

OCHOSI MATAOCHIN

*Cultural imposition, cultural appropriation, conquest and survival.
Multi-media installation.*



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The text “TRES PUNTAS” (three points) is written on the dirt with “cascarilla”. Cascarilla is made with egg shells and is used to make symbols and magic diagrams on altars and other places by the practitioners of Santería and other Afro-Caribbean religions.



The text “NUBES DE LLUVIA” (Rain Clouds) is written on the dirt with corn flour, the most sacred material for the Native Americans. In many native ceremonies corn flour is used to make symbols of rain clouds on the ground in the plazas, as prayers for rain.



The video in the television on the right in the installation is the documentation of Matachin Dances in the Sierra Tarahumara. These dances were documented on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day in 2003. The matachin outfits in the installation are the traditional matachin dress used for the dances in New Mexico, by both the Native Americans and the hispanics.

The video in the small television on the left in the installation is the documentation of the dances of Holy Week in a village in Copper Canyon in the Sierra Tarahumara. They are mock battles between good and evil; another manifestation of the conquest dances.





Moctezuma- Tell me in two words
The intention of your coming.

Cortez- Only for you to become Christian
Is what I'm here for, Moctezuma.

This God is so eternal
And if you want to see His glory
Forget your law
And go to the true God.

Moctezuma- And why do you bring your sword?

Cortez- Because if you are opposed
And do not submit to my demands
In it you will experience
That this is the true God.

Cultures are similar to ripples on a pond, overlapping, intersecting and affecting each other; what was a perfect group of concentric waves becomes fragmented upon contact with the movement of other ripples, still expanding and rippling along into smaller and more complicated patterns of movement.

I have always been interested in multicultural issues and issues involving cultural appropriation, probably because of my situation of being a displaced person.

I'm not a historian or an anthropologist, but an artist, and as an artist I have approached the thematic of this piece and make my own conclusions guided not only by research but also by intuition and common sense, not overlooking my artistic esthetics and sensibility.

In this installation I group multicultural elements of Afro-Caribbean religion and other American post-colonial rituals, specifically Ochosi, the hunter and tracker of Yoruba religion and Afro-American religions, and the Matachin dances and Conquest dances introduced in America by the Spanish conquistadors. By paralleling these two post-colonization phenomena I seek to compare attitude patterns between colonized societies and the development of rituals born out of cultural impositions. These rituals are appropriated, transformed and then incorporated into the richness of these cultures, creating unique and distinct traditions. I use the term post-colonial loosely, because I believe all of us share in a colonial situation. We all are part of a global colony and subjects of a brutal economic empire that sees no distinctions among human beings when profit is involved.

As colonized people we act and react in a colonized way.

We hang on to a romanticized past, feel helpless, and act with suspicion to the point of concocting the most creative conspiracy theories. We misplace our anger to where it works against us and alienates our potential allies, and, worst of all, we look at our culture and traditions as property, static, permanent and isolated.

Utilizing the symbols of Ochosi - the deer, the rattle and the bow and arrow - allows me to explore how the Matachin Dances evolved from being a colonizing tool to becoming a tool for survival and finally an integral part of local cultures in Central, South and North America; and how in many instances even the colonizers in a reverse of fortune become colonized and utilize these same cultural impositions as identity markers in their cultural make-up as a means of cultural survival.

Although some of the symbols of Ochosi, like the bow and arrow and the rattle, were symbols that were associated with the deity in Africa, his association with the Native American, the Indian, is a bit more complex.

In the Yoruba Africa, in sharp contrast with America, the worship of one specific deity is practiced by whole regions; in America one household might worship several deities.

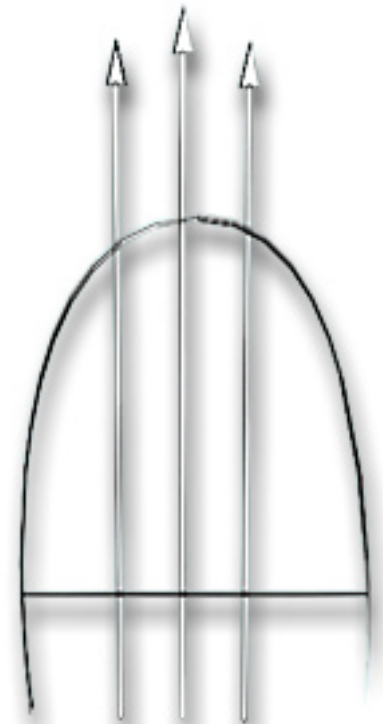
War and slavery resulted in the decimation of the regions of Nigeria that worshiped Ochosi; his cult coming to America with the slaves and disappearing altogether from Africa.

In 1502 the first African slaves were introduced in America.

The Yoruba religion from Nigeria in the Americas went through a major change; the slaves, being forced into Christianity by their masters, hid their religion behind the symbols of Catholicism and pretended to be worshipping Christian saints, when in fact they were worshipping their African deities.

In Cuba and Brazil, the runaway slaves turned to their hunter god Ochosi to help them survive in the American jungle and to the Native American as a guide.

In this way the image of the Native American became related with this new American deity.



Ochosi is syncretized with several Christian saints. In Brazil he is associated with Saint Sebastian, in Habana, Cuba, he is associated with Saint Norbert, and in Santiago de Cuba he is associated with Santiago Apostol, Saint James.

The Matachin Dances is not an easy subject because the theories of their origin and development are many and varied, and their practice and significance are shrouded by history and isolation.

They are apparently of Moorish ancestry (Matachin it is said to come from the Arabic meaning to assume a face). Probably arriving in Europe with the first crusaders, their development there is murky at best, but they were transformed in medieval Europe into sophisticated comic, religious and military theater: sword dances that, besides providing entertainment, played a role in the anti-Islamic propaganda of the times.

The dictionary of the Royal Academy of the Spanish Language defines Matachin: "in old times, a man disguised ridiculously from head to toe, with a mask and a dress of many colors. Dances were performed in a joyous way by these men, with funny gestures and hitting each other with wooden swords and bladders filled with air". This definition points to the mocking and comic qualities of the dances.

There is not a lot of documentation about the Matachin dances in Europe. This lack of documentation is probably due to its character as popular dance practiced by the lower classes. On the other hand there is extensive documentation of the practices of the nobles and aristocrats at the time. The first documentation of Matachin dances in Europe is as part of a Moros y Cristianos (Moors and Christian) dance.

The Matachin or Tablachin dancers seem to have preformed as part of the Moors and Christian Dances, but with time the Matachines evolved into an independent dance form, a very stylized form of mock battle between good and evil, forming part on its own right of the group of dances and theatrical performances known as Danzas de la Conquista (Conquest Dances).

Mock combat, as the formal predecessor of the Conquest Dances, can be dated back to ancient Greece. Xiphismos, as the ancient Greek called it, was spread through Europe by the Romans. The Visigoths adopted it from Roman culture, and it was incorporated in their military games, making its way to the heart of the Iberian Peninsula.

The Apostle, Saint James (Santiago), is said to have evangelized in Spain shortly after the death of Christ. Upon returning to Palestine, he was decapitated and, according to legend, his body taken by two of his disciples, transported as if by miracle to Galicia.

In the reign of Alfonse II in the 800's, the tomb of Santiago was miraculously discovered. Alfonse immediately visited the tomb and ordered a cathedral built, also making an important donation to Compostela.

Santiago de Compostela became the first and most important tourist destination in Europe, with pilgrims flocking to it. It became the thoroughfare for cultural interchange; the route by which the epic songs arrived in Spain in the mouths of street performers.

These epic songs take on many different reincarnations in the heroic poems of Spain, all replaying the war between good and evil; the light skinned Christians and the dark skinned Moors.

The Christian kingdoms in the Iberian peninsula, in desperate need of a consolidating force, found



the perfect image: Saint James mounted on his white horse, sword in hand, as he defeated the Moors. Santiago Matamoros (Saint James, Killer of Moors) became the battle cry of the Spanish Christians in the re-conquest of the Iberian Peninsula, and Santiago's supernatural assistance from the heavens helped in the creation of an almost mythical attitude of being the chosen people to fight heresy and fomented the miracle culture of the Spanish Middle Ages.

The historic evolution of these Dances is made possible by many factors, including royal and aristocratic events and the processions of Corpus Christi of the fourteenth to the seventeenth centuries, the latter transplanted to America; these demanded pomp and show of force and community participation.

Another factor in the evolution and importance of the conquest dances is the creation of local militias (Soldadescas) by Ferdinand and Isabella, a sort of homeland security.

With time these Soldadescas, or brotherhoods of soldiers and nobles, adopted the form of religious military societies under ecclesiastic supervision, and in the popular festivals they provided entertainment, becoming an integral part of the feast days in every village in Spain.

The "Conquest Dances", along with small religious theater representations ("Autos Sacramentales"), complemented the liturgical ritual in these fiestas by fomenting communal reinforcement and entertainment.

These fiestas were attended by all social groups: the nobles competing in lances games and Caballerescas, and the towns people with their dances; also in attendance were professional groups of entertainers, puppeteers, jugglers and story tellers exchanging elements amongst all of the different disciplines.

The villains in the Moors and Christians representations 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, suddenly transformed the Iberian peninsula; gave birth to Spain making it an imperial power and made it possible for all these cultural traits, medieval mentality, racial attitudes and the Spanish miracle culture of the re-conquest to come to the New World.

Upon arriving in Mesoamerica, the Spanish 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.

They failed to recognize the fundamental difference between the two practices, that of theater and ritual; allowing this difference in perception to be one of the transforming elements of these cultural impositions.

The conquistadores thought that making the native people dance to their own defeat was one of the ways to subjugate them, and the Conquest Dances of Spain became the dances of the conquest of the New World. The Aztecs understood religion, as did many of the Native American people, as an accumulative phenomenon. People conquered by the Aztecs 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 adding the Christian god to their own collection of deities and keeping their polytheist belief system was but a natural



progression.



The Rarámuri, as the Tarahumara call themselves, have a peculiar Matachin tradition, similar and at the same time dramatically different from the Matachin dances of the Southwest.

The Tarahumaras, as a response to colonization, retreated into the canyons (what we call Copper Canyon) and in the isolation of the Sierra, found protection from the invaders. If it had not been for the discovery of precious metals in some areas of the Sierra, the Spanish would never have followed them there. The missions in the Sierra Tarahumara were founded by Jesuits. In the mid seventeenth hundreds Charles III expelled the Jesuits from Spanish territory. Some of the Jesuit missions in the Sierra Tarahumara were elevated to par-

ishes, and some were handed over to the Franciscan missionaries. In the late seventeenth hundreds there were Franciscans running some of the Tarahumara missions. With the Mexican War of Independence in 1810 and the independence of Mexico in 1821, most of the Franciscans left the area. The resulting void of evangelization made possible a fusion of Tarahumara beliefs and Christian doctrine. It was not until the late nineteenth century that there was renewed interest by the Church in the Tarahumaras.

The Tarahumaras have adapted Christian beliefs and rituals to their concepts of the world in a very dramatic way; making it a good example of the transformation that takes place in cultural fusions. For the Tarahumaras the Conquest Dances have served as catalyst for these fusions, providing the stage to enact their perceptions of the universe, to reestablish cosmic equilibrium in the times of danger and to celebrate interaction between two brothers; god and the devil.

The tribes of the Southwest of the United States were not so lucky. The Spanish Inquisition regulated and prohibited their religious practices, some going underground or totally disappearing. The evangelization of



these tribes has continued uninterrupted since Don Juan de Oñate came to New Mexico in 1598, except for the thirteen years of Spanish absence following the Pueblo Revolt.

The colonization of New Mexico was not an isolated event, but part of the expansionist imperial power of Spain in the New World. By the time Oñate ventured into the Tierra Adentro, one hundred and three years of Spanish presence in the New World had already transpired. The Native peoples of the Caribbean had been extinguished in two generations, and slaves from Africa were already part of the cultural make up of the Spanish colonies. The first friars to arrive in continental America did so in 1523, and the first official mission was founded in 1524. One of the first known theatrical dances performed in America was a procession representing the taking of Jerusalem by the crusaders, performed in Tlaxcala as early as 1538.

The first known dance representation without dialogue, of the Conquest of the Aztecs, or Danza de los Moctezumas, is dated to 1566.

These Danzas de los Moctezumas are the best candidate for being the possible origin of the Matachin Dances we know in New Mexico. The Danza de los Moctezumas were performed throughout the Spanish empire. It has been documented in Guam, and, as late as 1900, in the Dominican Republic.

By the time the Spanish arrived in New Mexico, there were in place proven techniques for colonizing, evangelizing and conquering the native peoples of the New World. The “encomienda” system subjugated and made slaves of the native communities; the Christianization effort of the systems of missions, spreading along the royal roads of the colonies, was already flourishing. Since 1531 there was a New World native-friendly Christian deity, Coatlicue (“she who tramples snakes”). We know her better by the Spanish aberration of her Nahuatl name, Guadalupe.

The “Conquest Dances” were already being performed in the New World, not only by the Spanish, but by native communities that helped diffuse the Conquest Dances as part of the Christianization process, fomented and promoted by *cofradías*, *cabildos* and *gremios* (guilds).

There is a reference dated to 1651 stating that a guild of butchers in Mexico City organized masked dances with Indians, Montezuma and Cortez. This reference is peculiar to me, because another definition of Matachin in the Spanish dictionary is “butcher”. This definition of butcher makes sense in two ways, guild of butchers and the butchers of paganism.



In the Caribbean, the African slaves were also developing their own version of the Matachines, and the feasts



of Santiago were and are celebrated with the “Caballeros y los Vejigantes”; the caballeros being the Spanish Christians and the Vejigantes, the pagan devils. The Vejigantes wear African looking masks with multiple horns and dress in bat-like outfits with many colored ribbons.

Earlier I referred to the definition of Matachin according to the Spanish dictionary, and the mention of the use of bladders. Bladder in Spanish is vejiga; hence Vejigantes.

When the conquest dances were introduced to the African communities in the colonies, they acquired an African taste, while when they came in contact with the Pueblo culture of the Rio Grande, the dances acquired a solemn structure and feel similar to their traditional dances.

Even the comic passages in these new Native American rituals seem controlled and purposely poignant, as if through them the spectator may reach an understanding of the complexities of subjugation and mestizaje.

The “Conquest Dances” were intended to be a Christianizing and a subjugating tool, but did the native people of the Americas and the slaves brought here understand and share in the Spanish celebration of re-conquest, or did they see their own re-conquest being played out, with the future expulsion of the invaders / oppressors?

To what extent did these cultures recognize in these dances a continuum of their own customs and an escape from the brutality of their oppressors, helped along by Christian theories of redemption and paradise?

Are these dances, as some experts have claimed, a type of passive resistance under the guise of spirituality?

Has their comic nature allowed oppressed cultures to release their anger by mocking the oppressors?

I believe all these to be true in one way or another.

They are key elements in the transformation of imposed cultural traits of the culture of conquest into integrated traditions in the colonized cultures. They help to understand the historical process, and also help to preserve and enrich the cultures marked for assimilation.

Recently I was observing Matachin dances in a small community close to Albuquerque. I was talking with one of the dancers, and he asked me if I had ever seen something like it. Through our conversation I realized our two very different points of view. I was looking for the thread that joins all these traditions together. He, on the other hand, was interested in how his tradition was unique and different from even the most similar Matachin dances of other close-by communities.

Hispanic Matachin dances in New Mexico are similar to the Indian Matachin dances and other Conquest Dances throughout the Americas. They are the symbolic dances of the Christianization of Native America and the triumph of Christianity over paganism in the New World, and are probably the closest to the original cultural hybrid.

The Hispanic communities’ Matachin Dances follow the same basic formula created centuries ago, and have evolved in unique forms specific to each community. This formula for communal reinforcement focusing on



devotion, sharing and entertainment still fulfills the purpose it was designed for: strengthening community ties and Christian beliefs while providing entertainment within this context. With the more recent threat of cultural assimilation by the dominant Anglo culture, these dances also reaffirm community identity and pride.

I recognize I have a need to belong to my situation. This need makes me look for a common thread in these traditions. It makes me listen for a cultural echo resonating through the ages and through my experience and the experience of Spanish, mestizos and native people of the Americas.

At the same time I genuinely appreciate and

Photograph by Craig Johnson

respect those elements that are unique in every one of these rituals. They have endured isolation and racial, political and economic repression while reinforcing each community's specific traditions. They promise to continue morphing, revealing through these changes the cultural continuum and creating a record of how we adapt and enrich each other in our need to survive.



Photograph by Craig Johnson