

THE CARNIVAL PARTY IN GUATEMALA

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Photo by Manuel Guerra Caravantes

It is not a question of making a certain study about what represents the **carnival party**, but some considerations about the great roots that this popular manifestation has had, as a result of a Greek, Roman or Hispanic tradition, which has been incorporated into our idiosyncrasies.

About the origins of carnival I think it is not appropriate to expand, since many authors have said something about it. However, it is interesting the rise that, in the Latin American field, has had this phenomenon so typical of popular culture, represented in the carnival festivities.

The arrival of the Spaniards to our lands brings with it the “carnestolenda” festivities, which, although they were organized as a complement to a religious and commercial celebration, also offered recreation and joy to the human spirit. However, Carnival is par excellence a party that has no other object than fun, and it is the party, if not the most joyful, at least the most joyful and entertaining that has been known, since it brings with it entertainment, the compensation of our moods and the announcement of the traditional Lent.

Felix Coluccio offers us the following information in his **Argentine folkloric dictionary**:

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The ceremonies to celebrate Carnival are very ancient, believing that it derives from the Roman saturnalia, although there are vestiges of these festivals in all the ancient towns. Celebrating the new Year and especially the arrival of spring. In B. Aires, the game with water during the carnestolendas, and in many inland cities it still persists, although the enthusiasm for the carnival itself has been decreasing almost everywhere. (Coluccio, 1948:39)

In almost most of the towns of Guatemala, the enthusiasm for celebrating Carnival has been lost, being reduced only to celebrations that are traditionally done by the church. However, **the carnival party**, it has greater vitality in coastal regions or warm climates; in high places it acquires other peculiar aspects, although with the same purpose.

It is possible that in Guatemala the carnival was a purely aristocratic manifestation practiced by the Spaniards, leaving for the people only the game of flour, shells and water. Don José Milla, in his **Pictures of Customs**, tells us about a Carnival Tuesday in the bullring:

The last time I was in Los toros on Shrove Tuesday, six or seven years ago, numerous parties of masks entered and as I am little aware of the changes of the capricious tastes of the public, I thought that this year there would also be costumes in the square. (Milla, 1952:102).

In reality, the costumes are the true manifestation of carnival, but over the years it has been totally transformed, leaving for a small nucleus the case of the **masquerades**, the fancy dress balls and the play of the **streamers**.

In recent times the townspeople have practiced more the game of the shells and what was once a big problem: the game of flour and water, has been displaced by the shells, whose preparation begins since last New Year, when people are engaged in chopping scraps of china paper in a variety of colors.

The manufacture of shells in Guatemala is a domestic industry, in whose procedure several factors intervene, which are: collection of the shells, washing and drying of the same, chopping of the china paper to make a patchwork; painting of the shells with indigo in a variety of colors or whimsical shapes. This painting recalls **the easter eggs** that are given away in the United States.

Later, already painted and dried in the sun, a little chopped patchwork is put inside and the dent is covered with a small piece of paper as a patch, with which a shell is already formed and ready for it to be played with.

The shells are taken to the public squares and after the day of **Candlemas** (February 2), the Sundays of Carnival begin, a kind of prelude to the Lenten days. It is usually played with the shells in parks and public squares, as is traditional in the villages of the country. Even in primary schools, a day is set aside to celebrate Carnival, which people like to disembowel shells on their heads.

In the markets, public squares and park, baskets with the shells are found. These can be purchased approximately at the rate of two per cent or a penny a unit. In addition, they can be purchased by the bag or by the dozen, according to the possibilities and needs of the user.

It is to be recognized that Carnival has been inherited from old Spain and has been practiced for several centuries in all Latin American countries. Of great renown throughout Latin America and widely known worldwide is the Carnival of Rio de Janeiro. So are those of Panama, Venezuela and all of South America.

In Guatemala, there has been a significant change in **carnival party**, in a process commensurate with the evolution of culture. Currently a carnival is celebrated in societies, clubs or other institutions that sponsor carnival dancing, where there is only costume, confetti, streamers and dancing. Naturally, this is a manifestation for a certain group or social elite, but at no time could it be of a popular type, like the shell game.

The fact of cracking shells in the head, lying **itch-itch** throwing water and flour is nothing new in our environment and although it has been banned for several administrative generations, it has also been practiced in Spain and still persists. And it is that this thousand-year-old carnival tradition has always been practiced, because it is something that the people have within their own being, as an escape from the customs that the human race imposes on itself.

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Baskets with shells and masks during the Carnival party in Guatemala City.



Seller of shells and confetti during the carnival party in Guatemala City

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