

POPULAR GAMES OF THE EASTERN REGION OF GUATEMALA

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Presentation

At the beginning of this century, and probably until the sixties, the eastern Ladinos, particularly from El Progreso, Zacapa and Chiquimula, used to play a series of parlor games that were intended to amuse and entertain people, both women and men. Such games were played at the evenings at the inns or at the end of nine days of a deceased person, after praying for saints or during people's moments of leisure.

Commonly the games were held in the house of the owner or custodian of the saint. The occasion was also propitious to eat tamales and drink hot - a traditional drink made from fermented fruits and seasoned with ginger - **tiste** (drink made with achiote, toasted and ground corn, sugar) or horchata. Many of the attendees came to the house where the game was being played, attracted by the food that was served there. The games tested people's mental acuity, brought out their sense of humor and made them momentarily forget the sorrows of those present.

People of all ages participated in the games, but mainly teenagers and adults, since since they were held at night, children were generally sleeping. Sometimes the success of a game depended on the likability of whoever was calling the shots.

The following compilation was provided by Gregorio Alvarado (b. Zacapa, 5-9-1910), who participated in all the games described as a child and adolescent. Being a rural education teacher, he promoted them among his students with singular enthusiasm.

Professor Alvarado gladly agreed to collaborate with the research on **Ladino culture and identity in eastern Guatemala** (DIGI-CEFOL, 1992) by giving the manuscript he wrote on the subject in 1982, which we present on this occasion expanded with observations and comments from him, which were recorded ten years later, in October 1992.

Almost all the games presented are of Spanish origin and others were created over time in the different towns located near the Motagua River and little by little they were enriched with the ingenuity of their inhabitants. The games have the particularity that in addition to making all those present participate in different ways, singing, jumping, clapping, imitating people, things and animals, they reveal the unique sense of humor of one or two people who are the ones who direct the game activity and have comedic skills.

Some of the games reflect facets of the life of Eastern peoples. Thus, for example, the sleepers' game is interesting because it alludes to the construction of the railway - *Ferrocarril del Norte* - an event that constituted a transcendental historical event and that changed the lives of many towns in the region.

Currently, most games live only in the memory of the elderly, since now many other forms of distraction occupy the time of children, young people and adults such as radio, cinema, television, video, electronic games and sport, among many others. However, according to Alvarado, it is likely that in some villages far from the madding crowd emitted by modern devices, there are occasions such as birthdays, school activities and even funerals, where the practice of some of these games can still be observed.

El soldado, en el tronco de las flores, las vírgenes, el enfermo, los durmientes, el ángel de la bola de oro y el diablo de los siete mil cachos are among the most important games collected by maestro Alvarado and that he has offered to the Center for Folklore Studies so that they are known by all Guatemalans.

Twelve popular games narrated by Don Gregorio Alvarado

Gregorio Alvarado narrated what he remembers about these games as follows: "the games of yesteryear always caught my attention, games in which I took an active part. They were healthy and fun diversions that put my entire stretched body in motion. I always wanted to write about those games that children of yesteryear always played. The limited time available has prevented me from doing it and, above all, analyzing it. Many years ago, while I was present at the goal of the Guastatoya Basic Institute, Professor Enrique Orellana approached me and said: -Look, Alvarado, why don't you write something about the games that yesterday's girls liked so much. I have had that idea for a long time, I told him, but due to lack of time and sometimes, due to forgetfulness, I have not done it, but now that you, professor, remind me, I will do it, because look, those beauties of games are being lost and the new generations don't even know about them. But that is precisely why you should write them, he told me.

A word of encouragement is a force of encouragement for those of us who like to smudge pages. Here are the tales of yesteryear. San Agustín Acasaguastlán, August 3, 1982."



“The games of yesteryear always caught my attention. Games in which I took an active part...” Professor Gregorio Alvarado told us, who narrated what he remembers about these games.

El soldado (the soldier)

“It is a nice parlor game that is usually put into action during the evenings of the inns or at the end of nine days of some saint or at wakes, at the end of nine days for someone who has died. Men and women were placed in a circle and at one end the character who played the soldier going to war was seated on a chair. They were all given a name of all the implements that a soldier needs. One was called a cartridge belt, another a rifle, another a belt, another a uniform, another a kepi, another a bayonet, another shot, and everyone had to answer with the gadget that each one represented. When naming he responded the same thing that the soldier shouted. Sitting in his chair, the soldier began to shout:

- *This little soldier is going to war, but he needs a rifle...*

The one who had the name rifle had to instantly answer: rifle! And nothing else. And the game continued...

- *This unhappy little soldier is going to war, but he needs his uniform.*

The one who had the uniform name had to answer immediately: uniform! And nothing else.

- *This little soldier is going to war, the poor guy doesn't have a kepi. kepi! had to say the one with the name kepi.*

When someone made a mistake, they had to give a garment, whether it was a handkerchief, a ring or any object of private use. In the end, to return their garment they had to do penance. In other words, some games were imposed on the losers: some had to crow like a rooster, others had to raise their leg like a dog does to urinate, others had to serve as a corner post. It was very nice, because before they used to put a post in the corners of the walls and when you wanted to pass one, the other would bring it with your elbow... another had to serve as a mirror and the one who made the same face had to make the same faces. mirror, one in front of the other. Or give a kiss to another companion, and if the penitent was a man he would happily give it to a female. She always sang the one who played the soldier:

- *What penance do we give to the owner of the garment that is going to be released?*

Then the winning group shouted:

- *Let them flap and crow like a rooster.*

The penance was always set before seeing the garment.

Comment: “That's the soldier's game. In the towns of Santa Lucía, Guastatoya, that's what they play. I later taught those games here in San Agustín, ah! They loved it. That was when I was a teacher. Ah... for the inns: -Let's spend the night here, let's go and watch now because there is a hot (drink), the owner of the inn told me, then it was the games of the owners of the virgins and everything...”

En el tronco de las flores (on the trunk of flowers)

“This game was always played in a wheel. Men, women, children, named themselves after a flower known as rose, jasmine, diamela, alelí, narcissus, tuberose, pascua, mulata, yellow flower, cartridge and other flowers that existed in the environment. The master of ceremony or the one who had the lead voice, at the beginning of the game always warned that they were ready to answer and then went into action saying - with a wand -:

- *Well, gentlemen, aleli was missing from the trunk of flowers.*

Then the one who was aleli answers immediately:

- *He's lying, because here I am, said the aleli.*
- *And where were you? the trunk of the flowers asked.*
- *At lily's house, alelí said*
- *He's lying, because here I am, said lily.*
- *And where were you? the trunk of the flowers asked.*
- *At daffodil's house.*
- *He's lying, because here I am, said daffodil.*
- *And where were you? the trunk asked.*
- *At cartridge's house.*
- *He's lying, because here I am, replied cartridge.*

- *And where were you? the trunk of the flowers asked.*
- *At ponsettia's house, shouted cartridge.*
- *He's lying, because here I am, replied ponsettia.*

When someone in the game hesitated or did not answer, they had to give a garment and then the game of the trunk of the flowers would begin again.

And so, the word game continued until someone had to give up a garment to put it at the final moment, penance. This is the flower trunk game.”

Comment: “This game was customary for religious festivals or to spend the night watching over a deceased relative because here it is happy, it is fair to watch over a defunct: they play cards, goat, they eat a tamale and when the tamale is finished: -we want another tamale! - they say. And they are going to give him another tamale.”

Las vírgenes (the virgins)

“The fun of this game often depended on whoever acted as the buyer of the virgins. Young girls between 15 and 20 years old were sought for this precious entertainment and they were given the names of virgins from the Roman Catholic Church since it was the predominant religion in those times, when religious sects had not yet spread (Note that in 1920 in the Lo de China village -El Jícaro-, the Presbyterians invaded in such a way that only one Roman Catholic was left standing, everyone became Presbyterians, in Lo de China, it was a curious thing).

Thus, one was called Mary, another Magdalene, another Saint Rita, another Saint Teresa of Jesus, another Conception, another Veronica and in due time it was only about Virgins, not saints. The buyer arrived, very serious, you must see, and said (pretending to enter an establishment or house where they sold images)

- *Excuse me, I have heard that you have beautiful images and I need some virgins to give to my people.*
- *Ah... come forward, said the owner. Here are some virgins, come forward.*

Well, with their black cloaks (virgins dressed up) because before women used black cloaks, no one went out without them. And another thing, the traditional widows dressed in rigorous black, for the husband, for life, the black dress was traditional. They mourned for the brother, for a whole year, for the parents all the time, but more for the husband. Ah... the widow yes, all dressed up. There were widows who were 20 years old and aged in black in memory of their husband. That has already gone down in history.

Well, the buyer enters and observes all the virgins, approaches them, touches them, goes back and stands next to them again and says:

- *Wow, I like this Veronica, but she seems to have one eye smaller than normal.*

And that's the thing, the young woman who plays the virgin doesn't have to laugh.

- *And her mouth is also very big, I don't like it. Let's see this Mary Magdalene, ah, she is elegant, beautiful. But one ear of hers is bigger than the other, plus Magdalene has long hair and this one has short hair. No! -he grabs her by the nose- no, Magdalena had a nice nose, this one is flat. No, she doesn't suit me. Let's go see this Dolorosa, -You can see her martyrdom in the Virgin's little face- but I don't like a gesture that she has in her mouth.*

And so he goes, keeping an eye out for who's laughing. That's the thing: when you laugh, you give up a garment. Then another young lady replaces the loser.

What they had to give as a garment was a ring, an earring, a handkerchief, some of their own clothing. The people laughed at the humor of the buyer and at the one who played the role of Veronica or another virgin who should not laugh because she lost and had to give up her garment.

Sometimes another buyer would come and touch them by the hand, and then the forehead, and then run his hand across their cheek.

The people laughed with amusement at the jokes of the one who acted as the buyer. That is precisely what amused the listening public, because the act was done with some grace.

And then the moment came when there were clothes and you had to do what they said. The penances went by group, they took out garment by garment: "let's see what penance we put on the garment that is going to come out", without seeing the garment. "Well, let him play the bell." The bells were made back-to-back, flipping bells. And so, on it was the virgins' game.

Other penances were that they were made to dance, or that they flapped their wings like a rooster and sang, and others that they danced the tap dance and so on as the clothes came out. Happy time on the spiritual path at that time."

Comment: "This game was more customary at religious festivals, the novena of an image or at the famous inns because before they watched the image, they would wake up there playing cards with games. It was up to the entire house to go and leave the image at the neighboring house where they had the day left. Sometimes they would walk two or three blocks and arrive to deliver the image. He repeated asking for a posada José and María. Inns are still customary, but in the small villages. "In the big towns they have already disappeared."

El enfermo (the sick man)

“This ceremonious and interesting game was played in the patio, with all the participants sitting on mats. There they made a circle and named everything a sick person needs: there was soap, towel, sheets, pillow, medicine, spoon, syrup, pills, potty, enema, cloths, water, bread, cookies, gruel. And as is very natural, the patient needs the doctor and the mother. The patient lay on his mother's legs. A lady served there... as a mother. And as is natural, the sick man's only dolamas was: oh, oh; There was an “ouch” among the audience, but that one had to be ready because the sick person only (said) ouch, ouch! and he had to say, oh, oh, oh! on par (with the patient).

Among those present there were many who were willing to do these tasks. The patient, lying on a pillow, or on his mother's legs, exclaimed:

- *Ouch, ouch!*

The participant who played the role of “ouch” had to say.

- *Sir, sir,* he had to say.

When they made a mistake, they had to give up the garment, consisting of some personal belonging. Many times, the patient said:

- *Oh, grief, affliction, pain, annoyance,* and everyone who had those names had to be ready to act as if they were sick as well.

This game of the sick man was left to the good deed of whoever did it.

And so on, the game was fun if you left it to the actor, who played the sick person. Then came the delivery of the garments. The penances consisted of many acting as mirrors, others as shadows, as they had to mimic whatever the winners did.

Comment: “Everyone who wanted to participate in this game could do it, and it could be played on any occasion. That game is still played, but it was played more before. The happy people enjoyed these spectacles.”

El güegüecho

Well, in the güegüecho game, everyone (the participants) lines up. Together they make some güegüechos (a type of knot, or braided piece of cloth) with rags and there is one who stands in front with a grinding stone. He starts to say:

- *Gentlemen, I'm going to start grinding and I'm going to grind corn.*

And he starts going “thump, thump, thump”. And the others - while the one who had the lead voice was thumping - had to pass the güegüechos between them, and when the thumping stops, the one who ends with it has to put it over his neck.

Behind the row (of participants), about two or three meters away, there is another person with a grinding stone, and begins to grind, as if he were grinding corn or coffee or something else.

The action of the game consists of the one who plays the miller shouts:

- *Attention, the mill is going to work.*

And it starts to make a grinding noise. The first one in line who has the rag ball (or güegüecho) must immediately pass it to his partner and the latter to the other, but quickly. And he comes back to his point. When the miller stops suddenly, with two blows in a row, the one who did not have time to pass the ball to the one on his side, stays with it and then, the guard in front puts the ball around his neck, who is an idiot, It fits him in the shape of an idiot. And it is precisely the fun of the game: the miller suddenly stops with astonishing speed, then several people are left with two and three big guys on their necks. Then come the garments, for the punishment of penance. “That's the güegüechos game.”

“I played that a lot. Oh, I loved it.”

El casco de las mulas (the mule wheel)

“This game is for boys, from 12 to 14 years old, it was played by making a human ring, hands chained. At the beginning of the game they spin in a wheel and whoever needs a mule has to take it out of the ring.

The buyer arrives and says:

- *Whose mules are these?*
- *From the mule wheel, those in the ring answer.*
- *Can I take one out?*
- *Only if you can manage to do it.*

And when the buyer wanted to get closer to the wheel (to catch one of the participants who act as mules) everyone began to move and kick. There were some who raised a limb and kicked around. Sometimes they kicked him in the leg, sometimes in the shoulder. The buyer had to grab one of the legs.

Then those on the wheel begin to kick, just as mules kick. Until one of the mules finds itself in trouble, because many times they hit it in the abdomen, in the shin, in the shoulder, in the ears. You must be ready, otherwise you get hit. This is the mule wheel.”

El anillo (the ring)

“This game consisted of a player sitting on the floor, squatting, in front of a row of friends, also sitting. Behind them is another person in charge of placing an object in the hands of one of those sitting and saying:

- *The ring goes, and goes, and goes.*

Those who play this game sit on the floor, with their legs crossed and their hands also crossed over their backs with their palms facing up. Then there is one who tells the riddle, to see which friendly hand the ring is on. For this game they use a piece of china instead of a real ring. And the one who passes behind touches the hands of all the participants who form together. That boy, who was sometimes called “operator,” sings:

- *The ring goes, and goes, and goes, now you must guess where it goes.*

He shows his hands as a sign that he no longer has it, but rather one of those sitting there. Then the person sitting in front of the row must guess the name of the person who has the ring:

- *Let's see the ring Juan:*

And it turns out that the one who had the ring was Luis and not Juan. There is the loss of the garment. Sometimes the operator - the one who was going to give the ring - pretended to give it to a child, but he kept it and whoever had to guess was wrong.

San frijol

This game consists of giving names of domestic animals (commonly horse names), such as Careto, Moro, Pajarero, Lucero, Rocinante and so on. There are two who tell the game: one who stands about five meters away, the other who is San frijol.

The one who has the lead voice nearby says:

- *San frijol*
- *What does my king and lord command?*
- *Which horse do you want to ride?*
- *The fastest one*
- *Do you want to ride Pajarero, or maybe Careto, or even Moro?*
- *I want to ride Careto.*

Then the one who played Careto had to bring him to him in *cucuches* (on his back).

And the game began again. If the rider says a name that doesn't belong to any of the horses, then he must go through penance

Martinejo

“The kids loved this one and there used to be boxes of indigo ink in the patios of the houses (because before the women used to paint their clothes, and they had a thread that they called the putunque, made of cotton. There in Cabañas - Zacapa - There was a lady called Antonina and she had a little *guacalito* and a stick and there she had the bag of cotton and then she turned the stick over and put the cotton in, after a little while she took out the thread and used herringbone as a needle. This thread was “thrown away” by the ball thread. The ball thread replaced the one they made. Then came the reed thread and then the “ten” thread that was used for the kites)

A human chain is made in the shape of an arena and one of them remains outside and asks:

- *¡Martinejo!*
- *Señor viejo*, they answer.
- *¿Y las mulas?*
- *¡Las vendí!*
- *¿Y las reatas?*
- *¡Las vendí!*
- *¿Y el dinero?*
- *¡Lo jugué!*
- *¿Y los dados?*
- *¡Los tiré!*
- *¿Y las tabas?*
- *¡Las quemé!*
- *¿Y las cenizas?*
- *¡Las tiré al mar!*
- *¿Y lo demás que se hizo?*
- *¡Me lo comí con pan y chorizo!*

And then to repeat the same thing, it was a play on words.”

Comment: ““All these games were taught by older men. My aunts knew many games, as they were prayers... they knew, through them I learned and because of the interest in the horchata they gave and a little piece of marquesote.”

Escondederos o cucu (hide and seek)

This game was also called “peek-a-boo”; Let's play peek-a-boo, we said.

In this game of hiding, the group of boys chooses two who lead the game: one who remains and the other who goes in search of those who have gone to hide. The one who plays the boss says:

*Pelotía, manzanilla,
pie de gato, veinticuatro.
El que quiera comer miel
que vaya a la puerta de San Miguel.*

Then whoever it was was going to hide. And the leader said the same thing, the leader repeated it in front of the other participants. Whoever liked “Saint Michael” was going to hide where he didn't know where he was hiding. And so on until there is only the leader of the group and the other, the seeker of the hidden ones.

Once everyone is hidden, he shouts:

*Roma, roma,
va el rey de roma,
que les quita la corona.*

Then the seeker goes in search of the hidden ones, he touches them with his hand when he finds them. And everyone continues with the game and the same thing repeats itself.”

Los durmientes (the sleepers)

“In this game, those who take part are placed, completely as if asleep, on a flat and sandy place so as not to get tired. The buyer arrives who needs them for a section of the railway. He arrives, looks at them and touches them, turning them with his foot to see if they are not twisted.

- *I do like this little sleeper, the nail fits well.*

There were some who twisted or moved and whoever did that had to give up a garment. The thing about this game is that those who play the role of sleepers are strong young people and do not bend at the time of the test.”

El ángel de la bola de oro (the angel with the golden ball)

“It was played between women and men and the angel with the golden ball was presented against the devil with seven thousand pieces. They were games that were played a lot among the girls, mainly on full moon nights. The devil came and said:

- *Ton, ton. Yo soy el diablo de los siete mil cachos que te quiere llevar al infierno.*
- *Pues no porque aquí está mi ángel de la bola de oro que es el que me defiende.*

It was the struggle between evil and good. And so, a series of dialogues were carried out, in such a way that some went with the angel and others were won by the devil. Sometimes the devil won, other times the angel won, and at the end they ran away.

El chino

“When you went to bathe in the river, there was a game they called *El chino*. This game consisted of tagging one another, by putting your hand on them. It consisted of hiding under water and not letting yourself be tagged by someone who said: “chino, chino”. Whoever was tagged on the head then became the “chino”. Many would dive and stay under the water for a long time, as long as they did not allow themselves to be touched. “There were certain pools in Guastatoya that were the favorites of the kids.”