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TRADICIONES DE GUATEMALA



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GUATEMALAN TRADITIONS

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CHRONICLE

CORPUS CHRISTI IN GUATEMALA

Juan Coronel

Anyone who has traveled through Central America will have heard these words more than once: *para semanas santas, León de Nicaragua* (for Holy Week, León from Nicaragua); Corpus Christi, in Guatemala. Naturally, these phrases arouse curiosity, and one wishes to know how Guatemalan Catholics celebrate one of the three great Thursdays of the year. We had the opportunity to satisfy that curiosity, and we shall now recount for the reader all that our eyes witnessed.

What matters least in Guatemala is the religious part of today's festivity; what clings to it from the profane world is what truly draws attention, it is the preferred amusement of all social classes. Today is a joyful and memorable day for women and children and, by extension, for domestic servants, all of whom revel and triumph in the courtyards and surroundings of Guatemalan temples, which from early morning are transformed into marketplaces and bustling centers of chatting and flirting.

Outside, on the pavement of the streets, or beneath improvised cloth tents, the fruits of the region and the season release their fragrance: pears, peaches, apricots, plums, cherries, hybrids, little apples, *granadillas* and *parchas* (both similar to passion fruit), etc., etc. Among these temptations for the palate and the nose are a thousand and one toys for children. Brought by the hands of their parents, the children wander through the fair and would take everything home if they could. One toy in particular captivates them, appearing in countless forms: *El pito!* (similar to a whistle). Each child, having two or more whistles, blows and blows until their faces turn as red as crimson. Between eleven and twelve in the morning, the din of the whistles reaches its peak. A whistling ten times louder would be needed more than that hurled at perito Moreno by the people of Santiago de Chile for diverting the course of the Fénix River to imagine the eardrum-shattering concert performed today in Guatemala City. In the afternoon, the musical frenzy begins to subside, but no street, or corner is spared from the occasional sharp whistle like the final shots of a great battle.

Sharing the children's affection with the whistles is a native Guatemalan toy: the mico, which is a small monkey imitation, with a long tail, made of wood and dyed cotton, worn as a brooch in various sizes. One of the luxuries of this day is to wear a little mico pinned to the chest, a luxury that extends from children to young ladies and women, and from them to the vast ranks of dandies. We still recall how, on the eve of our first Corpus in Guatemala, the newspapers wished their readers "many micos." We didn't get it. We were familiar with the Spanish expressions *hacer mico* (to stand someone up) and *quedarse hecho un mico* (to be left ashamed or embarrassed), but not this use of the word. We only understood the phrase the next day. *Muchos micos*, that is, many successes because these trinkets, when not handed out hastily, are considered tokens of affection. Of course, amid the distractions

of the fair and the procession, boys and girls court each other freely, and upon seeing the parade of sighing, sweet-talking couples, one can exclaim with Bécquer, without fear of being mistaken: it is love that passes! The scene in the capital is repeated in all the towns of the republic, week after week, and so it happens that even in September, the celebration of this great day for Catholics still hasn't ended. Perhaps it is from this widespread custom that the traditional phrase originated: Corpus Christi in Guatemala.

It is in the indigenous villages where the Corpus celebration has the most charm and originality. We witnessed one whose memory will remain in our minds forever. La Antigua Guatemala, poetic and melancholically seductive, combines the beauty of its city with the indescribable splendor of its picturesque surroundings. Dueñas, San Juan del Obispo, San Antonio Aguascalientes, Santa María de Jesús, and many other small villages, most of whose inhabitants are Indigenous, stand out on the mantle of beauty that adorns “the city of ruins,” like threads of emerald green stitched by nature herself, making this sanctuary of happiness and peace recognizable at a glance, the kind of place that pure souls long for in this world.

One of those families who live without envy or being envied, cultivating the land inherited from their ancestors, and sharing, during festive days, the golden maize roasted in open-air fires, along with creamy white milk in which the kernels are dipped to be savored later on the lips, one of those families, whose greatest pleasure lies in hosting a guest in their home, invited us to accompany them to the renowned Corpus celebration in San Antonio Aguascalientes. It was during the season when the peaceful city of Antigua welcomes visitors from New Guatemala, seeking healthful waters and air, and a respite for the spirit. We set out one spring morning. The carriages advanced in a long procession and looked like baskets of vibrant pink roses blooming at the first touch of dawn. We passed by the Medina thermal baths and crossed the vast, symmetrical grove at the end of which one hears the murmuring of crystal-clear springs that feed the cold waters of El Cubo. Then came the vast expanse of valleys and mountains, the latter presided over by majestic volcanoes, gigantic censers raising smoke from their depths above the clouds, up to God. Fertile lands, rich with flourishing crops that promised a bountiful harvest. One's eyes never get tired of so much wonder. Pleasure captivated our gaze, and words seemed to carry music within them.

As we approached the first houses of the town, the sense of well-being we had enjoyed throughout the journey grew stronger. From one sidewalk to the other, colored paper decorations swayed in the morning breeze and rustled like Aeolian harps. The buildings, though modest, were spotless white, an immaculate white. Not a single leaf on the street pavement, nothing out of place to ruin the impeccable cleanliness. Indigenous men and women dressed in their finest Christian garb. The men wore their usual short pants that revealed their gladiator-like calves, and the women their *guipiles* (a traditional woman's attire) woven with red and blue threads. The rustic *guipiles* trembled slightly, as their chests were not confined by corsets. Soon, a young married couple approached us and offered their home for the day. That is how these Indigenous people honor their guests. They open their homes to be used as if they were the visitors' own, and they accept the discomforts that come with their generosity so that their guests may feel at ease during the celebration.

The same fair of toys and fruits was found here as elsewhere, but with the addition of fragrant, steaming food served on green leaves that take the place of plates. Some bring their meals already prepared from Antigua, but the Indigenous people's simple cooking is not to be dismissed.

It is evident that the Catholic faith has taken deep root among Guatemala's Indigenous people. As soon as the bells announce that the procession has left the temple, all heads are uncovered and every bit of chatter in the crowd is silenced. These poor, native peasants set an example of reverence and culture for those who consider themselves civilized. Built through collective efforts by the devout townspeople, four masonry chapels rise at the corners of the plaza in San Antonio, their crosses seeming to extend protective arms over the humble village. In each chapel stands an altar, exclusively dedicated to receive Christ in his real presence during the Corpus procession. Indigenous men and women of noble standing act as stewards of the feast and stand guard over the Blessed Sacrament, walking under the canopy alongside the priest who carries it. The women of that privileged class spare no effort to show their enthusiasm, their piety, and the coins they've saved beneath the grinding stone now set aside. They burn monumental candles as thick as masts, adorned with flowers and elaborate designs. For the ceremony, they wear expensive garments, though always in the style of their traditional attire.

What they call the *enagua*, the skirt or main garment, is just a single piece of cloth, with no cut or adornment of any kind, sewn with only one seam. No buttons, no clasps, no pins. Two turns, a knot, and they walk with the confidence that not even the strongest hurricane will disgrace them or cause their garments to fall, even if caught in the blades of a windmill. Completing the indigenous women outfit is a blouse of snowy whiteness made from the finest batiste. From where that garment is visible begins a fall of expensive lace that ends at the chest. Over this lacy canopy hangs a cross from the neck, swaying as the dressed-up stewardess walks. When the stewardess is young and not unattractive, when her long, shiny black hair flows down her back, when her teeth put lilies to shame with their whiteness, when each cheek offers a soft and tempting surface for the flirtations of love, one thinks of Pocahontas and finds the idea of a wild passion, untouched by the noise of the world.

Perhaps never before has a religious ceremony moved us as much as the Corpus procession in San Antonio Aguascalientes. Even the aristocrats who attended out of mere curiosity seemed to be touched by the deep, simple faith of the villagers. What a stage and what actors! The volcanoes offering incense to the heavens; the earth opening up in provident sheaves; the church crosses and the four chapel crosses speaking of faith and hope in a silent yet eloquent language; hearts immersed in devout and ineffable delight, and, above all, God in the heights, tirelessly pouring out blessings with generous hands.

Once the majestic ceremony concluded, it was time for the fair, the promenades, the picnics, and the dances that arose spontaneously and turned out to be delightful on the soft surface of the green grass. Soon the *son*, Guatemala's popular dance, spread everywhere, in the style of Chile's *zamacueca*, Colombia's *bambuco*, Venezuela's *joropo*, Puerto Rico's *seis*

chorreao, and a hundred other similar dances that reveal a common choreographic tendency among the Indigenous peoples of the Americas.

The sun was setting when we began our return to the city. We can still see the wide road lined with eucalyptus trees; we can still contemplate the poetic banks of the *Pensativo* River. At the time, we believed that in those places our quiet life would continue its humble course and that, in the cemetery called San Lázaro, eternal rest would one day begin for us. A beloved voice once promised us heavenly joys here on earth. All that has now passed. Fickle is human happiness, it hovers over a man's head for a moment, then departs forever, leaving behind only the mournful cries and flapping wings of the dark, grim bird of inconsolable sorrow!

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