



MACABÉA

REVISTA ELETRÔNICA DO NETLLI
ISSN 2316-1663

VOLUME 9, NÚMERO 3 | JUL-SET 2020

A BAKHTINIAN APPROACH TO MAYA ORAL LITERATURE



UN ACERCAMIENTO BAJTINIANO A LA LITERATURA ORAL MAYA

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RESUMO | INDEXAÇÃO | TEXTO | REFERÊNCIAS | CITAR ESTE ARTIGO | O AUTOR
RECEBIDO EM 11/05/2020 • APROVADO EM 05/06/2020

Resumen

El artículo discute la literatura oral como un término bien reconocido en etnolingüística y antropología, pero motivo de controversias en el campo de la literatura. En tiempos recientes, el tema ha cobrado un carácter ético, relacionado con los derechos culturales de los pueblos originarios del continente americano, y de igual manera, como un importante tema estético en la investigación académica. Con estas referencias en mente, me parece importante un acercamiento desde la teoría literaria bajtiniana, especialmente mediante aquellos conceptos basados en la estética de la creación verbal, para el estudio de las literaturas orales indígenas, la poética del pueblo maya en particular, cuyos logros intelectuales y artísticos destacan, tanto desde su acervo cultural arcaico como por sus resonancias en el presente. Esta discusión nos conduce al asunto de la literatura mundial como una esfera artística cuyo canon sufre críticas severas, provenientes en parte de las voces indígenas que el canon ha marginalizado, pero también de las voces académicas que persiguen la inclusión de las poéticas orales indígenas como literatura.

Abstract

This article discusses oral literature, as an old and well established term in ethnolinguistics and anthropology, but a controversial one in the field of literature. Recently, the issue has also become an ethical matter related to the cultural rights of native people in the American continent and by the same token, a major aesthetical subject for academic research. With that in mind, I consider the relevance of Bakhtinian literary theory, especially those concepts based on the aesthetics of verbal creation, as a way to approach the study of native oral literatures, the Maya poetics in particular, whose intellectual and artistic achievements stand out for their archaic backgrounds and their resonance in contemporary times. This discussion leads us to the issue of world literature as an artistic sphere whose canon is undergoing important critiques, in part coming from those indigenous voices the canon has left outside, but also from academic voices that aim for an inclusion of native oral poetics as literature.

Entradas para indexação

PALABRAS CLAVE: Bajtín; Teoría literaria; Literatura oral; Cultura maya

KEYWORDS: Bakhtin; Literary Theory; Oral Literature; Maya Culture.

Texto integral

Introduction

The dialogic thinking of Mikhail Bakhtin has become a major contribution to the development of theory and research in the humanities and the social sciences during the last decades, and its influence seems to be expanding in time. Much of such influence in contemporary thought is an ongoing process and probably it shall be only within the frame of the Bakhtinian *great time* that a comprehensive assessment may be reached. Perhaps an indication of Bakhtin's growing influence is the presence of his ideas and concepts in the academic discourse. Terms such as dialogism, polyphony, heteroglossia, cronotope, utterance and interdiscursivity are among the most popular, besides the references to his theories on aesthetics, etics, metalinguistics, and carnival. As a matter of fact, as it has been pointed out by Bubnova (1990), the worldwide reception of Bakhtin's ideas has become a major hermeneutic, ideologic and political issue.

Bakhtin's contribution to literary theory is well established and has become a main reference in contemporary research, although most of it has been devoted to written literature. In that manner, a substantial amount of mankind's literary creations has been left behind, not considered as literature due to its oral form, in spite of its highly aesthetic characteristics and its conceptual traits. It is my goal to approach the study of oral literature from the theoretic perspective of Bakhtin and his intellectual circle. Usually, his thought has been associated with the study of Russian and European written literature, but I argue that his philosophy of language and his aesthetic theory are of a general scope and have the potential to shed

important light on the study of oral literatures. My main argument rests on the fact that in Bakhtin's literary theory, the voice, the intonation, and the aesthetics inherent in oral discourse are of fundamental importance. His acute observations about the legacy of mythology and folklore in the development of written literature, particularly in his study of the European novel, is another aspect that deserves a careful consideration in our pursuit to advance a dialogic perspective on oral literature and to question the actual canon of literature.

Orality and literature

The following theoretical discussion related to the relationships between orality and literature is set as a way to establish a framework of reference to Bakhtin's contribution on the matter.

The term oral literature, understood as a cultural artistic creation has been a specific subject of research in anthropology, linguistics and literature for quite some time. Beginning with the early studies in the folklore of ancient and traditional cultures, there has been a recognition about the arts inherent in certain genres of oral traditions and specific terms have been used to refer to it, such as literary folklore, oral poetry, popular poetry, and more recently, oral literature, ethno-literature, ethnopoetics, oraliture, among the main ones. Along with those terms, most efforts were aimed to establish genres and classifications inspired in research on European written literature, such as fable, tale, legend, myth, or epics. Some attention was also given to the influence of such traditional genres in contemporary literature.

The works of the Russian scholar Vladimir Propp stand out as a paradigm of this trend, not just because of the status as oral poetry given to traditional fairy tales but for posing the problem of traditional oral creations in the field of literary studies. Following Propp's considerations, Jakobson dedicated some attention to the artistic nature of folkloric verbal creations and established criteria for their distinction with respect to written literature. According to him, the essential difference between folklore and literature is the specific rapport of the former to language and of the latter to speech [tradition/improvisation]. Jakobson also stressed the differences on the functional level and warned from the tendency to apply literary typologies to folkloric forms, considering that genres should be defined in relation to the specific community that created them:

The most urgent task of the synchronic science of folklore is to characterize the system of artistic forms that conform the present repertoire of a definite community – village, district, ethnic unity. In doing so, there must be taken into account, among other things, the forms reciprocal rapport inside the system, their hierarchy, the distinctions between the productive forms and those that have lost their productive capacity (Jakobson, 1973, p. 70).¹

The term 'oral literature' is indeed the ground of an interesting polemic among scholars. In his book **Orality and literacy**, dedicated to explain the absolute differences between both, Walter Ong (1996) bitterly criticizes the use of the term, arguing that it is the product of a textualized ideology, and that the Latin etymology of *literature* refers strictly to writing, to the letter of the alphabet, and not to oral verbalizations.

Scholarship in the past has generated such monstrous concepts as 'oral literature'. This strictly preposterous term remains in circulation today even among scholars now more and more acutely aware how embarrassingly it reveals our inability to represent to our own minds a heritage of verbally organized materials except as some variant of writing, even when they have nothing to do with writing at all [...]

Thinking of oral tradition or a heritage of oral performance, genres and styles as 'oral literature' is rather like thinking of horses as automobiles without wheels (Ong, 1996, p. 11-12).

In view of the lack of a better term of reference, Ong proposes the use of the expressions 'purely oral art forms', or 'verbal art forms', but realises that although "at present the term 'oral literature' is, fortunately, losing ground, [...] it may well be that any battle to eliminate it totally will never be completely won" (1996, p. 14). In my opinion, Ong will not win such a battle based on the etymological argument, simply because when one refers to literature as an art², it is not the written form that matters the most, but the artistic content and the social function. In fact, I would argue that oral literature has much to do with "writing", not in its mode of expression, but in its conceptual structure³. Besides, as many scholars have pointed out, 'literature' has become an academic institution, an ideological and political sphere whose main function in modern society is to codify and thus distinguish literary from non literary texts, that is, to establish the artistic canon⁴. It is within such a broad context that oral literatures have been excluded and where the battle is actually being fought.

In his study of oral poetry, Zumthor points out to an old aesthetic prejudice according to which all artistic language is identified with writing, where "literature" is defined "in reference to an *institution*, to a system of specialized ethnocentric and culturally imperialistic values ... It is not productive to think about orality in a negative fashion, by contrasting it with writing. Orality does not mean illiteracy" (Zumthor, 1990, p.15-16). Zumthor considers that to decide whether the notion of "literarity" applies to oral poetry no a priori response is at hand, considering that it all depends on the internal perception of the social group and of a social discourse on the matter. In other words, the social function, reception and the inscription of the text within society must be taken into account (1990, p. 27).

The Russian semiotician Iuri Lotman shares a similar view when he discusses the concept of artistic literature. He stresses the mobility of the line that separates the artistic from the non artistic text, which he considers depend on the historical moment and of the culture involved. In functional terms, Lotman says, “artistic literature can be any verbal text capable of an aesthetic function within the limits of a given culture [...but] a text that the author may not consider within the sphere of art, may belong to it for the researcher, and vice versa” (1996, p. 162-163). He illustrates this point with the way folklore has functioned in European literature, taken either as “an ideal aesthetic norm” or as non art at a different epoch⁵:

Folklore, excluded from the limits of art by the theory of classicism, became an ideal aesthetic norm for the Illustration and the Preromantics [...] Thus, not only artistic texts participate in the artistic development. Art, being part of culture, needs of the non art for its development, just like culture [needs] the non culture” (1996, p. 166).

In fact, one of the arguments to include artistic oral creations as literature is the concept itself, which has changed throughout the years, with a marked tendency to include oral traditions and arcaic texts, as it is stated in a dictionary of literature:

Inside a given culture, any verbal text with an aesthetic function may be considered as a literary one. This function does not pertain exclusively to the intentions of the author: an ancient sacred text may be taken by contemporary culture as relevant to literature (Gorp et al. 2005, pp. 281-282).

As mentioned before, another theoretical perspective that questions the literary canon as opposed to orality points out to the fundamental distinction between the medium (phonic/graphic) and the conceptual (spoken/written) aspects of a text⁶. According to it, a written text may be conceptually “oral”, while an oral text may be “written” in conceptual terms, such as it happens in some genres of oral tradition.

Apart from the field of literary studies, ethnolinguists and anthropologists are among the main supporters of ‘oral literature’ as a convenient term of reference for the artistic verbal creations of native cultures the world over. That is the case of Burns, Bright, Hymes, Niles, Tedlock, among many others, who argue that American Indian oral narratives must be taken seriously as literature. That is clearly stated in a recent study conducted by Worley (2013) on the oral narrative of the Maya Indians of the Yucatan peninsula. The author argues that the binary opposition orality/literacy has been used to exclude indigenous oral narrative as literature. He also emphasizes the importance of performative contexts, and the fact that

indigenous literatures are aimed to destabilize the prestige of the written word and to show the importance of non-Western literary traditions.

Oral Literature and Bakhtinian Theory

Literature is an inseparable part of culture and cannot be studied outside the total context of culture (Bakhtin, 1982, p. 362).

Taking into account the arguments given in the previous section, we may consider as literary certain genres of oral traditions in terms of their artistic form and content, as well as their aesthetic and social function within a given culture, but also taking into consideration the audience reception in different societies and historic epochs. However, in doing so, we also observe a need to advance perspectives of research based on literary theory in order to approach such specialized literatures. In general, research has centered on the identification of structural qualities, genres, rhetoric devices and figures of speech, leaving behind the aesthetic and social functions of these oral literatures, as well as the cultural contexts (Alejos García, 2001).

Bakhtin's literary theory is centered in the aesthetics of the verbal creation and in orality as the fundamental phenomena. Bubnova (2006) has remarked that although Bakhtin did not pay attention to folklore as such but was concerned with rather canonical literature, he employs profusely a vocabulary related directly to orality, like the voice, the tonality, the accent, and the dialogue. Bubnova observes that unlike authors such as Ong, Bakhtin does not conceive orality as a distinct sphere opposed to writing and does not establish a drastic and contrasting division between oral and literary cultures. On the contrary, she says, in his perspective the voice and the written word appear unified by the dynamic production of meaning, created and transmitted by personalized voices that represent ethic and ideological positions. From Bakhtin's point of view "writing is but the codified transcription of voices, capable of transmitting the meanings of an ontological dialogue" (Bubnova, 2006, p. 100).

In fact, Bakhtinian literary theory derives from a philosophy of language of profound sociological and musicological backgrounds (Alejos García (2009), Bubnova (2006), Cassotti (2010), Malcuzyński (1999)), from which derives concepts like discourse, the voice, dialogism, intonation, rhythm, polyphony, among others. Let us recall that in his proposal for a sociological poetics, Voloshinov (1997) argues that aesthetics is a modality of social phenomena, and that art as a totality does not reside in the object, nor in the isolated psyche of the creator or the audience but that it includes the three instances at the same time, "the artistic is a special form of interrelationship between the author and the audience, fixed in a work of art" (1997, p. 111).

As a way to understand the verbal aesthetic communication, Voloshinov analyses what occurs in a common oral discourse and concludes that the utterance is composed of a verbal aspect united to an extraverbal context, which participates

as an *enthymeme* in the communicative event. The spoken word contains a “synthesis of extraverbal values” that belong to the specific contexts of the utterance, and that are expressed in the particular intonation that necessarily accompanies every word. “Intonation is where values are expressed in their purest form. Intonation establishes a close link between the word and the extraverbal context: the living intonation seems to conduct the word beyond the verbal frontiers” (Voloshinov, 1997, p. 118). Therefore, oral artistic creations rely deeply on various levels of contexts for their performances, a fact well documented by scholarly research (Alejos García (2012), Bauman (1986), Foley (1991), Hymes (1994), Niles (1994)). But the Bakhtinian perspective goes a step further, establishing that through intonation written literature also depends on the extraverbal contexts. Voloshinov reckons that even though written literature cannot rely on extraverbal contexts without an explicit verbal reference to them, nonetheless such literature is also deeply interwoven with the unspoken contexts of life, due to the social values inscribed in the words and expressed in their concrete intonations⁷.

Implicit values are very important in literature. It can be said that *a work of art is a potent condenser of not verbalized social values: each word is impregnated with them. Justly, social values organize the artistic form in regards to its immediate expression.*

Before all, values determine the author’s *selection of the words* and the perception of such selection (co-election) by the audience. Because the poet does not choose his words from a dictionary but from the context of life in which words rest and become impregnated with values” (Voloshinov, 1997, p. 125).

Therefore, according to Voloshinov’s perspective, both oral and written literatures would share the same link to social life and culture through the implicit social values attached to the artistic word.

Bakhtin’s remarks on intonation are addressed in the same direction, stressing the need to take into account the different layers of context that participate in the concrete aesthetic communication, the *great time* being a fundamental one. Bakhtin also observes that the social values and the musicality of the spoken or written word are part of the perceptual scenario of a cultural community.

The meaning of the emotional and evaluative expressions in the discursive life of people. But the expression of emotional and evaluative relations can have a non explicit verbal character, but a character implicit in intonation. The most important and stable intonations conform an intonational background belonging to a determined social group (nation, class, professional collectivity, circle, etc.) (Bakhtin, 1982, p. 388).

Malcuzyński (1999) has emphasized the importance Bakhtin gives to intonation, as a sound component but at the same time as a social aspect that accompanies the word, and in a wider cultural sense, as the subtle musicality shared by each human community that is embedded in its own language, in the peculiar accents and manners of speech⁸.

The text, be it printed, written or orally-transcribed is not equal to the work [of art] as a totality (or to the “aesthetic object”). The needed extratextual context forms part of the work. The work appears wrapped up in *the intonational and evaluative music of the context* in which it is understood and evaluated (of course, such a context changes according to the epochs of perception, creating a new expression of the work) (Bakhtin, 1982, p. 389).

Therefore, we can say that in their aesthetic communicative purpose both oral and written literatures draw their meanings from contextual backgrounds, although each modality deals with contexts in different ways. In the case of oral literatures, a key to their understanding lays on the implicits pointed out by the intonation of the words, an intonation found in the living cultures where they belong. On the other side, their aesthetic character and social status are not given exclusively by the artistic form and orientation of the author but in a very important way, from the reception of the audience, an audience that differs according to a chronotopical world.

Another important contribution to the study of oral literatures is found on Bakhtin’s reflections concerning the importance of folklore, as an “ancient treasure” and as an endless source for all literatures, including the novel (Bakhtin, 1989, p. 264, 303). His historical perspective on the European novel stresses the folkloric origins of heroes, themes, motifs and world visions present throughout the development of this genre. The literary chronotopes derive from the folkloric perception of time and space. “Folkloric time had an enormous and productive influence in literature” (Bakhtin, 1982, p. 245).

The origins of literary language itself is, according to Bakhtin, an ancient phenomena related to the development of a linguistic awareness. The awareness of a speech diversity that turns into an awareness of a language diversity, in which “there is no longer one language, but a dialogue among languages” (Bakhtin, 1989, p. 111).

The language of the other placed between entonative quotation marks is very ancient: we find it in the very early stages of literature ... the word in the novel has a long prehistory, lost in the depths of centuries and millenia. It has formed and matured in the oral family genres -very little studied- of spoken popular language, as well as in some folkloric and inferior literary genres (1989, p. 420).

The study of the Rabelais novel stands out as a masterpiece in which Bakhtin shows the profound imprint of folklore in literature⁹. The conception of a realistic image of man and of time in space expressed in the work of Rabelais is traced back to the roots of folklore (Bakhtin, 1982, p. 216). In fact, he argues that “it is in the popular laughter where the folkloric roots of the novel must be searched for... it is there where a radical new attitude towards language and the word is generated” (1989, p. 466). It was through oral traditions, he adds, that the Roman parody was passed on during the Middle Ages. “It is thanks to the Romans that European cultures have learned to laugh and ridicule” (1989, p. 426-7).

Questioning the Canon

In his theory of the novel, Bakhtin (1989) develops an interesting idea about two opposing forces within the life of language: a centripetal one, with the tendency to centralize and unify it into a canonized official language, the “literary language”, and on the other side a centrifugal force that moves in an opposite direction, towards plurilinguism and heteroglossia. He observes how the category of a “general literary character” tends to set an order within an existing plurilinguism, canonizing a certain linguistic style, based on cultural-ideological intentions, and motivated by various interests and values, aimed to protect “the closed social character of a privileged collectivity (“the language of the noble society”) and protect national, local interests”. In the history of European literature, the development of the novel represents the centrifugal force that questioned the canon of “a literary language”, rejecting the idea of a unique, unitary language and the canonization of the ideological systems, and recognizing instead the existence of plurilinguism, of multiple national, social languages (Bakhtin, 1989, p. 182-197). In the following pages I will try to apply this revealing idea to the case of an indigenous literature that has been excluded as “literature” by the national hegemonic society, and that is now part of a cultural movement aimed to question the literary canon, and by doing so, restating their place in society.

The literatures of the Maya people are a particularly interesting ground where to test our theoretical ideas. For over two thousand years, they have maintained and cultivated a cultural heritage, whose traces bear witness in amazing archaeological remains but also in a rich oral and written tradition kept alive by the present-day descendants. It goes without saying that the Maya people, both ancient and contemporary, have been the center of one of the major research efforts in the humanities and social sciences.

On the one side, the discovery of the “Mayan code” has recently allowed epigraphic readings of a vast number of ancient written texts. An amazing history of heroes, kingdoms, wars, and scientific achievements has started to come to life, together with a growing awareness of scholars about the aesthetics of some of the ancient writings, present not only in the verbal aspects but in the plasticity of the

epigraphic writing itself. Tedlock is one of those scholars dedicated to the study of Mayan culture who proclaims the existence of a rich and ancient literary tradition that still awaits for a proper study and recognition.

The time has come to take a further step and proclaim that *literature* existed in the Americas before Europeans got here –not only oral literature but visible literature. So far, there is very little in print that would bring such a claim to life. Much *decipherment* has taken place but very little in the way of *translation*. Part of the problem is that decipherment is guided by linguistic rather than literary goals (Tedlock, 2010, p. 1).

On the other side, there is the existence of an impressive volume of Mayan oral traditions, shared by millions of native people in a cultural area known as Mesoamerica, archaic oral texts that have been documented in ancient writings, in colonial manuscripts and as a subject of scientific research for well over a century. An important academic task on this field is the preservation of this important heritage, in face of the drastic transformations that native cultures are undergoing in the present world, but another trend of research is their interpretation as a cultural aesthetic expression.

Until recently, the study of Maya oral traditions was understood as a matter of folklore, as remains of past ages, of interest to scholars dedicated to the reconstruction of a disappeared ancient civilization, but such a conception is undergoing radical changes, and much of the so called oral folklore is now being reconsidered as literature, by natives and scholars alike. This marks a major shift in the status of these verbal creations. As stated before, the perception of the audience is an important part of the conception of literature, and in this respect, we are witnessing the emergence of an oral literature, in part due to the recognition of a world wide audience. This claim for recognition is shared with other native peoples, such as the Quechua of South America (Espino Relucé (2010), García (2003), Lienhard (2003)), who also claim an old tradition of literacy, in terms of the conceptual aspect of their oral creations.

On the other side, there is also the emergence of contemporary Mayan writers and poets, whose works are not only being recognized as artistic but who adopt a critical stand in regards to the literary institution. Many of those artists draw their inspiration from their own cultural tradition, but there are others who also create and experiment with new topics and genres, employing their own languages but also writing in the dominant languages as a way to break the cultural barriers. Worley (2013) puts it clearly when he affirms that “the [Mayan] men and women who write indigenous literature as tellings of stories do so in order to destabilize the prestige of the written word and call readers' attention to the vibrant realities of this other non-Western literary tradition”.

Francisco Ligorred Perramón, an expert in Maya literature, states the existence of a millennial “Maya literary tradition” is evident in their oral tradition, hieroglyphic writings, colonial documents and also in their contemporary literature. The author considers the latter as a “product of tradition, and not an experiment or discovery of anthropologists and linguists [...] an expression of ethnic resistance by means of a poetic language inspired in tradition, but destined to be an essential element of future Maya cultural revival” Ligorred Perramón (2000, p. 334-335).

Maya oral literature has been widely documented by travellers and scholars, although its publication in print has been limited, says Ligorred. Yet, it has been the fundamental material for a Maya poetic recreation, it has functioned as “a means of support for cultural resistance” (2000, p. 345-346). The author points out that Maya writers inspired in their traditional literature have proliferated thanks to some government cultural policies. He also considers the influence of oral tradition in this flourishing native literature is evident in the use of certain literary resources, such as certain formulae, metaphors, paralelisms, diphrasisms, aliterations, vocalic harmony, as well as the development of their own cultural topics, such as the conception of time, of dream, and a whole set of cultural values (2000, p. 348-354). The author concludes with the recognition that:

Poetry is the genre par excellence of Maya literature ... it plays a similar role as oral literature; the latter continues with strong popular roots (legends and rituals) ... but the written poetry is able to blend in its verses aspects of cultural tradition and ethnic claims ... it is evidently a plural, communitarian and popular poetry” (2000, p. 356).

Therefore, we are dealing with a broad artistic and ideological movement, aimed not just to establish Maya ancient and modern verbal aesthetic creations as literature, but by doing so, it is aiming to question the academic institution and producing an impact on the literary canon itself¹⁰. This movement is causing interesting changes in the literary sphere on local, national and international scales, as can be seen in the inclusion of “oral literatures”, “ethnic arts”, and “popular poetry” in literary contests, art festivals and artistic awards. In this sense, it is remarkable the recent Nobel Prize on literature awarded to the singer and composer Bob Dylan, for it shows an ongoing major shift in the literary cannon.

In Bakhtinian terms, we can interpret such a revolutionary movement as a dialogic response of the popular voices, those of the native cultures, to the dominant, imperialistic establishment of Western literature. The case reminds us that all voices shall have their moment of resurrection in the *great time*, and this time, that moment has arrived for the Mayan voices.

Conclusion

A main purpose of this article has been to expand the notion of literature as to include the oral aesthetic creations, in particular those belonging to non Western cultures such as the Maya. My stand in favor of the term oral literature has led to the search of theories that provide appropriate conceptual tools for research on this field. Bakhtinian theory on literature provides an outstanding perspective in this sense, for its historical and phenomenological approach to language, based on orality and the social reality. The study of oral literature of the Maya people shows the potential of this theoretical and methodological approach, but it also allows an awareness of the anticanonical turn of present day literary productions.

Notas

1 All citations taken from non English publications are my own translations.

2 In the English language, the term literature is also used in a more general sense to refer to a body of writings related to a particular subject.

3 See infra Koch and Oesterreicher (2007).

4 See Lotman's discussion on this theoretical issue (1996). For the case of Latin American native literatures see Alejos García (2001), Espino Relucé (2010), Lienhard (2003).

5 See also Bakhtin's reference to the "discovery of folklore in literature" during the XVIII century in England and Germany (Bakhtin, 1982, p. 245). 1 All citations taken from non English publications are my own translations.

6 See reference of this theoretical contribution of Ludwig Söll in Koch and Oesterreicher (2007, p. 20-21). 1 All citations taken from non English publications are my own translations.

7 Jakobson remarks the long-standing interest among Russian literary theory in regards to the intonational aspect of the literary word: "The problem of the intonational surroundings [...] is one of the outstanding themes of reflection proposed by the Russian formalists" (Jakobson, 1963, p. 231).

8 On the musicological aspects of Bakhtin's thought, see Alejos García (2009), Bubnova (2006), Cassotti (2010), Malcuzyński (1999).

9 See "The folkloric bases of the Rabelaisian chronotope" in Bakhtin (1989, p. 357-375).

10 Lotman (1996) has put forward an important discussion on the subversive, anticanonical function of art that is relevant to our present subject. 1 All citations taken from non English publications are my own translations.

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Para citar este artículo

GARCÍA, J. A. A bakhtinian approach to maya oral literature. **Macabéa – Revista Eletrônica do Netlli**, Crato, v. 9., n. 3., 2020, p. 120-134.

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