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# TRADITIONS OF GUATEMALA



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Celso A. Laro  
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# TZULES DANCE

MARTÍN ORDÓÑEZ CH.

Momostenango is located in the northeast of the department of Totonicapán, more than 200 kilometers from Guatemala City. Its population, mostly indigenous Quiches, is faithful to its traditions. The locals of the place observe with great accuracy the sacred calendar or ritual Uchol K'IJ (unfolding of the sun). One of the main native expressions is the dance of the Tzules or the Gracejos, which the indigenous call qui Xajoj aj Tzulab, in Momostenango, which causes real admiration.

The group consists of 15 or 20 men dressed in old clothes and rags. However, a man appears in a woman's suit dressed in regional attire. The members of the group cover their faces with leather or cardboard masks. These masks have plumes made from any animal's hair, eyebrows, whiskers, or beards. The woman wears a wooden mask or simply a handkerchief. All carry in their hands a long and thick whip made of raw leather.

The dance is held annually on the fourth Friday of Lent, in honor of the Buried Lord parade of Calpetagua, who is venerated in the Church of Calvario, near the Cemetery of Momostenango.

The dancers appear in the town's streets, on the Wednesday before the fourth Friday and then head to the church atrium. Then they go to the headquarters of the Brotherhood of the Lord of Calpetagua, where they stay dancing the rest of Wednesday and Thursday. On Friday, they dance in a wide street near the cemetery gate.

The dance plot is based on the life of an adulterous woman and tries to explain the negative consequences that this kind of adventure has for men. The dance begins with a marimba solo, where the roles of wife and supposed husband are placed in the center of the marimba, and then make two rows of dancers look at each other, to dance in the same place. The man and woman go out dancing and take a tour of the improvised track. The woman tries to express the maximum coquetry and femininity to incite the man. Then, seeing this, the dancers each throw themselves to stroke and snatch the woman. However, currently, the husband reacts and tries to whip those who are to speak with his wife.

The "daring person", on the other hand, does not take any defensive attitude and only raises his arms and, after receiving the lashes, gives yells of taste and releases a laugh, more or less by force. So, they all pass and receive the same treatment from the husband; then the wife returns to her original place, and a new dancer takes the husband's place. This has been enhanced by the marimba. and while the marimba player is resting, the dancers make jokes or "chuckles" with each other and with the adulterous woman. However, when the jokes change their tone, the daring people are again whipped by the one who has taken the husband's place.

When another sound is heard, the woman and her new husband return to the track, and the above-mentioned acts are repeated. In this form, all the dancers take the husband's place, and the rest are punished or whipped as many times as members have the dance ensemble.

Previously, a plump mast about 12 meters high was prepared, containing at the upper end a basket with a cash prize donated by the mayor. After the first show

in the afternoon, the dancers head for the mast and one by one try to climb it up to reach the prize. However, most of the time they fail in their attempt to climb because the mast has been soaked. Finally, someone from the group manages to reach the basket that usually contains five quetzals, with which they buy moonshine for the party.

The dance resumes, but some are not satisfied with the day's exercise, retire in pairs, seek a reserved place, stand face to face, and be flagellated by turn until someone locates them. If they are not found, they continue to sacrifice until they bleed and die, as has happened in several cases.

This dance is believed to have been performed for more than 100 years. Each group of dancers takes nine years, but they participate by doing penance. There is a belief that anyone who does not fulfill the stipulated time dies in the year that breaks the oath he has made earlier.

The author can observe the body of a dancer, the fourth Friday of Lent in the afternoon, which was crossed with lashes.