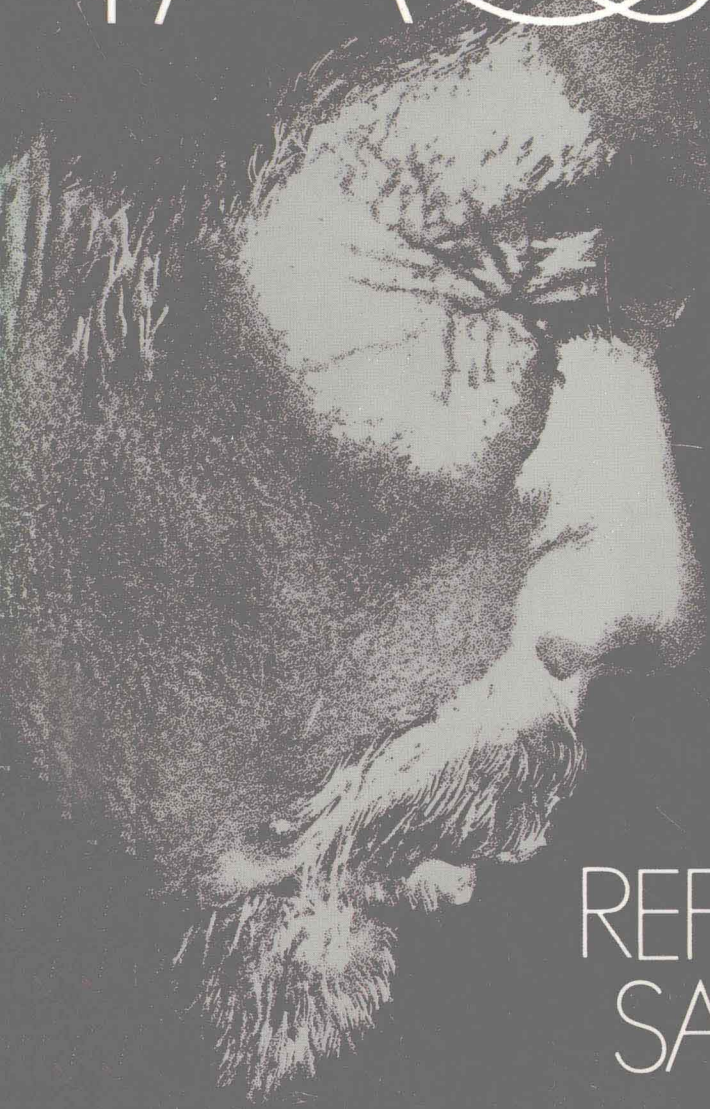


AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF A
YAOUI
POET



REFUGIO
SAVALA

THE
AUTOBIOGRAPHY
OF A
YAQU
POET

by Refugio Sayala

Edited with
Background and Interpretations
by KATHLEEN M. SANDS

The University of Arizona Press
Tucson, Arizona

About the Editor...

KATHLEEN M. SANDS has worked personally with Refugio Savala since 1976. A specialist in American Indian literature and folklore, she joined the English faculty at Arizona State University in 1977. Sands holds a Ph.D. in literature from the University of Arizona. She has published articles in journals of American Indian studies and American literature.

Photographs courtesy of: Arizona Historical Society, pp. 72, 81, 94; George Dante Iacono and the Arizona State Museum, cover and frontispiece; David J. Jones, Jr., p. 184; Rosamond B. Spicer, pp. 4, 17, 24, 26, 56, 144, 170.

Second printing 1981

THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA PRESS

Copyright © 1980
The Arizona Board of Regents
All Rights Reserved
Manufactured in the U.S.A.

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Savala, Refugio.

The autobiography of a Yaqui poet.

Bibliography: p.

Includes index.

1. Savala, Refugio. 2. Yaqui Indians—Biography.

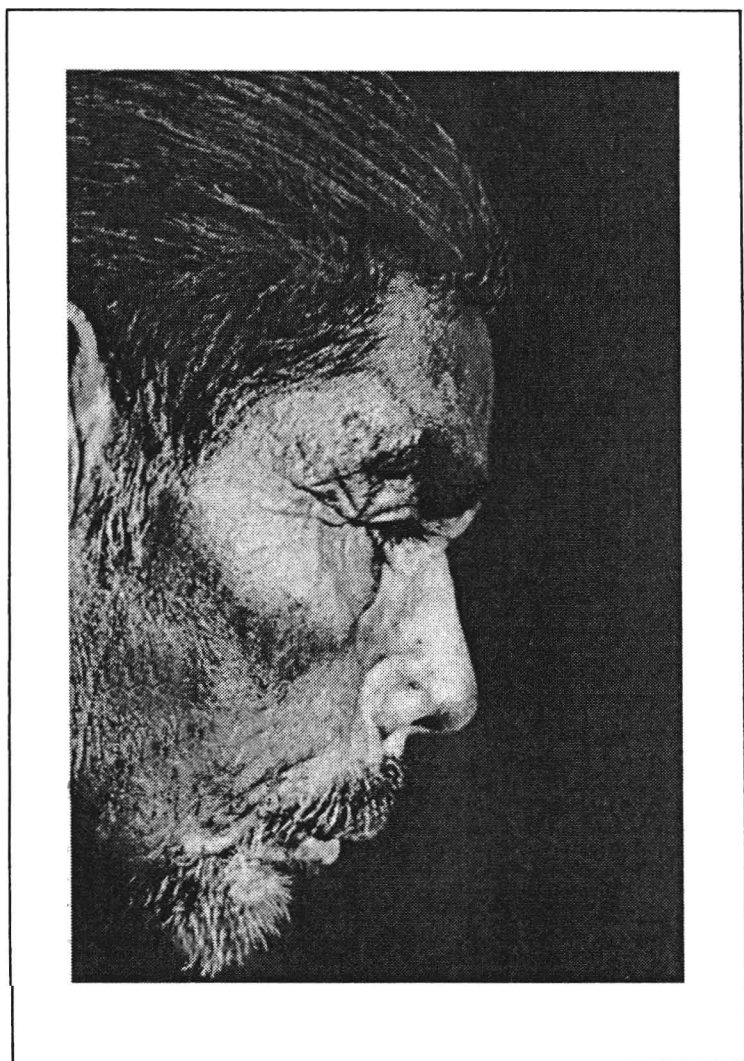
I. Sands, Kathleen M. II. Title.

E99.Y3S28 970'.004'97 79-19817

ISBN 0-8165-0698-1

ISBN 0-8165-0628-0 pbk.

THE
AUTOBIOGRAPHY
OF A
YAQUI POET



Refugio Savala, 1955

PREFACE

The Man and His Work

Refugio Savala is a person of poetic sensibilities, a man of words. His autobiography is a detailed and comprehensive portrait of the growth of a man and artist in a period that parallels the growth of the Yaqui culture in Arizona.

In his youth, Refugio 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 unique cultural heritage, his desire to become a man of letters intensified. His driving interest in language and in Yaqui perception and way of life inspired him to attempt literary forms familiar to the non-Yaqui world in order to communicate his personal and cultural vision to those who might otherwise never know of it. In the course of his lifetime, he has translated oral tales, written his versions of Yaqui legends, described Yaqui personalities and occupations in character sketches, recorded and analyzed ceremonial

Preface

songs and sermons, composed original ballads, created a body of personal poems, and set down his own and his family's history in his autobiography.

More than in any other aspect of his literary accomplishments, Savala demonstrates in his autobiography both his growing comprehension of the culture which bred him and his expanding facility with literary forms. Though it is his most ambitious written work, Refugio himself would probably never have considered setting down the story of his own life; he is a modest man. It was his long-time friend, Muriel Thayer Painter, with whom he had worked in translating a Yaqui Easter sermon and other traditional works, who suggested that his life might be of interest to the general public.

In 1964, while Refugio was in poor health and living in a Tucson nursing home, he showed Mrs. Painter some pages of a manuscript on which he had been working. They contained fragments of the story of his life, written in English and testifying to Refugio's ever-present urge to put his experiences and impressions into writing. These vignettes, however, were rather impersonal accounts of events.

Mrs. Painter suggested that Refugio try to personalize more fully what were essentially descriptions of various aspects of life in Yaqui communities. She told him to write about what he knew best, Yaqui culture, but to explain it in terms of his family's participation in it. She explained carefully that he should tell the story of his family in detail, as he had heard it and taken part in it.

Writing as Mrs. Painter suggested, Refugio slowly conceived the present form of the autobiography. Over a period of five years he set each incident down separately in a careful English longhand, then turned it over to Mrs. Painter, who typed it just as he had written.

The narrative which follows is essentially what Refugio wrote for Mrs. Painter. Some deletions and changes have been made to make it read smoothly, and the structure of separate parts has been reformed into logical chapters.

Refugio finished his autobiography in the late 1960s, and though both he and Mrs. Painter intended that it be pre-

PREFACE

sented to a general readership, it instead was consigned to the archives of the Arizona State Museum in Tucson, along with the other manuscript materials used in this volume. The project was not given any further attention until the spring of 1974, when I was told about it by Dr. Edward H. Spicer.

Only one reading convinced me that Refugio's narrative was significant for both its cultural and literary merit. Here was one of less than twenty existing written autobiographies of Indian men—an original piece of work, not an "as told to" narrative that was in any way affected by an intrusive recorder/editor.

I became determined to achieve Refugio's goal of giving his story to a non-Yaqui world. With continuing support and advice from Dr. Spicer, I began to edit the manuscript for publication.

After a year of work on the project, Refugio's location became known. When I finally met him, I found he fulfilled every expectation I had formed of him through my familiarity with his life story. The hours I spent with him increased my admiration, and I was honored by the acceptance, trust, and friendship he subtly and kindly offered me.

Refugio did not tell all in his autobiography; he is a rather private man. Hence I compiled a series of interpretive chapters to supply additional information and commentary on the events of the autobiography. These chapters were placed after the narrative, not before, for I wanted to avoid editorial intrusion in Refugio's very personal story.

Throughout the interpretive section, the emphasis is on the development of Refugio the writer, on the refinement of his poetic vision and his skill in expression. This is fitting, for Refugio, despite all his travels and all his occupations, is essentially a man of words.

KATHLEEN M. SANDS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am very grateful to Dr. Spicer for his confidence, advice, and support during my work on this narrative, and to the University of Arizona Foundation which, on his recommendation, granted funds for the research and translation necessary for the completion of the work. To Dr. Spicer and the Arizona State Museum, I am also grateful for the collection of Refugio's literary works and the character sketches in unpublished manuscripts. Without these resources, a full portrait of Savala would have been impossible.

I am also indebted to Western historian David Myrick, who made possible much of the clarification of railroad terminology and practice contained in the notes. His personal and professional enthusiasm for the project was invaluable.

For information concerning railroad policy and history in the Tucson area, I wish to acknowledge Charles McKissick and members of the Tucson Southern Pacific Engineering Department, who took time to educate me.

Acknowledgments

I also extend my thanks to my friend and colleague Rebecca Lee for the hours she spent criticizing the manuscript, especially for her thoughtful comments and suggestions. The University of Arizona Press deserves special credit for the sensitive and careful handling of the manuscript in all stages of editing and production.

For photographs, great appreciation goes to Rosamond B. Spicer, who not only provided pictures taken contemporaneously with Savala's young manhood, but who also, with the invaluable aid of Donald Bufkin of the Arizona Historical Society, did the research for the map of Tucson included in this book.

Finally, I extend my deepest appreciation to Refugio Savala for the strength of his narrative, the power of his style, and the resonance of his character.

K. M. S.

INTRODUCTION

Refugio Savala, Cross-cultural Interpreter

By EDWARD H. SPICER

Refugio Savala's family, one among many groups of refugee Yaquis in about 1900, plodded behind their donkey cart northward through Sonora. All along the unpatrolled border mothers with babies, kinless old people, orphaned boys and girls cared for by compassionate friends, and occasional fortunate families who had somehow managed to hold together—Yaquis by the hundreds walked the desert trails. They searched for freedom from the daily fear of being shot, hanged, or herded together and shipped by boat from Guaymas southward into permanent exile. Refugio, tiny refugee with his loving family, lay in the cart unaware that he was one of the many suffering the most desperate crisis of their history.

Refugio Savala's life spans that phase in the experience of the Yaqui people during which they faced the threat of extinction, held fast, and went on to survive. In Sonora during the

later nineteenth century, fertile Yaqui land was coveted by the landlords who ruled the state. Yaquis fought to keep their land from being absorbed into feudal estates on which, if the governors of Sonora had their way, they would have become landless peons. Yaqui resistance to this fate was so determined and so effective that federal troops had to be sent to back up the Sonoran soldiers whom the Yaquis had come to despise. In the face of Mexico's full military strength, Yaquis were forced out of their ancient towns along the Yaqui River. Nevertheless from mountain strongholds they continued to wage guerrilla warfare with such telling effect that President Porfirio Díaz declared a policy of deportation of all Yaquis to the henequen and sugar plantations of Yucatán and Oaxaca. Colonel Emilio Kosterlitzky, commanding the Federal Rural Police, relentlessly rounded up Yaquis wherever they could be found in Sonora. By 1908 he had picked up thousands and either killed them or shipped them southward. What had been a population of at least 20,000 was rapidly reduced to less than 5000. Many not picked up in the net of the Rural Police escaped into Arizona. If President Díaz's government had not fallen in 1910, only the few hundred Yaquis who had fled to the United States would have lived to carry on the proud Yaqui tradition.

It was in the new Yaqui settlements in Arizona that Refugio Savala lived the major portion of his life. We glimpse in his autobiography something of the tribulations suffered by the early Yaqui pioneers. We see their beginnings as penniless immigrants, forced to squat on land and build makeshift houses. We see them start at the bottom in the lowest paid jobs as railroad workers and cotton-pickers. We get some feel for early twentieth century Tucson viewed from this particular level of society.

However, it is characteristic of Refugio Savala that he tells his story without the slightest tinge of self-pity. He does not look upward to compare his boyhood with that of people better off. Rather he looks steadily at everything immediately around him and describes his enjoyment in it, as a boy in a good family coming into contact with warm and friendly teachers. There is no doubt about the poverty of the squatter communities or the people's desperate uncertainties; they

INTRODUCTION

never knew if they could remain where they had settled from month to month. These were the realities, and Refugio recounts them. But his emphasis is on the delights of family life and boyhood in a freer and, as he saw it, happier era in Tucson.

For Yaquis in this period the contrast with what they had left behind was tremendous. For the first time within the lifetime of most there was no sudden crack of rifles, no constant fear that Rural Police would ride up and demand whether they were Yaqui or not. There was still the hope that the desperate guerrilla fighters in the Bacatete Mountains would somehow, against impossible odds, keep the Mexican soldiers from taking every inch of the sacred homeland. In fact there were Yaquis here and there among the refugee population of Tucson and the Salt River Valley who urged that Yaquis in Arizona smuggle ammunition and guns to the Yaqui River, where a few guerrillas held out through the first decade of the twentieth century. But all this was further and further behind, and days began to be full of new satisfactions as jobs became steady, families regrouped, and children were all around.

At first Yaquis in Arizona had no understanding of their legal position. They had been accustomed to hiding their identity in Sonora and even had been forced to abandon their distinctive ceremonies, because such observances would reveal they were Yaquis, and neighbors might tell the Rural Police. Yaqui refugees had in fact been given political asylum in the United States and were not regarded by immigration officials as subject to deportation. This, however, was nowhere stated in any official document until 1931, and so the situation was still doubtful as Yaquis saw it. Nevertheless they did begin to revive their most characteristic and important religious ceremonies—in 1906 at Guadalupe Village near Tempe and in 1909 at Tierra Floja Ranch near Tucson. At the ranch the Yaqui laborers brought the whole complex organization of the traditional Easter ceremony into operation. From this time on the Yaquis may be regarded as having laid their new foundations in the United States. In Sonora, however, the Díaz government had not yet collapsed, and deportation and massacre continued until the Revolution in 1910.

The revival of the religious life of the Yaqui towns made it once more possible for Yaqui children to learn the traditional ways in which the heart of their culture was expressed. As a boy Refugio Savala became ill, and his mother made a vow to the Virgin Mary that he would dance with the Matachin dancers for three years, a vow which he fulfilled. Other than this, Refugio did not participate formally in the developing communities; he stood aside from the various political cross-currents in the villages, but maintained a deep and continuous interest in all that took place, especially in his home community of Pascua Village. Such interest, without holding office or participating in the political conflicts that evolved around such men as Juan Pistola, seems wholly consistent with Refugio's basic approach to life—a blend of loving appreciation combined with personal detachment, which is in fact the mark of the literary person.

It may come as something of a surprise to find that a railroad track laborer saw beauty in iron spikes and rail clamps, in the tongs of the gandy dancers, in the tamping of the rocks between the ties, and in the heaving up and carrying of the rails by the eight-man gangs. But Refugio finds as much to make poetry about in railroad tools, routine daily jobs, and proud accomplishments like bridges and smooth trackbeds, as he does in the desert trees of Cañada del Oro or in the pine forests of the Mount Shasta country. There have been others who have expressed something of railroad work and workers; but in Refugio's songs we find much more than the delight and pride expressed in such American folk traditions as the saga of John Henry, the steel-driving man. Refugio's joy in track labor and its accoutrements is a different thing from the lore of John Henry; it is the product of an authentic poet seeing and feeling beauty without the need to shout tall tales at the top of the voice.

The breadth of Refugio's humanity is apparent as he moves from steel tools to the natural world. There is quiet savor to be found in both his prose and poetry as he writes of the desert trees, plants, and flowers, a pleasure rooted in close observation. This is apparent in the account of his summers as a "walking cowboy" with his boyhood compan-

ion at the western end of the Santa Catalina Mountains near Oracle, Arizona. The feeling is deeper in his later account of how the Oregon forest moved him as he viewed it for hours on end while on military guard duty.

It is hard not to connect Refugio's delight in natural things with his awareness of Yaqui traditional poetry in the deer songs. Nearly all of these sing of the *seya aniya*, the "flower world" in which the supernatural deer lives "under the dawn." Most give some vignette of this "magical" world, as he calls it, from which the deer and his music come: the "flower fawn" among the trees, the deer rubbing his velvet-covered antlers on the tree branches, a cloud towering up and coming down as rain. The special feeling that Refugio has for nature seems somehow connected with his capacity for immersion in the traditional ancient flower world, which he has interpreted for non-Yaquis.

The personal qualities which appear in Refugio's writing are important for understanding his human quality as a poet and as a man, quite apart from the particular culture and language which have given him his chief nourishment. However, these remarkable personal qualities also have contributed to an exceptional kind of culture contact in the Arizona-Sonora milieu. Refugio has been a figure of some importance in the cultural life of Tucson, and hence in the whole region of Sonora-southern Arizona. More than any other Yaqui he has brought about significant cross-cultural understanding between the native Yaqui and the Anglo cultures. His contribution here, stemming in part out of his poetic and literary quality of mind, is unusual in any situation of contact between very different cultures.

Of course, there is no such thing as "cultural contact." There is contact rather between individuals participating in different cultural traditions. Refugio has throughout his life been very much a participant in Yaqui tradition. In contrast with a political and leadership involvement, Refugio's immersion in Yaqui society has been intellectual and emotional—a wellspring of his interest in life from his sensitive youth through his later years in a hospital room. His depth of feeling for the core values of Yaqui tradition and

concern for shades of meaning have made him an exceptional interpreter of Yaqui culture. Moreover his interest in the role, deepening through the period of his maturity, has been successfully coupled with his intense concern to master the intricacies of three languages.

Apparently on his own initiative in the first burst of his youthful talents, Refugio tried to write about Yaqui life in the homeland as it had been told to him by his uncle Loreto Hiami. Coming somewhat mysteriously out of what was for the Arizona-bred child the legendary land of his parents, Don Loreto was a force in Refugio's life that left its permanent mark. The boy had felt a great compulsion to listen and then a similar need to repeat the *etehoi* (tellings) to his companions; the result was indelible formulations of how people had lived in the old country, as well as what were to the Arizona youths the mysteries of Yaqui ceremony, ritual, and belief.

For Refugio literary expression was also a necessary part of learning Spanish and English. When a retired Kansas schoolteacher, Miss Thamar Richey, became deeply involved in Yaqui affairs and suggested that Refugio write out in English what he knew of Yaqui tradition, he had Don Loreto's accounts ready in his mind. The enterprise received further impetus when Professor John H. Provinse of the University of Arizona came to see Refugio in 1934-35. The young Yaqui man produced a sheaf of sketches (some of which appear in this book) in imperfect English but with honest feeling for Yaqui life in Sonora. They carry some of the character of the "rural" life that his parents had lived, and the mountain Yaqui life, as Refugio calls it, which is to say, the life of those Yaquis who took refuge in the Bacatete Mountains during their almost continuous fighting with the Mexican soldiers.

The next phase in this aspect of Refugio's life as cross-cultural interpreter was for him a period of profound new experience which he remembers both as a discipline and an exciting creation. In the spring of 1939 the great anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski came to Tucson for a brief stay. During the visit he became interested in the Yaqui Easter ceremony and inspired a Tucson woman, Muriel Thayer Painter, to begin what became a lifetime study of that com-

plex and beautiful ritual. Refugio was not in Tucson during Malinowski's residence, but in 1947 I introduced him to Muriel Painter in what was the first meeting of a long and fruitful association. Their first period of work together involved the translation into English of a long sermon in Yaqui, which a Maestro of Pascua Village had allowed to be recorded on discs in 1941, before tape recordings had come into use. The process of making a really satisfactory translation required first a careful transcription of the long discourse. It was in making this transcription that a new phase of Refugio's life began.

University of Arizona scholars had developed a way of writing Yaqui which Refugio immediately recognized as much more exact and understandable than the rough and ready orthography which he already knew and which Yaquis had used for centuries in writing letters to one another. He has said that learning to use this system of writing marked a new understanding for him not only of Yaqui, but also of the other two languages which he had been using all his life. He worked regularly for months under the direction of Mrs. Painter until a complete and carefully checked transcription had been produced.

The next step in the translation made it clear that Refugio possessed a genius for the work on which he had embarked. It involved the closest possible contact with the Maestro Ignacio Alvarez, in an effort to become aware of every shade of meaning which he had intended. The necessary discussion between Refugio and Don Ignacio was carried on, of course, in Yaqui. In the course of it, it became apparent that Refugio was thoroughly capable of listening and learning and not imposing his own understanding of Yaqui words and phrases on the older, experienced ritual specialist. Long periods of discussion were required before Refugio was ready to try the translation into English. Discussion was also often necessary between Refugio and Don Ignacio on the one hand and Muriel Painter and myself on the other.

Ultimately there emerged a translation which was essentially Refugio's, and we had no doubt that it was a rendering into English of what the old Maestro thought and originally