

Class, Race and the Tri-ethnic Tradition of the Americas
in «Venganza campesina» by Manuel Zapata Olivilla

by

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Afro-Colombian writer Manuel Zapata Olivilla developed his ideas about tri-ethnicity and the tri-ethnic tradition in great depth in his monumental epic novel Changó el Gran Putas. Broadly defined, tri-ethnicity describes the interaction of Native American (indigenous), African and European peoples and cultures in the formation of the modern Americas. Its adjective form, triethnic (triétnico), stands in sharp contrast to two other adjectives commonly employed to describe the mixture of peoples and cultures in the Americas - *mestizo* and *mulato* - because each of these refers only to a mixture of two entities. *Mestizo* most often means a combination of indigenous and European peoples or cultural elements. *Mulato* commonly refers to a combination of African and European peoples or cultural elements.

If we bring this concept of tri-ethnicity, and later the more inclusive tri-ethnic tradition, to our reading of «Venganza campesina» (1961), a short story published just over twenty years before the novel (1983), we can gain further insight into the narrative events and their

context, and we can view this concept at an earlier stage of the author's literary career. On the other hand, just as intriguing as bringing tri-ethnicity and the tri-ethnic tradition to a reading of «Venganza campesina», is bringing these concepts to our reading of events in Colombia today (2005), just over twenty years after the publication of Changó el Gran Putas.

If we read «Venganza campesina» at the plot level - that is, the level of the narrative that consists of a series of events that leads to a climax - we clearly perceive the elements of class and race and how they combine to give the text its narrative power. Less obvious, but no less powerful, is a reading of the text's use of symbols, discourse and global epic elements that combine to demonstrate that the tri-ethnic tradition is also present in the context of the narrative events.

In Changó el Gran Putas, Zapata Olivella recounts the centuries-long diaspora of African peoples to the Americas that began with the rise of the Atlantic slave trade less than a decade after Christopher Columbus landed in the New World. This historical process brought Africans, Europeans and indigenous peoples of the Americas into intimate contact. Their cultures, languages, belief systems and

bloodlines clashed, combined and coexisted until they formed the Latin America we know today.

Always central to this three-way encounter is the role of power relationships and the concept of justice. European empire and colonialism drove the historical events that formed the New World of the Americas and that formed the continuing basis for its development. Zapata Olivella explores the misuse and abuse of power as one of several interrelated themes in Changó el Gran Putas. But the misuse and abuse of power is the chief narrative thematic element in «Venganza campesina» from the title itself until the last line of the text.

When Emilio Góngora, the son of the all-powerful regional cacique, rapes the fourth of four young, unmarried women in the community, the townspeople predict a bloodbath. This time, the cruel and reckless young Góngora has raped the sister of Dionisio Montes. Dionisio, although illiterate, is known for his bravery, intelligence and dedication to defending the upright reputation that his late father worked his whole life in establishing for their family. The introductory narrative description is broken by laconic dialogue in classic campesino style as the townspeople follow Dionisio's actions after news of the rape. In four quick exchanges they applaud his bravery but

condemn his cause as doomed: one man against the cacique's many. But when Dionisio changes course, heading for the jungle instead of the Góngoras' ranch, the voices are quick to call him a coward and condemn him for backing down. For four days people talk about nothing but the fugitive, without knowing for sure where he has gone or why. But they speculate. Some think he went to commit suicide; others think he went to consult the spirits of the jungle for a way to appease his desire for vengeance.

Days later when Dionisio returns, the voices have forgotten him, and they figure he must have forgotten the offense. He looks ragged and dirty, but somehow seems to wear a strange and indescribable smile.

As if nothing had ever happened, Dionisio goes home, cleans up and goes down to the town's canteen for a little rest and recreation. Of course he runs into Emilio, who can't help bragging about his "exploits" in front of Dionisio. Unfazed, Dionisio proceeds to play dominoes with his friends. The voices take note: "'Asunto concluido'- debieron pensar..." This time the dialogue is unvoiced, subtle, almost an afterthought, as the text's punctuation indicates. But nobody notices the bottle that the "campesino ofendido" is carrying in his pocket. If the

voices think Dionisio has forgotten the offense, the narrator's language implies quite the contrary.

Dionisio has stalked his prey well. He knows Emilio's cronies would be carrying him home drunk, and he knows how to beat them to the ranch and uncork the contents of his bottle onto the sheets of Emilio's bed before the men arrive to "tuck in" their boss.

The reader has received ample hints of the poetic justice awaiting Emilio. But the reader still has a surprise waiting to be revealed. With Emilio's men safely on their way after leaving their boss laying under the covers of his bed in a drunken stupor, suddenly Emilio emerges screaming in pain from the dose of deadly poison he receives from the "mapaná 'rabo seco'", one of the most lethal of all South American snakes. Dionisio has stalked and captured this viper in the jungle in order to accomplish his family's *venganza*. Emilio has only enough time left to hear Dionisio recite the litany of his sins; Emilio must understand that his pain is no accident, that vengeance is being delivered.

And now comes the climax on top of the climax: as Dionisio recites Emilio's victims' names and the circumstances of each assault, the reader discovers that the first two women Emilio violated were la negra Cata and

la negra Lorenza. This revelation produces a shock, because there has been no previous mention of color or race in the narrative. Now the reader must rethink the narrative. The reader may wonder if color and its mention is a random circumstance. With two victims of four referred to as "negra" almost as a part of their names, "significant" replaces "random" as the operant descriptor for the role of color in this narrative. So now the reader must generate an internal dialogue to explore questions such as, where does class end and race begin and, what is the relationship between class and race and justice and injustice?

Tri-ethnicity, the interaction and mixture of the indigenous, African and European bloodlines and cultures, is a major theme in Manuel Zapata Olivella's perspective of the Americas, and especially Latin America. The world sees Latin America, and indeed Latin America sees itself, as divided and fragmented into classes, races, clans and nationalities. Some Latin American governments and ruling elites have prescribed homogenization of ethnicity and culture in an attempt to forge national unity (Vasconcelos in Mexico, Trujillo in the Dominican Republic, Rojas in Argentina), filtering out what they consider undesirable ethnicities and cultural characteristics - usually the

African and indigenous - and emphasizing their idea of the superior or more desirable ethnicities and cultural attributes: the European.

Colombia was no exception to this post-Independence Latin American Eurocentric perspective:

From 1851, the Colombian State promoted the ideology of mestizaje, or miscegenation. This whitening of the African population was an attempt by the Colombian government to minimize or, of possible, totally eliminate any traces of African or indigenous descent among the Spaniards. So in order to maintain their cultural traditions, many Africans and indigenous peoples went deep into the isolated jungles. (Murillo 12)

Murillo's words point us to a key portion of the text of «Venganza campesina» that implies a symbolic, historical and social link between the African and indigenous peoples of the Americas. This link, in turn, is an important component of the tri-ethnic tradition. On the afternoon his sister was raped, Dionisio Montes sharpened his machete and headed toward the outskirts of town. But the townspeople were surprised when he took a route opposite to the one that led to the ranch of Emilio Góngora, the son of

the regional cacique and the man who had raped Dionisio's sister.

Siguió la ruta de la selva, allí donde moraba el tigre, donde por las noches se quejaba los zorros y en las mañanas se encontraban huellas de sangre. Por cuatro días sólo se habló del fugitivo sin que nadie supiera a ciencia cierta por qué se había refugiado en la montaña y en qué parte de ella se hallaba. Los supersticiosos decían que había ido a invocar los "mohanes" de la selva, los dioses que mitigaban la venganza y devolvían la paz al espíritu. Otros sospechaban que buscaba la muerte en las garras de alguna fiera, abochornado por la deshonra de la hermana y la imposibilidad de toda venganza. (Zapata Olivella / Kooreman 40-41)

In their book Africans in the Amerctas: A History of the Black Diaspora, Michael L. Conniff and Thomas J. Davis point out the dramatic similarities between the flora and fauna, the climates and the geology of Africa and South America. They attribute these similarities to the legacy of continental drift. Millions of years ago the two continents were joined; the "hump" of Brazil filled the Gulf of Guinea and the two land masses fit together like two pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. The authors also point out

the irony that human history acted to reverse the effects of geological history. Through the Atlantic slave trade and the forcible transfer of millions of Africans along with a transfer of plants, animals, technologies, cultures and social structures, many regions of Latin America became highly Africanized. Through this process, human history served to reunite two regions that had been severed and separated from each other through continental drift (Conniff and Davis 89-90). The two authors are referring specifically to Brazil in this citation, but we know that the Atlantic slave trade was carried on by various European powers and dispersed African peoples and affected indigenous peoples in similar ways across the South American continent, the Caribbean and the southern part of North America. As recently as the 1970s, Allen Counter and David Evans, two African American researchers at Harvard University, traveled deep into the interior of Suriname on the South American continent where they lived among African communities who by choice remained isolated from 20th century life and followed the traditional ways of their ancestors: men and women who fought a guerilla war with their Dutch would-be-enslavers for 100 years before negotiating a treaty guaranteeing them land rights and peace (Counter and Evans xvi, 1-2). These communities had

developed extensive social and commercial relationships with neighboring indigenous communities. The experience of Counter and Evans that they documented on film was produced in part on video by television journalist Tony Brown and titled Black and Red: The First World - The Secret History of the African and Indian Tribes of South America.

Today in Colombia the link between the African descended communities and indigenous communities played an important role in the passage of Law 70, the Law of Black Communities, in 1993. This law laid the foundation for establishing legal collective title (beginning in 1996) to lands in the Chocó region where Blacks have lived for many generations. Marino Córdoba Berrio, who founded and serves as President of the Association of Displaced Afro-Colombians (AFRODES), described the critical cooperation between Black and indigenous Colombians that preceded the passage of Law 70:

In 1991, Colombia adopted a new Constitution. Blacks were not represented in that Constituent Assembly, but we asked the indigenous representatives to take up the defense of our culture and land rights. They won some recognition of our rights that were small, but important. (Córdoba 1)

Zapata Olivella has developed and refined his argument for the role of tri-ethnicity in the formation of the Americans throughout his body of work. He writes on the tri-ethnic tradition in his autobiographical works, his essays, his anthropological works and his narrative.

Especially in Changó el Gran Putas, his narrative masterwork, Zapata Olivella traces the role of tri-ethnicity in the careers of well-known historical figures such as Benkos Biojo of Colombia, Morelos of Mexico, Padilla of Venezuela and Alejandrinho of Brazil. But he also delves deeply into the influence of tri-ethnicity in the personal and cultural development of fictional protagonists, men and women who serve as anonymous archetypes born and growing to maturity under a colonial system where the sons and daughters of slavemasters were often of mixed race and mixed class, and the sons and daughters of slaves had indigenous mothers or fathers.

In Changó, freedom movements themselves can be offspring of the tri-ethnic tradition. John Brown, a Caucasian American led one of the most radical expressions of the abolitionist movement in the United States: an armed insurrection. But he saw his movement as incomplete and unsuccessful unless slaves and ex-slaves participated and fought at his side along with members of his own family.

In the 1970's, an Angela Davis-like protagonist is a political activist and follows the inspiration given by her native American ancestor and spirit guide who appears to her in recurring visions.

Zapata Olivella does not perceive true unity and a true cure for division and fragmentation in a filtering out of one culture or ethnicity in favor of another. Instead, he sees the path to true unity beginning with a frank acknowledgment of the role that all races, classes, ethnicities and cultures played in the formation of the Americas, even when the roles clash or contradict one another. The tri-ethnic tradition thus goes beyond ethnicity. It goes beyond race and class. Tri-ethnicity is a metaphor for healing and wholeness where each eye sees and acknowledges every member of the body. Tri-ethnicity is a metaphor for the elimination of injustice and the establishment of just and equitable power relationships. The tri-ethnic tradition represents an affirmation of who we are as individuals in the New World and of who we are as Latin Americans and Americans. Finally, the tri-ethnic tradition represents our willingness to affirm our kinship in the human family, to seek to understand to mystery of our shared past and to use that knowledge to negotiate a more enlightened and harmonious future.

In the preface to *Chango el Gran Putas*, Manuel Zapata Olivella presents this concept of tri-ethnicity and the tri-ethnic tradition in brief form, before he goes on to develop it at great length in the novel. Zapata Olivella establishes, even before beginning his novel, that the formation of the Americas is rooted in conflict and suggests that the reader must assume the voice of each role and experience the dialogue between and among them to more fully understand any one. Zapata Olivella indicates that the primary voice, the primary perspective will be of African origin, but that at any given moment the reader should expect to hear voices of different origins, even from different dimensions of time or space: "Al compañero de viaje: ...en esta saga no hay más huella que la que tú dejes: eres el prisionero, el descubridor, el fundador, el libertador." (Changó 56) ("To my travel companion: ...in this saga there is no trail except the one you leave: you are the prisoner, the discoverer, the founder, the liberator.")

At the end of his forward, Zapata summarizes his concept of the tri-ethnic tradition that the reader is about to experience: "Tarde o temprano tenías que enfrentarte a esta verdad: la historia del hombre negro en Américas es tan tuya como la del indio o la del blanco que

lo acompañarán a la conquista de la libertad de todos."

(Changó 57) ("Sooner or later you had to confront this truth: the history of the black man in the Americas is as much yours as that of the Indian or that of the white man who will accompany him to the conquest of liberty for all.")

If we read the dialogic interplay of historical/class roles posited by Zapata Olivella early in the preface to Changó as part of the tri-ethnic tradition he describes at the end of the preface, it suggests a possible unified reading of *Venganza campesina*, *Changó el Gran Putas* and the current situation of armed conflict and political instability in Colombia all as dramatic chapters in the continuing narrative of the founding and development of the Americas since 1492. In «*Venganza campesina*», the reader is Emilio Góngora, perpetrator of injustice and abuser of power. The reader is also Dionisio Montes, seeker of justice and nemesis of the evil-doer. And the reader is the spiritual presence of the indígena (Native American) who lived on the land in harmony with nature before the arrival of the European or the African.

The observer of today's Colombia is the citizen and civilian of Bogotá who may escape the brunt of the day to day violence that plagues his or her land and people. But

the observer is also the fearless and ethical elected official who faces death daily to better the conditions of her people. The observer is the politician who accepts bribes, resigned to his country's unfortunate and immutable fate. The observer is the army commander, the guerilla commander and the paramilitary commander calling the shots. And the observer is the *soldado*, the *guerrillero* and the *paraco* in the trenches. He or she is the displaced Afro-Colombian, the displaced indigenous person and the displaced campesino. In today's Colombia, there is no trail except the one that you leave.

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