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# TRADITIONS OF GUATEMALA



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**TRADITIONS OF GUATEMALA**

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**Brief notes for the study of a popular festivity**

*DECEMBER SEVENTH: DAY OF THE BURNING OF THE DEVIL*

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**I. INTRODUCTION**

*When I was a child, I eagerly looked forward to December seventh every year to take part in the Burning of the Devil (a traditional Guatemalan festivity), together with my neighborhood friends, from my Recolección neighborhood. I remember the immense joy I felt as, at six in the evening, every doorway on Callejón de la Cruz lit up with bonfires and firecrackers that went off wildly.*

*Meanwhile, my grandmother, a lady from the end of the century, dressed in a shawl and mengala (a traditional head or shoulder covering worn by women), would sweep the house and perform exorcisms to drive out the horned one (as she called him). She would sprinkle "holy water" on all the members of the family. She insisted that the devil had to be driven out of the house so that we could enter the December festivities purified.*

*Saint Thomas Aquinas warns that Catholic faith wants demons to be something concrete, and that, therefore, one must be cautious of them "because they can harm good people through their actions."*<sup>5</sup> *Caro Baroja asserts that, at that time, the devil was a concrete, familiar character, "as familiar at least as the saints and patriarchs, so much so that Gothic artists represented him with very defined attributes."*<sup>6</sup>

*Embodied as evil itself, and with this representation assigned to him by the Church Fathers, legends emerged in which the devil was the main character, legends that spread throughout the entire Middle Ages, with origins both Greek and Latin. The devil's permanence can be seen in the stories and legends of old Europe, where he plays a very important role and is always humiliated and ridiculed alongside holy people. This is confirmed by Guatemalan popular theater: in Guatemalan loas, "the devil is a funny character, and the most beloved by the people." "A loa with the devil is a guaranteed success."*<sup>8</sup>

*Devil or demon legends have remained intact until the 20th century, where "he continues to be represented with the same attributes."*<sup>9</sup> *One must reflect whether, behind the medieval image of the devil, there remains a dark trace of an old local or regional divinity from Western culture, in the strictest sense.*<sup>10</sup>

*Created and placed in the Middle Ages, the devil must have gained strength in Spain. And, since medieval Spain (as it still is) was the most fanatical and fervent defender of Catholicism, the image of the devil became a representation of evil itself and, therefore, a creature fiercely fought by the Holy Inquisition Tribunal. The devil was associated with the trials conducted by the Inquisition and acts of witchcraft.*

*In conclusion, we find the devil acting throughout Europe at the end of the 15th century, precisely at the time when the Spaniards were discovering America. Therefore, we can affirm that, in popular mentality, the devil has a real and conscious existence. It is here, in this series of legends created around the*

*medieval image of the devil, where the possible origin of the festivity of the Burning of the Devil, celebrated on December 7th, might be found. Through the power of popular tradition, this festivity has been passed down through the centuries and remains ingrained in the mentality of the people.*

*In searching for connections, we find that this magical world in which ideas related to the devil move is very easy to overlap with the field of witchcraft. Let us explain:*

*The devil is the lord of the night, of the mysterious night. Therefore, the worshippers who honor him, his priestesses, are witches and sorceresses. We will not delve into the world of witches, as it goes beyond the scope of these notes, but it should be noted, due to its relation to the studied popular festivity, that the true days of witches are the full moons, especially Fridays and Saturdays; major Catholic religious holidays are also propitious for this effect: especially Good Friday, Holy Week, and the day of the Virgin of Conception, December 8th, whose eve is celebrated the day before, the day when the devil is burned. On these days, witches often gather at crossroads to invoke evil and the devil.<sup>11</sup> The Burning of the Devil is probably associated with the day of witches celebrated in the Middle Ages, and after 1854, when the dogma of the Immaculate Conception was instituted, it became linked to this day, being, as it is, a major Catholic holiday. It is hypothetically possible that Catholic priests created the image of burning the devil on the eve of the Conception festivities to enhance the importance of the Immaculate Conception celebrations.*

*In conclusion, the possible origin of the Burning of the Devil is found in medieval Western Europe. It came to America through the thoughts of the conquerors, where it was reworked according to the mentality of each of the Spanish-speaking countries in the Americas. This festivity can be found in certain places in America. In Paraguay, for example,<sup>12</sup> it is celebrated with the same characteristics as in Guatemala. Finally, we must*

*also note that the Burning of the Devil is also associated with the Conception festival.*

*A deeper investigation might confirm that the origin of this celebration is something else. But until that happens, the hypothesis remains.*

### III. DECEMBER 7TH: THE BURNING OF THE DEVIL IN GUATEMALA

*Through a brief investigation of the literary folklore of the city of Guatemala, we find the popular explanation for this celebration.*

*The Burning of the Devil is manifested in Guatemala through the creation of bonfires at the doors of houses at six in the evening on December 7th. On this day, all kinds of useless objects are burned so that, through the fire, "the devil leaves the house."<sup>13</sup>*

*"On December 7th, the eve of the Virgin of Conception's night, here in the neighborhood of La Parroquia, we burn the devil. And do you know why? Because throughout the year, the horned one hides among the old things and brings bad luck to the houses. That's why on December 7th, when the Virgin defeated him, we burn garbage so he returns to hell. Whoever doesn't make their bonfire with the old things from their house, the evil one stays with them and can win them over, like it happened to Don Chepe Ruiz, who lived in the Callejón de los Tunches. That's why we make the bonfires, so the devil doesn't win us."<sup>14</sup>*

*Anyone who has ever seen Guatemala City from the viewpoint of Antigua or the one on the road to El Salvador on this day will not deny the beauty of the spectacle. It gives the impression of being a new Rome burning from all sides.*

*The collection of objects to burn begins days before, but it intensifies on the morning of the 7th. Specially sought are easily combustible materials such as wood shavings and "chiribiscos," which are purchased at carpentry shops and currently at Cerro del Carmen. Years ago, chiribiscos were collected in the Corona meadow and in the Las Vacas ravine, "beyond the old La Parroquia."*<sup>15</sup>

*On the seventh of December, at exactly six o'clock in the evening, all the accumulated trash is taken out to the street and set on fire; but "it must be with pinewood (ocote) from the house, because if not, the devil won't leave."*<sup>16</sup> *And "while the trash is burning, one must sprinkle holy water in every corner of the house, and sweep the whole house with a broom made of escobillo at exactly six o'clock, so that the devil leaves the house."*<sup>17</sup>

*As for the bonfires that burn along the sidewalks, they slowly die down amid the joy of the people, who try to outdo each other in building the biggest pyre. Meanwhile, children light firecrackers, and even more, they chase each other with flaming brooms "to help the devil find the gates of hell."*<sup>18</sup>

*Anyone who, as a child, accomplished the feat of jumping over the bonfires and playing tag with brooms can confirm how unforgettable this kind of fun is. The popular celebration lasts about an hour. By seven o'clock in the evening, it is all over: "The devil has been burned," and he has left the homes of the old neighborhoods of the city.*

*Analyzing the origin of this festivity in Guatemala through popular versions, I found that during colonial times, luminarias (bonfires or illuminations) were made for great celebrations: the ascension of a king to the throne, the birth of a royal firstborn, the arrival of an archbishop, etc. This secular celebration also passed into the religious realm, and then luminarias were made for major Catholic celebrations of double-cross or high solemnity: these luminarias served "to illuminate the night."*



*Later, during the independent era, luminarias in the secular realm were reduced to the night of September 14th, the eve of the 15th, the date that commemorates the signing of the Act of Central American Independence; and in the religious sphere, to Christmas, Corpus Christi, and the Immaculate Conception. Over time, these gradually disappeared, until finally only the luminaria of the eve of the Feast of the Conception remained, made “to light the Virgin’s night.”<sup>19</sup>*

*Another version suggests that these luminarias became associated with the festivity of December 7th because of the burning of the devil that took place in Santo Domingo on the day of the Rosary (“a devil made of firecrackers was burned in the atrium on the first Sunday of October”). This association eventually transferred by contagion to December 7th, but the sermons of priests also greatly contributed to it, as they referenced the crushing of the devil’s head by the Virgin of the Immaculate Conception.<sup>20</sup> That is, the Virgin’s triumph became linked to the defeat of evil, mocking the devil by forcing him to flee from the homes. According to this version, this association gave rise to the burning of the devil on December 7th.*

*Thus, the idea of burning the devil led to the idea of expelling him from the homes, and from then on, household trash has been burned, “because before, only dry leaves were burned.”<sup>21</sup>*

*Connecting all these popular ideas, we find that this festivity originates from the bonfires made to commemorate great colonial celebrations, called luminarias, and over time, this evolved into the burning of the devil, without changing its date: the eve of the Feast of the Immaculate Conception.*

*Regarding this, we must not forget the link to the Feast of the Immaculate Conception: this is the most popular feast in the Catholic world, and it has been widely promoted by the Franciscan Order. It is a double-cross feast, which means it has a vigil, and in this regard, let us not forget that, according to the Roman calendar, the hour of the vigil was six o’clock in the*

*evening, the very hour at which the devil is burned in Guatemala. The connection is evident.*

*A third version even more strongly ties the burning of the devil to the Day of the Conception. The bonfires were made to illuminate the Virgin's procession, which departed from the village of Concepción Las Lomas and arrived in San Pedro. In earlier times, both were independent towns that supplied the city and today are part of it. The former is now part of Zone 5 and the latter of Zone 15.<sup>22</sup>*

*Confirming this version, Father Juan Rodríguez Cabal of the Dominican order said, "whoever has spent a night on the eve of the Virgin of the Immaculate Conception will have seen the luminarias along the roads in her honor."<sup>23</sup> Another version adds, "that during these luminarias, the devil was burned, one with each step of the Virgin, so that the evil one would leave the world."<sup>24</sup>*

*The above description refers only to Guatemala City. However, we have information confirming that this festivity is also celebrated in the interior of the country.*

*According to the geographer Julio Quan,<sup>25</sup> in Granados, a municipality in the department of Baja Verapaz, December 7th is celebrated by playing with "fireballs." The informant explains that the fireballs are made from cloth, wrapped in wire, and then soaked in gasoline, leaving a long wire attached to hurl them in the style of South American boleadoras. People light them in the church atrium at six in the evening and then proceed through the town. Quan believes it is a ceremony related to fire and that it is a widespread tradition in both Verapaces. He also sees a connection to Halloween and the winter solstice.*

*The celebration also takes place in other cities: in Antigua Guatemala and in some departments, especially in the departmental capitals of the eastern region of the country. This supports the hypothesis of a Western origin of the festivity, as the*

*eastern region of the country is home to the most direct descendants of the conquistadors. It is the region of the poor ladino.*

*However, there is no concrete evidence to definitively state anything. The brief notes presented here refer only to Guatemala City.*

#### IV. THE BURNING OF THE DEVIL THROUGH POPULAR LEGENDS

*Popular legends, whether historical, etiological, or religious, have the virtue of preserving the purest traditions of a people, because in them the most ancient elements are fused together.*

*In Guatemala City, there are several legends<sup>26</sup> that make direct reference to the burning of the devil. In them, one can discover the origin and depth with which this belief is rooted in the popular spirit.*

*Among the versions found,<sup>27</sup> I have distinguished three: the first refers to the origin of the festivity, which we already discussed in the second part of this work. The second recounts tragicomic moments that happened to the devil during his flight, and finally, a third refers to situations experienced by specific people on December 7th, during the celebration.*

#### V. SOME LEGENDS

*From the latter two versions, I transcribe the following legends:*

##### THE TRICKED DEVIL

*"I'm going to tell you what happened to the devil one December 7th. Back then, my grandmother was still living with us. We lived in the Ermita neighborhood, on Hope Street. Every day the old lady, who was a real churchgoer, would go to Mass and visit her Lord."<sup>28</sup> She was incredibly Catholic!*

*"On the day of the burning of the devil, my grandmother and all of us had gathered every bit of trash we could find around the house. On the seventh, the old lady even sent my nephews to collect chiribiscos (kindling) in the Potrero de Corona. She did this every year. At exactly six o'clock in the evening, she lit the bonfire and began sprinkling holy water everywhere, shouting: '-Cursed demon, come out from where you're hiding and go back to hell!'"*

*"Well, you'll see, my grandmother said that from a corner of her room, the devil came out and charged at her. Then, since she had nothing to defend herself with, she pulled the rosary from her chest and threw it at the devil, breaking one of his shins."*

*"Limping, the poor devil, with his tail between his legs, ran out and threw himself into the bonfire we had made. I swear to God I'm telling the truth: I saw a hairy man pass by me and jump into the fire, leaving behind a stench of sulfur. A moment later, my grandmother came out screaming and bringing down all the saints from the heavenly court. She was very frightened. The poor devil, as usual, ended up messed up on his own day."*

Informant: Teresa Aguilar. 58 years old. Domestic worker. From the Ermita neighborhood.

Collector: Celso A. Lara.

Recorded on magnetic tape.

Date: January 1967.

### THE GOLDEN BUTTERFLY

*"It happened in Candelaria. My grandmother's house is very large and very old (it seems it was one of the first built in that neighborhood). The patio was full of trees, and there's a large pila (water basin) in the middle, one of those beautiful ones that only old houses have; in the back, there's a bougainvillea arch over a small door where my grandmother keeps the junk room."*

*"One night, my cousin and I were sitting near the pila when a woman suddenly appeared from the back of the yard and walked toward the corridor in front; it looked like she was floating in the air, and you could see that she wasn't walking on the path but moving through the rose bushes. She was dressed in white; her face, under the moonlight, I remember it very well, was extremely pale, and her black hair fell down her back. We both felt a deep chill, and when we asked my grandmother about it later, she told us that ever since my grandfather had passed away, that woman had been haunting the house every night. But it didn't end there, listen, the worst happened to my cousin Rosita because of that wretched ghost. I remember that on a December 7th, we were burning the devil, and we had made a big bonfire; when Rosita decided to go inside the house to do something, I don't know what exactly. She went in, and suddenly we heard a loud scream; I ran inside and found the poor girl lying on the grass, and I swear I saw, with my own eyes, a golden butterfly (but I swear to you it was as golden as real gold) rise into the sky, floating up in the smoke from the bonfires. Rosita told us later that when she was about to jump over a puddle, a woman dressed in white (the same one we had already seen) offered her a hand; that's when she got scared and screamed, and prayed to Jesus of Candelaria. Then she said the woman turned into a butterfly and flew away, and it's true, because I saw that butterfly with these eyes, which worms will one day eat when I die." "Rosa had to pay dearly for that encounter with the ghost. Listen, the hand that touched her stayed thin forever, what a shame, because she was such a pretty girl!"*

*"Rosa had to pay dearly for the ghost's favor; just imagine, the hand that touched her remained thin forever, what a pity, because it was so pretty!"*

Informant: Andrés Pérez. 45 years old. Occupation: carpenter, from the Candelaria neighborhood.

Collector: Celso A. Lara.

Collected on magnetic tape.

Date: February 1967.

*When analyzing the two previous legends, we find that the devil is portrayed, as we indicated in the first part, as a humorous figure who always ends up the loser.<sup>29</sup> On the other hand, the romantic tone of the second legend is noteworthy. This can be explained by the fact that the informant comes from a petty bourgeois social stratum and from a neighborhood that once held a certain importance, especially due to its artisans. It is also typical of the petty bourgeoisie to add flashy elements to the legends they tell, as outward signs of prestige. That's why we find a butterfly, specifically, a golden one. In this regard, it is worth mentioning that in the San Sebastián neighborhood, the Siguanaba is seen bathing "with a golden water bucket,"<sup>30</sup> and in the Sagrario neighborhood, the comb she uses for her hair is also made of the same metal. By contrast, the same spirits have different attributes in the working-class neighborhoods of La Parroquia and La Candelaria.*

*Finally, the presented legends allude to the function fulfilled by the December 7th festivity, the burning of the devil: it possesses a magical meaning. It is a purification, the expulsion of evil from the home, and the triumph of good. The dialectical play between these two forces is what gives meaning to human life, according to popular belief.*

#### IV. CONCLUSION

*The celebration of the burning of the devil on December 7th, at least in Guatemala City, serves a magical function. It probably has its origin in Western culture, according to the hypothesis outlined in these notes.*

*It is possible to predict that this celebration, having lost the function it once fulfilled, is doomed to extinction and will become part of Guatemala's folkloric history.*

*However, to deliver a definitive statement on the subject, further in-depth field and archival research is necessary.*

## NOTES:

- 1 All material used in this study can be consulted at the Population Studies Center of the *San Carlos de Guatemala* University.
- 2 This origin is attributed by the twenty versions collected in the oldest neighborhoods of the city: *La Candelaria*, *La Recolección*, *La Parroquia*, and *Cerro del Carmen*. The research file for each of these versions is available at the institution mentioned in note 1.
- 3 GEORGES C. VAILLANT. *La Civilización Azteca* (Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1959), p. 195.
- 4 JAMES GEORGE FRAZER. *La Rama Dorada* (Magic and Religion) (Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1961).
- 5 JULIO CARO BAROJA. *Las Brujas y su Mundo*, (Madrid: Editorial Alianza, 1969), p. 109.
- 6 Ibid., p. 99.
- 7 Cf. Lithuanian Folk Tales, Folk Tales of Spain, Tales from the Caucasus, Folk Tales of Castile, Tales and Legends of Old Russia, etc., all published in the Austral collection.
- 8 Opinion of Prof. Gonzalo Mejía, undergraduate student in literature at the Faculty of Humanities. Cf. Gustavo Correa and Calvin. *La Loa in Guatemala* (New Orleans: Middle American Research Institute, Tulane University, 1958).
- 9 CARO BAROJA, Op. cit., p. 100.
- 10 Ibid., p. 106.

- 11 For an in-depth study on the topic, see the book by Julio Caro Baroja, *Op. cit.*
- 12 PAULO DE CARVALHO-NETO. *Folklore de Paraguay* (Quito: Editorial Universitaria, 1961), pp. 329 ff.
- 13 Informant: Luis Barillas, from the neighborhood of Candelaria.
- 14 Version by Felipe Martínez, from the neighborhood of La Parroquia.
- 15 This information refers to the neighborhoods mentioned in note 2.
- 16 Version by Lola de Mendoza, from the neighborhood of La Recolección.
- 17 *Ibid.*
- 18 Version by Eva de Castillo, from the neighborhood of El Sagrario.
- 19 Version by Ramiro Araujo, altar maker from the neighborhood of Guarda Viejo. Version obtained through Gonzalo Mejía.
- 20 Version by Gonzalo Mejía, from the neighborhood of Belén.
- 21 *Ibid.*
- 22 Version by Celso Lara C.
- 23 Literal version by Ramiro Araujo, annotated by Gonzalo Mejía.
- 24 Version by Julio Arriaza, from the neighborhood of La Ermita.



- 25 Licenciado Julio Quan, director of the Center for Population Studies and university professor, is the leading authority in Guatemala on the country's human, physical, social, and cultural geography.
- 26 Collected by the author.
- 27 I collected twenty versions of this legend.
- 28 Refers to the Blessed Sacrament, which is venerated in Catholic temples.
- 29 Cf. the description provided by Caro Baroja, *Op. cit.*, on the image Western culture has of the devil, pp. 96–108.
- 30 CELSO ARNOLDO LARA. "Las Leyendas Clásicas de la Nueva Guatemala de la Asunción," in Alero "Guatemala Adentro," (August, 5.2, 1971), p. 28.

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