

Conquest Dances

Danza de Matachín / Danza de la Pluma

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The cycle of dances performed throughout Latin America and parts of the south west of the United States recognized as Conquest Dances are multicultural dances; a fusion of European, Native American and in some cases African ideas, mythology and esthetics.

The iconography of all these dances, whether Matachines in Northern Mexico and the southern United States, La Danza de la Pluma in Oaxaca, or Vegigantes in the Caribbean, allow such a vast variety of readings it is impossible to pinpoint what they represent. The one thing we can agree on is that at one point European and Native American ideas and rituals came together to form a new way to understand the world. The conquest and colonization of America was also the conquest and transformation of European culture in America.

All cultures in Mesoamerica had until then shared a cosmology, a similar Parthenon and the calendar. The deities were similar and the gods responded well to the cycles of nature because they were the cycles of nature.

At the time of European contact, the Native nations were very familiar with the dynamics of conquest, subjugation and tribute.

But this new conquest was different from everything that had previously happened; never before had a belief system been forced onto the native people in this way.

For the first time in native history, idols were destroyed, rituals prohibited and dances forcibly changed.

The Europeans who arrived in America were also well acquainted with conquest and subjugation; for centuries Christian kingdoms had fought the Moors for control of the Iberian Peninsula. They believed in the supernatural assistance in war by their saints and martyrs. The villains in the conquest dances in Spain were interchangeable, and this flexibility of themes later allowed for the dances to reflect the enthusiasm for the new Spanish crusades in the New World.

The discovery of America in 1492, the same year of the re-conquest and the expulsion of the Jewish people in the Iberian Peninsula, suddenly transformed the Iberian Peninsula and gave birth to Spain, making it an imperial power. All these circumstances made it possible for all these cultural traits, medieval mentality, racial attitudes and the Spanish miracle culture to come to the New World.

At this critical time, two different cultures, each previously totally unaware of the other's existence, interacted. In awe and amusement they tried to understand each other's worlds and at the same time reassess what they knew about their own individual worlds - all this in the urgency and violence of conquest and colonization.

As is pointed out by the Chilean art historian Olaya Sanfuentes Echeverría, in her essay about the myth of Saint Thomas in America, "Up to the point of the discovery, for the European man the history of Christianity was the history of the world, which implied an enormous challenge because finding new lands and unknown populations of men meant finding a place for them in the biblical stories.

The gospels stated that the apostles would preach the word of God in all parts of the globe; this new region could not be excluded because it would discredit the foundations of Christianity. Therefore the European colonizers had to find signs of a previous evangelization of the American territory. If a previous evangelization had occurred with the resulting civilizing effect attributed to the Christian faith, how could they explain the presence of idolatry and bloody rituals in these new regions?"

This is only one of the theological and existential problems encountered by the Europeans in America that made them reassess their position in the world and in Christianity.

In this instance they relied on the fact that Saint Thomas had gone to evangelize in India, and correlating like they had with India to these West Indies, they blended Saint Thomas to the figure of the anti-human-sacrifice, peaceful Quetzacoatl. Because they believed the teachings had deteriorated so badly, they saw themselves as new apostles reviving and revitalizing the Christian teachings Saint Tomas had left behind.

All these challenges and responses to the newly found lands forced the Spanish to blend Mesoamerican myth with Christian lore for their own

benefit.

Mesoamericans understood religion as an accumulative phenomenon. In historical native conquests, conquered people were not expected to totally reject their beliefs and ignore their deities, but to recognize the gods of the triumphant culture as their own and as part of their belief system. So at the time of the European conquest, adding the Christian god to their own collection of deities and keeping their polytheistic belief system was but a natural progression.

But the conquest and Christianization of America was not that simple. The native communal vision of the world, of property, and of work was quickly supplanted by the feudal system of “encomienda”, and whole nations were enslaved.

Diseases for which native people had no natural defenses ravaged the populations, and the new religion dictated norms of behavior totally foreign to their understanding of the world, of people’s relation to nature.

In their effort to convert the native people, the friars and priests developed aggressive strategies. In Europe, the “Conquest Dances”, along with small religious theater representations (“Autos Sacramentales”), complemented the liturgical ritual by fomenting communal reinforcement and entertainment.

Upon arriving in Mesoamerica, the friars quickly established a parallel between their Conquest Dances and the war dances they observed in Tenochtitlán. The Spanish realized the importance of public rituals, spectacles and pageantry amongst the native cultures of the Americas and quickly supplanted the native dances with their own secular, military and religious theater.

In this Christianization effort, bible stories were told by using pre-Hispanic hieroglyphs painted on cloth banners or lienzos. The native dances were transformed by the Conquest Dances of the Iberian Middle Ages, and little by little new Christian icons started populating the New World.

Tonantzin blended into Guadalupe in Tepeyac, Mexico; Pachamama into La Virgen del Cerro in Potosí, Bolivia; Cocijó into Our Lord of Lightning in Oaxaca; and hundreds of other native syncretic manifestations of Christian saints, virgins and Christs started being worshiped in the churches that were built on top of pre-Hispanic temples and other sacred places.

These churches were built by native people, and native artists were trained in the European fine arts. They sculpted the church facades and porticoes,

painted the Christian iconography for the churches and convents, and by the friar's encouragement or in a subversive manner began infiltrating their own iconography into the Christian places of worship.

Although the priests tried to preach to all, only the educated in the native population were able to grasp and understand the canons of Christianity. The majority of the population were not really fully converted.

Parts of the liturgy and some of the form of the Christian rituals were incorporated into the pagan rituals throughout the Spanish and Portuguese colonies. African slaves were brought to America, and another influence was added to the mix. The seeds of something new and different began germinating and growing.

Early on in the conquest it was the native dancers that adapted their ancient dances to the requirements of the new Christian masters; and, as it happened with architecture and art later on, dance allowed the native cosmology a space.

Dance was very different to the Spanish than it was to the native people.

The Spanish had public dances. These dances were theater, propaganda; they were entertainment devoid of mysticism. On the other hand, for the native people dance was a ritual, a magic formula that had the power to personify nature's forces and cycles, the power to transform the viewer, the power to please the spirits. Although the intended theatrical reading of the dance was the battle and triumph of Christianity over paganism, native dancers kept paying homage through the spirituality of the dance to the natural deities they had always revered.

These hidden meanings, these native readings allowed native communities to survive, to appropriate and transform all the new influences into concepts they could understand and appreciate.

In this way a new native Christianity, a new mestizo culture, and a new and revolutionary art movement were born.

Silvia Rodriguez points out talking about Matachin Dances, which is probably true to all conquest dances in America, "The complex intricacy of every dance set and ritual gesture suggests a clear message that nonetheless remains elusive. The power of the dance lies in how its basic plot gets played out with such astonishing variation, each locality imparting its own

distinctive stamp.”

After more than ten years documenting mestizo dances throughout the Americas, we have come to recognize different aspects of these dances that are common to all of them.

The most significant similarity among all these dances is the commitment of the dancers.

Born of a strong sense of belonging and of a strong faith, it is a form of spirituality that is moved by a personal sense of responsibility to the entire community. It is the need to pay your dues to nature, to a higher power and to the community's well-being that fuels this commitment.

It is the physical sacrifice of the dancers that continually regenerates the bond between the community and the spiritual realm in the fiesta. The commitment of each dancer allows every one in the community, by their quiet participation, to honor the life-giving forces of nature through the dance.

There are many other similarities between the Matachines and La Danza de la Pluma dances, encompassing a variety of gestures, costumes and tools used in these dances. The basic structure of these dances features a group of dancers divided in two single parallel lines, with the main characters centered and in prominent positions. These main characters enact the drama of conquest. Another similarity is the tools of the dance: the palma, pala, sonaja, cupil, penacho, whips, and thrones; all symbols related to supremacy and warfare. The act of dancing itself is a similarity. The feet on the ground, stomping, jumping, kneeling, creating and recreating physical diagrams of mixed origins that sweep through the landscape of two cultures in repetitive and hypnotic movements.

The main characters are all similar: Cortez, Moctezuma, the Abuelos and their counterparts the Subalternos, and the Malinches.

We can speculate about the function or symbolism of the character of La Malinche and come up with various readings, but the power of this character as a facilitator of change lies in its enigmatic qualities, its elusiveness, and its childlike demeanor. In the instances where two Malinches dance, the cultural duality of the dances is manifested unequivocally through these characters - a European Malinche and a Native American Malinche. The use and

symbolism of the character of the bull shows one of the most striking differences between La Danza de la Pluma and the Matachines. The Bull is the beast; raw animal power said to represent paganism. It is defeated and castrated in the Matachines dance; it has no direct counterpart in La Danza de la Pluma.

There are, however, two characters in La Danza de la Pluma, who have their counterparts in the Abuelos of the Matachines dance, that fill the gap. These are the Subalternos, holy clowns, mischievous and vigilant. They wear black masks with big protruding white tusks. At the end of the ritual / performance, the Subalternos dance - part dance, part comedy routine, part closure. In this dance, one of the Subalternos, referred to as El Negro, is dressed in black and orange; and, with the aid of a chair, represents the bull. The other Subalterno, El Guero, dressed in green and yellow, is the bullfighter. After much joking and running around, El Negro pins El Guero to the ground, and The Bull is victorious. After long hours of recreating the drama of the conquest of the Aztec empire, it is the bull, the dark skinned personage, that is the ultimate victor.

There are levels and levels of complexity in the characters of these dances, and to claim full knowledge of what it all means is impossible and ultimately not important. It is in the act of dancing and the stoic participation of the audience in the context of the sharing of spirituality and wealth on the Feast Day that conjures up the spell of transcendence and facilitates a state of communion that assures well-being.

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