
[9] *From languages to texts. The scientific explorations of Konrad Theodor Preuss on the nature of “oral literature” among Amerindian cultures.*

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The study of Amerindian languages was established as a field of interest since the XVIth Century, when the different missionary members during the Colonial period registered and analyzed the languages they were finding in order to facilitate their evangelization mission. The materials produced in this phase were reused in a second moment in the XIXth Century, as intellectuals and amateurs showed interest in defining the name and number of known Amerindian languages and worked to determine their place within newly defined linguistic families. A third phase started in the XXth Century, with the scientific effort to consider Amerindian languages by their own expressions. In this phase, texts in original languages were registered and were taken as the main source for new research lines.

In this paper, I want to focus on the beginnings of the third phase, in which scientific explorations were taking place as one of the main ways to understand Amerindian cultures. I want to focus on the scientific work about Amerindian languages that emerged from the Ethnological Museum in Berlin. In particular, I want to consider the work of Konrad Theodor Preuss who documented Amerindian literature from 5 different groups in Mexico (Preuss 1912; 1932) and Colombia (Preuss 1921/1923; 1926/1927).

For his study of Amerindian populations, Preuss applied the methods commonly used in his time for the understanding of language and culture in classical Philology. For him, if there were no written or archaeological texts –as in the study of Greek and Roman cultures–, oral tradition was the best way to gain access to the minds of people. Preuss developed a methodology that took language as the starting point for the understanding of Amerindian mind and religion. My study will consider his position among other methodologies used at the beginning of the XXth Century in anthropological scientific circles.

Bibliography Preuss, Konrad Theodor 1912 Die Nayarit-Expedition. Textaufnahmen und Beobachtungen unter mexikanischen Indianern. Erster Band. Die Religion der Cora-Indianer, Leipzig: Teubner. 1921/1923 Religion und Mythologie der Uitoto. Textaufnahmen und Beobachtungen bei einem Indianerstamm in Kolumbien, Südamerika, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht. 1926/1927 Forschungsreise zu den Kágaba. Beobachtungen, Textaufnahmen und sprachliche Studien bei einem Indianerstamme in Kolumbien, Südamerika, Viena: Anthropos. 1932 “Grammatik der Cora-sprache”, International Journal of American Linguistics, 7(1/2), New York: 1-84.