of the Sonoran Yaqui way of life. Most of these are incorporated into his autobiography. The variety of forms in the oral tradition is reflected in Savala's narrative: origin stories, ceremonial source narratives, culture hero legends, fables, character sketches, comic sketches, personal or family reminiscences, New Testament variants.

Many of the tales Savala preserved with very little change from oral versions he had heard, and all fit within the context of purposes and forms of traditional storytelling. As Ruth Warner Giddings points out in her study, *Yaqui Myths and Legends*, certain characteristics of Yaqui storytelling can be discerned. She notes:

Although many stories show considerable foreign influence, they are usually given a Yaqui background familiar to the narrator. The style of the

wording appears to be more individual than formal. However, different narrators are often consistent about the sequence of events. Formal endings are not always used. Kinship and occupations of characters are frequently mentioned. Names are usually given. Geography is often related to story action.⁴

She further explains, "The characters in early Yaqui stories are not elaborately drawn. They represent common Yaqui social personality, conception of supernaturals, and the animals."⁵ All of these traditional aspects of storytelling are evident in Savala's work, primarily because the traditional tale is nearly always the source for his versions. In "The Son of Nothing," for instance, the characters are types, the most important personalities given names, the geographical setting clearly defined, kinship and occupations explained in some detail, and a formal ending omitted. In many of his tales, for instance one concerning a bewitched young suitor, the transformation of animals into humans and the reverse is common, and animals consistently possess the power of speech.

However well Savala's versions of Yaqui tales conform to traditional forms and techniques, they are original in many respects. In the cases where other versions of his tales have been recorded, the individual style of Refugio's work is clear, as in the tale "The Singing Tree," one of the narratives central to Yaqui beliefs about their origins. The tale, as recorded by R.L. Beals in *The Contemporary Culture of the Cahita Indians*,⁶ is extremely terse; emphasis is on the predictions of the conquest and coming of Christianity and on the rejections of these prophecies by a large portion of the ancient population. The prophecies are general, and there is no characterization of the seer other than that she is a queen. In Edward H. Spicer's work, *Pascua, a Yaqui Village in Arizona*,⁷ the prophecies are more fully detailed. For instance, it is predicted that men would fly through the air and that people would talk to one another over long distances "without shouting." The origins of the people are suggested and the separation of believers and non-believers is given more attention. Still, there is little development of the central character and the events of the myth are merely a series of actions with no defined motivation. Savala's version however, also incorporated into his autobiography, is well-detailed, carefully molded to form a dramatic structure. He begins by describing the singing tree in detail and analyzing its effect on the ancient people. He creates an image of a crowd of puzzled and curious people and vitalizes the scene by singling out an elder to speak; he urges the people to call on the wise old woman of the forest to help them interpret the language of the tree. Arrangements are made for the old man to journey into the wilderness and return with the wise woman. The en-

counter between the two is revealing of Yaqui custom. The old woman has foreseen the coming of the messenger and welcomes him to her ramada where he greets her formally and advises her of his mission. Her characterization as a seer is defined as she allows him to finish his speech though she already knows his purpose. She explains she is too old for the journey. The scene is not only dramatic in form, but the moment is suspenseful. The only hope for interpretation of the tree's message seems lost. A turning point in the plot has been reached, and Savala advances the action by introducing the nymph-like daughter of the aged woman. She is humble and respectful but also intelligent and skillful, an ideal young woman, and she has been prepared by the mother to undertake the interpretation of the singing tree. Her extra-ordinary powers are revealed on the journey back as she avoids the hazards of the wilderness and remains untired despite distance and hardships. She is received joyfully and honored by the people, and they listen attentively as she interprets the message of the tree. The prophecies are less spectacular than in the other versions, but more penetrating in the sense that she defines the methods of sustaining life by planting and cultivating, while warning that the very processes that will sustain life will also bring a penalty, death. With pronouncement of this basic human concept, Savala shifts focus from her to the people who must choose whether to accept the price of humanity or reject it. As in traditional versions of the myth the group divides, but unlike the other versions where rejection is bitter and negative, Savala's tale ends with a final celebration by those who reject human life. He writes, they "gathered and danced the farewell dance and disappeared into the morning air, going underground to establish their own kingdom."

The significant difference between the traditional versions of the tale and Savala's is that Savala deliberately structures the tale for dramatic effect. He accomplishes this by describing three encounters: the first dialogue among the wisemen; the meeting of the elder and the wise old woman; and the encounter between Sehamoot, the young seer, and the wisemen at the singing tree. The major events are tied together by the journey outward and the return, with the turning point at the very center. The emphasis in the tale is not so much on the message of the magical tree as on preparation for acceptance of it. In the other tales, the prophecies cause dissention and bitterness, but Savala's separation of the people is peaceful and respectful.

Savala also emphasizes the magical nature of the prophecies by creating a magical setting and characters who possess extraordinary powers, thus the final scene of the tale is properly prepared for by the development of the character of the prophetess who has demonstrated worthiness

to act out the role of emissary for supernaturals.

The metaphorical language of the tale is also distinctly Savala's. In Beal's version, the tree is simply a "great pole,"⁸ in Spicer's "a tree without branches, like a telephone pole."⁹ Savala describes it as "A big dry tree with all its limbs almost crumbling to the ground" and notes that it vibrated "like the chords of a harp when touched by the passing wind." This is an especially appropriate image since the harp is a traditional instrument used for Yaqui ceremonial events. Savala consistently draws sharp visual images in the tale: Sehamoot arrives at her mother's house with a "young stag she had slain;" she appears before the people who expect an old crone, "a rough, sturdy wild-looking young woman who did not show the slightest sign of weariness." When she prophecies the use of seeds, the language is almost Biblical as she says, "It shall come to pass that, from the seas, water will be lifted in clouds and carried by the winds to the plains in the form of rain." Savala's version is invested stylistically with a dignity that is lacking in the briefer versions, and his emphasis on full development through detailed characterization, dialogue and well-defined motivation makes his version more immediate and artistically satisfying than the others.

The same devices and techniques Savala uses in this tale are evident in his versions of other traditional tales. He does not abandon the traditional formulas for the telling of legends; rather, he amplifies each aspect of the tale, vitalizing the traditional elements by dramatically associating them with everyday life and "other primary interests such as beliefs about the magical aspects of nature, the supernaturals and surrounding environment, the accepted Yaqui customs, and the mores and social attitudes of the tribe."¹⁰

While most of the tales Refugio has written are versions of Yaqui folk literature, some appear to be entirely original as, for instance, "The Harper's Legend" which he wrote in Pascua Village on July 10, 1936, to preserve an event which had occurred in his father's life. While this invention of a tale in written form is not entirely analogous to creation of an oral tale, the legend does comply with the characteristics of Yaqui traditional story-telling and implies both the motivation and process of traditional folk literature.

Savala is more than a narrator of traditional tales, and even more than the creator of traditional type tales, for he sometimes goes beyond prose to create a poetic narrative by using the substance of a tale to form the content of an original poem. At the end of his harper's legend is a notation "from the Harper's Legend" which is followed by a poem entitled "To My Father":

'Weep thou not, it is thine spirit of the art
That stirs in thee so much emotion.
Thou art mine and come to mine vast mansion.
I will teach thee cord by cord in the harp.'

The little boy was ready with the answer to start.
The Goddess of the art, Talia, won a decision.
The little boy gripped the gift with great ambition,
So much with it as lover did never part.

With his harp, the passing wind a lovely song
He heard at noon, not in vision nor in dream.
It is a dream, it has been with him so long.
He heard above in the air the fowls scream.
In their wingbeats he heard the music throng.
In children he found the love, flowing life's stream.

Savala ends his harper's tale by saying, "When the little boy wept, no one saw him, but he told me not long ago, and at the age of seventy, he loved exceedingly to play the harp for little children." He goes on to say that the man is dead, and that he grieves because he was Savala's own father. Thus the final paragraph of the legend becomes the link between tale and poem and both become part of the narration of a crucial event in his autobiography. In the first verse of the sonnet, the goddess of music comforts the weeping child, promising she will teach him to play the instrument he loves. The child replies eagerly in the second stanza and succeeds in his desire to play. The final stanza links his talent with nature in the metaphoric wingbeats, as well as setting up a continuum from his own childhood desire to play the harp to the pleasure his music has given successive generations of children. In relation to the tale which inspired the poem, the final line, "In children he found the love," suggests Martín Savala's love for music as a child and the fulfillment of that love in the lives of his own children.

The Italian sonnet form, which Refugio recalls as being familiar from his reading of Spanish literature as a young man, is irregular in metrical form but follows the traditional rhyme scheme. It is a form he used in only two works, in both instances to memorialize his deceased parents, suggesting he deliberately selected a formal and disciplined mode to temper the emotional intensity of the subject matter.

In the sonnet written after his mother's death, there is no evidence of a companion prose work. The poem is more direct, developing the theme of grief transmuted to joy through faith. In the second stanza Savala writes, "I wandered as never before in vain,/ So bitter was the spot

wherein I fell," but in the final lines consolation is derived through trust in God:

She was reclaimed by the Master Divine,
And the justice of God forever the same
In my darkest moment his light did shine.

The "sharp pain" of the opening lines is balanced by the "light" of the final line.

It is only in these two poems that Savala gives full range to the intensity of his emotional life. Neither the content of his personal narrative nor the subjects of his prose tales allows expression of the loss and grief experienced in his mature life. These two poems, however, indicate an attitude held by the poet toward his work in verse form. Central to most of his poetry is a concern with faith and a sense of ultimate fulfillment of love, whether between parent and child in the sonnets, or between God and mankind as in his major poetic work, "Jesus, Mary, and Joseph." In the later work, his most ambitious writing in verse, Savala draws on traditional Yaqui prose narrations of the events leading up to the Immaculate Conception and Nativity. He explains that the content is drawn directly from Yaqui lore. Savala first worked out the Immaculate Conception portion of the poem in prose form. The narration begins with the familiar story of Mary's selection of Joseph to be her husband when his staff "bloomed like the lilly in springtime." The story is commonly known among Yaqui people and is likely derived from apocryphal gospels. Again, Savala has drawn on his prose to form the content of his verse.

The central portion of the poem is based on Yaqui legends, and Savala attributes the final part, which describes the betrayal of Christ, to his own reading of the gospels. The poem as a whole reflects Jesuit influence in the early history of the Yaquis which resulted in the adoption of Christian stories into the body of Yaqui lore. In the literature formed from this meeting of cultures, the outstanding characteristic is the adaptation of narrative content to conventional Yaqui forms and the application of Yaqui characterization and setting. The poem demonstrates an even further mingling of culture since Savala chooses to put his Yaqui/Christian narrative into verse form and uses images and devices which intimate familiarity with 18th century poetic techniques.

The influence of his reading in English literature is suggested in still another literary form, the character sketch. Among them are descriptions of ceremonial positions held within the community, such as the following discussion of the role of the coyote singer in the traditional ceremonies of the Yaqui warrior society:

The coyote is a symbol of trouble to the Yaqui. Therefore, the war dance was originated with the Yaqui army and is performed by soldiers.

The dance is performed by three dancers. The headdress is of coyote skin and hawk feathers. In one hand he has a bow and arrows; in the other a short splintered *carrizo* cane with which he strokes the bow.

The singer calls the dancers. When they are far, he makes signal with the drum and the dancers come rushing to him. Good dancers sometimes do amusing tricks. Sometime during the night the coyotes sneak through the crowds to where the *pasco ohola* is dancing. They request water or cigarettes and when the *pasco ohola* comes near them, they grasp him and run away carrying him along into the coyote quarters where the *pasco ohola* is dressed in a coyote outfit. They make him dance a funny song. Then the man in charge of the feast pays a fine to take the *pasco ohola* back to the ramada. This act is called 'The Stolen Goat.'

This sketch and those describing performances by other ritual participants are brief and undramatic, but they are indicative of Savala's knowledge of the various aspects of ceremonial life and his expertise at economic presentation of occupational and ritual definition. Written in his first burst of literary effort, they became the basis for his long and thorough development of material concerning Yaqui beliefs and ways which was continued during his association with Muriel Painter and is full described in his autobiography.

While the actual number of poems in the whole of Savala's literary work is small and his use of words and poetic forms is sometimes less than effective, there is considerable justification for speaking of Refugio Savala as a poet. It is apparent in all aspects of his literary work that his is an imagination out of the ordinary and that his poetic transmutation of experience is a pervasive tendency. His stance, apart from the political and social complexities of his community, and his consistent response to the natural world and need to express his vision of life in words mark him as a man of letters. Savala is no ordinary Yaqui Indian, despite his involvement in traditional occupation and espousal of traditional beliefs, yet neither is he a man unique to his culture. Another many-sided Yaqui man of letters has been his contemporary in the 1930s and 1940s, Ambrosio Castro, a Sonoran Yaqui. Though he wrote only in Yaqui and Spanish, his works also include *corridos*, tales, legends, myths, creative prose, and poems, some of which were published in Spanish in a work by Alfonso Fabila¹¹ and others in English in *Folk Literature of the Yaqui Indians* by Ruth Warner Giddings.¹² The similarities in the literary works of Castro and Savala suggest they represent a not uncommon type of

Yaqui artistic sensibility and intellectualism, one which may have occurred in the original pueblos in the past. These artistic traits may reappear as the tradition on which they are nurtured continues to be passed from generation to generation.

While Savala's poetic imagination and literary productivity have made him a person of special importance to his community, other aspects of his intellectual dedication have broadened his impact to the non-Yaqui community as well. He is a figure of considerable influence in the cultural life of Tucson, in particular, and the Arizona-Sonora region in general, for more than any other Yaqui, he has contributed to the Anglo understanding of Yaqui culture. Because he has fully participated in Yaqui life and studied the traditions of his culture thoroughly, he is in a unique position to both preserve and communicate his insights. His literary bent of mind and his voluntary assumption of the role of teacher have suited him to the position of cultural interpreter, and his fluency in Yaqui, Spanish and English have contributed significantly to his facility as a teacher of culture. Though in his youth his interest in Yaqui traditions was primarily a personal one, his immersion in traditional lore placed him at an early age in the role of cultural preservator. His language and culture continued to nourish and eventually compel him to express his knowledge of his society and its values in written form, and with that, his introduction to academic and literary outlets for his talents ensued. As he matured in his understanding of his culture and in the modes of expressing his knowledge, his association with Dr. Spicer and Muriel Painter revealed to him the value and importance of his stance within his own culture and the possibilities of communicating the richness of it to a larger society.

Refugio's dedication to the role of interpreter of his culture has not been achieved without price. He has continually suffered the frustrations and depression that accompany marginal existence. Caught on the fringe of two societies, partly by this emotional and literary tendency toward observation rather than full participation and partly by intellectual choice, he has foregone the comfort that a narrower view of life might have offered, but his choice has not been without compensation. When he speaks of his life, it is with obvious satisfaction in his role of writer and teacher. When he recalls the past, he often quotes lines from his autobiography or whole stanzas from his poems. His literary vision is incorporated so fully into his perception of the past through his autobiography that interpretation of his culture has become inseparable from his person. Though all his written and oral contributions reflect this immersion in culture and desire to communicate it to others, nowhere is it so clearly exemplified as in his autobiography where the intention to inform

a non-Yaqui audience is clearly observable, and where his personal participation in Yaqui life, his understanding of traditional lore, his literary expression of the oral tradition of his people is voiced in many forms, and his role as cultural interpreter is described in detail. The autobiography draws together all aspects of man and artist into an accessible, informative, and thoughtful portrait of a unique personality and culture. It vividly illustrates how the complex culture of the Yaqui people permeates every facet of Savala's life: his attitudes, values, personal relationships, employment, and art. Both consciously and unconsciously, Refugio Savala is committed to the Yaqui way of thought and behavior.

Savala has lived his life in the growing cultural and ceremonial cohesiveness of the Yaqui settlements in Arizona. In his autobiography there are glimpses of the hardships and joys the enclaves of refugees experienced. Like most immigrants entering the United States, the Yaquis were poor, but they were not strangers to poverty. Their life in Sonora had been spare, based on subsistence farming and manual labor. Exiled from Mexico, they began life in Arizona at the bottom of the economic stratum, taking the lowest paying jobs as cotton-pickers, ranch hands, and railroad laborers. If there was self-pity, anger, envy, it seems to have been submerged in the struggle to build a new life. Savala himself never indulges in self-pity, nor appears to have awareness of it in those who surrounded him in his youth. He conveys his own willingness to meet the hardships of life, grateful for the opportunity to pursue his life in freedom. He describes the realities of poverty and the uncertainties of remaining in one place from month to month clearly, but emphasis is on security of family, pleasures of building a new life, and satisfactions of boyhood in an era of exciting activity in Tucson.

An intense interest in the people and events which he experienced and a steady vision are perhaps the two outstanding characteristics of Refugio Savala's autobiography. As his narrative progresses, the enthusiasm and vitality of his approach to life are tempered by a series of tragedies and personal losses, but Savala never indulges in sentimentality. He writes about his life with some detachment, preferring to present the setting, the characters who people it, and the events descriptively, seldom analyzing or probing significance. The result is a record of a man and of all the influences brought to bear on him worked out in chronological narrative and elaborated through the poems, tales, sketches and songs integrated into his life history. That is not to say, however, that Savala's narrative is merely a well-detailed case history, simply a sociological document which focuses on a representative Yaqui male and his cultural milieu. Savala is hardly the typical Yaqui, and he is not engaged in a documentary. Refugio Savala defines himself as a writer and teacher, and he set

out consciously and deliberately to present his life and his culture to a non-Yaqui audience. Though it began as a response to a request from an anthropologist, it became a personal life story of historical, cultural, and literary value.

NOTES

1. Rosalio Moises, Jane Kelly Holden, William Curry Holden, *A Tall Candle* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1971).
2. Edward H. Spicer, unpublished manuscript, Tucson, Arizona, 1976.
3. Maria Chona, *The Autobiography of a Papago Woman*, ed., Ruth Underhill (Menasha, Wisconsin: American Anthropological Association Memoir, 1936), p.3.
4. Ruth Warner Giddings, *Yaqui Myths and Legends* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1959), p. 16.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 17.
6. R.L. Beals, *The Contemporary Culture of the Cahita Indians*, Bureau of American Ethnology Bulletin, No. 142 (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1945), p. 223.
7. Edward H. Spicer, *Pascua, A Yaqui Village in Arizona* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1940), p. 240.
8. Beals, p. 223.
9. Spicer, *Pascua*, p. 240.
10. Ruth Warner Giddings, "Folk Literature of the Yaqui Indians" (Thesis, University of Arizona, 1945), p. 180.
11. Alfonso Fabila, *Los Indios Yaquis de Sonora* (Mexico: Secretaria de Education Publica, 1945), pp. 77-78.
12. Giddings, *Yaqui Myths and Legends*, pp. 21-22, 28-41, 45-64, 67-68, 89-92, 95-105, 117-30, 131-36, 143-57, 160-62, 166-70.