

FROM THE "XUL" TO THE "XACALCOJES". THE MAYAN-QUICHE MUSIC OF TOTONICAPAN

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Background

Referring to the music of the Maya in a few words is a difficult task. Like mathematics, astronomy, architecture and other disciplines, music reached a high level of development. Its already transformed expressions were subject to the adoption of new and varied forms that remain today.

Codices (Dresden), polychrome vases (Chamá), murals (Palenque), stelae (Ceibal), and the archaeological evidence itself (National Museum of Archaeology, Popol Vuh Museum), offer convincing proof of the broad and complex musical expressions. An ample instrumental arsenal, ceramic drums of the most varied forms, (cup, hourglass, communicating glasses) of wooden body drums, rattles (for dance, war and rituals) wooden and snail trumpets (*strombus gigas*), turtle shells, scrapers (of animal femur), whistles (vascular, globular -direct and indirect-), simple, double, triple flutes (of direct and indirect insufflation), and the same tun or "Tun Kul" (that has a rather late presence among the Mayas), conformed, roughly speaking, the set of musical instruments of the Mayas at the moment of the arrival of the Hispanics to Mesoamerica.

Pre-Columbian musical occasions are associated with ritual contexts (magic-religious), warriors, agricultural work or hunting and gathering activities, recreation and with particular importance to dance. Regarding their sound ranges and the phenomenology of sound itself, little is known yet. The incipient investigations in acoustics and timbre (organology) of pre-Hispanic instruments have shown us that their sound ranges go beyond the pentaphony. Regarding the phenomenology of the sound fact, although methodologically impossible to reconstruct with exactitude, it is

the ethnomusicology who will have to clarify the key structures of the pre-Hispanic music, manifested in the traditional popular music of today.

Roots of today's traditional Mayan folk music.

The reference to the Mayan antecedent is not fortuitous, since as we pointed out above, it survives, although historically transformed, and manifests itself as in previous times, within a larger set of cultural facts intimately associated with the sphere of the sacred. With the arrival of the Castilians and with them many Moorish cultural traits, new cultural loads in music were subject to profound processes of transformation. In the conversion to Christianity, one of the fundamental motives of the "conquistadors", music and popular theater (dance-drama) played a leading role.

It is here where we can corroborate the extensive knowledge that the Maya people had about music. This must have been the case, otherwise the development of new forms would not have been relatively "easy". Although Guatemalan musicology has not been able to demonstrate it with property, recent investigations indicate an early development of European music in this part of the continent. Thus came the violins (rabe-medieval), harps and guitars (lute type), as well as the chirimia (of Arab origin) and drums with two drumheads (bass drum and snare drums), also tambourines and aduf (of Arab or Moorish influence). Later, wind instruments were introduced that would come to form the later processional and festive bands of today's Guatemala, in some cases replacing traditional aerophones.

Another cultural burden to fully understand the spectrum of Maya music is African. The nefarious part of the history of the slave trade also has its repercussions in Mesoamerica. Indeed, research has shown us the high demographic rate of the black population that inhabited colonial Guatemala, which is also waiting to be clarified in the light of historical research. In the field of music, instruments such as the marimba (and its variants) or the caramba, are the best proof of cultural elements

that the Maya, heirs of a wide musical universe, knew how to adopt, recreate and bring to the varied world of sound expressions that exist today.

The musical expressions of the mayas of totonicapán.

The Mayas of Totonicapán are heirs to a great musical tradition as a reflection of a sub-region, since the Quichés are the most densely populated ethnic group in the country, and the totality of their musical expressions is broader than what is described here.

The *Xul* (flute) and Tamborón is the ensemble that, due to its organological and phenomenological characteristics, preserves the most pre-Columbian features. Although it is, in this case, a drum with two drumheads (European), the instrumental ensemble as such has its reminiscences from the classic Maya. The music performed by this ensemble is associated with ritual contexts.

However, it is the instrumental ensemble of shawm (Arabic) and drum (known as Tun in the region), which has the greatest presence. The validity of this musical expression is a faithful sample of the capacity of adaptation and recreation of the Mayan people, inasmuch as they have incorporated it to the popular tradition since the colonial period. Its musical contexts are associated with processional and confraternity music, as well as for the "Dance of the Conquest (*Baile de la Conquista*) of the Quiché area.

The set of trumpet and drum has certain characteristics of interest. Although the trumpet is known since pre-Columbian times, now we see a trumpet of European type that in its embouchure has incorporated the principle of the shawm embouchure (type "Piruet" of double interlocking reeds), which allows a very particular sound production. The drum (snare drum type) which is played by the same player as the trumpet, alternates its "*toques*" (in a responsorial way) between one instrument and the other.

It is important to emphasize that its interpretations are given in the context of the Holy Week and that many times they are executed by the interpreter from the top of the bell tower of the church, so that its sonorous production is heard throughout the town, serving as a signal to indicate the development of the Holy Week processions. Although acoustically transformed, the trumpet survives in ritual contexts of high hierarchy as in pre-Columbian times.

The case of the marimba, a musical instrument whose development in Mesoamerica is due to the connection with African cultural loads, is the best proof of the capacity for adoption and recreation. The extensive acoustic knowledge of the Mayans allowed the marimba to be located in such a particular development that it is possible, today, to refer to a Guatemalan marimba.

In fact, the expression of a Guatemalan marimba should be conceived around its multiple variants of which Totonicapán has the following: the marimba of Tecomates or of Arco, played by a single interpreter and that, due to its characteristics, is known as the first form of marimba developed in the country. Today, although rare, this instrument is played by a single player. The dimensions and acoustic properties of this instrument are different from the three-register marimba. These marimbas are also known as Marimbas Sencillas and usually accompany choreographic contexts such as the Baile de Pascarines. It is important to highlight that when they are played in choreographic contexts, what we understand as "accompanying sound textures" are added to their sonorous expression, provoked by shouts, laments, vocal insufflations, whips, rattles, etc. (the "context sound texture" is the noise of the people, the ringing of the bells, fireworks and other environmental sounds).

There are other types of marimbas also played by a single performer, but accompanied by saxophones, trumpets, or trumpet and saxophone. The context of these marimbas is the Baile de Mejicanos, which has a wide diffusion in the Quiché area. The instrumental antecedent of this expression is probably found in the simple marimba and transverse flute ensemble. This expression, although still little known, is found in some parts of Guatemala and is probably the first way that the marimba was played, accompanied by an aerophone. Of particular importance is the Xul (flute), since this is of direct embouchure and transverse position, a really scarce example since pre-Columbian times. Organologically, it is important to mention that this flute has a black beeswax stopper whose center is pierced and covered by a membrane of "car belly" (pig intestine), forming the principle of the ringed and scirmed also present in the marimba cajones, causing a particular "charleo" to its sound production. This expression is still associated to the Baile de los Monos and in other occasions to sacred contexts.

Next in harmonic complexity to the *Marimba Sencilla*, played by only one person, is the *Marimba Sencilla* with three players who play the Tiple (melody), Centro (harmony) and Bajo (accompaniment) registers. This ensemble, in addition to accompanying some traditional dances, also performs in more spontaneous dances and in other types of festive and civic activities. In some occasions, the

accompaniment of the drums and double bass are added to this instrument. This is the most complex traditional instrumental form of marimba performance, as the following forms known as Marimbas Orquesta (accompanied by a brass ensemble, electronic bass, and percussion) have repertoires and contexts that are more popular rather than traditional in nature.

These variants of Marimba Sencilla with diatonic tuning (regularly tuned in F or G major), can change to other major scales thanks to small "balls" of black beeswax, which adhere to the back of the key.

The instrumental genre of strings is the least common in the Quiché area of Totonicapán and is represented in the Guitar and Violin Ensemble, also introduced from the colonial period. Today its contexts are associated with the Dance of the Dead and funeral rituals (November 1st).

The world of the vocal expressions of the Quichés is undoubtedly the least known, since this expression is highly personal and linked to magical-religious contexts. We have been able to locate other expressions of vocal character at group level and whose phenomenological analysis makes us find a little known sonorous expression and without greater explanations for the academic analysis. Indeed, in the dance of the *Xacalcojes*, the dancers form a very particular vocal texture provoked by shouts, laments and other types of vocal gyrations and the shaking of their rattles, as well as the sound provoked by the blow of the "chicote" (whip) and of a drum (snare drum type).

About repertoires and musical occasions

Originally, we must clarify that we are dealing with a body of anonymous repertoires transmitted orally. In the case of the "Flauta y el Tambor" (Flute and Drum), these pieces are called "toques," and their performances are associated with Holy Week and ritual-festivals of the agricultural cycle in the Mayan world. The genres of the repertoire for the "Chirimía y el Tun" are "Sones" and "Marches," which, when associated with a traditional dance such as the "Conquest," bear the name of the character (Tzunúm, Tecún, Pedro de Alvarado, Malinche, etc.) they accompany in the dance. There are as many sones for the indigenous characters and marches for the Spanish characters as there are individual characters. There are also certain choreographic steps in the dance that have their own "particular toques." Although

the performances of these dance-dramas are associated with the religious-festive or Judeo-Christian cycle and manifest during Patron Saint Festivals, the development of the dance implicitly includes a prior rehearsal period and a subsequent performance period in which the music (of particular importance), accompanied by other elements, makes traditional dance a catalyst and reproducer of popular wisdom. On other occasions, the Chirimía and Drum ensemble performs "toques" to accompany processions and rituals in Cofradías, giving these performances a ceremonial connotation. The repertoires performed for these occasions are different.

In the case of the marimbas, the genres interpreted, besides the "Son", are the "Corridos" and "Guarachas" which are performed in dances of a more spontaneous character than those mentioned above. Most of these pieces have a title and are anonymous. Some of them have been able to identify their author, having been reported anonymous, which makes us think that they are in an advanced process of adaptation-recreation. However, the marimba that accompanies traditional dances, as in the case of the Chirimía and the Tun, has as many repertoires as there are characters in the dance, and its most frequent genre is the "Son".

The "Guitar and Violin" ensemble is associated with funerary rituals and has a special role on All Saints' Day (November 1st). The sones they play have neither names nor authors. Funerary rituals, with their implication of connection to other worlds, also have pre-Hispanic antecedents.

The musician

The performers of the instrumental ensembles we have mentioned are all Mayan-Quiché, monolingual and dedicated to the work of the land and in some cases, to commerce. Few of them make music their only activity. Heirs of a wide musical tradition, it manifests to be linked to a spiritual formation, as a sine-qua-non condition, for its interpretation. It is learned orally (example, custom, etc.) and each generation that receives it imprints the testimony with the characteristics of its

historical time. Regularly the ties of kinship are given, and frequently the ensembles are formed by father and sons, brothers, uncle and nephew(s). Contracts for musical occasions are established by word of mouth and are highly respected. Sometimes the ensembles have their representative or owner of the instrument, and they are the ones in charge of the contracting. They also play an important role in the ensemble's activities. It is important to note that most of the musicians are the builders of their own instruments, so their musical knowledge also includes acoustics and timbre. The participation of women in the instrumental ensembles is publicly null and only in some dances do girls participate. On the other hand, they play a fundamental role in the religious aspect, in the feeding and care of the dancers and in other spheres of ritual context limited to women. However, it is in the vocal expressions (of the life cycle, of work, of recreation) where it has more participation, only that these are little known.

Conclusions

First, it should be said that the musical universe of the Maya-Quiché is extremely complex and broader than what is presented here. That in its different expressions, (acoustic and phenomenological), different cultural keys can be perceived, such as the Mayan, the European (influenced by the Arab) and the African (whose development is colonial) and that all survive, although historically transformed and are musical expressions little known even by the western world. Its deep relationship with the sacred contexts says of it the particular importance that, for the Mayas of today, it means. Although continuously attacked and with lack of support on the part of the mass media (radio, press and television) it has managed to survive and has looked for mechanisms of ethno-resistance that demonstrates the ample cohesive character and the importance that it manifests. It highlights the interest of the bearers of this expression in seeking new alternatives for the transmission and documentation of their cultural heritage, as well as the encounter of new experiences in the field of their knowledge that have more dignifying results.