



Songs that Make the Road Dance: Courtship and Fertility Music of the Tz'utujil Maya (Recovering Languages and Literacies of the Americas)

Linda O'Brien-Rothe

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An important and previously unexplored body of esoteric ritual songs of the Tz'utujil Maya of Santiago Atitlán, Guatemala, the "Songs of the Old Ones" are a central vehicle for the transmission of cultural norms of behavior and beliefs within this group of highland Maya. Ethnomusicologist Linda O'Brien-Rothe began collecting these songs in 1966, and she has amassed the largest, and perhaps the only significant, collection that documents this nearly lost element of highland Maya ritual life.

This book presents a representative selection of the more than ninety songs in O'Brien-Rothe's collection, including musical transcriptions and over two thousand lines presented in Tz'utujil and English translation. (Audio files of the songs can be downloaded from the UT Press website.) Using the words of the "songmen" who perform them, O'Brien-Rothe explores how the songs are intended to move the "Old Ones"—the ancestors or *Nawals*—to favor the people and cause the earth to labor and bring forth corn. She discusses how the songs give new insights into the complex meaning of dance in Maya cosmology, as well as how they employ poetic devices and designs that place them within the tradition of K'iche'an literature, of which they are an oral form. O'Brien-Rothe identifies continuities between the songs and the K'iche'an origin myth, the *Popol Vuh*, while also tracing their composition to the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries by their similarities with the early *chaconas* that were played on the Spanish *guitarra española*, which survives in Santiago Atitlán as a five-string guitar.

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