UNIVERSITY OF SAN CARLOS OF GUATEMALA

CENTER FOR FOLKRORE STUDIES



# TRADITIONS OF GUATEMALA

# 9-10



Guatemala, Central America

1978

*EXPLANATION*

*Under the same title, we announced in issue 3 of* ***Traditions of Guatemala*** *that this magazine would become a biannual publication. And we kept our promise, publishing issues 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8 throughout 1975, 1976, and 1977.*

*Due to financial constraints, which we face today and which may persist in the future, we have been forced to consolidate issues 9 and 10, both corresponding to 1978, into a single volume. Therefore, we announce in advance that we will soon have to turn to individuals and institutions interested in defending Guatemala's cultural heritage to obtain the support that may allow us to save a magazine that aims to disseminate studies, documents, and other testimonies related to our popular traditions. We believe that only through their collaboration can we continue moving forward. Please accept, readers of* ***Traditions of Guatemala****, to whom we reiterate that we are motivated by the purpose of securing the future of the magazine of the Center for Folklore Studies of the University of San Carlos of Guatemala, the excuse implicit in this note*

*The director*

## GUATEMALAN MASKS

*Mario Monteforte Toledo*

The mask is an almost universal practice, among primitive peoples as well as among cultured societies. Emphasized by the values that predominate in different times and places, they are religious in character in Africa, artistic in Japan, and share both essences in Guatemala and Mexico.

It seems as if, as soon as spiritual concepts are consolidated and differentiated, the need to stereotype arises, to make the character who utters foreign words both more theatrical and more human, and in any case, less subject to the personal distortion generally imposed by performers.

Through this process of fixation and simplification, classicism is undone. In this sense, the mask is anti-romantic, for it impedes as much as possible the expression of man as a non-actor; and for this reason, contemporary humanity has abandoned it, in need of dynamic and realistic characterizations, ever more complex and contradictory as they approach the dark motivations of the subconscious. Almost all of the artistic expressions of the Indians are eminently classical; one need only analyze music, dance, weaving, or poetry to immediately discover the purity of the types, the adherence to accepted standards, and the minimal intervention of the creator in the work of art. The Indians call scholasticism "custom"; "not custom" means that what is required of them cannot be done because it is contrary to canons, to ancestral rules.

Taken from El Imparcial. Guatemala, circa 1944-1954.

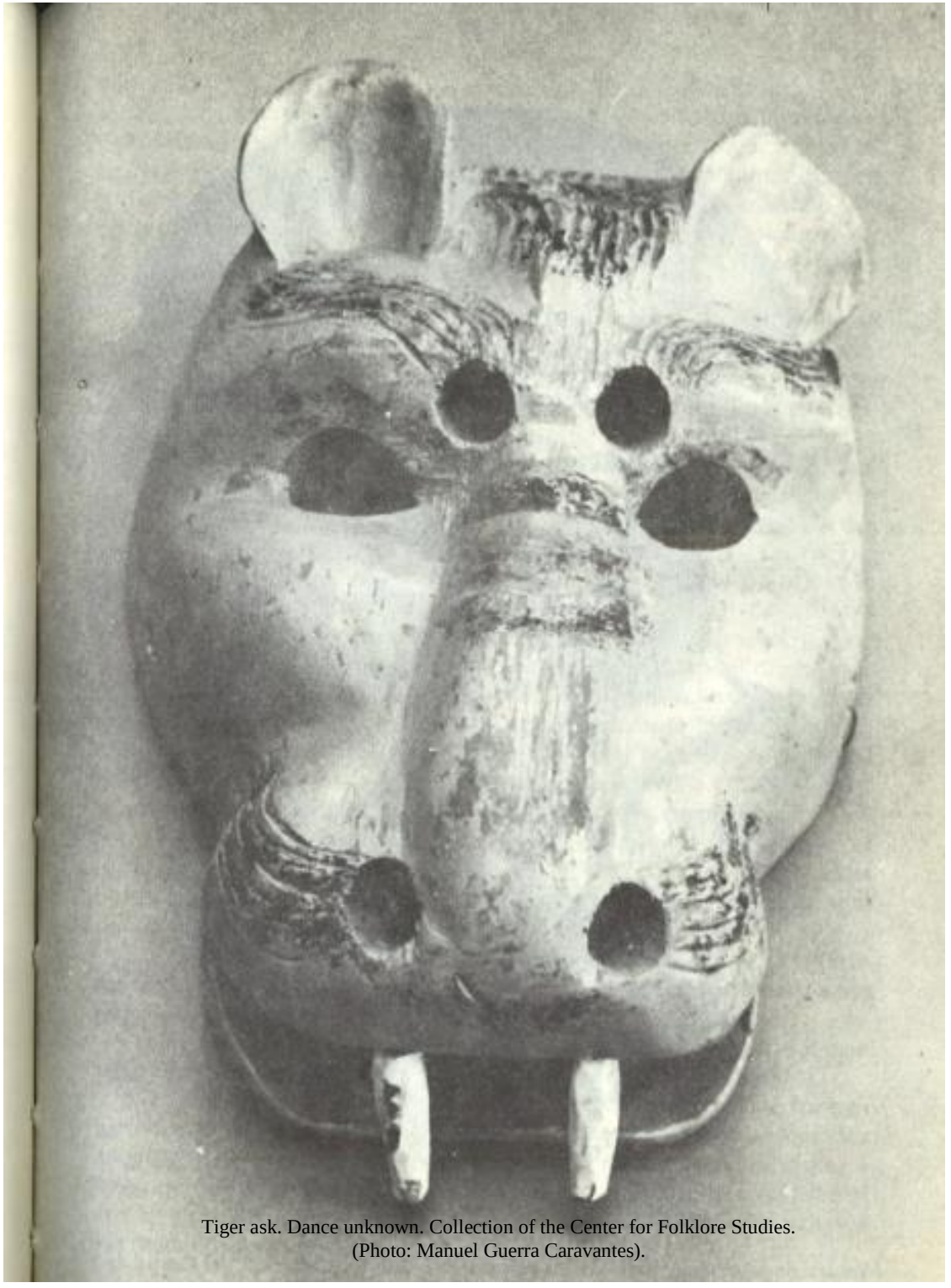
This why Guatemala is one of the countries richest in masks, whose use dates back to time immemorial. The ancient Indians sang, but above all they danced and performed theater. The Popol Vuh cites several ritual dances practiced by marvelous beings in the age of the giants, before the advent of the men of corn: those of the blowgunners in übalhá; those of Ixquic, the maiden of the underworld; and those of animals and gods. Later, men danced to the dawn and other natural phenomena, already in the historical era of the migrations led by the four first lords of the houses of Quiché. And almost all of these dances were performed with masks, which are even mentioned and are the cause of gifts and miracles. Also remember the admirable Rabinal-Achí, and consult Mayan and Quiché codices, ceramics, and buildings. Therein lies the source of today's Guatemalan masks.

Since the naguales were incarnations of various beings or people, it is understandable that animals were part of the Indians' artistic expressions. Thus originated the masks of deer, tigers, lions, dogs, monkeys, birds, etc., which, moreover, play such an important role in Maya-Quiché myths, and the adornments that still survive on certain human masks, such as quetzals, lizards, frogs, and especially snakes.

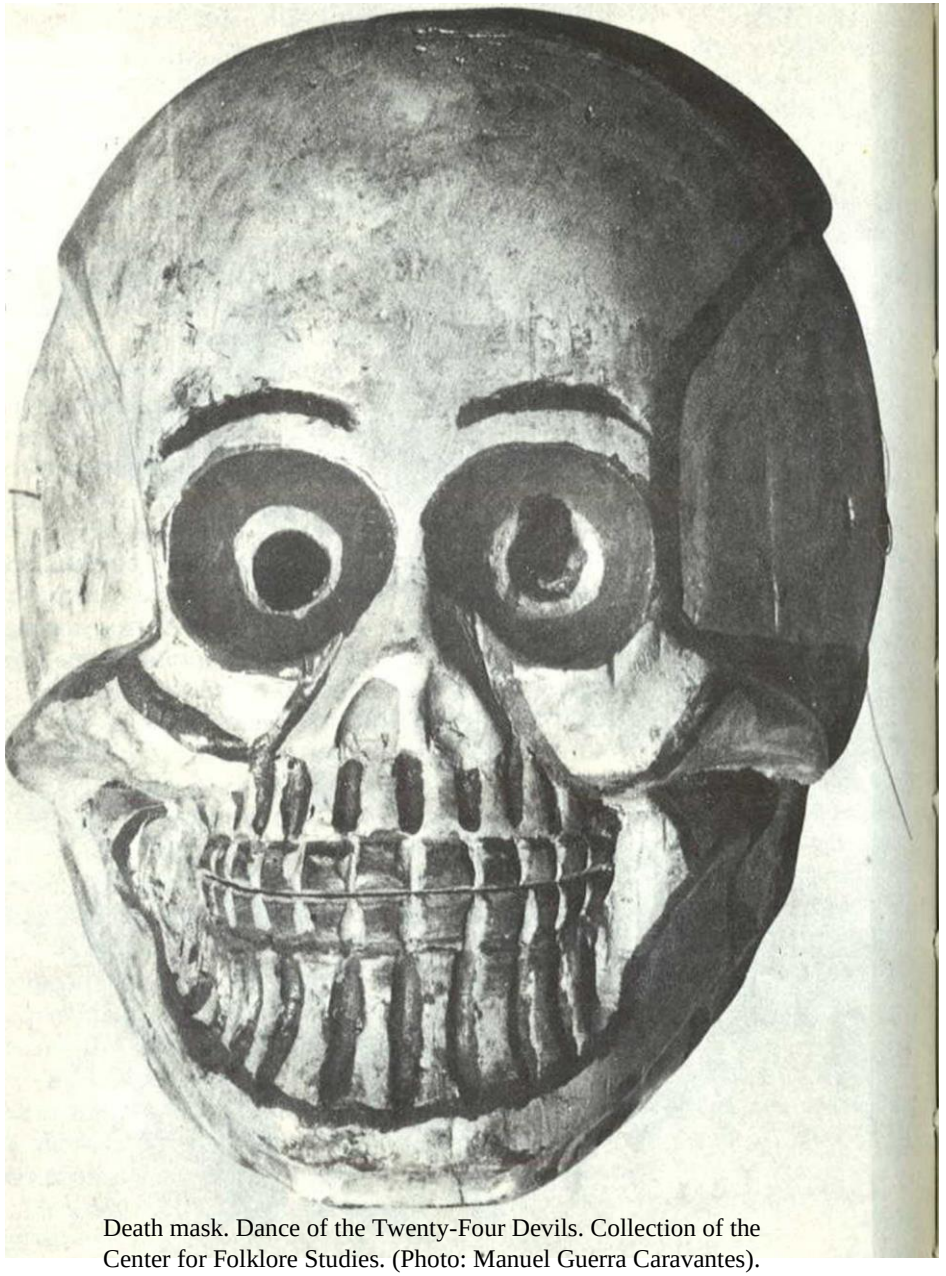
They are the same symbols that appear on Indian textiles, although less stylized and less esoteric; because the masks respond in part to aesthetic demands, while the male attire, and especially the female one, has a religious or mythical origin. Balam-Quitzé, Balam-Acab, and Mahucutah, three of the first Quiché lords, painted bumblebees, wasps, and other animals on the clothes of the two virgins sent by the vassal tribes to seduce the god Tohil with their flesh. The lord of the vassal tribes marveled at these fabrics "that shone before the eyes" and wanted to put them on, and immediately the "drones and wasps came to life and began to sting him" (Popol-Vuh, Part IV, Chapter II). Truly, the indigenous fabrics of today seem painted by the gods.

The masks were made of stone or richer materials, such as alabaster and jade. Although the first Spanish chroniclers also mention wooden masks, it was surely the conquistadors who perfected the skills of the Indian craftsmen in carving, and especially in stucco and retouching, which unfortunately is being lost or degenerated.

Mask-making was—like almost all Indian arts—and still is



Tiger ask. Dance unknown. Collection of the Center for Folklore Studies.
(Photo: Manuel Guerra Caravantes).



Death mask. Dance of the Twenty-Four Devils. Collection of the Center for Folklore Studies. (Photo: Manuel Guerra Caravantes).

A motif of hereditary craftsmanship. There are still two or three families in Totonicapán, and the Ignacio family in Chichicastenango, where the wonderful Guatemalan masks are made. It is regrettable that current artisans, especially the Ignacios, are letting their imaginations run wild, creating purely decorative masks—even those of cows and goats—abandoning the pristine mythical motivations on which the masks of their ancestors are based.

If it weren't for the foresight with which the Spanish understood the substantial values underlying the indigenous world, they would be admirable as conquistadors. Trade wasn't the primary reason for subjugation; it was the superposition of artistic, moral, and religious symbols. Sensing the social significance of the dance, with its belongings and attire, they took advantage of it to make the process and meaning of their arrival from across the sea understandable in a visual way. The Dance of the Conquest and the Dance of the Moors and Christians still survive, the latter completely alien to the American milieu, yet used as a vehicle to exemplify Catholicism's struggle against heresy. The masks used for these dances, made by the Indians, have not lost their baroque characteristics or the design they probably had since the 16th century. Nor has the recitative text been distorted, which the Indians have repeated for four centuries without understanding that it narrates their defeat and refers to the biased course of their noble history. A unique practice is observed in the Dance of the Conquest: King Tecún-Umán, who wears a beautiful aquiline mask with two quetzales on his forehead throughout the performance, dons another mask accentuated by his pallor at the moment of his death, with which his weeping vassals parade his corpse to the accompaniment of music of extraordinary purity.

There are also masks from the Negritos dance, which originated in the time of slavery, where Black people were treated with leniency, perhaps because they suffered the same conditions as the Indians.

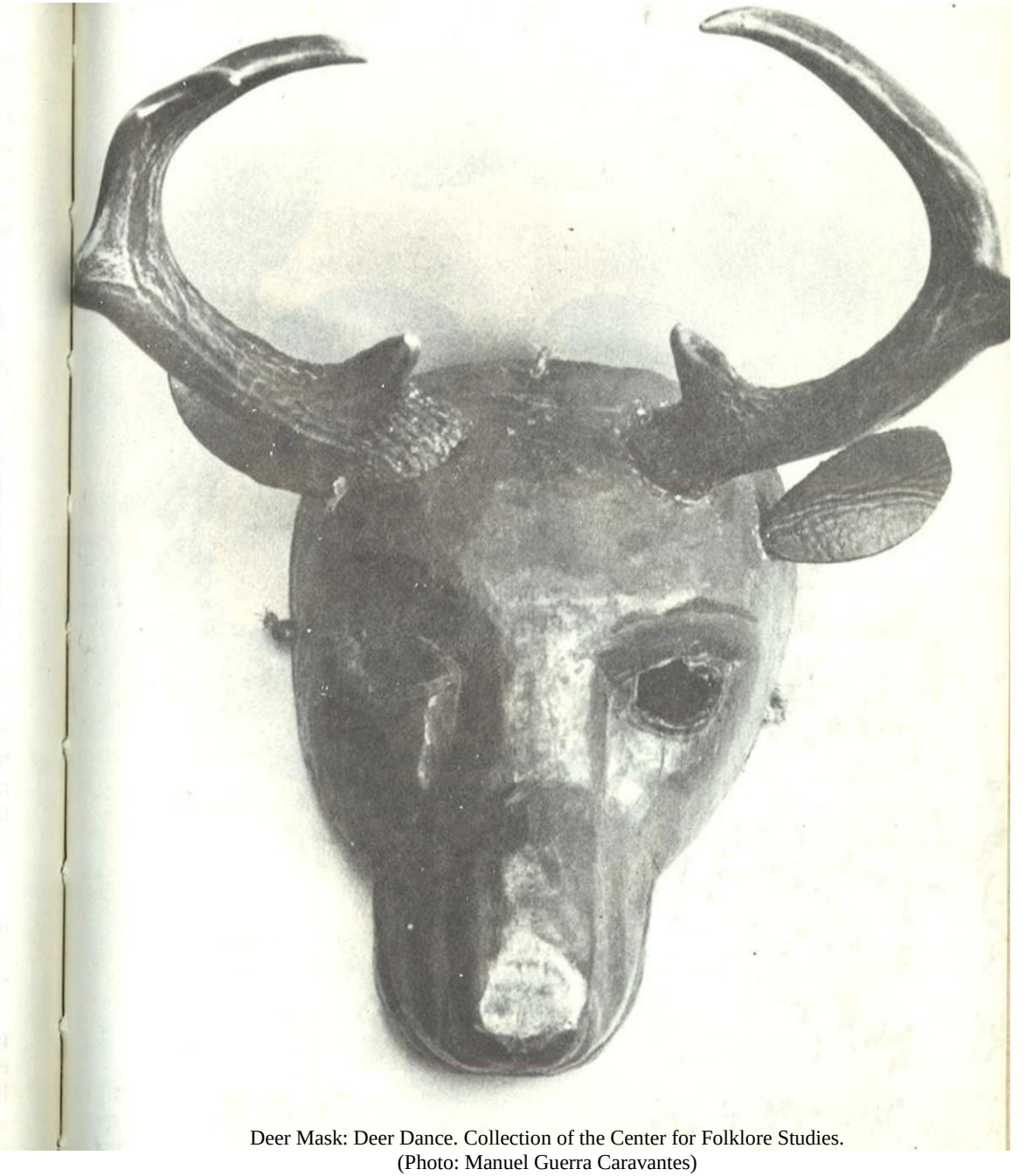
There is another dance called "Los Fieros," in which the masks have mestizo features and the emphasis on the grotesque falls on the clothing.All these dances, and consequently the masks that form part of them, are of Spanish origin. The Indians cannot have adopted them out of conviction but rather out of religious imposition, at first, and later because, to the beat of music that was their own, they incorporated them into the art of dance, which was so closely linked to their world and its expressive modes.

Another influence of Spanish on indigenous mask-making is evident in the devils, who abound in so many vernacular dances. No Indian document mentions horned mythological figures. The kingdom of Xibalbá, supposedly located underground, is not exactly equivalent to the biblical hell, even though it was inhabited by evil powers described in detail in the Popol Vuh. The worst monsters of Xibalbá, the Tucur and the Camalotz—owls and bats—are portrayed with fervent imagination, but they bear no relation to the demons of Christian cosmogony, as they appear in current Indian dances. Perhaps for this reason, the devils in these dances play comic rather than sinister roles, surely not under Spanish influence but because that is how Indian minds interpreted and realized them.

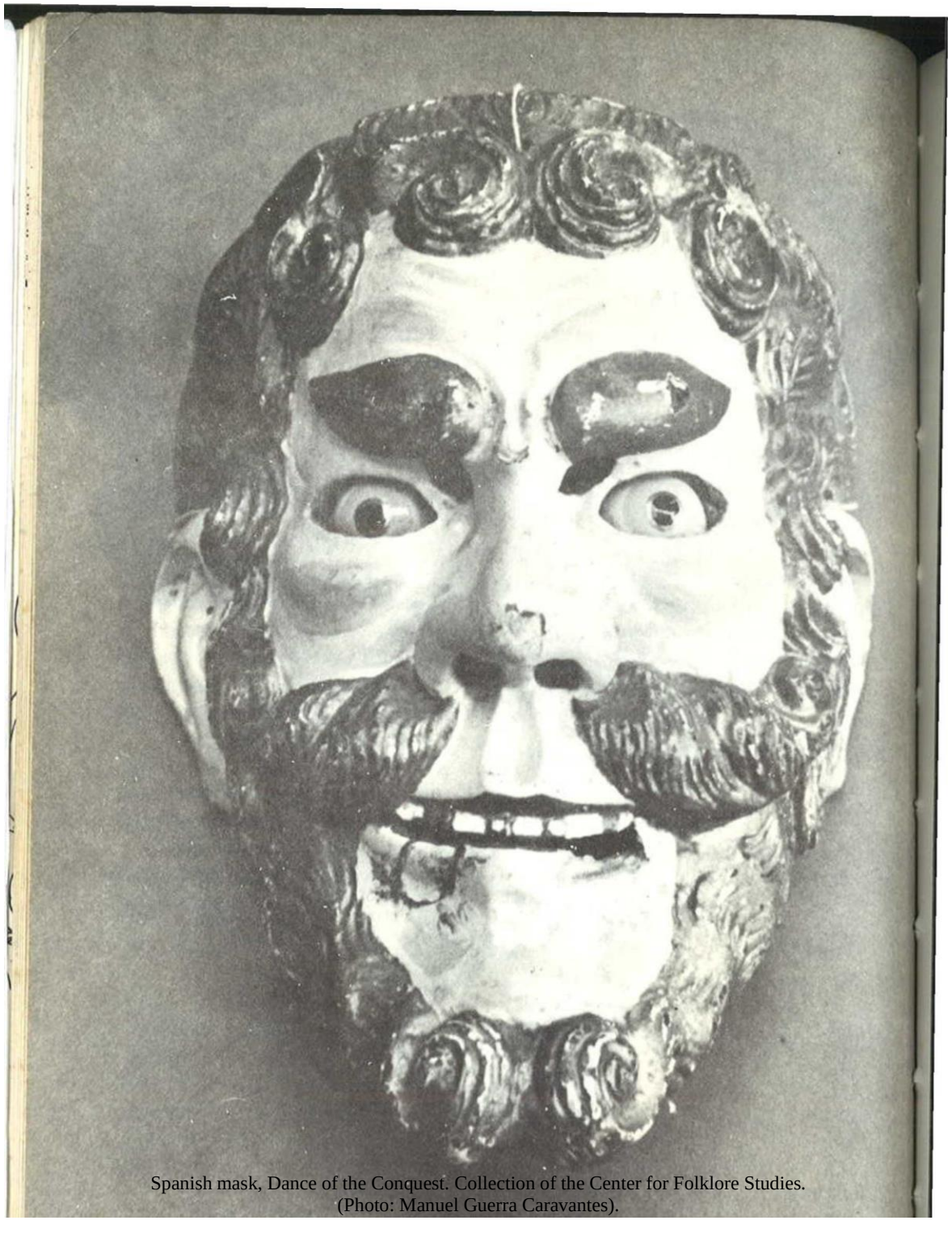
These are the only indigenous dances that emanate from the Conquest and the Colonial period. Incidentally, the masks that accompany them are the ones that most closely adhere to stereotypical artistic canons (the aquiline nose, the long, coiled mustache, the hair in exaggerated curls, the high, furrowed eyebrows). More characteristic and genuine of the Indian is the animal masking, which in many dances is expressed in Mayan-Quiché languages, according to the oldest texts passed down from parents to children, demonstrating the unique mnemonic abilities of our aborigines.

The ritual dances of the Mayan-Quiché have been lost: possibly the missionaries extirpated them as things of the devil. We only know of the masks used in them from what can be seen on the stones in museums and ruined cities.

But it is evident that Guatemalan masks belong to the Indian, who has been making and preserving them, like many other artistic treasures that rightly make the country proud.



Deer Mask: Deer Dance. Collection of the Center for Folklore Studies.
(Photo: Manuel Guerra Caravantes)



Spanish mask, Dance of the Conquest. Collection of the Center for Folklore Studies.
(Photo: Manuel Guerra Caravantes).