Before reviewing this brand new, delightful collection of Tz’utujil folktales, a few words about the context are in order. Since the 1930s anthropologists have produced numerous accounts of Tz’utujil, K’iche’ and Kaqchikel Maya living around Lake Atitlán in the mid-western highlands of Guatemala. Recent studies deal with the Guatemalan internal war (1962-1996), in which state and, to a lesser extent, insurgent forces terrorized and murdered thousands of Maya villagers and tore apart the fabric of their cultural and communal lives. Postwar criminal violence, economic uncertainty and despair have been added to old bruises – racism, poverty, weak government, overbearing oligarchies.

Given all the scholarly and activist attention to the Lake Atitlán region, certain gaps in knowledge are surprising. For example, there was no full-length Lake Atitlán life history until 1981 when James D. Sexton, Regents’ Professor of Anthropology, Northern Arizona University and Ignacio Bizarro Ujpan (pseudonym for Pedro Cholotío Temó), a Tz’utujil elder from San Juan la Laguna, published Son of Tecún Umá. In Tecún Umá and three other books, Cholotío Temó chronicled his and his community’s life and, in a way, Guatemala’s from 1973 to 1998. Sexton, Cholotío Temó’s editor and translator, wrote lucid, detailed essays placing Cholotío Temó’s life-histories in historical, cultural and political context. These detailed accounts of a particular life, place, culture and historical period are and will remain significant additions to Mesoamerican literature and scholarship.

Choltío Temó and Sexton have also published on another, perhaps somewhat less neglected topic – Tz’utujil folktales, The Dog Who Spoke being the third in the series. In The Dog Who Spoke Cholotío Temó relates 20 stories and folktales, Alberto Barreno and son Carlos, of Kaqchikel/Ladino parentage and from the tourist town of Panajachel, relate the other 13. Sexton and his student, anthropologist Fredy Rodríguez-Mejía, edited and translated the stories. Lake Atitlán enthusiasts will notice that Barreno’s step-brother, an anthropologist, worked with Sol Tax, the famous pioneer Lake Atitlán ethnographer.

Some of the stories are traditional, others said to report “true” events, and several were written expressly for the book. Most are Tz’utujil, a few Kaqchikel, but many are also heard in Ladino (roughly non-indigenous) villages, and it is not clear if the sources are Mayan, European, African, or even Jewish for that matter (see “King Solomon and the bee”). If not exactly exclusively Tz’utujil, a majority of the stories are Tz’utujil variants of common Maya themes and figures, e.g., animal spirit guardians (naguales) and witches (charactoles). However, Sexton does not worry too much about the precise origins of the stories or how much they do or do not depend on exclusively Tz’utujil ethos and practice.

Sexton says the tales can be told by and to anyone at any time; they are not confined to ritual moments. Almost all are short – about 3 pages in length. Many of them are social or moral commentary, and often cautionary. Some are simply amusing (my favorite is the “Living dead man”) and racy, others a bit heavy, but rarely as grisly as Grimm’s tales – in general, Maya are more restrained (repressed?) and stoical than Europeans. Animals who speak, help or threaten humans are important (in 7 of the 33 stories) as are family relations (in another 7). Several tales involve the natural landscape. Some, though far from all, assume or reflect Tz’utujil moral views – respect for elders, treating animals with kindness, the inevitability and virtue of hard work, humility, generosity (and expectations of reciprocity). They also celebrate cleverness – rabbits who outwit coyotes – and its limits. Cleverness like envy can backfire. Oral aggression and duplicity are relatively common in the stories. Given the experience of Maya people in Guatemala, there is, perhaps surprisingly, little expression of hate or fear of racial, class or political others.

Several indigenous Mesoamerican themes are noticeable by their absence. Space is limited, so one example may do – the pattern number in the stories seems to be three, whereas the number four might be expected as Maya and other native Americans live in a world of quadrilateral symbols. Of course, cultures change constantly, overlapping...
with other systems, some elements coming from antiquity, some from today, creating new kaleidoscopic patterns that express variations of universal human problems, from family relations to finding the proper balance between rectitude and self-striving.

The translations – “free” not literal (xvii) – are first-rate and completely faithful to the patterns of speech in Guatemala. The orthography is reader-friendly and conforms to current linguistic standards. Sexton’s comments, the glossary, and the stories are all given in Spanish and English. By all rights, The Dog Who Spoke should become a text of choice for teachers and students who want to learn Spanish (or English).

Some may wish for more exegesis, although Sexton does provide enough of the context for readers to understand and enjoy the folktales. It is not always clear how or why the stories are “Tz’utujil.” But if Tz’utujil take them as “theirs” then so they are. I wish Sexton had compared and possibly contrasted the themes in the life-histories and the folktales. Much more important, the Sexton-Cholotí Temó works are rich, deeply textured expressions of the life and ethos of contemporary Tz’utujil. Mesoamerican scholars will welcome The Dog Who Spoke, and, let me add, it is also clearly intended for a broad audience, including high school students. These wonderfully translated and delightful stories provide all of us with access to another particular way of life in which we can also recognize ourselves.

References

* Norman B. Schwartz is Emeritus Professor, University of Delaware