

René Acuña
Biography¹ and Bibliography
Born: June 13, 1929, City of Guatemala
Died: January 20, 2018, Tlaltenco, México, DF

René was born into a well-to-do Guatemalan family. Aside from the family's townhouse in Guatemala city the family also had an hacienda which produced coffee. René spent his early life between these two family homes.

René's early education was heavily influenced by Catholic teaching. He felt early on that he was destined for the priesthood and became an ordained Jesuit priest. He went to Spain to continue his studies at university level. However, upon returning to Guatemala to take up his duties as a priest love got in the way and he got married which of course precluded his continuing on in the priesthood. After he was defrocked he left Guatemala to continue his studies at U.C.L.A. in the late 1960's and by 1973 had received a doctoral degree in philosophy. During this time the marriage produced three children.

By the mid 1970's René joined the faculty at U.N.A.M. and was part of the Centro de Estudios Mayas. There he stayed first as a member and then as emeritus until his death.

¹ This biographical sketch is based on bits and pieces which I learned about René's life while we worked on various projects. It may not be accurate for two reasons: 1) a faulty memory on my part and 2) the disjointed manner in which I received information about his life which has led me to assume certain things which may not be true. His son Olivier Acuña have read this article and made some observations which are incorporated here.

I first contacted René Acuña in the late 1970's because I wanted to get the microfilm of the Hispanic Society's Solana Vocabulario. I was told that in order to get the microfilm I had to contact and get permission from the last person who had asked for the same, who happened coincidentally to be René Acuña. Thus began a long period of correspondence punctuated by visits, first in late 1982 and then two three month working stints, one in the summer 1992 and the other in the fall of 1994. The 1982 visit took place in his family home in Culhuacan and the rest in his walled-off enclosure in Tlaltenco.

Sometime between the first visit and the second one René and his wife separated. It must have been a bad experience for René because he lived in Tlaltenco like a hermit. He had very high walls built around his property as an indication that he wanted nothing to do with the outside world. And indeed, except for his daughter and her family, he had almost no visitors all of the time I was there. And he especially loathed women, from which I gather that his separation from his wife must have been a very bitter blow to him.

In February, 2001, René visited me in Milford Ct during his tour of various libraries to check out more primary sources for things he was working on. By this time we had gotten all of the Franciscan vocabularies punched into the computer along with several Franciscan publications such as the Coronel *Discursos...* and were able to make comparisons of various examples of usage in the vocabulary entries with the religious texts. It quickly became obvious that several examples of usage in the vocabularies were derived from the religious texts. We decided to work up an article about the history of the vocabularies. This article, *THE MAYAN FRANCISCAN VOCABULARIES: A PRELIMINARY SURVEY*, was published by Centro de Estudios Mayas, Vol. 24 (2003). While only my name is given as the author of the article, as I pointed out in the Acknowledgement René played a very important role in the development of the article.

The last time I visited with him was in the fall of 2013 when he invited my wife Leonor Kim Yu aka Nochi and me to stay at his home in Tlaltenco.

René was a prodigious publisher of books and articles as the accompanying bibliography can attest. From the early 1950's through the mid 1960's his main interest was in poetry. Then came an interest in indigenous literature which began with the publication of *El Rabinal Achí, teatro prehispánico*. This interest continued to be his main focus throughout the rest of his publications.

Aside the items listed in the Bibliography there is one minor addition to the things which René did. Throughout the 1980's Patricia Amlin was working on an animated film of the Popol Vuh using images from Mayan vases as the basis for the figures used in the film. For the final version of the film which came out in 1989 two minutes into the film one can hear René reading the opening lines of the Popol Vuh. Michael Coe, one of the people who helped Patricia with the film, suggested she contact René to do the reading.²

A source close to the family has kindly sent me the following:

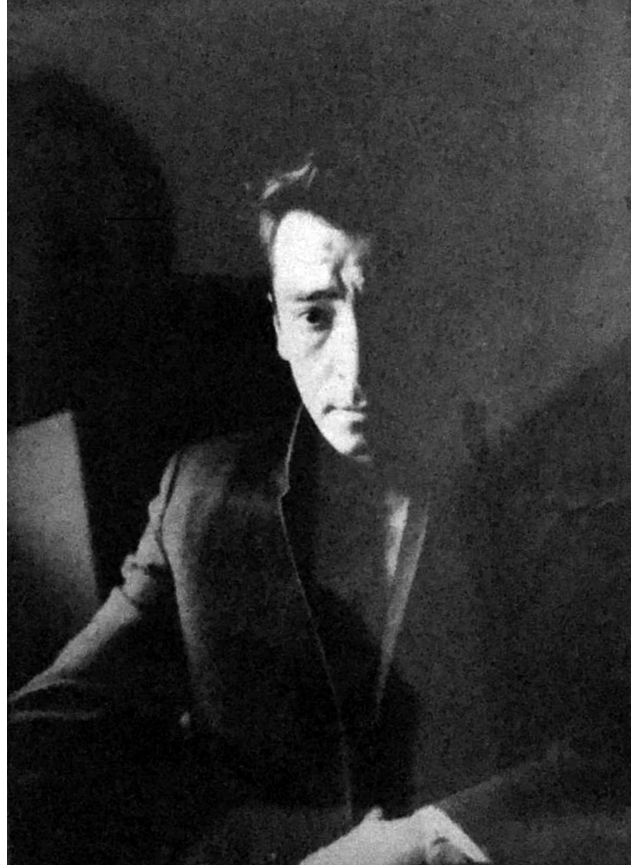
Desde muy joven, en el seminario jesuita de Guatemala, Rene escribía poesía y tenía como mentor al jesuita español y poeta Ángel Martínez. Poco después de ordenarse sacerdote recibió un premio relevante en poesía, y la Embajada Española en Guatemala le otorgó una beca de Cultura Hispánica para estudiar en la Universidad Complutense de Madrid.

Ahí fue compañero de aula con su futura esposa, y después de tres años ella le acompañó en su regreso a Guatemala. De vuelta a su ciudad natal fue nombrado Asesor de Folklore en Bellas Artes. A partir de ese nombramiento estuvo realizando varias investigaciones de campo especialmente en el pueblo de Rabinal, y quedó tan profundamente impresionado al entrar en contacto con los vestigios de la antigua cultura maya que su vida tomó un nuevo giro.

Para terminar, mencionaré que por su amplio conocimiento del latín y su probada erudición lingüística, la Universidad Autónoma de México le encomendó para su publicación diversas investigaciones, ensayos y traducciones sobre algunos autores clásicos grecolatinos entre los que destacan: Virgilio, Cicerón y Tito Lucrecio Caro. También hizo una recopilación de las cantigas de Pero Meogo, trovador gallego-portugués del siglo XIII.

En realidad, Rene trató temas bastantes diversos. Le interesaba mucho el teatro y fundó algunas revistas. Pero consideré enviarle una visión global.

² See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FHSOGryN-DA>



René Acuña as a young man



René Acuña in 2013 with Mucuy Bolles and Leonor Kim Yu in Tlaltenco



René Acuña in 1994 walking his dog Yala
on the slopes of the extinct volcano Tetlalmánche

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