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8

Guatemala, Central America

1977



REPORT  
OF  
RESEARCH



# RESEARCH REPORT OF THE STUDENTS PARTICIPATING IN THE WORKSHOP ON FOLKLORE APPLIED TO EDUCATION TAUGHT BY THE CENTER FOR FOLKLORIC STUDIES

*We publish below 6 reports presented in the course **Techniques and Methods of Folkloric Research**, taught on the occasion of the course on **Folklore Applied to Education** by the Center for Folkloric Studies from May 2 to June 11, 1977.*

*Numerous works of collection of folkloric phenomena in the field of varied quality were presented by the students of this course. Due to the impossibility of publishing them in their entirety, for reasons of space, we have selected the most representative. However, all of them are kept in our archives where they can be consulted.*

*Besides the intrinsic importance of these reports, they also have the merit of having been carried out with many limitations. The students had barely fifteen days to prepare them, and only very few among their authors had had experience in research of this nature. Hence, this was their first approach to this field and therefore; to evaluate the results of the reports, the aforementioned limitations must be taken into account.*

*It is necessary to emphasize that these investigations did not intend to delve into the analysis of the folkloric event, but rather to get the student to train in the use of the field research cards used in the Center for Folkloric Studies. Due to this circumstance, nothing more than the detailed description of the folkloric event should be sought in the reports, an objective that was largely achieved and that allowed the student to come into contact with the reality they are studying. Let this be a testament to our recognition of the participants in the course on **Folklore applied to education**, because thanks to them and the effort they made to*

*rigorously apply the scientific method, it is possible to have the works that we now include in **Traditions of Guatemala**.*

C.A.L.F.

## TRADITIONAL CHRISTMAS EVE MEALS IN GUATEMALA

### Introduction

The influence of pre-processed raw materials and easily available in the markets, plus the contribution of foreign techniques, have caused traditional folkloric foods to disappear or at least change, to the detriment of our cultural identity.

There are a series of dishes that are prepared for family or popular festivities and that not only in each town or region but in the neighborhoods of the same city have their own stamp. The food is made with exquisite taste by the residents of each place, who boast, today as yesterday, of having "secrets" to make it different from others. Furthermore: to distinguish it from what is customary in different areas or neighborhoods of the same city.

This work offers a sample of the typical foods of two areas of Guatemala City where, as everywhere, the traditional - folkloric - character of many customs has been lost.

### The Posadas

Christmas Eve celebrations are preceded by the so-called posadas, a very widespread custom that begins on December 16 and consists of taking the images of Joseph and Mary on a visit from house to house. In each home or "**posada**," after the prayer concludes, "**tamalitos de cambray, chuchitos, tamalitos de anís, tamalitos torteados, tamalitos paches**" are served, accompanied by drinks such as *batido*, *ponche*, chocolate, or coffee with cinnamon.

In some towns, it is customary to have a kind of competition among those who host the posadas, so that the altar and the food offered are the object of this competition.

The culmination of the Posadas occurs on December 24, generally at the house of the owner of the images or the steward of the brotherhood, with the succulent Christmas Eve scene. The strained tamales - red ones are savory and black ones are sweet - and the previously mentioned drinks constitute the traditional Christmas picture.

Dinner is served at midnight and the party continues, next to the "nativity scene," until dawn. For breakfast, tamales of one color or another are eaten again, and for lunch on the 25th, turkey or chicken broth with chili to taste is served.

### **Traditional Christmas Eve Foods and Drinks**

The data contained in this part of the work consists of information provided by people who were given open and direct interviews about the popular foods typical of the Christmas festivities.

#### **The tamales and ponche of Francisca Pérez**

This lady, 57 years old, originally from San Juan Tecuaco, department of Santa Rosa, and residing in Zone 3 of Guatemala City, learned to cook at the age of 12 and has a food stall in the market.

Mrs. Pérez says that she celebrates Christmas Eve with her children, daughters-in-law, sons-in-law, grandchildren, and other relatives in a simple environment, next to the modest nativity scene she makes for these holidays. She affirms that she is more concerned with the food than the nativity scene and that is why she prefers to spend more resources on making the red tamales for December 23 and 24.

Let's look at some aspects related to the preparation of the tamales below.

#### **Ingredients**

10 pounds of corn (cooked in a single boil to make the dough); 3 pounds of pork lard (mixed with the corn dough and a dose of salt and beaten together);

Recado, a kind of sauce that includes red tomato, pepitoria, sesame seeds, miltomate, guaques chili, allspice, Castilian pepper, cinnamon, pasa chili, achiote, and salt to taste. All these ingredients are toasted on a clay griddle over oak ember fire and then mixed with water);

3 pounds of pork (ribs in small pieces);

½ pound of "diced" pork belly;

Olives;

Capers;

Prunes;

Salt leaves and banana leaves.

### **How the tamales are cooked**

Once the dough, the *recado*, and the leaves are prepared, the meat mixture is added and then they are wrapped in double leaves tied with *cibaque* (for the head of the household or other people who are to be favored with the best tamales, some are prepared with better meats and condiments and are tied in such a way that they can be distinguished from the rest).

The cooking of the tamales is carried out in a clay pot with a "bed" of wet corn cobs placed at the bottom to prevent them from burning. The fire, from oak wood, should last approximately three hours; the pot should be covered and the water inside must be maintained to prevent the tamales from burning.

### **How they are served**

For Christmas - says Mrs. Pérez - a table is prepared "with its little tablecloth" and the open tamal is placed there on a regular plate. It is accompanied by toasted corn tortillas, but sweet bread, French bread, or any other is also usually customary.

### **The Ponche**

The most usual is hot ponche, whose preparation requires these ingredients:

Diced pineapple;  
 Diced sweet apple;  
 Diced papaya;  
 Dried plums;  
 Raisins.

All these elements are cooked in water, with sugar to taste, pieces of cinnamon, and a few cloves.

Before the ponche boils, a few drops of aguardiente or wine are added, to taste.

Mrs. Francisca Pérez finally comments that her tamales and her ponche are first-class, but she only makes them for Christmas Eve because both are very expensive. If she made them to sell - she continues - their cost would not be covered and she would not be able to make a profit. However, she says that she makes regular tamales to sell on Saturdays and that this is her main activity.

### **The Tamales of Felipa Alburez**

She is approximately 56 years old (she doesn't remember exactly) and is originally from San Martín Jilotepeque, department of Chimaltenango, and has resided in this capital for about 45 years. She now lives in Zone 18.

Mrs. Alburez works as a street vendor selling vegetables and says that she learned to cook in Antigua Guatemala when she was only 10 years old at the home of Dr. Catalán, where she worked. She likes to celebrate Christmas with her family - children, grandchildren, daughters-in-law - and she herself is then in charge of making the tamales, the ponche, and the chocolate. As in the case of Mrs. Pérez, she holds the family gathering next to the "nativity scene" at a simple table.

She prepares her tamales in this way:

#### **Ingredients**

Corn dough (prepared by cooking the grains in a clay pot;  
 then they are sent to be ground in a motor mill, as it is the fastest procedure - before it was done by hand - the dough is soaked in water and

then strained through a thick cloth to discard the corn husks; once the dough is thin, lard is added and it is put on the fire; the dough is stirred with a wooden spatula until it "reaches its point"; the consistency of the dough is tested by taking a little with the spatula and adding cold water to make sure that it "forms a ball" and does not disintegrate. Then it is left to cool); Salt to taste;

Recado (Prepared with the following condiments: red tomato, miltomate, bell pepper, guaque chili, pasa chili, pepitoria, sesame seeds, allspice, Castilian pepper, cinnamon, onion, achiote, salt, and pork lard);

Once the *recado* is ready, the meat, which can be pork, turkey, or chicken, is added until it boils. Then it is left to cool.

Banana leaves, which are washed and passed through something hot so that they are slightly cooked, are used to wrap the dough, the *recado*, and the meat.

Unlike Mrs. Pérez, Mrs. Alburez's tamales are not tied with *cibaque* but are only wrapped. Once wrapped, they are placed in a clay pot with a "bed" of banana leaves at the bottom; they are covered well with the same kind of leaves; water is added and, finally, they are cooked for 3 or four hours over an oak wood or corn cob fire.

### **How they are served**

Mrs. Alburez is accustomed to serving her Christmas Eve tamales to her family, bringing them to the table open on a pewter or China plate. She also serves sweet bread and French bread so that everyone can accompany the tamal according to their preference, and she also puts out a large pot of ponche. Liquor is added to the ponche for adults in the proportion that each person likes. Children drink it plain.

For the Alburez family, Christmas Eve ends with breakfast on December 25, when all their members eat tamal again with bread, ponche, or coffee.

The informant recounts how in times past, tamales were served not only at Christmas but also on the occasion of other festivities: birthdays, births, baptisms, communions, marriages. The current economic situation

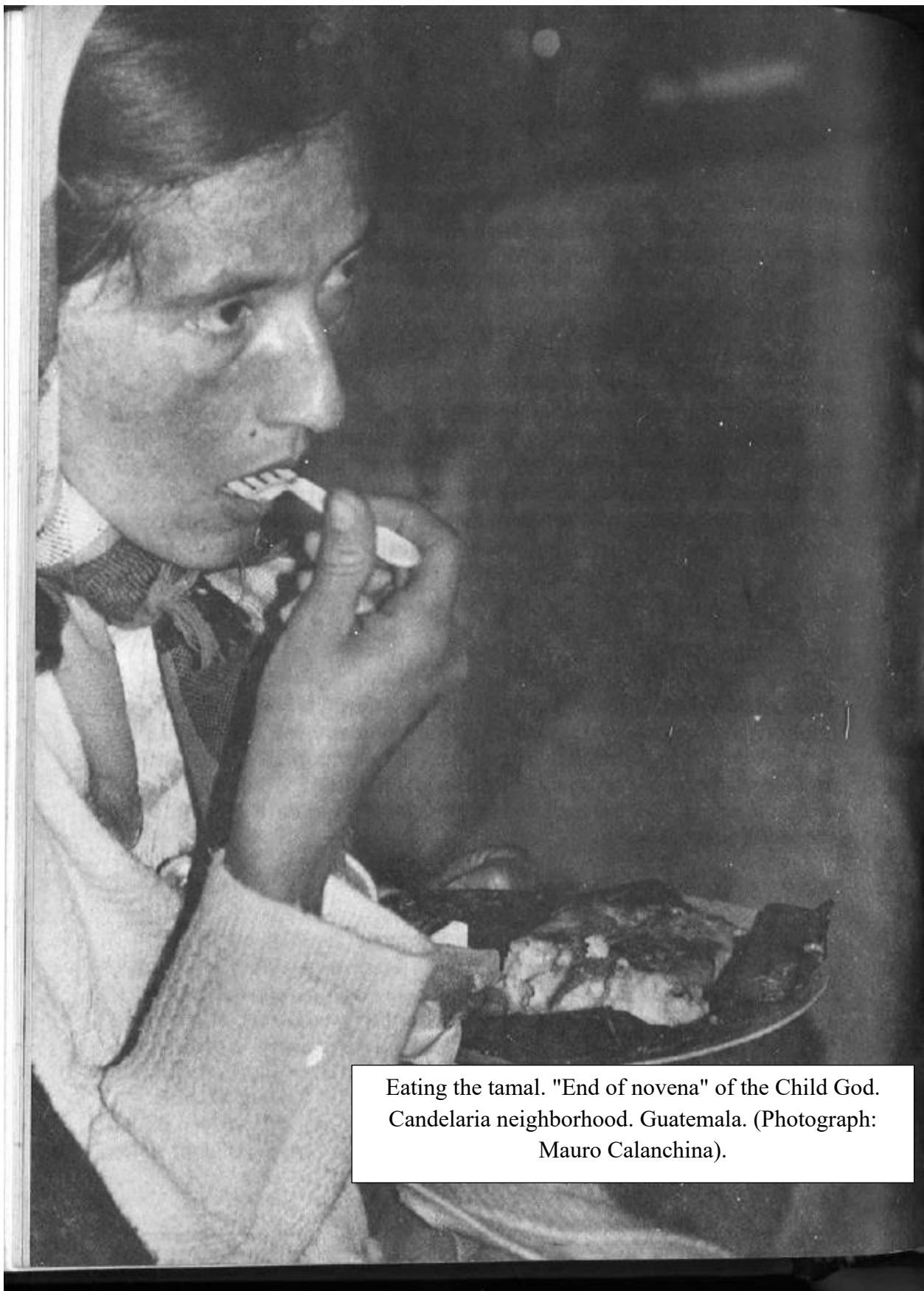
no longer allows for this custom to be maintained. Now - says Mrs. Alburez - people buy their tamales in stores, but these leave much to be desired: they lack capers, olives, prunes, and other ingredients that give them their traditional flavor.

### **Variety of Tamales**

In addition to the tamales made by Mrs. Pérez and Alburez, which are typical of festivities and social and religious ceremonies, there are others made for daily consumption. Among the most well-known are the **shepes**, made with corn dough and green beans; the **porches**, made only of corn dough to be eaten hot or cold as an accompaniment to broths and some meals; the **chuchitos**, filled with meat and colored with achiote; and the varieties of sweet tamales such as those made with anise and **cambray**.

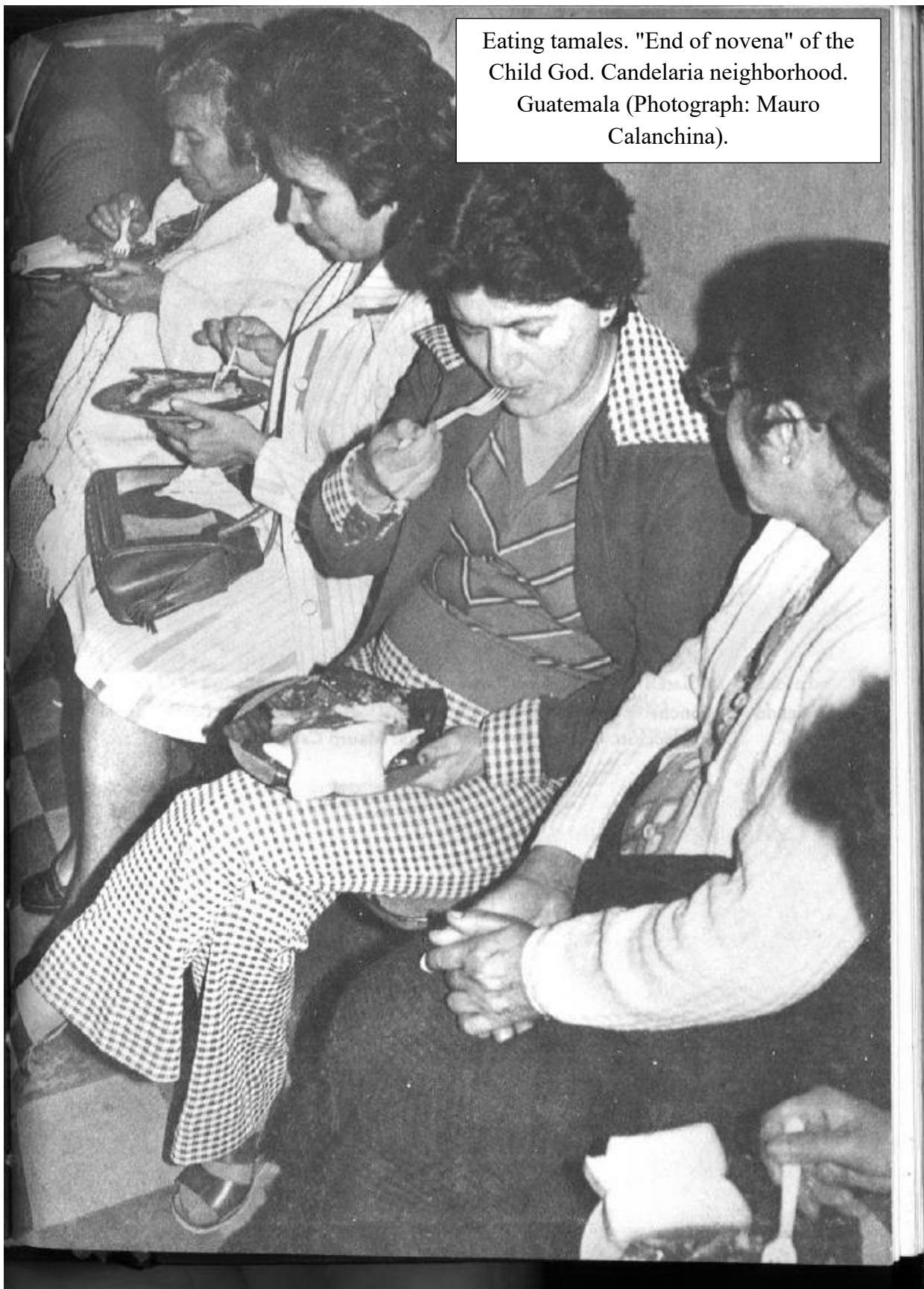
### **Types of Drinks**

Traditional drinks are also very varied. In addition to the ponche that is customary during ceremonies and festivities, others widely consumed among the population include: the **batido**, prepared with cocoa and water; the **machito mixqueño** or atol de Mixco, made from corn; and the *rax-ucun* or atol de elote (corn gruel), which has spread throughout the country from the highlands.



Eating the tamal. "End of novena" of the Child God.  
Candelaria neighborhood. Guatemala. (Photograph:  
Mauro Calanchina).

Eating tamales. "End of novena" of the  
Child God. Candelaria neighborhood.  
Guatemala (Photograph: Mauro  
Calanchina).





Serving the ponche for the "End of novena" of the Child God. Recolectión neighborhood. Guatemala. (Photograph: Mauro Calanchina).



Serving the ponche for the "End of novena" of the Child God. Candelaria neighborhood. Guatemala. (Photograph: Mauro Calanchina).