



The Life and Work of Dr. Jorge Luis Acevedo Vargas

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Friend and Collaborator

Few people lived as largely and as exceptionally as did Dr. Jorge Luis Acevedo Vargas. He was an absolutely unique figure with personal, intellectual, creative, social-cultural and pedagogical acumen, all tightly integrated into a single generous, studious and creative personality. He continually sought to better our world, starting in his own community. Jorge was a humble man, and it never showed so much as when we approached people in the streets of Santa Ana, and so too with important tribal elders in our work as ethnographic researchers. Through his friendliness, kindness and generosity, many issues and inquiries became possible that might have eluded others.

Jorge started life with modest beginnings. Raised Catholic by his mother with his brother in Santa Ana, directly across the street from the church. Through education and hard work Jorge became accomplished. He told me once that he got over his fear of performing by singing for coins in busses as a child. That he went on to be educated and eventually become a professor and finally Dean of Fine Arts at the University of Costa Rica, let alone achieve so much more in life, is a testament to his courage and strength of character. It speaks well of Costa Rican society that it afforded opportunities to such a young man. His love for his mother, his brother Augustine, his wife Ana and his sons Martin and Roberto sustained him.

Similar to what Guaymí sukia Pedro Bejarano once told us about his role, a sukia's (shaman's) responsibilities are like concentric rings in a special cosmology, starting in his own heart, in his home, within his family, as part of his tribal community and finally within the natural world that surrounds and sustains every living creature. Jorge also saw his role starting at home with his family, in his community of Santa Ana, and within his beloved country, Costa Rica.

He was indeed a prolific supporter and chronicler of Santa Ana's history, art and culture, publishing a great work on the subject. He served as a professor and later Director of the Escuela de Musica and finally Dean of Bellas Artes at the University of Costa Rica in San Pedro. Jorge formed UCR extension programs in Turrialba, San Ramón and Puntarenas. He always sought to integrate the plastic, dance and musical arts; never more profoundly than at the Escuela Municipal de Artes Integradas (EMAI) where he fostered students, professors and artists and where he personally

commissioned many works of art for the benefit of Santa Ana as a community. His gregarious nature and profound generosity fomented friendships throughout the area, indeed he opened EMAI to non-Santa Ana students, hoping to create a new paradigm for wider Costa Rican education. Internationally he wrote and sang many forms of music, including opera (produced in Teatro Nacional, twice), created the annual Baroque Music Festival, directed orchestras, studied ethnomusicology at the Sorbonne in Paris, and wrote encyclopedia entries. Jorge and I loaned parts of our collection and shared our writings with the Museo de Jade, Museo de Oro and the Museo Nacional, the Goethe Institute in San José, in addition to the Museum of Musical Instruments in New Mexico, USA and Rain Forest Lodge Sarapiquí. Jorge also served as Academic Director of the Costa Rican extension program for Aquinas College of the U.S., enriching the lives and experiences of North American students, always seeking to integrate them into Costa Rican culture.

I originally met don Jorge at UCR in 1986 when I was an exchange professor from Linfield University in Oregon. Jorge was then Director of the Escuela de Artes Musicales. Professor Amparo Cruz Zúñiga, director of La Escuela de Artes Plásticas at UCR introduced us because she knew Jorge was hoping to attract the interest of a painter to paint a mural, but moreover to work with him in the field. Jorge greeted me with his typical kindness and courtesy. I liked him immediately and soon committed to work on the mural, but I told him I wanted help doing the necessary research, and that I wanted a free hand in designing the murals. He agreed. At the time my Spanish was very poor but he understood that I had pre-existing interest in indigenous studies in the U.S., particularly ancient petroglyphs, and that I had done field work in this regard. We quickly became friends, despite the struggles to communicate, but by going out in the field many, many times over the years, initially to Coto Brus to meet the Térraba, Boruca and Guaymí, and later the Maleku, Bri-bri and Cabécar tribal groups, our friendship blossomed into what was an almost 40 year friendship and intense collaboration. Documentary aspects of which I am still working on. Jorge did not learn English very much (though he could order pancakes and say thank you in a most disarming way, but through his clear diction as a singer, his humor and patience I learned and soon became a full participant in the field work.

Toward the end of his life, Jorge greatly enjoyed and appreciated the eagerness of the current generation of students to learn about Costa Rican indigenous music in the context of a complex historical and social-cultural history and political dynamic. The educational culture indeed has changed at UCR.

When I painted *La Musica en Los Pueblos Costarricense* in 1986, for example, there was a backlash among many of the classicists professors who complained that the murals contained no pianos, French horns or violins. Jorge calmly and diplomatically commented that there are several floors in the Facultad de Artes Musicales building at UCR, that the murals celebrating indigenous cultures was merely the first, the foundation, upon which Costa Ricans might find themselves. Even the then Minister of Culture, himself a painter, recommended that my murals at UCR be washed away with strong acid; such was the resistance to indigenous studies. Jorge always stood firm in

his belief and always defended our study and my artistic endeavors, even in settings where and when it was not appreciated. I was later criticized for doing these paintings at UCR as twice an American Senior Fulbright scholar. With Jorge's support and reassurance I persisted and went on to paint murals in San Ramón and Santa Ana. I didn't realize until years later that Jorge personally funded the materials for my work, which was typical of Jorge's modesty, generosity and humility.

On many of the long trips criss-crossing diverse corners of Costa Rica, we had stimulating conversations about art, culture and academic structures, as well as our personal lives. I recall at one point rolling along in a rain storm in a leaky Land Rover, traveling over the Cerro de la Muerte. Conditions inside and outside the Land Rover were cold and wet. Jorge was driving. We talked and talked, fighting the cold at that altitude in the rain, and Jorge steering nervously around landslides, sink holes and big trucks. We talked about the school in the new music school holding classes in the public library in Santa Ana. We agreed that the arts needed to be taught in an integrated fashion. I promised, rather spontaneously, to paint murals on any new school he managed to build in Santa Ana. Little did I realize I had in effect committed myself to a six-year creative project. The upshot is that the city passed a bond and the present EMAI structure was built. Around 2009 an enthusiastic Jorge phoned me (*Maestro* as we called one another) long distance to say we had an appointment with an architect to discuss mural sites; that I should come immediately to Costa Rica. I did. The rest is history.

Between 2010 and 2016 I created *Origins, An Allegory of Creative Transformation La Musica en Los Pueblos Costarricense* at EMAI. I formally dedicated it to don Jorge at the inauguration in 2016. Before then, I had painted the mural *La Musica en Los Pueblos Costarricense* in 1986, *El Otro Yo* in San Ramon in 1993. None of these works would have been realized without the support of don Jorge.

Jorge and I are not anthropologists but rather artists who found that by attending to art and musical art forms, and by addressing shamanic individuals with great respect and curiosity, valuable insights into tribal identity and forms of animism became ripe for original scholarship and deeper understanding. A central and shared epistemological critique of education, and a guiding inclusive philosophy guided us: that music, ritual, dance and object-making relate to socially-culturally identity. That cosmology, i.e. how our place in a vast scheme matters is seen was key. Western educational structures take a divided model of disciplines and specialists, each with their own special vanities, even in supposed liberal arts institutions. We found that this approach does not serve very well when we seek to profoundly understand indigenous cultures. We in fact found important entrance points into formerly neglected aspects of Costa Rican anthropology precisely by asking shamanic figures how songs, objects and rituals relate, how music and the plastic arts, healing, dance and mythology are bound together, how they understand cosmology and their part in it. This was the character of our conversations for many years.

Since Jorge and I were career academicians as well as practicing artists, we founded Centro de Educación y Documentation de las Artes (CEDIA) in 1992 as a physical and digital center, with collaborators from various disciplines. We always hoped that the full flower of that ambition may be accomplished in the future, given the extensive material we are now offering to other artists and scholars. We realized that the rich material we were studying would ultimately require linguists, anthropologists, sociologists, religion scholars, medical specialists (given the plant medicine and shamanic healing practices) as well as art, music and dance artists and historians. We gave it a start.

The intellectual challenge is to sort out and better link contemporary classifications of knowledge, and the corresponding disciplines. An example is the ulú balsa stick, bastion. The ulú in essence contains tribal history, the integrated elements of song and the plastic arts, traditional iconography, medical memory, metaphorical structure and indeed cosmological structures. It is used in Cabecar and Bribri healing practices by high shamanic awa/jawa "medicos". The drawn balsa stick is drawn with symbols that have no name, per se, but instead rhythmic chants, calling forth the spirits of the forest, and by extension healing forces that they believe surround and compose us as human beings. The stick represents the spinal column of the patient, the central post of a conical "casa sagrada, casa de dos" and a mystical link between the *inframundo* below and the *cielo* above, traversing the terrestrial plane we live on. There is more, but this example shows the multiple ideas that weave our phylogenic academic disciplines together, as well as the partial understanding standard disciplinary divisions create for us in academia. It is my hope that through passing the CEDIA archive to UCR that our work, this legacy, will be more fully realized.

The passing of Dr. Jorge Luis Acevedo Vargas is a loss to us all. I am confident that his legacy will live on in his beloved Costa Rica, and indeed internationally. I know that I shall miss his wisdom, humor, kindness, and lucid focus. I shall miss collaborating with him professionally, strategizing how to enrich our work together and make it accessible to the many. And, beyond the professional, Jorge was my friend.

I can still hear his clear and resonating, sonorous voice joking, the way he would say "Maestro Mills" and greet me over the phone. Jorge and I had many adventures together in Costa Rica but also in Nicaragua, Guatemala, Mexico and in Oregon, USA. He introduced me to a world I did not know and enriched my life in the process when he shared Costa Rican traditions like the regional peasant *cyolera* drinking festival, *chichadas*, or eating *chicharrones* with still-visible burned hairs.

I remember vividly still the many times we were in Boruca to fully experience and document the three-day *Play of the Little Devils*. Wild times. I remember him proudly and rather slyly introducing me to a rather greasy plate of *Mondongo* in Nacoya, and I can still hear his mirth at my reaction. We of course shared many meals together. I remember the many times we ate in the field, huddled, sitting on low wood benches under the tin roof of a rancho, surrounded by new and old tribal friends, simply celebrating our togetherness, drinking *pejivalle chicha* and eating boiled white rice

sprinkled with canned tuna that we just brought, holding onto platanillo leaves as plates.

So many shared experiences. We often had to choose between suffering the rain and insects or covering up to endure the sweltering heat. Jorge hated the bugs that liked to nest in his bushy hair at night. I remember river crossings that would scare less pacific folks. Though it all, Jorge seemed to take it in stride, often with humorous asides. Despite his intense interest in indigenous spiritual life and cosmology as he preferred to call it, he was a deeply religious man and I feel privileged to have been his friend.