

>> From the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C.

>> This is Janice Hyde at the Library of Congress. This December the Librarian of Congress, Dr. James. H. Billington, will offer the public an unprecedented American celebration of Mexico. The event will feature Mexico's diversity and cultural legacy. It will also explore what it means to be a Mexican American, an identity that is claimed by 10% of the population living in the United States today. The conference will serve as the stage for two premieres, the unveiling of the Martin Ramirez, Madonna and the debut of a remarkable documentary film, filmed over the course of 30 years, the History of the Mexican Revolution. For this event, the library has gathered a star studded group of speakers. Among them is Mexico's leading anthropologist, Dr. Miguel Leon-Portilla, who will be honored with a Library of Congress Living Legends Award. The two day celebration, which will take place in the Coolidge Auditorium on Thursday, December 12 and Friday, December 13, 2013, will be accompanied by an exhibit of the libraries Mexican Treasures. Public hours will be from 9:30 am to 5:30 pm. For more details visit [www.loc.gov/celebration-of-mexico](http://www.loc.gov/celebration-of-mexico). And now it is my pleasure to introduce our featured guest, Dr. Miguel Leon-Portilla. Dr. Leon-Portilla is a distinguished, highly decorated, Mexican anthropologist and the world's foremost authority on Nahuatl, the ancient language of the Aztecs, which is still spoken in Mexico and in some communities of the American Southwest. He has been a professor at the National Autonomous University of Mexico School of Philosophy and Letter since 1957. He also serves at University as the Director of the Historical Research Institute and member of its governing board and is currently the Emeritus Researcher of Historical Research Institute. He is a prolific author and his numerous books include such works as An Exploration of the Philosophy of Nahuatl, which has been translated into 15 languages, A Compendium of the Indigenous Literature of Mexico and a Translation of a Nahuatl story of the Virgin of Guadalupe. He holds an MA with distinction from Loyola University in Los Angeles and a PhD from the National Autonomous University of Mexico, UNAM. Dr. Leon-Portilla, thank you so much for joining us.

>> Thank you to you also.

>> What is the relationship between language and culture? Do you think language reflects culture or helps to shape it?

>> Well this is somehow a very difficult question. There are many theories conceived by linguists, anthropologists, philosophers, about it. I would first going to describe what is the meaning of language? Language has two components, one anatomical, that is physiological, in our bodies. And the other one is mental, or if you prefer, spiritual. The component or anatomical component includes a number of parts of our body. It's a very complex system. The minimal unity of articulated sound, that is of clear sound, is called Phoneme. There are different phonemes according to the place where the L is projected. The linguists [inaudible] sound or it's a [inaudible] stop and so on. Now if you have one phoneme, it's just one articulated sound. If you have a combination of various phonemes, it's a word. If you have a combination of several words, it is a sentence. If you have a combination of several sentences, it is a text. Well this is what I think about language, language is innate in human

beings, Chomsky says. We're not used to one language. There are many languages and the many languages are not innate because, [foreign language] is our Spanish word innate, then all human kind would speak only English or Spanish but there are many, more than 5,000 languages. So the possibility of language yes, is innate. But the human language, no, the human language is learned, learned when we are babies from our mother. That's why languages are called mother languages. Those were learned since early as childhood. Now culture, to me, is whatever is created by humankind. Anything you can imagine, if it is created, imagine it organized, developed, it is culture. Even those are things, I mean, it's not just an animal act, it is a cultural act. Now culture developed along the centuries in different ways, in different countries by different people but the only component of language which is the capacity we have to symbolize symbols. Symbol means that you concede something to express another thing. Now our minds have this capacity. If you with your mind have been more in the United States you would say water for water. Chemist says it is 5% 20 Oxygen. But if you were a Spanish speaking person you would say Agua. Or if you're a French speaking person you would say l'eau. So there are different languages and this language symbolize with a different sound, specific sound, whatever exists on earth. Then this is a connection between culture and language. We cannot create anything, we cannot produce anything without language because language permits us to think precisely and with clarity. So language is a permanent in the context of culture to be a gold medal to develop, to create, to organize something. Of course culture gives us language, the different cultures, organize the expressions in different ways. How language was born, that's another thing that has been the subject of many theories. I suppose at prehistoric times, man began to point things and say look, this is water, water, water, water, so many times that people began to think that water was physically related to this water. Of course it's not physically related because if it were the only way to refer to it would be just one language. But there are many languages, it means there are many different symbols. But now the marvelous thing is that humankind has the capacity of expressing symbols in many different forms and those symbols approach reality in different forms. They conceive it in different forms. Language and culture are basically related. Culture cannot be developed without language. Culture influences language. Language also is a contingency for culture to organize itself to develop.

>> The next question I have is related to this and that is to what degree can an outsider, one who is not a member of a culture or a speaker of their language, understand and appreciate the poetry and literature of others?

>> Well to say that an outsider can understand and enjoy a composition conceived by a person of a different language and culture has two forms of action. One is yes, he can and another no, he cannot in the same way. He cannot enjoy, understand, in the same way. Why? Because let's put example of one play by William Shakespeare. If you are an English speaking person, or even if you have learned English and you are familiar with the culture of English speaking countries, then you will, you refer to your own culture. Let's say if this was a city in which people move around, when you think of the city in which you are living or you have been living, which city is scientifically different from a city in China

or in Turkey or in Japan or even Mexico, in that respect, and China, does not understand and enjoy the same composition in the same form. He can understand and enjoy in different form because classical compositions particularly which survive to continue for the centuries, Shakespeare or Cervantes or Miguel, the author of [foreign language] in Spanish, or [inaudible] so beautiful, so deep, that they survive. And because they survive, they enjoyed not only a toast of the same culture, a toast of the same language but in translation by many millions of people. But the experiences to which the text is related are different from the experiences to any person in modern days have, to begin with. So the possibility to understand and enjoy in the same way and enjoy and understood those who were living in the same time and the same culture is impossible. But nonetheless you can enjoy it. So you see in one respect if you belong to the same culture, you enjoy more simply and more adequate. But anyway, there is a possibility open to even outsiders. I will just make an example, Heraclitus, a great philosopher, said nobody can enter into the same river twice. Why? Because the water is different. Running water so it is an impossibility. Nobody can read a text twice, the same text. But nonetheless anybody, I'm including [inaudible] can understand and enjoy it in different ways, the text, the classical text, maybe.

>> What lessons can we learn from Nahuatl culture, especially anything that might help us cope with some of the more vexing problems facing the world today?

>> I believe Nahuatl culture in general, the indigenous cultures of the Americans are a source of inspiration for modern man. We move around with anxiety, try to be ready to be on time. We try to prepare this or the other thing we have been asked to do. So at times our lives are inflicted by anxiety, not by peace. The Columbian man, like many Indians today, now there are about two million people who speak Nahuatl, they see life, enjoy life in a different way. They do things with calm, with no pressure. For instance, they are making little toys for kids. They paint them. They polish them. They dialog with their own hearts. That's a beautiful expression in Nahuatl that says [foreign language], I am in dialog with myself. Describing the various artists, several texts which are in Nahuatl, insists that the artists, the [foreign language] is in constant dialog with his own heart. You may ask him how did you receive this text, vision, Indian text? Well we know that the Columbian Mexicans have writings, writing systems. The Mayan have developed a complete, almost perfect, writing system, to convey their ideas and feelings. These texts are included in what we call [foreign language] or painted books. Now when the conquest of Mexico took place, some decided to say the culture has aged and has transferred the ancient wisdom from the books and the Latin alphabet, they have learned from the missionary priors. And that's how we have [inaudible]. If you imagine a library of Mexico, it's a beautiful text, our University has furnished two years ago, which is [foreign language], Mexican songs full of wisdom. We have also dialogs between different poets and stages. Stage one we call The Dialog of Flower and Song, Nahuatl [foreign language]. What do we mean by it? We mean, it's a metaphor, a symbol that means art, deity, poetry. The famous poet, Nezahualcoyotl. He was born in 1402 and he passed away in 1472. He lived 70 years. He was Lord of Texicoco, a town close to Mexico City. He

said, I will pronounce it in Nahuatl after I give the English translation, he said

[ Foreign language ]

Now my heart knows it. I am listening to a song. I am contemplating a flower. May it not wither. That is the discovering of symbolism. We were saying that language really is conveying symbols. So for this man everything in life is conveyor of symbols. There's another beautiful text which is the dialog for flower and song. There was a ruler of another town [foreign place] not far from the city of Pueblo. The Lord of this place invited several poets and the question was what do you mean by flower and song? [inaudible] said flower and song is a gift of the gods. We receive it but then we spoil it. Another said flower and song, what it is is what we [inaudible] we see marvelous images of colors but then they vanish down. And they do not come to a conclusion, the Lord who invited them to the dialog says I'll say something I feel everybody is to agree, flower and song is perhaps the only way to say true words. In other words to really approach the reality of the world, the best way is by means of symbols, of metaphors. Here everything is open to flower and song. The only conclusion [foreign language] reached is flower and song that is what makes possible our friendship. So I believe that we can learn from the literature from what we see in our everyday lives when we approach Nahuatl speaking persons or mixed speaking persons, if we approach them we'll see that they have a deeper kind of happiness. They have not an anxiety. They are not anxious to make money. It's different. They take pleasure. It's another possibility to exist. This is something we can learn from them, from Nahuatl and indigenous culture in general.

>> We've been hearing from Dr. Miguel Leon-Portilla who will appear at the Library of Congress celebration of Mexico, which will be held on Thursday, December 12 and Friday, December 13 in the Library's Coolidge Auditorium from 9:30 am to 5:30 pm. Dr. Leon-Portilla, thank you very much for joining us.

>> Thank you, Dr. Hyde.

>> This has been a presentation of the Library of Congress. Visit us at [lloc.gov](http://lloc.gov).