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SNAKE DANCES AMONG THE QUICHÉ INDIANS IN GUATEMALA*

Fraaz Termer

The indigenous population of Guatemala still preserves, even in our times, many of its ancient customs—including the traditional dances performed during the annual festival days. Without exaggeration, it can be said that in every town or village with an indigenous population, the

*The anthropologist Joaquín Noval placed this work in my hands due to the authorship of Franz Termer.

In search of any editorial precedent, I found the reference by Ruth Bunzel (**Chichicastenango, a Guatemalan Village**. Publications of the American Ethnological Society. Marian W. Smith, editor. J. J. Augustin, publisher, Locust Valley, New York, 1952), which transcribes the following: "Termer, Franz. '*Los bailes de culebra entre los indios quichés en Guatemala*'. Proceedings of the International Congress of Americanists, New York, 1928, New York, 1930."

It is possible—so Professor Noval believes—that this text is a translation from German, done by *Licenciado* Antonio Goubaud Carrera. Or, less likely, that this typewritten original is simply a copy of the cited publication, perhaps made because Goubaud did not possess his own copy of it. What is certain, however, is that this version passed through Goubaud's hands. This is evidenced by a marginal note on the first page, in his own handwriting, which literally reads: Ethnology. Professor Noval—Goubaud's favorite student and close friend—has no doubt about this.

Although the title of the work seems incorrect (it would be more accurate to say *Los bailes de la culebra entre los Indios quichés de Guatemala*), I have chosen not to alter it. Therefore, the text entrusted to me by Professor Noval is published with complete fidelity, and it is important to note that, since the only formal edition of this article is out of print and unavailable, its reproduction is undeniably timely. ROBERTO DÍAZ CASTILLO.

(NOTE: Text taken from *Estudios* magazine, Guatemala: *Círculo "José Joaquín Pardo"*, Department of History, Faculty of Humanities, University of San Carlos, No. 2, 1968).

feast days of saints are celebrated with dances. The centuries that have passed since the introduction of Christianity among the Indians have not altered their style of dance from that of their pagan ancestors. They have preserved the same musical rhythms, the same gestures, and movements of the body and limbs, changing only the meaning.

In pre-conquest times, these dances had a pantomimic and dramatic character. Today, they have become so blended that the current dances are a combination of recitations and pantomime within the same performances. This transformation resulted from the conversion of the natives to the Christian faith. The friars and priests introduced elements from Castilian history and the conquest—texts that are more or less simple, and which glorify the Church—in place of ancient dramas based on mythological subjects, the worship of pagan deities, and absurd and strange rites from the old cults. As a result, one can now see purely Christian dances at these festivals. However, taking into account the simple imagination of the indigenous, it is clear that the clergy allowed the existence of another type of dance, with themes taken from nature, which better reflect past customs, even though the texts have also been Christianized.

Finally, there is yet another category of dance with a humorous or comic character; and if we call the first and second types "Dramatic Dances," we must call the third type "Comedy or Farce."

When compiling a list of the dances still performed in Guatemala—or at least celebrated until recently—we find the following:

I. Dramatic Dances related to historical and ecclesiastical subjects:

1. *Baile del Tun or Xahoh Tun*, also known as *Rabinal Achí*, as documented by Brasseur de Bourbourg. Despite three years of traveling through Guatemala, I have not encountered this dance myself; however, S. K. Lothrop references a *Baile de Tun* in his study *A Note on Indian Ceremonies in Guatemala*, noting its existence in the towns of San Juan Ixcay, Nebaj, Santo Tomás Chichicastenango, Chajul, and Cotzal.

1 Indian Notes, Museum of the American Indian Heye Foundation, vol. 4, No. 1, pp. 68-81, 1927.

2. Dance of the Conquest
3. Dance of Cortés
4. Dance of the Moors
5. Dance of the Devils
6. Dance of the Precious Stones

Among these, the Dance of the Conquest, the Dance of Cortés, and the Dance of the Moors are very frequently performed and highly valued among the indigenous people.

II. Dramatic Dances Related to Natural Themes:

1. Dance of the Deer
2. Dance of the Animals and the Hunter
3. Dance of the Tapir
4. Dance of the Monkey, already mentioned in the *Popol Vuh* as Hunahpú C'oy
5. Dance of the Flyer

III. Comic or Farcical Dances:

1. Dance of the Bull or Little Bull
2. Dance of the Chiquimultecos
3. Dance of the Mutes
4. Dance of the Snake
5. Dance of the *Gracejos* (Jokers).

Among the last ones, the Dance of the Snake and the Dance of the Jokers are often merged into a single performance, as will be shown later. Although this list is not complete, it confirms that there is still a fairly large number of traditional dances in Guatemala.

These dances are more or less well documented by Brasseur de Bourbourg, Otto Stoll, and Carlos Sapper. In my travels throughout the Republic of Guatemala, I had several opportunities to attend festivals in various towns, almost always encountering the Dance of the Conquest, the Dance of the Bull, and the Dance of the Deer, and less frequently the Dance of Cortés, the Dance of the Devils, and the Dance of the Monkey. I observed in some cases a noticeable decline, either because the performers recited only part of the text, or because the costumes and decorations were lacking. The latter is due to the rather high prices charged by costume renters, which the poorer *cofradías* (religious brotherhoods) cannot afford. Nevertheless, the people's interest in these dances remains strong, and they attend them with a certain sense of religious devotion.

When I passed through the department of El Quiché, in western Guatemala, where a dense Indigenous population still resides, I was surprised to discover a dance about which I had never found any mention in the major works on Guatemala. It is called the "Dance of the Snake" or the "Dance of the Jokers", or also in the Quiché language "*Patzáj*", which means "The Bending of the Corn." The fact that it even has a special name in the native language drew my attention so strongly that I resolved to witness it personally. I later had three opportunities to do so: in the city of Santa Cruz del Quiché, in the village of San Bartolo Aguas Calientes, and in Pologuá, a rural site—an upland plain located at 2,700 meters above sea level in the western part of Momostenango.

Later, I learned that it is also known in other rural areas and sites of Momostenango, in the town of Cubulco, the city of Rabinal, and in the hamlets of Chichicastenango, Totonicapán, San Cristóbal Totonicapán, San Francisco El Alto, San José Chiquilajá, Orintepeque, and La Esperanza—all located around Quetzaltenango. This shows that the dance is still commonly practiced in the Quiché Indian region.

In other parts of the Republic, such as in the Cakchiquel region, the Dance of the Jokers does exist, but it seems to be given less importance or is already in a state of decline. It has also fallen out of favor in the eastern part of El Quiché, where it has become heavily mixed with modern elements that are unrelated to the original meaning of the dance, making it very different from the version found in the regions mentioned above. For instance, in Rabinal, performers now use an artificial snake made of paper, and I was told the same occurs in the Cakchiquel territory of Chimaltenango. Similarly, in Santa Cruz del Quiché, the tradition was in considerable decline—something not surprising given that it is a large city with a predominantly *ladino* (non-Indigenous) population, where the Indigenous people are somewhat hesitant to publicly display their customs.

Now, the performance of this *Patzáj* dance is described according to my own observations. The number of dancers—all of them men—reached twenty in Santa Cruz del Quiché, twelve and thirteen in San Bartolo and Pologuá, respectively, though in other places up to thirty people participate. All were dressed as men, except for one who was dressed as a woman—that is, wearing a *huipil* (blouse), *enagua* (skirt), and sash, but also a man's felt hat and a silk veil over the face. Some of the men wore everyday clothing—that is, pants, shirts, jackets, and straw or felt hats. Others wore the traditional attire of Santo Tomás

Chichicastenango and El Quiché neighboring towns to Santa Cruz. Only one wore the outfit of a person from Sololá. All of them wore comical, dark-colored masks. Two of the masks portrayed little old men wearing modern red glasses, and another depicted a European man with a sheepskin on his head. In their left hands, each dancer carried a *chinchín* (a kind of rattle), and in the right, a chicote or whip like those used by the highland shepherds. Only the "woman" carried a silk handkerchief in her right hand. To the side of the dancers was a marimba of the *tecomate* type (gourd resonators), and near it, a rather mysterious earthenware jar covered with a cloth. The dancers formed two lines and danced toward and away from each other in steps matched to the rhythm of the music, all the while shouting loudly. Then the "European" danced with the "woman," who was also being courted by the little old men—without rejection. These tried to steal her away from the European, who intervened and reclaimed her.

Apart from these comedic scenes of the attempted abduction of the woman, the other participants fought with the one from Sololá, who was beaten and mistreated by the *Maxeños* (natives of Santo Tomás Chichicastenango). This likely symbolized ancient rivalries between the Quiché and Cakchiquel tribes. The dance continued like this for a long time until the dancers again arranged themselves in two lines, as at the beginning. After a short pause, one of them approached the previously mentioned jar, removed the covering cloth, and emptied its contents. Out came a live snake, about half a *vara* long (roughly 40 cm). The boy immediately picked it up from the ground, grabbing it by the neck with his right hand. He spun around a few times while his companions danced and shouted from their places, and then finally slipped the snake inside his shirt, letting it slither across his skin until it fell to the ground. Then others picked up the snake, repeating the same scene, with which the dance came to an end. The dialogue performed in Spanish during the dance was improvised with jokes about the woman, the European, and the Sololá guy.

In San Bartolo Aguas Calientes and Pologuá, the dance had a more original character. The dancers wore ordinary clothes, but they were torn—like those of very poor people. Their masks were black and depicted comic faces, and instead of hats, they wore sheepskins on their heads. In their hands, they carried *chinchines* (rattles) and *chicotes* (whips). Among them was an old man in a particularly grotesque outfit, with a squirrel skin draped over his back. One had a mask representing a European, and another dressed as a woman but wore a man's hat and a veil over the face, holding a *chinchín* in one hand, a small whip in the other,

and a silk cloth. Next to the tecomate-style marimba was the jar containing the snakes.

The dance began with loud shouting and whistling from the performers. The two lines merged into one, dancing or running across the square, while the boys cracked their whips in the air.

The same scenes followed as before: the woman being stolen from the European and various mocking actions, accompanied by indecent jokes and aggressive improvisations, all spoken in the Quiché language, which, as previously mentioned, is the only language spoken during the dance. Besides these scenes—which greatly entertained the crowd—there were others of a lewd nature. Each dancer took turns stealing the woman and “possessing” her, in scenes marked by extremely obscene gestures and pantomimes by the rest of the participants. In short, the entire dance devolved into a pantomime sexual orgy. Afterward, the two lines regrouped and faced off again, except for the European and the woman, who stood to the side. Then came a scene of actual flagellation, where the two lines took turns whipping each other. The blows were harsh and landed anywhere on the body—including on the masks and even bare heads. Then, all the dancers collapsed to the ground as if dead, until one of them suddenly stood up and pulled three snakes out of the jar. The other dancers picked up the snakes and slipped them under their shirts, allowing them to slither across their bodies and fall to the ground. The woman also placed a snake inside her *huipil*, while the others—especially the old man—made obscene gestures in front of her. Afterward, the snakes were put back into the jar, concluding the dance with this scene.

Naturally, the more times the dance is repeated, the more intense and wild it becomes, depending on the level of drunkenness of the young men. In other places where this dance is performed, the scenes are mostly similar. In some rural hamlets near Momostenango, participants even hang different kinds of fruit on their bodies—especially a kind called *chiche*—and instead of whips, they beat each other with *chichicastes* (a stinging plant).

Even more original is the dance as performed in the hamlets of Totonicapán, where it takes place only in the mountains or in scattered ranches in the highlands. It is said that this dance used to exist in the city of Totonicapán itself, but it was later prohibited. In these rural areas, the young male dancers gather some time before the celebration with a shaman or diviner (*zahorín*) and perform a ritual with him to protect themselves from illness and to avoid fainting during the dance. Three days before the festival, the bravest men, along with the *zahorín*, go up into the

mountains, where the shaman performs another ritual, through which he tells the men where they can find snakes. He says things like: “Go in this direction; look under this stone or at the base of that tree,” etc. Twenty-four hours later, the young men go to look for the reptiles, which are indeed found at the locations indicated. Any kind of snake may be caught—whether it’s a *mazacuate* (*tolopom*), a coral snake, or a cantil. If the snakes are venomous, their mouths are sewn shut with thread. The animals are then placed in a gourd bowl (*jícara*) covered with a cloth, and brought to the house of the designated lead dancer, who later plays the role of the woman.

When the day of the festival arrives, all the dancers gather at the chief’s house and from there go together to the place in the mountains where the dance is to be held. The dancer playing the woman carries the jar of reptiles on their arm. The dance begins without the woman, who is brought in later into the midst of the others. She must dance with each of the young men, always carrying the jar. Then the snakes are taken out, and each dancer performs the snake dance as already described—placing the snake under his shirt. During this part, they all shout loudly and shake their rattles to make the snake “come out of the pants.” At the same time, they call to the snake, saying: “¡Ay qué bonita la fortuna!” These are the only words in Spanish spoken during the whole performance; the rest is spoken in Quiché. Finally, all the dancers form a circle and end the dance by whipping each other with their *chicotes*. After the celebration, they take the gourd bowl or jar containing the snakes back to the forest and release them.

Thanks to the kindness of a friend of mine from Momostenango, Mr. Abel de León, I received some special information about the Gracejos dances in the surroundings of Momostenango, which I include here. This knowledgeable observer of indigenous customs wrote to me:

“The Snake Dance, or Gracejos Dance, as observed, is nothing more than entertainment for the Guatemalan indigenous people. It lacks any historical background, and its proceedings are without rules—more immoral than anything else. Over the course of a single day, it presents scenes that mock the domestic sphere.

It involves several individuals dressed as men, one dressed as a woman, and one as a bull—that is, wearing a mask with horns and a body covering the back with a tail. All the men wear masks, each one uglier and more poorly made than the last, and with plumes of long white bristles. The woman does not wear a

mask, but instead covers her face with a red silk scarf. All carry small rattles (*chinchines*), perforated all around their circumference, which produce a distinctive sound when shaken. Only the bull does not carry rattles. The woman wears a red huipil, a skirt striped in dark blue and white, and a hat that helps keep the scarf in place on her face. She also carries a gourd bowl (*jícara*) about 10–12 cm long and 8 cm in diameter at its widest, with narrower ends.

From the gestures and caresses directed toward the woman, it is clear that this is a sexual dance. But there comes a moment when the woman removes the snake from the gourd and places it on the ground. All the Gracejos surround it and shake their rattles. The snake lifts its head and part of its body, flicks its tongue, and moves from one side to another. Then, one of the dancers picks it up and puts it between his shirt and body. Soon, the snake appears through a sleeve or pant leg. If held by the neck, it coils around the dancer's arm. They feed it by placing a piece of beef fat in the gourd.

There is a moment when each *Gracejo* dances with the woman, who stands ready with a whip. Any of the others who dares to pass through the middle receives a lash from the dancer. Sometimes two or three conspire—two hold the dancer tightly while one embraces the woman and simulates sexual intercourse, standing up. When two compete for the woman, they lash each other repeatedly and forcefully, leading to shouting and laughter among the dancers. Everyone says whatever comes to mind, and at the end of each sentence they shout and laugh.

When it comes time for the bullfight, the individual dressed as the bull appears. He charges at anyone who stands in his way, lifts the body covering his back, and throws it forward over his head. Those being chased by him strike the hide with their whips, and the blows can be heard from a distance.

The marimba consists of 34 wooden bars, and its sound is amplified by gourds placed underneath each bar, varying in length and thickness in proportion to the bars. The longest gourd is 30 cm, the shortest 6 cm. Each gourd is pierced at the bottom on one side, and a fine membrane covers the hole, which vibrates with the sounds of the bars. The pieces played by the marimba player (there is only one) are melancholic and exceptionally monotonous.

Whenever the dance processes through the streets, the bull charges at the Gracejos, lifting his hide as he goes. They respond by whipping the hide, often falling and colliding, which provokes laughter and cheers from the dancers.

In all other parts of the dance, the bull does not appear."

If we now examine the snake dance in terms of its content and purpose, we see that at its core it is an erotic dance interwoven with comic and mocking scenes. Because of this, and especially due to the presence of the snake, it clearly reveals its pagan nature and origin. It is certain that the dance is based on ancient fertility rites and cults. Even its indigenous name, "*El Doblar del Maíz*" (The Bending of the Corn), confirms its connection to agrarian worship. Before our eyes, the scenes described by early chroniclers come to life—those moments when the Mexican and Mayan peoples celebrated fertility festivals with rituals that were highly obscene and erotic, performed before their idols as a way of asking for prosperity and the flourishing of their fields, milpas, and the human race as a whole. Even in those times, the snake, as the personification of earth and moisture, symbolized fertility in general, and often appeared alongside gods of abundance. It is no mere coincidence that we find the snake today in an indigenous dance associated with corn cultivation, as its indigenous name clearly suggests.

If we look for references to these dances in the past, we find them among the ancient Mexicans, who celebrated such festivals during the *Atamalqualiztli*, which occurred only every eighth year and was likewise connected to the cultivation of maize. Given the profound interest that this connection entails, what follows is a Spanish transcription of the relevant passage from the original Nahuatl text of Sahagún, according to the German edition by Eduard Seler.

The *Atamalqualiztli* Festival

Every eight years, the *Atamalqualiztli* festival was held, meaning "Eating of little water tamales." Sometimes it took place during the *Quecholli* month, other times during *Tepēlhuītl*, and participants would fast for seven days. They ate only water *tamales*—corn mixed with water—without salt, chili, lye, or slaked lime. They would eat only in the morning, and anyone who failed to fast—if caught—was punished.

When the festival day arrived, it was called: "Fortune is gained" and "Shells become sea snails." Since all the gods danced during this celebration, it was also known as the "Dance of the Gods."

All kinds of animals entered the scene: hummingbirds, butterflies, bees, flies, birds, beetles. Men danced while disguised as these animals. Others came in masks representing a string of tamales made from fruits, especially *Cochiztapotl* (*Casimiroa edulis*), or a string of turkey meat, all paraded before a granary filled with fruit *tamales*.

Many more appeared in masks portraying poor people, or as vegetable and firewood sellers. There was even one masked as a leper, and others as owls, screech owls, and other birds. *Tlaloc*, the god of rain, sat in front of a well full of snakes and frogs.

The *Mazatec*, as they were called, would eat the living snakes, one per person, as well as frogs. They caught them with their mouths, not with their hands. They bit into them, capturing them from the water in front of *Tlaloc*, and danced with the snakes they had eaten. Whoever finished eating their snake first, with it still hanging from their mouth, would cry out "*papa*" and circle around the temple.

Those who had swallowed snakes received gifts, and the dancing went on for two days, with more processions on the second day after sunset. This was done four times, and then they ate the fruit *tamales* from the granary. Everyone took some home after the celebrations.

The elders wept, fearing they might not live to see the next cycle of the celebration. They would ask, "*In front of whom will this festival take place next time?*"

The festival was held for the following reason: it was said that the maize needed to rest after eight years. They believed they had tormented it, eating it excessively, seasoning it with chili, salt, lye, and lime, essentially killing it. This festival was meant to revive the maize. It was said that the maize was rejuvenated through the rituals of the celebration.

The day after the festival was called "The sinking of bread into sauce", marking the end of the fast and in honor of the maize.

There are remarkable and important comparisons to be made between this and the Quiché snake dance:

Both are dances related to maize cultivation, held as celebrations to ensure fertility and abundance. The Mexicans called their feast "Fortune is gained", and today, the Quiché dancers still cry out, "*Ay qué bonita la fortuna!*"

In both traditions, dancers dress like poor people and hang fruit from their bodies—like the Mexicans wore strings of fruit. The Quiché believe they will get sick if they don't perform the ritual beforehand, just as the Mexicans feared skin diseases if they skipped the celebration. The Mexicans used animal masks, and so do the Quiché—today, we still see a dancer with a squirrel or wildcat mask.

In ancient Mexico, dancers ate reptiles to absorb their good omens, while modern Quiché dancers symbolically place the snake inside their shirt, embodying the same meaning.

These parallels are strong enough to confirm the origin of the snake dance in Guatemala: it descends from Mexican traditions and was brought to Los Altos by Nahua peoples, whose migrations into northern Central America are documented both in chronicles and archaeology of the Quiché and Kaqchikel regions. These migrations profoundly influenced the relatively primitive cultures of the highland Maya, bringing not just material culture, but also religious practices and cults, as evidenced in the *Popol Vuh* and the *Annals of the Kaqchikels*. For all these reasons, the snake dance remains one of the most fascinating and important cultural survivals still practiced in Guatemala.

Wurzburg Universität

NOTE: After this work by Dr. Franz Termer had gone to print, we were surprised by the news of his passing in Hamburg, where he was Director of the Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, which houses a rich collection of artifacts of Guatemalan origin.

Dr. Termer was preparing an edition of his book on the exploration, excavations, and research he conducted at Palo Gordo, an archaeological region in southern Guatemala.

May the publication of this work serve as a tribute from ESTUDIOS magazine and the José Joaquín Pardo Circle to the distinguished German ethnologist and archaeologist. THE EDITORS