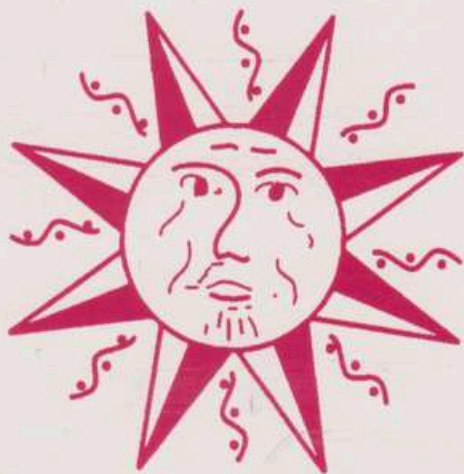




## **La Tradición Popular**

- 1. The Tzotzil Carnival of  
Xenaloh, Chiapas, MX.***
- 2. Ritual Buffoons in  
Guatemala***

***Carlos René García Escobar***





# 1. The Tzotzil Carnival of Xenaloh, Chiapas, MX.

## 2. Ritual Buffoons in Guatemala

Carlos René García Escobar

Since the 7th Central American Anthropology Congress was carried out in San Cristóbal de Las Casas City, state of Chiapas, Mexico—from the 16th to the 20th of February 2009—I had the chance of visiting the municipality of Xenaloh, next to San Juan Chamula, where Carnival was being celebrated through a series of traditions the Tzotzil population was accustomed to.

Present in said municipality, accompanied by the poet Ambar Past and my family, in the afternoon of the 16th, as in the morning I had participated in the inaugural forum, I noticed it was a festive day, Tzotzil style.

Carnival, as we know, is a truly ancient tradition with a western character, but originated in territories known currently as the Middle East, including Egypt, where it developed, reaching its prime in Ancient Greece and Rome. In the Christian Era, Carnival was linked with different anniversaries of primitive Christianity, carried out before the Lent commemorations related to the Life, Passion, and Death of Jesus Christ, to bid farewell to mundane pleasures and to proceed to do the preparatory penance for the commemorations which are currently known as Lent and Holy Week.

Historically, the medieval carnivals now spread in the rest of Europe are remembered, and in said vividness, they appear once more, rejuvenated, in the 18th and 19th centuries, in both the very Europe and America. Here is where the American type assigns Carnival its own cultural characteristics, due to the particular historical processes of American societies, in which the coexistence of contradictory social sectors—slaves (like the descendants of Africa), the continental Indigenous conglomerate, the racial mixture with Europeans (Spaniards, English, French and Portuguese), Afro-Americans, and Indigenous People—leave their cultural impressions on the very execution of carnivals.

These societies are divided into social classes, whose conditions lead them to disrupt their contradictions, and make fun with certain permissiveness of their authorities, and members of the dominant and oppressive sectors, as it always was in their Meso-Oriental and Central-European origins.

These American carnivals were extremely popular in mixed-race societies, though not in indigenous populations; nevertheless, the existence of indigenous localities where they are still celebrated is surprising; and it is here where the detail that originated this text lies. Details that explain the apparition of an external tradition are roughly offered, tradition that acquires cultural characteristics and impressions, which are very particular and linked with the historical process of colonization in these latitudes.

The purpose is, then, to elucidate the population of Xenaloh's carnival process, in which the following are found: linking expressions with the all-time Maya Tzotzil ritual, syncretism with colonial catholic Christianity, and what is fundamental in this case, demonstrations of the slavery which was applied to the descendants of Africa, brought to America in inhuman conditions, and destined to do agrarian and domestic work as slaves in all the formalities of said socio-economic condition, fomented and developed with impunity by the above-mentioned Europeans.

The prior text means, therefore, that the Tzotzil carnival of Xenaloh, Chiapas, is practiced under cultural characteristics proper of the Tzotzil group in relation with the presence of African slaves and their descendants since colonial times. It is about, as we will further see, a social relationship made up of different attitudes and behaviors which come from a social and historical process that finally linked them. Let us see. African inhabitants were forcibly transferred from African coasts, in the context of an inhuman and absurd



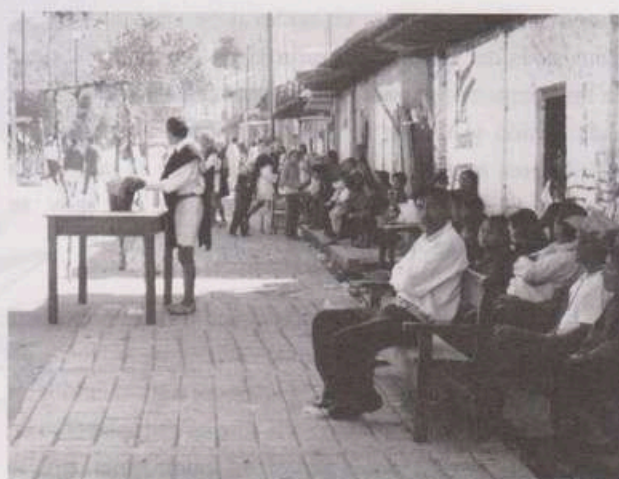
traffic of slaves, which the Portuguese, Spanish and English were responsible for, through the Atlantic Sea to the South and Central American coasts, the Caribbean and the Gulf of Mexico, since the first years of the 16th century. It is known that in Panama there were slaves since 1509. According to Claudia Dary, since 1536 there were black people at the domestic service of Don Pedro de Alvarado, as reported by him to the King of Spain in a letter dated May 12th of that year. Bernal Díaz del Castillo confirms it when telling they were allies in the Spanish troops during the Conquest. That is how we know of their presence in America from the beginning of the 16th century.

The important event that defines a certain indigenous imaginary in Meso-America in relation to the strangers of black skin living in these latitudes consists in the following beliefs: In Mayan tradition, the god of death appears with black impressions in different archeological expressions and known signs. The Kekchí world in Guatemala knows him as *q'eq*, a strange and negative character who provokes fear because of his punishing nature. In the central region of Guatemala, he is remembered in the *De Toritos* traditional dances, as the herdsman of a country house where a bullfight was going to be carried out; in the social scale they were above cowhands—who are represented by indigenous

people—who are invited to herd the bulls to the ring where the fight will take place.<sup>5</sup> In the region of the State of Chiapas he is remembered as an evil individual, abductor of women, who lives in hidden caves in the mountain. Everything mentioned above originates from the moment when slaves escape from the Spanish slavers in cities and estates, and as fugitives or *cimarrones*, they occupy remote places in the mountains, in Guatemala the Sierra de las Minas, for example, and in Mexico the Altos de Chiapas, were geographically, the Ciudad Real is located, now San Cristóbal de las Casas.

In the case of the Tzotziles, specifically in Xenaloh, black people are remembered as abductors of women, a topic which is expressed in the Tzotzil carnival of said locality. The topic and argument are presented as how I will describe them according to my observations of that day in that place.

Since very early in the day, groups of confraternity members are organized, who go through the streets with different garments, batons, scepters, flags, and musical instruments, looking for those houses where their inhabitants have created small altars allusive to the ritual or where they are expected to prepare a staging which brings up a memory lost in the times of the myth.



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2. Dary Fuentes, Claudia. *Literatura Popular de los Caribes Negros de Guatemala*. Bol. La tradición Popular No. 34. Centro de Estudios Folklóricos, Usac, Guatemala, 1981. Pág. 3.
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4. Cabarrús, Carlos Rafael. *La Cosmovisión Q'eqchi' en Proceso de Cambio*. Iximulew. 1ª. Reimpresión 2006. Págs. 36-40.
5. García Escobar, Carlos René. *Detrás de la Máscara*. 1ª. Ed. CEFOL-Col. Monografías, Vol. 3. Guatemala, 1989.
6. Lozada Toledo, Josué. *El j'ikal. Un elemento negroide de la tradición Oral entre los tsotsiles de Chiapas*. Ponencia presentada en el VII Congreso Centroamericano de Antropología, en Chiapas, México, 2009.





According to what Josuhé Losada Toledo from the INAH center in Chiapas exposed during a presentation in the above-mentioned congress, black *cimarrones* occasionally left their caves in the mountains and abducted women, to take them to live with them. They had children with them, who grew up rapidly and looked like their biological parents. Once the women managed to escape from their captors, they returned with their children to their place of origin, but due to their new condition they were rejected by their husbands and Tzotzil families, and ended up dying because of illnesses acquired in the inhospitality of the places they were taken to. The captor would return to town to search for them, but would not be able to find them. The event turned into a mythical game which is represented in every moment when the Tzotziles enter homes and represent an allusive scene, full of pornographic pranks



and jokes, just as how it will be described next—here I have to acknowledge and thank the help of poet Ambar Past, widely known and friend of the Tzotziles, who interpreted for me and translated into Spanish the dialogues of the scene:

The group of dancing confraternity members and their musicians—playing *pitos de carrizo*, harps, handmade *ravel*, guitar and *guitarrilla*, *caja*, and *chinchines*—enter the home where they will stage a theatrical action. Once all of them are inside, surrounded by numerous children, women grouped in the kitchen, sitting on the floor, and some adults and elders, and after dancing some *sones*, two or three dancers get ready and lay on the floor, facing the door and entirely covered with a *petate*. Meanwhile, the rest dance a son performed by the musicians.







In that moment, three individuals dressed in beige flannel vests with their faces painted with black shoe polish arrive. They are searching for a sister, and ask about her from the door or in front of it, inside the home and before the individuals who are lying on the floor, pretending not to see them. The spectators, the adults, say she is not around and that they do not know her. These black people (*J'ikal* in Tzotzil, according to Lozada Toledo), threaten to put a dog inside the house who will search for her in all the corners of the house

and warn that he can drop and break utensils or lift the skirts of women, etc. The spectators answer it does not matter. One of the *j'ikal* acts as a dog, and barking and growling he gets inside between everyone, searching for the woman in different places of the house. When he does not find her he returns with the others and they start speculating where she can be—everything, like it has been said, is done as a joke.







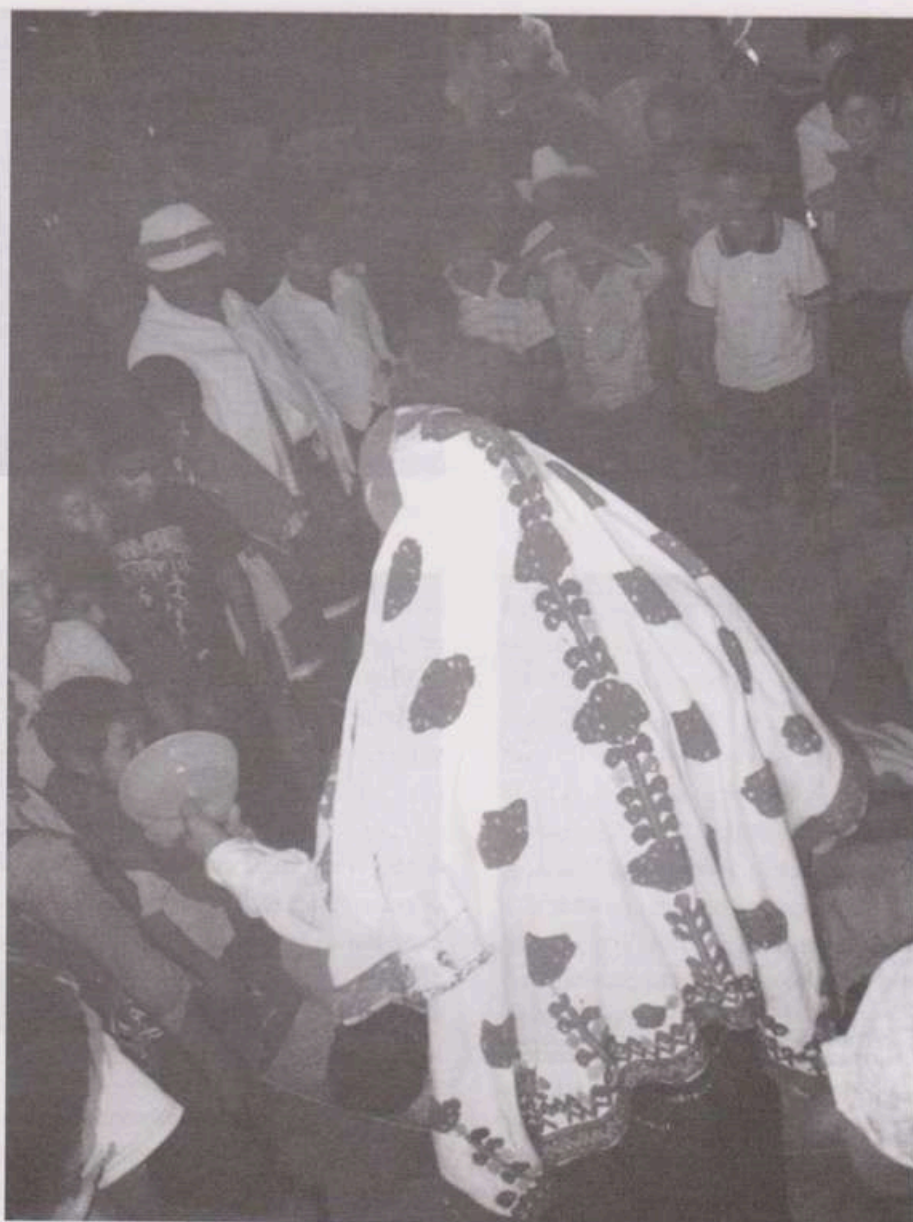
Suddenly they notice a lump on the floor and ask what it is. The spectators answer it is a tomb. The *J'ikal* say they do not believe it and threaten to open the tomb. They ask for instruments such as a shovel or a pickaxe. They are given the instruments and then pretend to be digging a hole until they find other lumps. Meanwhile, the laughter of the public is noticeable, especially of the children and teenagers who watch the scene, captivated. The black people or *J'ikal* ask who the buried ones are. The public answers they are dead. They do not believe the answer, and so they say they will make a test. There comes an action which is known as *sexual lesson*. They kneel before the ones who are lying—in between them there is someone wearing a skirt—grab them by the legs

put them on their shoulders, and make love to them many times, which causes laughter in the public. After this scene comes another where the *J'ikal* return to their prior places and carry out a ritual with prayers to revive the dead or bury them. One of the *J'ikal*, the one in the center, stands at the door looking inside like before when they came, then others lie over the *petate* and a prayer from between the dancers begins to exorcise them with a container full of water and begins to pray, in Tzotzil language, splashing water over the ones who are lying with their right hand, and over the spectators.

To end the ceremony, the prayer throws the water they have left over their shoulders and behind, which falls on the faces of the spectators who stand by the door; this is







1. The Tzotzil Carnival of Xenaloh, Chiapas, MX.  
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motive of surprise, and a motive of laughter for everyone. Music resumes playing, and everyone resumes dancing *sones*. The alleged dead rise and also dance. After the *son* ends, they all go out and head to another house to repeat the scene. The *J'ikal* have left before and are always alone, for they must get to where the dancers have gone to search for their "sister." A bull-like structure which accompanies them in their journey stays outside the home as the scene unfolds.

Outside, groups of women with censers wander discreetly along the streets of the town. The use of a specific alcoholic beverage called *poch* is also common. This theatrical popular tradition is executed by many groups equally, and in different parts of the town.

We can infer we are before the ritual execution of a myth, a frequent event happening in the colonial past.





The presence of black *cimarrones* hidden in mountain caves who appeared in Tzotzil towns of the Chiapaneca region searching for and stealing food supplies for consumption, and women to take them to their hiding places to live with is confirmed. These events are reported by stories taken from the oral tradition which Lozada Toledo gathered from other Tzotzil towns according to their presentation. This event probably disappeared and stopped happening when slavery was abolished in the beginning of the 19th century, when black people freely dispersed in the meso-American territories. Then it became the myth which can be now seen, practiced in Carnival parties.

It is the strength and endurance of the oral tradition that reminds us of the past events of Tzotzil history, during the times of their social relationships with the slaves, descendants of African people, all in the context of the production social relationships in their condition of oppressed and exploited social classes.

But, why during Carnival? We do not know. In this context we should refer to the public sexual actions which take place in the ritual, which cannot happen during other ceremonies and other liturgical times, as Christian Catholicism would not allow it, given the amount of pornographic jokes that happen in Carnival games of the staged ceremony. Besides, the use of water as an essential element of carnivals is emblematic, and Xenaloh was no exception.

Being soaked with water in Spain and America is an essential custom during these dates. Let it be reminded that the Carnival festivity is linked with the spring solstice, which is also linked with the coming of water, and that bathing in rivers, lakes, tributaries, and also being soaked in water, is ritually magical and favors rain and soil's fertility, therefore, as with agrarian rituals, water is also necessary during this celebration.

It is an authentic carnival, with the style of any other non-indigenous society in any other part of the world where Carnival is practiced. Only that this one is full of profound and intertwined roots in the social and economic relationships which happened, propelled by the slave forms of production.

As in other parts of America, we infer this is how it originated and developed.

Guatemala City, Colonia La Florida  
April 6th, 2009.



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The photographs in this article correspond to the development process of the scene, chronologically synchronized according to the narration of events, produced due to the visit of the author to Xenaloh, during the 7th Central American Anthropology Congress in San Cristóbal de las Casas, Chiapas, MX., in February 2009. Author's note.





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