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# TRADICIONES DE GUATEMALA



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REVISTA DEL CENTRO DE ESTUDIOS FOLKLORICOS

15

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GUATEMALA TRADITIONS

**15**

Guatemala, Central America

1981







## **THE GIANT KITES OF SANTIAGO SACATEPEQUEZ, A HISTORICAL, SOCIAL, AND ARTISTIC APPROACH\***

Mario Roberto Chacón Polanco

### **0 introduction**

On the occasion of the day of the dead (November 1<sup>st</sup>), in Guatemala, an extraordinary of a popular nature takes place in the municipality of Santiago, in the department of Sacatepéquez, an extraordinary celebration of a popular nature. A unique activity: this involves flying giant kites, artifacts made of sugarcane and tissue paper, at high altitudes, challenging the strong northerly winds typical of this time of year in Guatemala. This traditional artistic expression is an astonishing as it underappreciated.

The research presented here has provided us with the opportunity to express our admiration for the bearers of this traditional, phenomenon, as well as allowing us to contribute to the dissemination of their art and, therefore, contribute to its preservation, and self – development.

This paper analyzes the phenomenon of Santiago's giant kites from three perspectives: historical, social, and artistic. Finally, some conclusion and recommendations are presented that the author believes are necessary.

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- This work was presented in a Latin American competition called the University of Panama Award, promoted by the Department of Artistic Expressions of the University of Panama in 1981. He participated in the essay genre and received an honorable mention.

The author is currently studying at the faculty of Architecture of the University Of San Carlos Of Guatemala, where he is currently completing the final requirements to obtain the academic title of architect.



## **PANORAMIC VIEW OF THE CEMETERY FROM NEAR THE ENTRANCE**

**Photo By: Mauro Calanchina.**

Finally, in the preparation of this work, we counted on the invaluable collaboration of the kite makers of Santiago Sacatepéquez, the advice of Francis Evany of the Guatemala tourism institute, and specially the guidance of Ofelia Columba De León Melendez of the Center for Folklore studies at the University Of San Carlos Of Guatemala. Her enthusiasm and dedication were contagious.

# **PRESENTATION**





## **LITTLE FLYERS, HEIRS OF AN ADMIRABLE TRADITION**

Photo By: mauro calanchina.

# **1. HISTORICAL ANALYSIS**

Despite numerous studies, the phenomenon of the giant kites of Santiago Sacatepéquez is only superficially understood. That is why we began our research by trying to cover all the bibliography referring to the subject. From our review we concluded that only three more or less complete works give an idea of the folkloric fact, in addition to several articles scattered in newspapers of recent years. Of these works we can comment the following:

The first is a descriptive work by Roberto Diaz Castillo, which offers considerations on the origin and causes of the phenomenon. The second is a short work by Ida Bremen de Santos that identifies kites within the classification of crafts and offers information on their typology. Finally, the third, the most complete of all, was prepared by Hector Abraham Pinto, provides information about the work process and the origin of the phenomenon. It also presents a general description of the same. This literature review made us feel the need to conduct in – depth research in Santiago Sacatepéquez. This concern led us to contact Mr. Rigoberto Xoc, a traditional barrel maker who has been working in Santiago Sacatepéquez for eighteen years.

He told us about his work, that its purposes are practical and aesthetic. He strives to make small and medium – sized kites and is driven by the desire to make a good product. He is unaware of the time and/or event related to the appearance of the giant kites; however, his father, of the same name, recounted the following:

“The government of Dictator Jorge Ubico was in the power, and it was customary at that time for large delegations to attend the inaugurations of government works. It happened that on occasion of a visit by the ruler to Santiago – the informant did not specify the occasion he was shown kites made on the premises, to which the ruler commented:

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1. Roberto Díaz Castillo. **Popular Arts and crafts of Sacatepéquez.** (Guatemala: center for folklore studies of the university of San Carlos of Guatemala, 1976).
  2. Hector Abraham Pinto. “The kites of Santiago Sacatepéquez”, in **traditions of Guatemala**, No. 7 (Guatemala: center for folklore studies of the University of San Carlos Of Guatemala, 1977).

-¿ why don't they make them bigger? That's how the size of the kites gradually became bigger and bigger, just evolving into the giants that are known today.

We consider this oral account to be very important in establishing the origins, so we set about trying to verify it with other sources. Therefore the local museum

houses a commemorative plaque that reads: “Ubico admiration. Bridge of Santiago, renovated on June 30, 1942. Cost Q.1, 421.18”. Our first observation was to establish some relationship between this fact and the recorded oral tradition. We then interviewed the parish priest of the Catholic Church. He told us the following about the origins of the giant kites:

“Common kites, the smallest in size, may have emerged in Santiago at the beginning of the century. However, the date of appearance of the giants cannot be specified because the few stories we have are spoken and only coincide in indicating that they date back some forty or fifty years”

By reviewing the available bibliography, we were able to verify that “Juan Francisco Ecute, for 75 years old man, stated that in his time they did not fly kites as large as those seen now, because he remembers that the ones made to fly were small, like those seen in stories today. However, he added, they have gone through a long process of many years and have gradually improved the forms until reaching the current ones”.

Although we attempted to investigate the archives available at the local municipality, we were unable to obtain any information, as the old records were destroyed by a fire and only a few recent ones remain; likewise, the review of the National Newspaper Archive did not provide any information. It is more, only the volumes corresponding to 1942 were not available. However, from all that has obtained, the following hypothesis can be deduced:

It is impossible to establish a period during which, to some circumstance that we will propose later, the common kites began to transform into what would later become the giants: we can set this period between 1940 and 1945; this coincides with all the oral accounts obtained to date and also gives it a characteristic that has been little considered until now, that of process, that is, the transformation is the result of a progressive scale in size over time – the annual celebration – and to this correspond the inaccuracies in the chronology of the accounts.

¿ now, under these circumstances did this transformation?

To answer this question, let's consider another story that will help us make another proposition later on: although our informant, Mr. Hector Raul Tejeda Jimenez, 21 years old, told us that it is a custom that has been around for a long time, it makes us think that it is not as old as is believed, “My grandfather told me – says the informant – that on one occasion a man came to this town and brought a kite about a yard in size, so the boys liked it and began to make them bigger.”

So, we have two versions that, despite differing in the paternity of the phenomenon, provide something concrete; someone arrived in Santiago, perhaps from the capital, and proposed a larger kite to the common people, and it seems that it must have been around 1940. However, we will give credence to Mr. Rigoberto Xoc version that the ruler Jorge Ubico had some influence on it. Some reasons allow us to support it:

1. The story is direct, that is, it has not undergone major changes when transmitted from one generation to another.
2. The story corresponds chronologically to the period proposed here; remember that the dictator did not fall until 1944.
3. The story was told to me under particular circumstances: we must note that this work required little more than of two months of regular visits to Santiago, during which it was possible to establish a closer relationship with the Xoc family. It cannot be forgotten that indigenous of Guatemala are notoriously reserved when it comes to sharing details of their customs, rituals and/or celebrations, except when a certain level of trust has been established.

We therefor want to propose the following hypothesis, which seems definitive to us:

We won't affirm that general Ubico was the one who originated the idea of making Santiago's Kites larger, because at the moment the available documentation doesn't fully confirm this. However, it is possible to attribute it to someone in his government – a subordinate – out of an eagerness to please. It must be remembered, for this, that the dictator's birthday was celebrated with great pomp throughout the country – and on that date it almost coincided with the first of November... (November, 10<sup>th</sup>)-. Craft fairs, dance, processions, etc. were held everywhere in his honor. All the evidence consulted lead us to believe that large kites were prepared for this occasion by delegation from *Santiago Sacatepéquez*\*.

We believe that all of these points should be verified more precisely by historical, ethno historical, and ethnographic sources. However, the sources are still very imprecise; the painstaking archival search and limited time available did not allow us to clarify the problem further. We hope that the proposals presented will stimulate discussion and allow for a deeper understanding of the origins of his traditional phenomenon.



**Indigenous children supporting the flight of their kite creation.**

Photo By: Mauro Calanchina

## **2. SOCIAL ANALYSIS**

## 2. 1 Socio-geographic localization

Santiago Sacatepéquez is a typical town in central-western Guatemala. It has the status of a village and covers an area of 15 square kilometers at an altitude of 2,000 meters above sea level. The estimated population in 1980s. Was 10,414 inhabitants of which 90% were indigenous (about 9,372 inhabitants) and the remaining 10% were not-indigenous (about 1,042 inhabitants)? The total indigenous population, about 90% were catholic, the predominant language is *Cakchiquel*<sup>7</sup>.

## 2. 2 Socio-geographic localization

The previous section has already mentioned something about the ethnic group to which the kite makers of Santiago belong: it is indigenous par excellence. However, one or more ladino mestizos are usually involved in the work groups. All of them belong to the urban population, although a considerable number work in agriculture, others in commerce and small craft workshops. This means that the majority are full-time peasant or semi-peasant workers, so the kite making is done slowly and only at night... As Díaz Castillo points out, three or four weeks before November 1st, children, young people, and adult men devote themselves to kite making at night. Although all the residents of Santiago Sacatepéquez know that during the quiet night the men are busy with this task, they pretend to be unaware of whose houses the work is carried out. The idea seems to prevail that, until All Souls' Day, no one should be aware of the existence of this activity.

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7. Demographic projection. Population census, 1973.

8. Information provided by the Catholic Church of Santiago Sacatepéquez.

9. Roberto Díaz Castillo, op. cit., p. 520.

Santiago has a little-recognized peculiarity: they are not made to be sold; they constitute a personal art object, and in Mr. Xoc's opinion, if they were sold, the cost would be so high and the lifespan so short - given the nature of the materials - that they would be inaccessible to the buyer; he estimates that each kite could be sold for Q 100.00 *quetzals*. He points out that a kite was recently made by order of the American anthropologist Ken Smith and taken to a museum in Minnesota (he did not specify the city). It was made with certain details suggested by the buyer, which we were able to verify in the photograph that our informant has. For example, it did not have the symbolic flags that are usually placed on the top of the kite; allegorical figures were added to the motifs normally used in the design, and tissue paper reproductions of the Mayan characters used in the murals by Alfredo Gálvez

Suárez that are found in the vestibule of the National Palace of Guatemala were attached.

Finally, our informant emphasized that the cost of such a kite was Q 200.00, *quetzals*. Which was distributed between materials and the labor of four people.

The number of people dedicated to making kites in Santiago Sacatepéquez could not be determined, but it can be easily inferred that they are very few and almost exclusively indigenous, who are mainly dedicated to agriculture and petty trade to supplement the low family income.

### 2.3 The phenomenon as a folkloric expression

We are faced with an aspect of material folklore which involves popular art and which we can define in the following way, based on the compilation made by Roberto Díaz Castillo of the works of *Fernando Anaya Monroy*, *Ismael Moya*, *Paulo de Carvalho-Neto*, *José Castillo Farreras* and others, in his book **Folklore and Popular Arts**.

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10. This, like others (Holy Week carpets and the altars of Concepción), are examples of what is known as ephemeral folk art. Kites are a concept coined by *Alberto Beltrán* of Mexico. (NE).

11. Cfr. Roberto Díaz Castillo. *Folklore and Popular Arts*. (Guatemala: Center for Folklore Studies, 1968), pp. 23-24.

1. It must have a popular character, meaning it identifies with the people; the kite makers not only identify with the people, but are part of them.
2. It must be anonymous; despite the research efforts, it was not possible to discover the paternity of this traditional manifestation and even if we had known the name of its creator, anonymity would be preserved for the society in which it arose, since we would be dealing with the bearers and not the creators. It must be traditional; this suggests the transmission of a certain amount of knowledge directly - that is to say, from person to person - from one generation to another: all of this can be observed in the practical use of the kites of Santiago Sacatepéquez.
3. It must be traditional; this suggests the transmission of a certain amount of knowledge directly—that is, from person to person—from one generation to another: all of this can be seen in the practical nature of the kites of Santiago Sacatepéquez.
4. It must acknowledge the existence of historical and geographic patterns. This can be easily answered because the phenomenon is so deeply embedded in the historical development of the population that it fully identifies it within the departmental context, and ultimately, this very same thing defines it territorially.

5. It must fulfill a function. In other words, it must satisfy a need embedded in the society in which it emerged. In the case of Santiago Sacatepéquez, that need is for aesthetic expression and spiritual satisfaction.
6. It must be collective. There can be no doubt about this in Santiago Sacatepéquez, since it suggests the participation of the entire community. In addition, the fact that the community considers this manifestation as part of its culture is presented.

## 2. 4 Other parallel expressions phenomenon to the phenomenon

A few days before November 1st, particularly on the eve, some preparations are made for the main event of the Day of the Dead and the two following ones: the flight of the giant kites.

These preparations include: preparation of seasonal fruit preserves (*chamomile\**, *jocotes\**, and *squash\** and others); in most cases, it turned out to be a mere hypothesis, and therefore lacked any reliable foundation.

However, it served as a starting point for our investigation. When the main informant (Rigoberto Xoc) was asked about the meaning that kite making had for him, he replied that there was nothing surreal or spiritual about it: it was about continuing a tradition that was accompanied by natural skill, ingenuity and, above all, a lot of enthusiasm.

On the other hand, we were interested in knowing the opinion of the parish priest, who explained it in the following way:

*"It should be noted that this is a town with a predominantly Catholic population, for whom death means the abandonment of the body by the soul and its passage to another form of life; this implies that their spiritual life is limited to another world, that of GOD, therefore, by suggesting this form of communication, a direct relationship between the living and spirits would be assumed, ruling out the participation of the former".*

When many people are asked about the meaning of the phenomenon, many are unaware of it, or, as Roberto Díaz Castillo suggests, "...know nothing or want to say nothing about it." Therefore, we try to gather available opinions, circumstances, and facts to try to achieve a more well-founded account. First, it is known that there are no direct or indirect accounts that prove that it is indeed a form of communication. Second, it is known with certainty that the assumption that it is a form of communication belongs to Western culture, since the Ladinos are the only ones who offer information about the phenomenon. Third, special circumstance prevail that make

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13. Information provided by the parish priest of Santiago Sacatepéquez.

14 Notwithstanding the author's observations, new anthropological research initiated among the brotherhood's leaders suggests that the phenomenon is a communication between the underworld and the world of the living, a belief that, moreover, has been deeply rooted among indigenous people since pre-Hispanic times and continues to exist in current indigenous cosmogony. The bibliography on this subject is extensive. (NB).



The flight of giant kites is possible: absence of rain, strong and prevailing winds very particular at this time of year, the land that presents the cemetery has special characteristics in space and configuration of the winds, which make it unbeatable for this purpose.

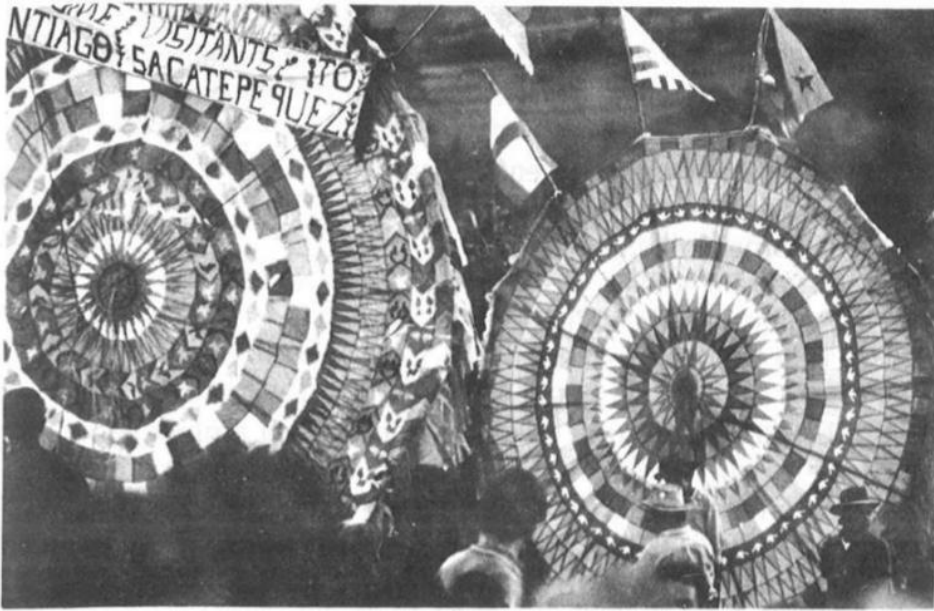
If we add to all this the hypotheses that we suggest about its origin and also the transformations that the phenomenon has suffered and continues to suffer, and that presents variants in the design despite using the same technique, we would simply find ourselves with an artistic object, that is, a means of expression.

Now, what is it that you want to express?

To answer this question, we can use our informant's opinion regarding the motifs used in the kite designs. They correspond, first and foremost, to those used in the indigenous textiles of the area: they have been adapted to the possibilities offered by tissue paper. In addition, other motifs are used that we would call of institutional origin: the flags, which in this case turn out to be important elements to justify **THE EXPRESSION**, since they do not have even the slightest spiritual relationship with the living, much less with the dead. They are, strictly speaking, an **EXPRESSION** of greeting and welcome to the foreign visitors who were abundant that day. Finally, other motifs used are of a civic nature, such as national symbols: the flag, the white nun, the *Quetzal*, and heroes like *Tecún Umán*. With all this, we can conclude as to what is being expressed: the environment, society, moral and artistic values determine the means of expression.

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15 We are convinced that the significance of the kites of Santiago Sacatepéquez is much deeper than the author suggests. It is not reduced to a mere artistic manifestation. An exhaustive ethnographic investigation and an analysis of the anthropology of religion would yield more solid and different results than those proposed here. Correa. **The Spirit of Evil in Guatemala** (New Orleans: Middle American Research Institute, Tulane University, 1955), pp. 48-53 and particularly 54 and **passim**. Also: José Castañeda Medinilla, "The Polychromy in the Kites of Santiago Sacatepéquez", in **Guatemala Indígena**, Vol. XIV, No. 3-4. (NE).



**TWO GIANT KITES WITH A VARIETY OF GEOMETRIC DESIGNS.**

Photo By: Mauro Calanchina.

### **3. ARTISTIC ANALYSIS**

### 3. 1 Usage material

In order of importance, the materials are as follows:

1. Tissue paper in sheets.
2. Castile cane
3. Past glue
4. Braided pita
5. Glue
6. Lightweight fabric for the tail.

Tissue paper is used because of the wide range of colors it offers. It's also extremely light and transparent, making it unbeatable for this purpose. It's been reported among kite makers that the brilliance of the colors has noticeably diminished—which we were able to confirm—and the manufacturers seem to be continuing this trend, which, in their opinion, detracts from the quality of the kites.

The Castilian cane, also known as the reed rod, is used because it is easy to obtain (it grows abundantly in many plots near the town, which generally belong to the barrel makers themselves). Furthermore, it offers all the possible and necessary alternatives in diameter and resistance to the bending stress to which it is subjected.

The glue is made from starch, which, as is known, comes from the processing of cassava in the eastern region of the country, and which, once crystallized, is extremely light.

Braided pita or ribbon is obtained by interweaving the elongated fibers of the maguey and also comes from the region and the east of the country.

The other materials are well-known and rarely used in kite making, so we won't explain them further. To all of them, we must add the tools used (accessories), such as scissors, flat chisels, templates, and blades.

### 3. 2 Preparation and execution

Preparation begins thirty days before the event, but can be reduced to fifteen days, depending on the skill and experience of the kite maker.

First, the Castile cane to be used are prepared. To do this, they must be selected, cut, and taken to a place where they can dry. This place is generally the roof of the group leader's house, or as they say, "**The principal**." The necessary pita (string) is prepared, both to form the basic structure that is tied with it, and the string needed to raise it. While in some cases it is found or chosen already braided, in others, the members decide to make it themselves.

Other materials, such as paper and glue, for more immediate use, should be provided only in sufficient quantities for the main face of the kite; this is where the designs are to be executed. In addition, the back lining for that face and the so-called "fringes" necessary for flight are made. Added to this is what is needed for the flags placed on the head of the kite, whose number corresponds to the number of members in the group.

The selected Castile cane, ranging in diameter from half an inch to one and a half inches, originate from a common center. Others cross it from end to end (the length of the diameter) and are joined at the periphery with string and glue to prevent them from shifting. The length of the rods or reeds obtained and their respective diameter partly determine the size of the kite. Cut to a length equal to the diameter, the total number of rods can be fourteen, sixteen, or more.

The main face of the barrel is made as follows: starting in the center, forming a figure with ten, twelve, fourteen, or more sides (flat). This constitutes the master figure, as it determines the sides and size of the subsequent figures, which in practical terms are concentric rings.

These figures or concentric rings are formed by the succession of triangles or wedges or the combination of squares and triangles, or triangles and rhomboids, although in some cases, successive circles, crosses, and strictly geometric flowers are often added. Regarding the production process, *Mr. Héctor Raúl Tejeda Jiménez*, 21, describes it as follows:

*"any color, the color you want to start the kite with, then fold it into ten parts to get the center of the kite, like this figure here (folds a small piece of tissue paper, makes a cut with a carpentry chisel and shows us the figure he has taken in a few seconds), from then on the templates or just squares are taken out. To make a kite with knives you need two because the small blades are the ones that go up the two colors." 16. Start in the center, fold a piece of paper "First templates, a small blade a larger one 2 the large ones are the ones that go on top to combine"*

Once the main face of the barrel is formed, a lining made of tissue paper, but in a single color (usually white), is placed on the back, and the cane structure is placed on it, the exact measurements of which are those required by the piece of paper.

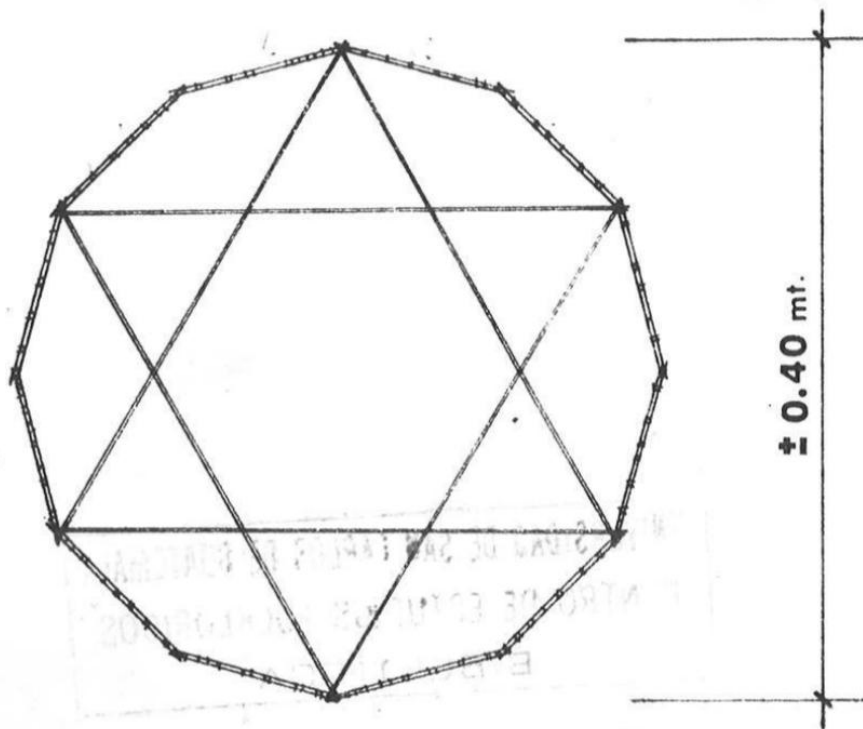
Next, the bridles and tail are attached. The bridles are made of pita and form a pyramid from the center, the edge of which measures exactly the same as the largest radius of the kite. The tail is attached with another pita bridle to the rear of the kite. As already mentioned, it is made of light cloth and can measure between four and six meters in length. At this point, everything is ready for its raising. The flags that are placed on the head of the kite are made separately; however, these are carried and placed until just before the raising.

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16 Informant *Hector Raul Tejeda Jiménez*. Santiago Sacatepéquez, 1980.

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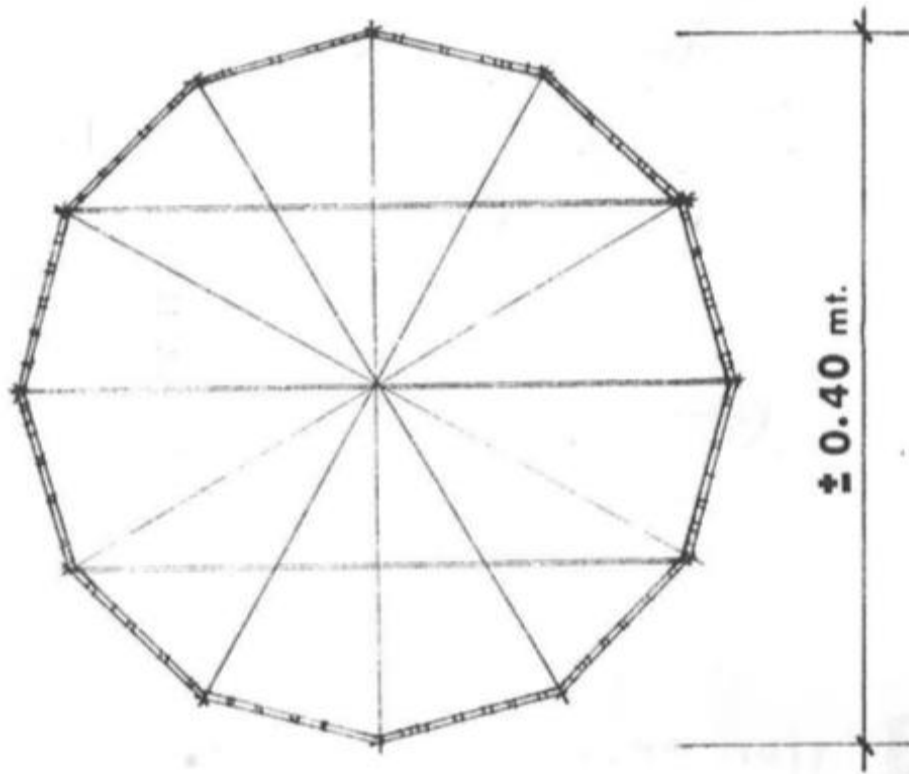
# **TYPES OF KITES**



# 1

**TYPES ONE**

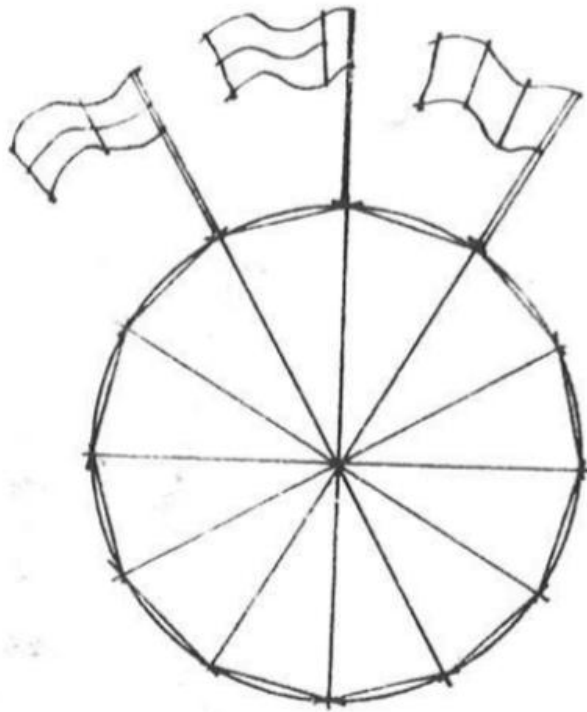
STAR INSCRIBED IN A CIRCLE ("FLATTENED")  
6 MAIN RODS, TWO OR MORE COLORS.



## 2 TYPES TWO

"FLATTENED" CIRCLE

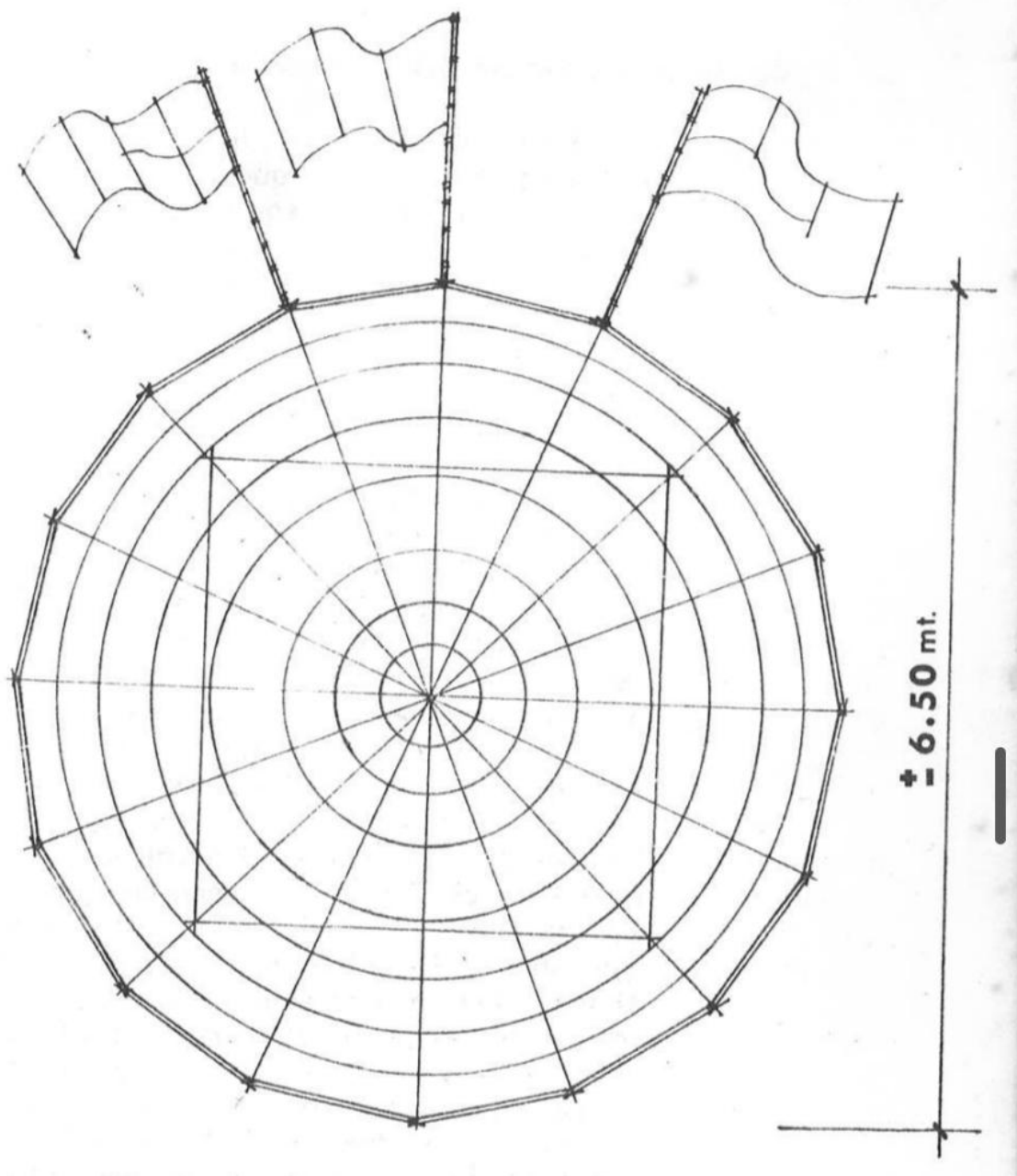
8, 10 OR 12 MAIN RODS. TWO OR THREE COLORS IN SEM-HORIZONTAL STRIPES.



### 3 TYPES THREE

"FLATTEN" CIRCLE, PREDESTER OF THE GIANT KEG, 6 OR 8 MAIN RODS, AND 9 TRIANGULAR SEGMENTS IN 2 OR 3 COLORS, 2, 3 BANDI ERILLAS.





# 4 TYPES FOUR

TYPE KNOWN AS GIANT KITE, 10 TO 16 MAIN RODS, AND REINFORCEMENT OF 4 EXTRA SQUARE RODS, 4 AND MORE COLORS, AND 3 TO 5 FLAGS.

### 3.2.1 Technical characteristics of the entire process

In general terms, the production technique is intuitive, meaning that the problem of composition and distribution of stresses in the elements has not been previously considered, as it responds to a traditional task, transmitted orally and from generation to generation.

Regarding the design composition, logical symmetry proved to be the most reasonable solution—stability depends on it, as all natural forms confirm—because it provided a uniform distribution of mass. As a general rule, the composition is developed through concentric rings of progressive size formed by juxtaposed elements.

The kites have a "radial" structure of reed rods, which must be numerous. That is, leaving little space between them to prevent the paper from being torn by the air: consider that the average wind speed is 25 km/hour, acting on an area of 28.27 m<sup>2</sup> (assuming a kite of 6.00 m in diameter); this reed structure, as a general rule, is reinforced in the back with a square also made of reeds and can be increased to two or three more squares if the diameter is so large that it requires it. These auxiliary frames reinforce the radiated structure avoiding excessive deformations produced by the tensile stress to which all the rods are subjected.

Equally effective is the ring of pita that connects all the poles radiating from the center, located on the periphery; this element acts as a tie, preventing the pieces it connects from shifting.

Equally effective is the ring of pita that connects all the poles radiating from the center, located on the periphery; this element acts as a tie, preventing the pieces it connects from shifting.

Equivalent of the wind acting tangentially in the area, and can be sustained in the upward currents of the same. The other function, no less important, that is, of the structure -, the tension force that is produced in the main rope; said tension force seemed considerable to us and we decided to try to calculate it, so after the analysis of forces and components it turned out to be equivalent to 55 Kp., and since the purpose of this work is another, this deduction has not been included here.

If we now consider the function of the kite's tail, we see that it is initially attached to the structure by another bridle (but this one is only made of two strings), and it also distributes the force resulting from the tail's "drag" to two points on the structure, which in turn maintains the kite's stability and direction within the air current; this stability includes the weight compensation produced by the greater accumulation of mass at the head of the kite - remember that this is where the flags are placed - so its length also depends on this. The length of the same can vary

from four to six meters, and this estimate is made empirically, generally by those with the most experience in this field.

Finally, it should be noted that kite sizes can vary from three to seven meters in diameter. This ultimately depends on the financial resources and time available to the makers. In previous years (1978 and 1979), competitions were held to award prizes for the largest kite or the one that flew the highest. However, with the introduction of television, other prizes were awarded, and other aspects were also taken into account when awarding them, such as quality.

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17 55 kph = 55 kiloponds, a measure equivalent to 55 kilograms of force. Assuming a constant speed of 25 km/h, an area of 28.27 m<sup>2</sup>, and a chord inclination of 45° with respect to the ground.

The elaboration, motifs used in the design, etc. Wind speed is very important. It has recently happened that due to speeds below 25 km/h, it has not been possible to fly them on the main day, but only on November 2nd; the weight and the expansion area of these devices contribute to this.

### 3.2.2 The artist as a possessor of skill and resources of expression

The richness of the motifs and the splendor of the colors on these kites are no surprise. We are dealing with the heirs of one of the highest prehistoric cultures of the New World... "The Maya worked with very rudimentary instruments, yet over many generations they developed a vigorous and refined art of impressive realism and subtle abstraction."

In chapter two, we noted that it was the designs of indigenous textiles that initially provided the initial motifs for the kites of Santiago. Indeed, they are a large catalog of these. Carmen Neutze de Rugg, referring to indigenous textiles, notes in this regard:

*"The influence of nature and its feelings and emotions have given women, since ancient times, reasons for expression in their fabrics and clothing. That is why we frequently find in needlework a source of beauty, with rhythm and creative skill that cannot be overlooked when studying the art of a people. The imperative need to dress is in many cases the best expression of culture."*

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18 The validity of these resources has always been questioned unfavorably within the context of the preservation of popular cultural heritage. (NE).

19 Carmen Neutze de Rugg. Designs in the Indigenous Textiles of Guatemala. (Guatemala: Center for Folklore Studies of the University of San Carlos de Guatemala, 1974), p. 12.

*Achieved over time. Guatemala is one of the few places in the world where design and color have become the primary, or even the only, artistic object that seeks to create something beautiful, although the final result has been, as in ancient times, an extraordinary art. Weavers often have a great aesthetic sense in their lives that gives them the joy of paying tribute. "20*

So, if we add to this existing creativity a natural manual ability - here in Guatemala examples abound everywhere. Just walk around the local museum and observe the beautiful pieces of all kinds displayed there - we find that the resources of expression are contained in the artist's own medium, which considerably stimulates the creation of objects.

### **3.2.3 Costs degree of difficulty and**

The working group proportionally contributes the necessary funds to cover the costs of making the kite, which is mostly covered by the paper. Thus, it is known that a six-meter diameter kite uses 320 sheets of tissue paper (approximately Q16.00, quetzals), for both the main face and the back lining and fringes, as well as for the flags. According to the same calculation, a four-meter diameter kite uses 215 sheets of paper (approximately Q11.00 quetzals) for all its elements.

Now, let's look at how the 320 sheets used in a six-meter kite are distributed: 80 sheets are used on the main face and must logically be of various colors, 80 sheets for the flags.

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20 *ibid.*, . 60.

More are used in the back lining and they are of a single color, another 160 sheets are finally used in the fringes of the contour and in the flags that are placed on the head of the kite.

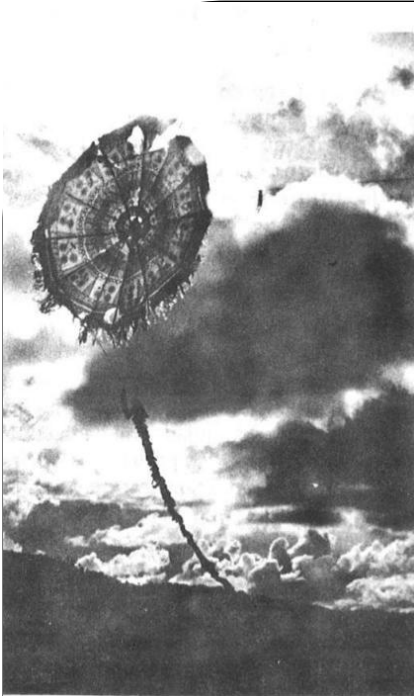
As for the cane poles used in the basic structure, they usually do not represent any expense, since, as already mentioned, they are easily collected in nearby fields.

The braided rope needed to raise it can be quite long and have a uniform thickness. Due to the tensile stress required, this length can reach up to 400 yards, that is, about 335 meters, which can cost Q 24.00, which added to the Q 16.00

gives a total of Q 40.00, to which only the cost of the glues would have to be added, which could easily reach a cost of Q 50.00.

The degree of difficulty depends, in particular, on the unique characteristics the group wishes to give to the kite. These are contained in the figures used in the design. Thus, geometric figures do not present much difficulty, while human figures, flowers, and phytomorphic designs in general present greater difficulty, as it is known that they must maintain perfect symmetry with the main canvas.

On the other hand, the basic structure of the cane poles has been simplified. It is made up of concentric poles of equal size, joined at the periphery by a piece of string that forms a "flattened" circle within which is inscribed a square of cane, which prevents excessive deformation caused by wind.



**Giant kites: myth and reality in a little-studied tradition.**

Photo By: Mauro Calanchina.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Regarding the origin of the kites, the following can be stated:

- 4.1 Common kites appeared in Santiago at the beginning of the century, although we were unable to determine the exact date. Giant kites appeared around 1940, and the process during which they progressively became larger dates back to between 1940 and 1945.
- 4.2 As for the reasons why such a transformation is offered, we say:
  - 4.2.1 The transformation was made possible through a process<sup>21</sup> that cannot yet be said to be complete; it is still ongoing. The beginning of the changes in the Santiago kites was probably due to the influence of someone linked to Jorge Ubico's government. Nor can it be completely ruled out that it was Ubico himself. The data obtained suggests that large kites were prepared and seen for the first time for one of the dictator's birthdays, particularly that of 1942.
- 4.3 Regarding the meaning of these kites, we arrived at the following conclusions:
  - 4.3.1 The explanation that attributes the idea of magic to the phenomenon must be discarded.<sup>22</sup> it must be considered as a means of expression, such is its character as a traditional type of artistic object.  
The design of the motifs used in the kites do not respond in any way to a symbolism that would allow us to suppose that it is a form or means of communication between the living and the dead.<sup>23</sup>

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22 Cfr. 14 and 15 above. We do not believe this categorical statement. (NE).

21 Every folkloric phenomenon, as a cultural element, is the product of a particular historical-social process. In the context of culture, nothing is excluded from this process. (NE).

23 Ibid. (NE).

It should be noted that these designs were originally inspired by indigenous textiles, whose meanings are well-known and ultimately reflect the environment; to these are added those of a civic-nationalist nature, as already mentioned.



**Actors and spectators, stage and equipment for the air show.**  
Photo By: Mauro Calanchina

## **RECOMENDATIONS**



It has already been noted that the transformation of Santiago's kites, in our opinion, continues, and this is mainly due to external causes: a growing number of people are becoming more interested in giant kites, and some have tried to obtain one for themselves. They order them to their liking, thus modifying their own characteristics. It is foreseeable that this will change the original nature of the design and, even more so, will commercialize what until now has been an object for personal use.

5.1 Therefore, the preservation of these original values is necessary. We believe this can be achieved, first and foremost, by compiling an inventory of the designs on the kites, accompanied by preserving some samples of them, both in a local museum in Santiago Sacatepéquez and in the National Museum of Popular Arts and Industries in Guatemala City.

5.2 There are, however, other unfortunate circumstances that are equally worrying in this regard: year after year, thousands of visitors arrive in Santiago Sacatepéquez. One might say they practically invade the small local cemetery. It is painful to observe the most unbridled disrespect displayed by these people in what should have been a place of worship. Thus, from the disturbed graves left by the San Gilberto earthquake of February 1976, the bones of those who have already died are extracted; thousands trample the graves in the ground, and others pierce them with tripods for their sophisticated photographic equipment. Furthermore, consumerism leaves a trail of trash: beer cans, papers, food waste, etc. All of the above makes it necessary to organize the avalanche of people eager to contemplate the aerial spectacle. To avoid this, we suggest limiting the visitor area so as not to detract from the joy and excitement traditional to the event. We believe this is feasible and that there are many institutional mechanisms to achieve this.

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