Shirley L. Arora: folklorist and paremiologist
(3 June 1930 – 23 Mars 2021)

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Abstract: Shirley L. Arora, American scholar, was a renowned folklorist and paremiologist with international reputation. Her work focused i.a. in folk narratives, beliefs, and the folklore of birds. Her major scholarly contributions were informed by paremiological matters. She investigated the rich appearance of proverbial comparisons in the works of the Peruvian writer Ricardo Palma, and she published one of her invaluable books on *Proverbial Comparisons and Related Expressions in Spanish* (1977). She also published numerous articles on various paremiological topics in the yearbooks *Proverbium* and *Paremia*. Her many articles appeared in English as well as Spanish, with the most important theoretical contribution being her essay on "The Perception of Proverbiality" (1984) that also appeared in Spanish translation as "El reconocimiento del refrán" (1997). It is one of the most cited publications on proverbs in the world. She was a beloved professor, a diligent administrator, and an engaging lecturer at conferences in the United States and elsewhere. International paremiology owes her a great debt of gratitude for her invaluable contributions. She had a major impact on modern proverb scholarship and will most certainly be remembered with respect and admiration.
Keywords: Paremiology. Folklore. Proverb. Spanish. Shirley L. Arora.

Título: «Shirley L. Arora: folclorista y paremióloga (3 de junio de 1930–23 de marzo de 2021)».
Resumen: Shirley L. Arora, académica estadounidense, fue una renombrada folclorista y paremióloga de reputación internacional. Su trabajo giraba, entre otras cosas, en torno a los relatos populares, las creencias y el folclore de las aves. Sus principales contribuciones académicas se centran en cuestiones relacionadas con la paremiología. Investigó la profusa aparición de refranes en las obras del escritor peruano Ricardo Palma y publicó uno de sus valiosos libros titulado *Proverbial Comparisons and Related Expressions in Spanish* (1977). También publicó numerosos artículos sobre diversos aspectos paremiológicos en los anuarios *Proverbium* y *Paremia*. Sus numerosos artículos aparecieron tanto en inglés como en español, siendo la contribución teórica más importante su ensayo sobre «The Perception of Proverbiality» (1984), que también apareció traducido al español como «El reconocimiento del refrán» (1997). Es una de las publicaciones sobre refranes más citadas del mundo. Fue una profesora muy querida, una directora diligente y una apasionada conferenciante en Estados Unidos y otros países. La paremiología internacional tiene una gran deuda de gratitud con ella por sus inestimables contribuciones. Tuvo un gran impacto en la moderna investigación de refranes y, sin duda, será recordada con respeto y admiración.
Palabras clave: Paremiología. Folclore. Refrán. Español. Shirley L. Arora.

Titre : « Shirley L. Arora : folkloriste et parémiologue (3 juin 1930 – 23 mars 2021) ».
Résumé : Le travail de Shirley L. Arora, universitaire américaine, célèbre folkloriste et parémiologue de renommée internationale, portait, entre autres, sur les contes populaires, les croyances et le folklore des oiseaux. Ses principales contributions universitaires portent sur des questions liées à la parémiologie. Il étudia la profusion de proverbes dans les œuvres de l'écrivain péruvien Ricardo Palma et publia l'un de ses précieux ouvrages intitulé Proverbial Comparisons and Related Expressions in Spanish (1977). Il a également publié de nombreux articles en anglais et en espagnol sur divers aspects paremiologiques dans les annuaires Proverbium et Paremia, dont la contribution théorique la plus importante est son essai sur «The Perception of Proverbiality» (1984), traduit en espagnol par «El recognition del refrán» (1997). C'est l'une des publications de proverbes les plus citées au monde. Enseignante très appréciée, directrice assidue et conférencière passionnée aux États-Unis et dans d'autres pays, elle restera certainement dans les mémoires avec respect et admiration grâce à l'énorme impact que son travail a eu pour la parémiologie internationale et la recherche moderne de proverbes.
Mots-clés : Parémiologie. Folklore. Proverbe. Espagnol. Shirley L. Arora.

It is with a broken heart that I wish to inform the international community of paremiologists that our well-known colleague and friend Prof. Shirley L. Arora passed away on 23 March 2021 at the advanced age of almost ninety-one years. She was born on 3 June 1930 in Youngstown, Ohio. She received her B.A. and M.A. degrees from the prestigious Stanford University in 1950 and 1951 and earned her Ph.D. from the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA) in 1962. In the same year she became assistant professor of Spanish and Portuguese at that university. In 1976 she was promoted to full professor and in 1981 she became the chairperson of the large Department of Spanish and Portuguese for the next ten years. She retired from UCLA at the age of seventy in 2000. Based on her teaching and scholarly achievements, she was elected to the Fellows of the American Folklore Society in 1992 after having received the honor of presenting the annual Archer Taylor Lecture in 1989 at the meeting of the Western States Folklore Society.

Among folklorists she is especially known for her numerous publications on the La Llorona legend, among them the often-cited article on "La Llorona: The Naturalization of a Legend", *Southwest Folklore*, 5 (1981), 23-40. She also was the author of literary works, notably her novel *What Then, Raman?* (Chicago: Follett, 1960). It was translated into several languages (including my native German) and was also made into a movie in the Kannada language of India as *Bettada Hoovu* (1985). I will never forget the joy and excitement that I felt when reading her book. It came as such a surprise to me when she presented it to me as a present many years ago. Little did I know that my paremiological friend was also an established novelist. But let me cite from her letter of 27 January 1995 to me in which she relates in her own words what I have said thus far. Before doing so, I should also state that I am quoting from a book of letters that I published to celebrate our long friendship in the year 2010 as a celebration of Shirley Arora's eightieth birthday: *"True Friends Are Like Diamonds": Three Decades of Correspondence Between the Folklorists Shirley L. Arora and Wolfgang Mieder* (Burlington, Vermont: The University of Vermont, 2010), pp. 80-83. I still have a few copies of this book with its 314 pages, and would be delighted to send it to interested persons:

> January 27, 1995
> Dear Wolfgang:
> […] I was born in Youngstown, Ohio. My parents had moved to California just after their marriage but they actually drove back all the way across the country just so there would be one more native Ohioan in the family. (It was no easy trip back then, either, even if it was not exactly like cover wagon days.) Less than a month after I was born they drove all the way out to California again. Except for the years I spent in India, and short visits elsewhere, I've lived here ever since.
> I grew up in Glendale, went through the local school system and community college, then left to attend Stanford. Harbans [Arora] and I met there. He's from Punjab (Northern India) and was getting his Ph.D. in biology. When he finished his degree he went back to India to fulfill his contract of government service (a requirement of the fellowship that sent him to Stanford); I completed my B.A. and my M.A. at Stanford and then joined him over there.
> We were married in Kodaikanal, a town in the South Indian hills a day's journey or so from Mandapam, the location of the government research station where Harbans was posted. Mandapam is a small, isolated place on the seacoast just opposite the island of Ceylon (now Sri Lanka). When we were there, there wasn't even a road to it; you had to go by train and then walk the last couple of miles from the station. (Now there's a road and a bus.) We lived in Mandapam for close to four years before returning to the U.S. to stay. Our older son, David, was born in Kodaikanal and was two years old when we came back here. Air fares were out of reach then, at least for us, so we came by ship and then by train, a total of approximately one month. Not a luxury cruise by any means.
> Harbans was appointed to a research position at Caltech, so we settled in Pasadena. I enrolled in night classes to get my General Secondary teaching credentials, and taught a couple of years in the L.A. school system (junior high Spanish, English, Life Science, Physical Science). Then I was awarded a fellowship at UCLA, so I left my teaching job to become a full-time doctoral student. That was in 1958. In 1960 our younger son, Alan, was born, and in 1962 I completed my Ph.D. I joined the faculty that same year.
> My interest in folklore goes back to my years at Stanford, where I studied with Aurelio Espinosa, Jr., and

with Juan B. Rael, two leaders in the field of Hispanic folklore studies in this country. (Aurelio Espinosa, Sr., had retired shortly before I arrived, so although I met him I never had a class with him. It was Rael, actually, who got me started in the study of Hispanic proverbial speech, specifically proverbial comparisons; my dissertation topic – the use of comparisons by the Peruvian writer Ricardo Palma – grew out of a class I had with him. During the years I spent in India I kept my Spanish "alive" by reading and re-reading all six hefty volumes of Palma's work, so that by the time I returned to the U.S. and entered UCLA I had the groundwork for my dissertation essentially done [published as *Proverbial Comparisons in Ricardo Palma's "Tradiciones Peruanas"* (1966)]. At UCLA of course I worked with Stanley Robe, who was my dissertation chairman. Wayland D. Hand was also a member of my committee.

I don't know what other odds and ends of information might be appropriate to add. Hobbies? I enjoy natural history, especially bird watching, and besides the "usual" travel to Europe and a couple of visits back to India, I've done some of what could be considered "eco-travel," including trips to Costa Rica, the Galapagos Islands, and the Peruvian Amazon (twice). Most of my field research has been concentrated in Mexico and Spain (and of course Los Angeles). An offshoot of my interest in natural history has been an interest in folklore related to animals and birds, and I've been doing articles on birds for the *Encyclopedia of American Belief and Superstition* [that was unfortunately never published].

My novel grew, as you know, out of my experience living in India. *What Then, Raman?* is set actually in Kodaikanal (although it's not called that in the book), and the other book *The Left-Handed Chank*, has as its setting the seacoast where we lived most of the time. The film *Bettada Hoovu* is a Kannada-language version of *What Then, Raman?*, Kannada being the language of Karnataka State. The state government gives prizes for the best films each year, and *Bettada Hoovu* won the second prize for 1985, while at the same time I was named "Film Writer of the Year" (!). Although I missed the awards ceremony (which included, I'm told, a rain of rose petals falling down on all of the awardees), I was given a very nice private award ceremony when I went to Bangalore, the state capital, a few months later. The film went on to win the national government award as best regional film of the year, and the boy who played "Raman" won India's equivalent of an Oscar as best child actor. (If there's time during your visit here in April, maybe I can show you the video of the film; it has English subtitles, which the Indian government provides for all prize-winning films so that they can be shown on TV – English still being the *de facto* common language in India.)

[…] All the best, Shirley

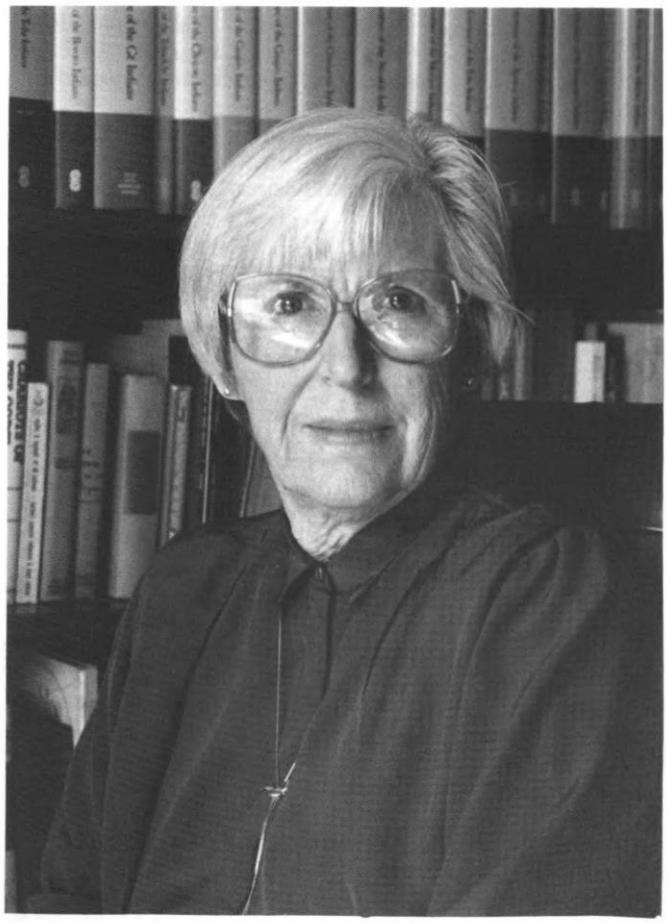
Shirley wrote this account for me so that I could tell the audience of an upcoming lecture she was going to give at my University of Vermont something about her exciting life. She did not say anything about her incredible achievements as a paremiologist in this letter because she knew, of course, that I own all her publications as special treasures.

The volume of our letters is a heart-warming testimony of a deep personal and scholarly friendship between two dedicated and diligent proverb scholars. Once we met in the late 1970s, our friendship together with our respect and admiration for each other's work continued to grow, and we stayed in touch all the way to the end of Shirley's long life. Her son Alan even arranged it that I could take part in the virtual birthday celebration that he organized when she turned ninety not too long ago. Our correspondence went on, with my letters usually including the following *leitmotif* as for example on 19 December 2019: "Please know how often I think of you and how much my students like your publications". Just three months before her death, my letter to my dear friend began with this sentence on 29 December 2020: "This morning on my way to the office I thought of you, Shirley, as I often do. Then when I came home around noon, there was your most welcome Christmas card waiting for me. When I opened it, I found two beautiful pictures – one of you and one of Alan and his family. I also noticed that you signed the card. Thank you so much for thinking of me. Barbara and I enjoyed hearing from you so very much".

What tied us together was, of course, our engaged work on paremiological matters. But I was only one of Shirley's proverbial compatriots. She had colleagues and friends throughout the world that most certainly included Julia Sevilla Muñoz from Spain who together with her important publications is mentioned numerous times in our correspondence. In any case, I have attached a

bibliography of Shirley's invaluable publications on proverbs, proverbial expressions, and proverbial comparisons. It is not possible to comment on every important item, but let me just make a few short comments on some especially noteworthy books and articles.

There is no doubt that her published dissertation on *Proverbial Comparisons in Ricardo Palma's "Tradiciones Peruanas"* (1966) is one of the very few literary investigations of an individual author for the use and function of proverbial comparisons. Shirley not only discusses Ricardo Palma's (1833-1919) reliance on such phrases but also presents important theoretical considerations regarding the types of comparisons, their stylistic features, their transmission, variation, and distribution as well as their metaphors. Several articles followed, of course, but about ten years later appeared one of Shirley's major contributions with the title *Proverbial Comparisons and Related Expressions in Spanish* (1977). In addition to being a valuable collection of Spanish proverbial comparisons as they are used in the Los Angeles area today, this book also presents a fundamental guide for effective field research on proverbial language. It discusses various types of comparisons, their style and metaphors as well as their frequency and distribution in Spain and South American countries. Various patterns, wordplay and the use of names are also analyzed. The dictionary contains 2114 separate entries each with rich annotations and explanations. There are also English translations and parallels, and an outstanding bibliography is also included. The book represents a magisterial accomplishment in Hispanic paremiology and paremiography.



Speaking of bibliographies, I would like to point out that all of Shirley's publications are based on her vast knowledge of secondary sources, to wit her "Critical Bibliography of Mexican American Proverbs" (1982). In the same year she also published her article "Proverbs in Mexican American Tradition" (1982) that is the basis for all subsequent studies on the proverbial language brought by immigrants from Mexico to the United States. Naturally Shirley also looked at how these Spanish language proverbs survive in the United States in their original language and by way of loan translations. Numerous articles followed once again, including a fascinating look at how proverbial language functions among academics: "'No Tickee, No Shirtee': Proverbial Speech and Leadership in Academe" (1988). Here she shows that proverbs and proverbial phrases do in fact play a considerable role in the oral communication among professors. Shirley studied their use by sixteen professors during the many committee meetings that took place over a period of two years at the University of California at Los Angeles. She noted 159 proverbial texts during her unique "field research" and explains that the intellectually sophisticated professors used the proverbial language for the purposes of instruction, persuasion, commentary, humor, and as impression of familiarity. I must admit that I play this "game" as well during long meetings while I think of my dear friend.

But the *magnum opus* among her published articles is without any doubt "The Perception of Proverbiality" (1984) which I had the honor of including as the lead article in the first volume of *Proverbium: Yearbook of International Proverb Scholarship* that I have edited for the past thirty-eight years. I still remember receiving the manuscript of this article, knowing instantly that it represents a truly seminal accomplishment. As I wrote to her on 22 February 1984 after having received her manuscript: "I would like to take this opportunity to thank you for contributing this excellent study to *Proverbium*. The first issue is supposed to be a particularly fine one, and your paper will most certainly strengthen the merit of this yearbook" (p. 17). In fact, I would venture the guess that this article belongs to the most quoted publications in international paremiology. For this reason, I included it in my essay volume *Wise Words. Essays on the Proverb* (1994) ten years after its original publication once again. Three years later it also appeared in Spanish translation as "El reconocimiento del refrán" (1997). What makes this article of not quite forty pages so special and cutting edge to this day? It basically deals with the problem of what people perceive to be proverbs. She argues that proverbiality depends upon traditionality, currency, repetition, certain grammatical or syntactical features, metaphor, semantic markers (archaic words, etc.), and phonetic markers (rhyme, meter, alliteration, etc.). The more a given statement possesses such markers, the greater are its chances of being perceived as a proverb. These theoretical considerations are followed by a discussion of a "proverb survey" consisting of 25 different texts which Shirley presented to 46 Spanish-speaking residents of Los Angeles, California. The survey included 2 *bone fide* Spanish proverbs and 23 were *ad hoc* inventions (pseudo-proverbs) incorporating one or more of the identifying features mentioned. She presents statistical analyses of the responses and is able to prove her contention that statements with the most "proverbial" markers have a good chance to be perceived as actual proverbs. Shirley concluded by stating that it is important for scholars to know by what criteria a native speaker judges a statement to be a proverb. Detailed notes and a Spanish and English list of the "proverbs test" are also included in this significant study. Innumerable subsequent proverb studies throughout the world have cited and continue to refer to this publication. I know that I have quoted from it numerous times in my own work, and I shall definitely continue to do so with thanks and appreciation as I remember my special friend.

From her later articles let me mention in particular "A Woman and a Guitar: Variations on a Folk Metaphor" (1993), "Proverbs and Prejudice: El Indio in Hispanic Proverbial Speech" (1994), "El refranero español en Los Angeles (California)" (1997), "'Como decimos nosotros': The Transcultural Use of Spanish Proverbs" (1998), "Tradición, invención y autoridad en el refranero actual" (1999), and "Paremiología hispanoamericana: Un campo en peligro de extinción?" (2000). They were published in *Proverbium* and, once Shirley and Julia Sevilla Muñoz had become personally acquainted, also in *Paremia*. Both Julia and I as editors of these two yearbooks

considered it a special honor to publish her important work. In fact, her last publication "The collection of Spanish proverbs in Los Angeles (California)" (2019) appeared in *Paremia* as an English translation of her Spanish article "El refranero español en Los Angeles (California)" (1997) that had appeared there twelve years earlier.

The fact that Shirley's last original publications all appeared in essay volumes dedicated to me on various advanced birthdays (I am but fourteen years younger that she) is especially meaningful to me, and I shall forever be thankful for her efforts of writing them at a time when her health was already not the best any longer. They inform my own work as all her publications have done for such a long time. In fact, as I am writing these words to remember Shirley, I am working on a paper about modern Anglo-American proverbs that have their origin in various sports. And how lucky for me that she published the article "Baseball as (Pan)America: A Sampling of Baseball-Related Metaphors in Spanish" (2004) some years ago. With her paper of the same year on "Proverbs and Narratives: Some Observations from Contemporary Spanish-speaking Tradition" (2004) she returned one more time to her interest in folk narratives with which she had begun her illustrious academic career. This was followed with a paper on "crossover proverbs" (2009), i.e., the interrelationship of Spanish and English language proverbs and vice versa, including the translation from one language to another. Her very last article then, written when Shirley was 85 years old, appeared in a *Festschrift* dedicated to me on my seventieth birthday as "'Crossover' Proverbs: Spanish to English?" (2015). Here, in her final statement as a world-class paremiologist, she returns one more time to her paremiological "love", i.e., the influence of Spanish proverbs on Anglo-American proverbs and vice versa. Her city of Los Angeles with its multitude of Spanish speakers was the perfect background for her life's work. She did all of this as a scholar, of course, but there was much more to it. There was also always the human element that encouraged and inspired her to undertake her scholarly work. In our modern interconnected world, it behooves all of us to pay attention to fellow human beings of different cultural and linguistic backgrounds together with their proverb treasures.

Speaking of treasures, let me close these observations in celebration and memory of my dearest friend Shirley L. Arora by stating that she was the embodiment of the proverb "True friends are like diamonds". She was an educator *par excellence*, serving and inspiring generations of eager students with her informed lectures and challenging seminars at the University of California at Los Angeles. She was also a diligent and respected administrator of a large Department of Spanish and Portuguese at that famous university. For all of this she deserves our appreciation and thankfulness. But she was also an eminent scholar of folklore with a national and international reputation. Above all, she was a leading proverb scholar for many decades here in the United States, in Europe, in Mexico in particular and in South America in general. She has influenced proverb scholars everywhere, and her remarkable scholarly achievements will continue to inform and influence paremiological studies. Paremiology has lost one of its greatest champions, who as a woman broke through many glass ceilings as she carved out her career with courage, determination, and dedication. She now rests in the hall of fame for paremiologists and will influence both paremiology and paremiography by way of her scholarly accomplishments. We, who continue her significant work, will remember and treasure Shirley L. Arora.

It is difficult for me to carry on without my long-time friends who have died as Shirley has done a few months ago. But I will not forget them, and I shall most certainly carry my dear friend Shirley in my mind and heart during the years that I can still serve international paremiology.



Shirley L. Aroras Proverb Publications

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See also:

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