



The popular festivals of the Virgin of Conception in Guatemala

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In many towns, villages and cities in Guatemala It is celebrated during the month of December, the festival of the Virgin of Conception. This gives rise to multiple popular expressions of extraordinary color, artistic richness and deep significance.



Virgin of Conception of the *San Francisco de la Nueva Guatemala* Church of the Assumption. (Photo: Guillermo Vásquez, 2004)

Thus, in the town of Conception, *Ciudad Vieja*, department of *Sacatepéquez*, the aforementioned festival takes on unusual splendor. It begins on December 7th with the banquet. After noon, the characters who will participated in the dance-dramas follow the same itinerary that the prayer of the Virgin on day eight will follow.

At nightfall on December 7th on the eve of Conception Day, both in *Ciudad Vieja*, and in the rest of the country, the devil is burned. At six o'clock in front of the doors of the houses, large piles of garbage are incinerated (dry leaves, papers, kindling, straw and shavings, amongst other objects.) Fireplaces have virtue of scaring away the devil and purifying the home in the triumph of good over evil. After the burning of the devil, the population prepares to celebrate the Immaculate Conception of Mary and later the most important New Year's Eve celebrations.



Virgin of Conception “*Chapetona*” of municipality of *Ciudad Vieja Sacatepéquez* (Photo: Guillermo Vásquez, 2007)

From very early in the morning of December 8th, the main day of the Conception festival in *Ciudad Vieja* the people gather in the atrium of the church and in the main square. The councilors of the Brotherhood of the Virgin set off hundreds of fireworks every moment, this activity intensifies once the ten o'clock mass is over. The burning of gunpowder reaches such a point that a thick curtain of smoke covers the square and the temple. In 2004 five hundred flying bombs, rockets and sixteen grenades were consumed simultaneously.

In 2005, four praises, a challenge and a farce were performed throughout the entire route of the *Ciudad Vieja* prayer. The main characters of these praises were the Indian, the Devil, the Mayor, the property manager and the patron.

In this town, Mr. Rodrigo Martínez Flores, a barber by profession, is among others in charge of choosing the actors, copying the originals and rehearsing the performance.

He is also the representative of his company with which he tours the departments of Sacatepéquez every year. Escuintla and Guatemala performing at prayers and patron saint festivities. Immediately, and always in front of the atrium of the monumental 18th century baroque church, the dancers of the traditional dance-dramas gather together: the dance of the twenty-four devils and the dance of the conquest.

Each devil characterizes and individualizes a sin: lust, exploitation, politicians, drinking, gluttony, etc. Added to these characters are the guardian angel, the soul and death. The dancers carry a musical instrument with which they accompany the dance and the recitation of the speeches.

The orchestra is made up of three guitars, two *zambumbias*, four jawbones, an accordion, two *chinchines*, a triangle, two tambourines and a set of castanets.

The music of evident traditional African-American character, serves as the basis for a more or less fixed choreographic pattern, on which each dancer improvises freely. The devils move marking a circle and forming columns to the rhythm of their musical instruments. In front of the main character, the elder devil, they recite their speeches.



Virgin of Conception of the Metropolitan Cathedral of the New Guatemala of the Assumption (Photo: Guillermo Vásquez, 2009)

The rehearsals prior to its performance begin early in *Ciudad Vieja*. Since August, the dancers have met every Sunday, after four in the afternoon, at the local school. Mr. Braulio Camargo, who is the rehearse and enthusiast of the group, keeping the originals of the Dance with jealousy. He is in charge of copying it and delivering it to each dancer as well as directing the rehearsals.

Late in the early hours of the next day the Virgin of Conception finally arrives at the temple atrium. It is at this moment when the town pays its last tribute to its patron saint, which consists of a new explosion of fireworks.

Meanwhile, the popular celebrations of the Conception in *Ciudad Vieja* continue for eight more days, until the eighth, a festival that has the same splendor of the main day.



Virgin of Conception from the church of *San Francisco* of the *Nueva Guatemala de la Asunción* (Photo: Guillermo Vásquez, 2004)

Only then are the festivities of the Immaculate Conception suspended, waiting for another December to shine with equal enthusiasm.

The Virgin Conception in Guatemala

Since the time of the navigator Christopher Columbus, Guatemala became a devotee of the Virgin of the Conception like so many other cities of Franciscan devotion in Latin America.

At the same time, the images of the Virgin of Conception are multiple and carved with singular beauty, and almost all of them “go out to see their people”, to “scare away the bad guys”, thus going out to put off wrongs. The images that in simple litters travel through neighborhoods, and alleys in these days of Conception have a long history and no less tradition. Here is the most important Conception of the *Nueva Guatemala de la Asunción*.



Procession of the Virgin of Conception on December 8, 2004 (Photo: Guillermo Vásquez)

The Immaculate Conception of San Francisco

Having been elected pro-minister of the seraphic order in the Province of Guatemala, Father Fray Antonio Tineo traveled to Spain in January 1598, with the purpose of requesting from the king an increase in Franciscan religious. The immaculate image of *Nuestra Señora de la Limpia Concepción* that is venerated in the titular chapel of this ministry in our church in Guatemala (...); two organs, one for San Francisco and the other for Almolonga; two images of San Francisco, one for the main altarpiece and another for the processions; a San Juan Bautista for the holder of Comalapa and another for Alotenango; and an image of Santiago for the holder of Atitlan.

We can therefore situate the making of the image of Immaculate Conception of San Francisco between 1598 and 1599. We can also affirm that the image was made by one of the most famous Sevillian sculptors of the time, as bellow it will be said, because not just anything would be brought to one of the most flourishing Franciscan provinces of the New World, and even less so of the image was originally destined of the first-born convent of Almolonga.

The story is as follows: when the Friar Diego de Cubillas was elected guardian of the convent of Almolonga, he dedicated to the enrichment and grandeur of the temple and convent, since these were dedicated to the purest Conception, of which he was a great devotee. *Antonio Tineo, to bring*

order so that at the expense of the benefactors that Fray Diego de Cubillas requested, caused an image of Nuestra Señora de la mayor Perfección y Primor that could be achieved."



Members of the Moors and Christians dance carrying the banner of the Virgin of Conception (Photo: Guillermo Vásquez, 2009)

"It was like this, and our P. Tineo brought a beautiful pilgrim, whose beauty stole the affections of the serious religious of this convent of Guatemala (as well as the official gentlemen of the brotherhood and chapel of the Conception), who arrived at him, and at a time when the brotherhood of the Limpia Concepción was being promoted with great heat, and the decoration of its beautiful chapel, the very rich jewel of the image was imprisoned, (...) remaining in the chapel of the Conception of this convent, effigy of Our Lady, with universal consolation of this city (...)"

Father Tineo came with the sacred image in the last months of the year 1600, remaining, as it was said, in its titular chapel, from where he has witnessed the event of Guatemala, and in front of whom the prostrate people have known implore divine favor. The image was damaged and was not repaired until days before the solemn pontifical coronation, it was retouched by master Huberto Solís.

Despite the transformations it has undergone, it still bears resemblance to its sister the Virgin of Conception, patron saint of *Ciudad Vieja*. This extraordinary image has been able to attract crowds for centuries. Its prayer on December 8th, constitutes one of the most faithful symbols of the faith and enthusiasm of the people of Guatemala. She has brought together, centralized, and development for centuries the devotion and enthusiasm for the Immaculate Conception in Guatemala City, and while the city has been a metropolis, the other towns of the country and the kingdom have taken an example and model from its celebrations of Conception. Providential sanction of such a situation constitutes the pontifical coronation of such a beloved image of the Most Holy Mary, Our Lady, on December 5th, 1954, when the Marian Year was celebrated in commemoration of the first centenary of the Dogma of the Immaculate Conception.

La Chapetona

Having been disappointed in his attempt to have a new image in Almolonga, Father Cubillas, thanks to the pious kidnapping and robbery carried out by the friars and brothers of Conception in the Convent of San Francisco, decided to repeat his request, using the offer of the brothers of the Immaculate Convent Of San Francisco to pay the costs to make another image in Spain for Almolonga. The creator (of) the image of Our Lady, finally in his town “(...) *“When opening the drawer (...) the salve was sung to her, more with sobs of devotion than with sobs of devotion than*

with a copy of lights on the altar (...)” Referring to the celebrity of the arrival of the holy to his house, the numerous contests of those days, the most solemn novena, sermons and festivities of the most plausible that have been seen here, with which the most beautiful and most magnificent image was placed on its throne (...) of the Most Pure Conception of Our Lady that with the title of Chapetona is (venerated) in the famous altarpiece of the church of Almolonga (...)”