



Popular Tradition

Convites in Guatemala

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Convites is the name given in Guatemala to the fun parades inherited from the European carnival-style *mojigangas* or parades (funny parades), phenomena originating from the European Middle Ages that first appeared in Central America during the late colonial period (17th and 18th centuries). The name comes from the verb "convidar" (invites), meaning "to invite to share." These activities were held in Guatemala in advance of the traditional festive celebrations of communities dedicated to one of the saints of the Catholic Christian calendar. These activities were held in order to announce their upcoming festival, parading through the town streets along the route of the main procession on its day, but originally and specifically for the celebrations of Christ's Corpus Christi and the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary. It should be remembered that at the end of the 18th century, the Bourbon monarchs brought about certain transformations in universal Catholic Christian ritual at the behest of Pope Innocent III, and the Corpus Christi festivities were distinguished by the appearance of all kinds of creatures and monsters of nature that were universally expected to pay homage to the Holy Sacrament of the Altar, accompanying it in its procession, albeit at a certain distance. (They always appear far from the atriums and/or at the front of the procession.) At that time, the Church had prohibited religious theater activities within church precincts, as had been customary for centuries. (Viqueira, 1984, cited by García Escobar, 1989:140).

As it is a carnival heritage adapted to Christian Catholic canons as much as possible, the performers of the convites in the Kingdom of Guatemala disguised themselves in different ways with masks and costumes that, at one time, were also those of traditional dances, especially animals (monkeys, tigers, bulls, dogs and deer) and human characters as *gracejos*, or with long nightgowns (for the days of the Dead and All Saints - the case of Villa Nueva,

Guatemala -), who generally went on foot or on horseback, collecting alms to help them in the preparations for the celebration, entertaining people with their "gracejadas" most of them with a satirical and mocking sense in reference to events of local social life and well-known characters in the environment. They have also been known as "Bailes de Gracejos", "Bailes de Enmascarados" or "Bailes de Fieros".

At the same time, specific dance expressions known as "Dances of the Giants and the Bigheads" were added. All of this took place in specific locations as they emerged as unique customs in each region. Regarding the Corpus Christi festival, this tradition is still preserved in Rabinal, Baja Verapaz, and Patzún, Chimaltenango. The same is true for the Feast of the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary, where the *gracejos* are especially known as the infernal devils, an allusion to the Virgin's victory over these biblical beings as proclaimed in Genesis. (See the cases of Villa Nueva, Guatemala; Ciudad Vieja, Sacatepéquez; and Escuintla.) This custom remained in force for decades during the 19th and 20th centuries, having originated sometime in the previous centuries, as already mentioned, specifically in central regions of the Captaincy General.

(In the present-day municipalities of San Juan del Obispo, Ciudad Vieja, Jocotenango and Sumpango in the Department of Sacatepéquez, in the departmental capital of Chimaltenango and in its municipalities El Tejar and San Andrés Itzapa. In San Raymundo de Peñafort, a municipality in the Department of Guatemala. Also on the south coast in the Departments of Escuintla and Suchitepéquez and in the west in the municipality of San Juan Ostuncalco in the Department of Quetzaltenango and in Santiago Atitlán, Sololá. To the north, in the Verapaces and in El Quiché).

CONVITE IN SANTIAGO ATITLÁN, SOLOLÁ. YEAR 1982.



Approximate age of photo: 40 years.

CONVITE OF THE FIEROS IN VILLA NUEVA, GUATEMALA. YEAR 1986.

This convite is approximately 150 years old. It takes place on November 1st, more than a month before the Concepción festivities in Villanueva on December 8th. Currently, hundreds of people in costume participate.



1. Band of musicians



2. Band of musicians



3. Fauna characters



4. Indigenous people dancing a son (a traditional dance).



5. African



6. Catarina Bull



7. Nursing service

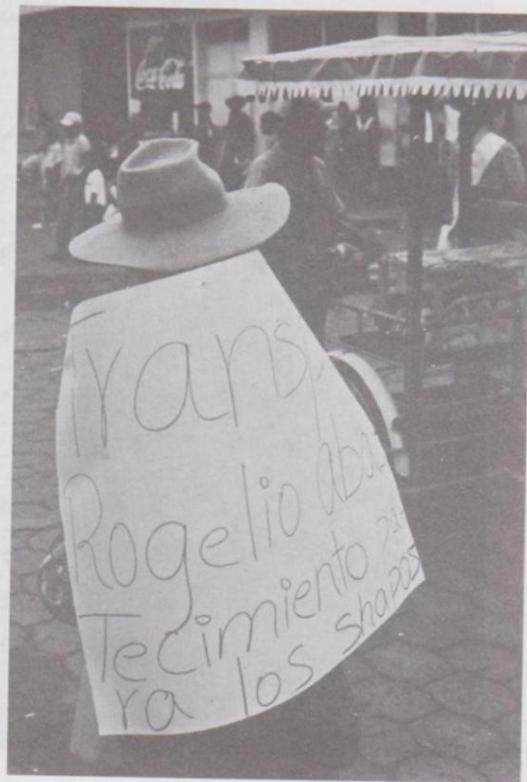


8. The Jury

SAN BERNARDINO SUCHITEPÉQUEZ CONVITE, SUCHITEPÉQUEZ. 2005.



18. Local character.



19. The same character.



20. Fiero in the role of a kaibil



21. Fieros.



22. Fieros interviewed by local students



23. Fieros during the preparations before the official departure.



24. The Fieros posing for our cameras.

Due to infrastructure changes in land-based communication (roads and transportation) beginning in the 1940s and 1950s, and to wired and wireless media technology (radio, film, and television), which has increasingly penetrated the country's geography since the 1960s, many traditional activities that had been hidden or forgotten for decades began to become a visual part of Guatemalans, especially those who viewed them with the eyes of critical observation and research, but generally those who chose the path of folkloric exploitation for private, commercial, and international-tourism profit. (The State, its various governments, and private enterprise.) This is the moment when some traditional feasts, which were timidly, so to speak, practiced in various regions of the country's interior, which had preserved them in their localities, appeared on the national scene. The existence of the traditional feasts of Santa Cruz, El Quiché, and Mixco, Guatemala, began to become known.

Perhaps because of their festive and humorous nature, many municipalities did not take them seriously, although they also did not take into account the serious and austere ritual dance activities, such as sacred rituals and ceremonies and traditional dances. This was the time when the country's state authorities considered traditional popular activities as atavistic elements subject to modernization or transformation into lucrative folklore activities for the benefit of nationality, civilization, and economic progress. The dividends from their exploitation began to be reaped by the country's politically and economically powerful sectors, thus enriching the national coffers and their pockets. It is then the time when, due to these influences and the inevitable imitation of what comes from outside (through radio, cinema and TV), the invitations lose all inherited expression and become festive and graceful demonstrations in keeping with contemporary modernity, which is transmitted through new media technologies, thus fulfilling new needs for popular artistic expression in accordance with the new social dynamics brought about by the massive increase in populations.



25. Convite in the capital city for August 15, 2005.

Although the traditional motifs persist to a certain extent, such as inviting guests to the celebration, marching along the next procession route for the main or titular day, and collecting financial support (alms) for the preparations, the paraphernalia has transformed. Now, it is no longer about collecting financial support (alms) or marching along the procession routes, but rather about structuring a moderately aesthetic choreographic spectacle, tailored to popular tastes and contemporary rhythms produced across borders, especially those highly technological. The characters have changed and are now those that correspond to television series and Hollywood films destined for international mass consumption. Today's convites have become private businesses for groups of people who collect money from each other to cover the costs of purchasing expensive costumes that reflect

new imagery produced by the influence of film, television, and cable, primarily.

Imaginaries that correspond to foreign stories and characters, including those from the world of Walt Disney, the comic and sinister characters of Hollywood, which, in turn, globalize characters from ancient and modern European, Asian, and African stories. Viewing the convites from this historical perspective, knowing that they belong to a universal traditional activity and that, once they acquired Guatemalan characteristics that were completely lost over the last forty years, it can be considered that these convites have lost the opportunity, which was consolidating as a genuinely Guatemalan tradition, to be considered Guatemalan cultural heritage. While these convites form particular bonds of solidarity, fraternity, and friendship among the performers, as well as time being incorporated into their expressions, all this does not hinder a patrimoniality that demands genuine characteristics of belonging to an ancestral and truly continental tradition.

CONVITE TO THE CONCEPTION PRAYER IN SAN ANDRES ITZAPA, CHIMALTENANGO. YEAR 2000.



9. Faun Costumes



10. Homogeneous Clown Costumes



11. More Faun Costumes accompanied by boy and girl drummers.



12. European-Style Costumes



13. Tropical-Style Costumes



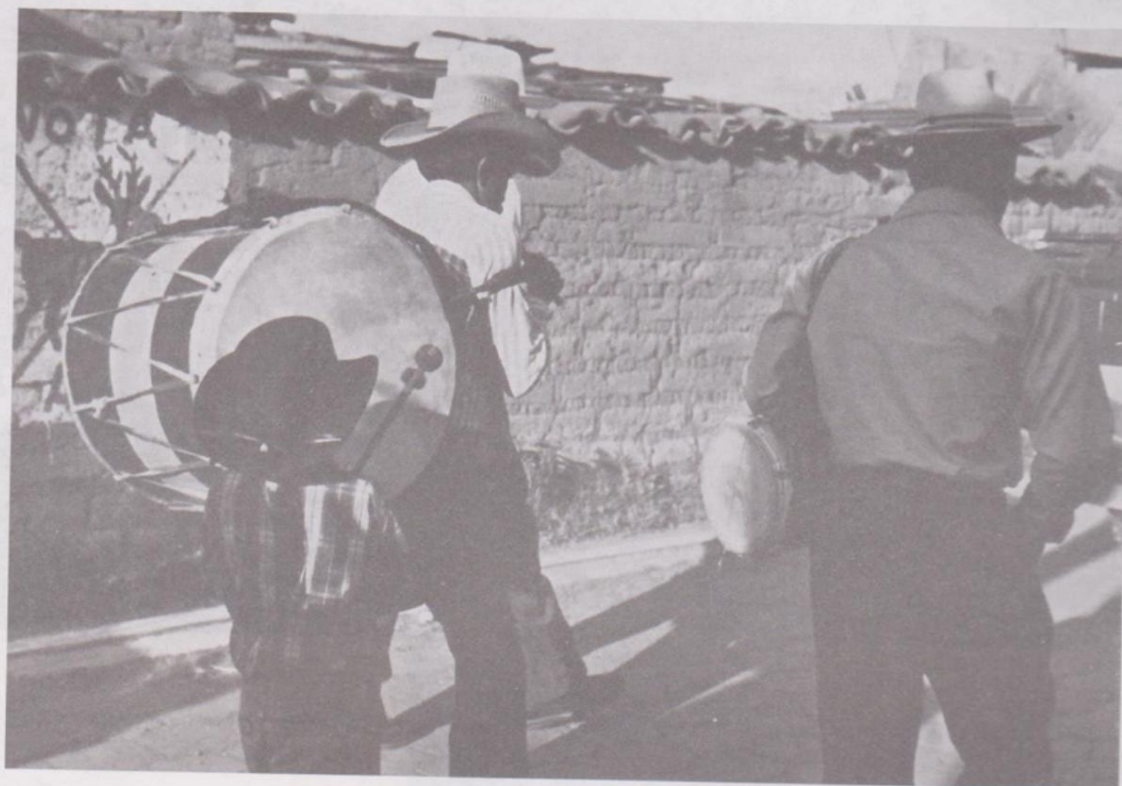
14. Tropical-Style Costumes



15. Girls on Horseback Preceding the Prayer of Concepción



16. A Whistle, Drum, and Snare Drum Ensemble Preceding the Prayer of Concepción with the Girls on Horseback



17. A Whistle, Drum, and Snare Drum Ensemble Preceding the Prayer of Concepción with the Girls on Horseback

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Santa Cruz el Quiche Convite, El Quiche, on the patron saint's day of San José, San José Nacahuil Village of San Pedro Ayampuc, March 19, 2005



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