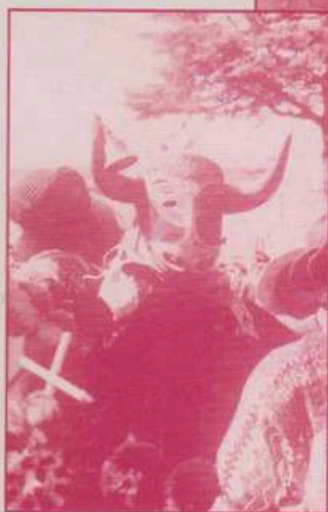




Folkloric Masks of Guatemala

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CENTRO DE ESTUDIOS FOLKLÓRICOS



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Masks of nahuals:

1. Toro. Totonicapán, Totonicapán.
2. Diablo, danza la sierpe, Rabinal Baja Verapaz.
3. Venado. Totonicapán, Totonicapán.
4. Mico y Toro, danza de toritos. San Raimundo, Guatemala.

Photographs by the author.

FOLKLORIC MASKS OF GUATEMALA

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INTRODUCTION

The knowledge we get about them through the traditional Guatemalan folkloric dances is compelling, as well as the knowledge we get specifically from the masks used in folkloric dances. It's like traveling across national territory with ritual and festive calendar in hand; perceiving movements, musical production, the colorful costumes, listening to their recitation when there's one, seeing them dialog with those supernatural features of their masks.

Guatemala doesn't fall behind when it comes to the general anthropological scheme that acknowledges that all cultures, in every period in the history of the earth, some concrete and material ways, were accepted in order to avoid the everyday reality for in that way they would consecrate themselves as a cult of a supernatural force that, according to world outlook, cosmogonically dominate the world.

Among these forms of cult, the conceptual processing that originates from language and symbols has produced abstract and concrete manifestations like religion and the framework of a more complex world of symbolic fixations.

Myths and rituals, ceremonies full of hieratism and mysticism; dancing, musical, dramatic, aesthetical, and literary art,

with all and their material resources as concrete ways of expression; these are the most complex ways of communication that have developed through the historical course of humanity. They are based on a communication from the unconscious to the concrete manifestation that shapes entirely the collective memory of the peoples.

We acknowledge that, in the case of Guatemala, which is part of a more extensive region, more specifically, *Mesoamerica*, the study of this ancient cultural connotations should be deepened in detail and adequately aimed with the purpose of deepening

into the knowledge that our cultural backgrounds offers and about how our most conspicuous identity has been shaped, how it has fallen on hard times thanks to the contemporary developments in modernity, post-modernity, economic globalization and neoliberal politics driven by the government and is corrupting every authentic expression of our true being as *Guatemaltecos* (Guatemalan inhabitants).

In the present booklet we are presenting, briefly, an study of the guatemalan mask with the purpose of offering to the readers a resemblance of those authentic masks that are part of the Guatemalan imaginary insofar as it concerns one of the most popular ancient expression and nowadays, a tradition; the folkloric dance.



The Rabinal Achi dance. From the front Quiché Achi. January 1999. Rabinal, Baja Verapaz. Photograph by the author.



But what is a mask, what is it for, what makes it fascinating?

In the first place, let's follow Arturo Castiglioni's statement (1993-106):

"The mask is adaptable, through a analogic and imitative conception, to protect the individual by means of evading the personality."

This means that, with the mask, it is believed that the apparent personality is assumed with the purpose of defending against hostile forces that don't recognize the individual, so the mask allocates a desired immunity. This is also a magical performance because the personality of what represents the mask, be it human, animal, or good and evil representations are assumed, therefore, what the mask represents is imitated.

These mask representations are also essentially related to divine and superior forces whose qualities are desired by the one wearing them as a way of unconsciously confronting the hostile forces that were mentioned.

Its origin dates back to pre-history, beginning with the change in the facial features by using paint and other elements, such as feathers, tapes, objects and bones; at the same time, it conforms the origin of earrings, rings, necklaces, etc. that are unconsciously functioning as amulets, talismans and/or as drawbacks, as was already stated above. The mask acts as a form of invisibility aiming to play, intimidate, seduce others and hide from them.

In general, it magically acts and satisfies the desire to assume another personality by evading their own, transmigrate to other realities to evade everyday life, which in itself is hard, dull and threatening.

On studies of Guatemalan masks, see especially the work of Lesbia Ortiz. See annexed references.



**Dance of the Conquest. Sololá, Sololá. August 1993.
Photograph by Carlo Bonfiglioli, Conaculta, Mexico.**

Is in this way, how art in the history of humanity is born, for it is about the abstract metamorphosis of the self, about reality itself with aesthetic purposes and the satisfaction of spiritual and material needs that cannot be achieved through everyday life.

This metamorphosis logically extends to the animal and vegetal kingdoms. Naturally, in this case is studied the phenomenon of metempsychosis as a part of this situations.

In conclusion, as Miguel Covarrubias says (Pomar, 1982:11):

"The use of masks is one of the most interesting aspects of human culture and the concept of "mask", the face of a man or an animal as a complete being. Independently, it's one of the most classical and usual manifestations of art across the globe. Be it as a magical instrument that helps to establish the contact between the spirits and humans, to glorify a deceased king, or to personify demons, deities, or mythological heroes in ceremonies or theatrical representations, the mask possesses a strange power that stimulates the imagination. Thus, the mask is the overview, the essence of the deity, the demon, the death, or the hero that's being represented..."

María Teresa Pomar (1982:15) says that:

The mask is tightly linked to folkloric dance and it can be considered the richest among the forms in which popular art is expressed for it brings together theatre, poetry, music, dance and sometimes luxurious costumes tailored by the talented hands of craftsmen and craftswomen, masks that are occasionally crafted with facial and corporal paintings. Sometimes, because because of the entangled beauty that's within a mask, its segregated from its context and only it is seen as an object. It cannot be dissociated from folkloric dances nor from culture for it belongs to it, precisely because it is a very important part of it.

The mask in ancient Guatemala

Is origin is rooted in a very remote past, back to the formative periods of the proto-Mayan. All the existing evidence was discovered in archeological findings. They are found figuratively detailed in stelae, lintels, murals, and ceramics dating back to the pre-classic Mayans, including codices. They've been associated with a strong culture to the divine, mainly because it is known that the mask was linked to religion and death in the pre-Hispanic period, that is to say, with the magical-religious ways of thinking and with the



cult to the death and to the gods. Living and dead men, as well as the gods, can be found adorned with animalistic masks. It is well-known that masks were used in ceremonies and rituals that were dedicated to the different cosmogonical cults of the Mesoamerican cosmovision.

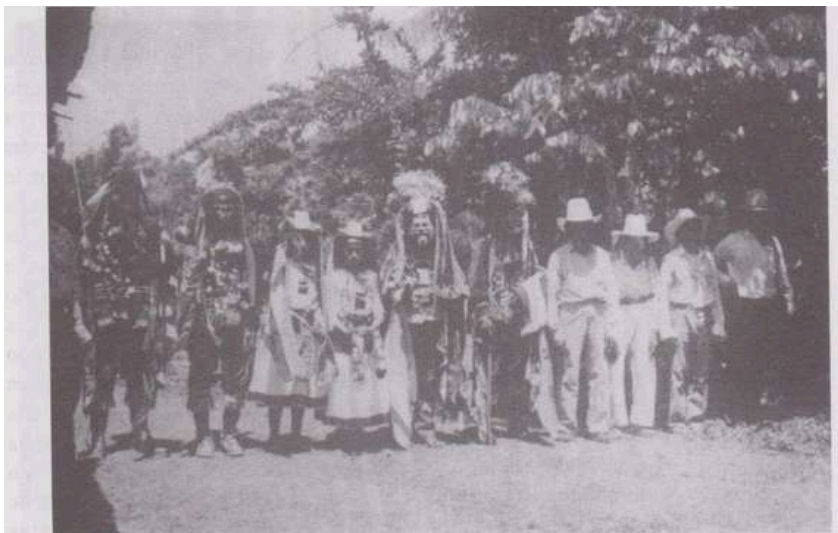
The mask in colonial times

Despite the strong influence of Hispano European culture and the Judeo-Christian religion, indigenous communities stayed true to their cosmogonic essence, although they disguised them with the new religious beliefs. To the original masks and folkloric dances, (most of them destroyed by the fervent christian missionaries), were added others, like the Spanish, the moors, saints, virgins, angels, demons, the death, bulls and african lions. The folkloric dances, that way before were rituals of religious cults, now were transformed for this and that interpolation with the sole purpose of entertainment, favoring Christian evangelization. Consequently, it affected the masks too.

As it is to date, at that time it was common in Indigenous communities to

celebrate their religious festivities according to the Christian calendar. In that way, religious festivities transformed into patron saint festivities because they were celebrated as a cult to a Christian patron saint, a member of the calendar of saints established by the church. Everything depended on the patron saint advocated to every colonized community.

Then, the visits to sanctuaries and festivities for blessed religious images became very common, matching with the agricultural cycles.



*Dance of Cortez. Cubulco, Baja Verapaz. July 1993.
Photograph by Carlo Bonfiglioli, Conaculta, Mexico.*

As a result, for every patron saint festivity, the folkloric dances for patron saints and as entertainment to the community began to spread. (Sánchez Hernández, 1997: 33). Gradually, the mystical-ritual essence of ancient past will leave a space for modernity, although not entirely, as the remnants still sparkle in dance rituals at the end of 20th century.

The mask in the 20th century

The colonial situation regarding traditional dances and its masks did not change at all despite the Guatemalan society organizing its political life after the independence from Spain. In the republican period, dictatorships and inside fights for the power over the political and economical dominance between conservatives and liberals didn't allow major cultural development among the populations. Although it's true that at a certain moment, 1851, the indigenous communities were protected by the dictator Carrera by means of a decree (Ortiz, 1993:46-47). The entire indigenous cosmogonical systems that developed during the colony didn't change. Growing dependable from one power to another didn't have a major meaning. Regarding colonial religious structures, officials and popular ones, according to what the journalistic chronicles and the



*Danza de Toritos. Mayordomo (estate manager)
and Workers. August 1990. Santo Domingo Xenacoj,
Sacatepéquez. Photograph by the author.*



research papers of foreign anthropologists, the situation that triggered the change began to unfold until the revolution of 1944.

It started when the catholic church introduced their new policies with religious influences and the intervention of the Catholic Action and the animosities against the atheistic communism and "Indigenous paganism". This means to undermine the grounds of brotherhoods, the ideological religious standing of the Mayan communities, that, as we already said, were formed by the religious syncretism that originated during the colony. To this, we can add an early and weak intervention of an evangelical-Protestant order that, since the liberal period, gained its first followers among the mixed-ladino communities.

Yet also, since the foundation of the Guatemalan Institute of Tourism up to the present time, the erroneous tourism policies in relation with popular cultures that have always characterized it since always, have weakened the existence of traditional icons such as folkloric dance costumes, but specially, masks. A unique and special commendation deserves the hardwork of the anthropologist, *san carlista*, Alfredo Gómez Davis (r.i.p.) carried out in the department of Totonicapán when he worked for that dependency.



Moors and Christians Dance. Cobán, Alta Verapaz. August 1995. Photograph by the author.

Since the 60s, masks started to disappear from the Guatemalan dance spectrum, mainly because, on one hand, the tourists bought the most ancient and, consequently, authentic, from their owners; on the other hand, the hardest years of war, the conversion to fundamentalist evangelism of many dancers caused the destruction or selling to the national tourist market. A few of them are still being sold at commercial prices in traditional stores in the busy zones of Guatemala City or else hanging on the walls of the offices of businessmen or collectors versed in these matters. Without taking into account the amounts that were sent to foreign countries.

However, the mask makers started to disappear and give way to a few of their followers, that elaborated masks for the moorish shops in the country, although no longer with the techniques and ancient designs as we will see it later on.

Other types of masks introduced to the popular dance spectrum about 25 years ago were the ones used in convites (parades originated from ancient mascarades or *mojigangas*) now less traditional than before, in which modern dances are performed with foreign

electronic music and the mask represent characters from international television. In that sense, the comment goes without saying.



Dance of the Huastecos. Camotán, Chiquimula. ... Photograph by Claudia Dary.

The ways of crafting masks

According to Maria Teresa Pomar (1982:20) many resources have been used for the crating of masks, for example: different types of wood, animal skin, wax, different kinds of fabrics, cotton, felt, silk, clay, prefabricated materials such as cardboard, paper, wire, iron and aluminum alloys, tinplate, turtle or armadillo shells.

Masks are also decorated with vegetal, industrial or lacquer paintings. Decorated with ixtle, natural hair, manes, wild boar bristles, sheepskin or goatskin pelts, beads and sequins, and natural horns from deer, goats, cattle, and sheep — or made from cloth, iron, and wood, among others.

She also illustrates (Idem:21) the different types of masks in existence:

"There are different types of masks: the full-face mask, used to cover the face; helmet-style mask, that lays on top the dancer's head; the half-mask, masks that only covers half of the superior/inferior side of the face;



and the skullcap mask that sits upon the superior side of the skull. Likewise, there's the waist-level back masks, that are attached to the waist with shoulder straps and belts."

In Guatemala, traditional masks are generally made of wood and the style known in Mexico as "full-face mask" is used in many folkloric dances across the country. In the etno-drama, *Rabinal Achi* we observe three types of masks: the full-face mask, the skullcap with veil that covers the face, and the waist-level back masks known to the dancers as "shields".

In the case of Guatemala, (García Escobar, 1987:67), the full-face mask is crafted with white pine, but the cedar and conaste are also used. With the help of chisels and gouges, the piece of wood will slowly take form. The dimensions, features and profundity are a result of the mask maker's expertise gained over time and through experience. Afterwards, they're sanded and painted. Finally, the eyes are placed in the mask, and because glass-made ones were discontinued, they were replaced with seeds of oak that are placed from the inside out with black wax and painted from the outside to resemble an eye.

Many masks have the holes in the eyes, nose, and mouth open, but, logically, all have two openings below the eyebrows with the purpose of serving as a visual channel to the performing dancer. The colors are of many pink shades. In the past, flesh-colored painting, colonial heritage, was widely used; nowadays, it has been replaced by oil paint.

For the hair, generally, is used a golden tone as well as the gray tone.

We've have observed that in the dance of the Christians and Moors, masks with black hair are used.



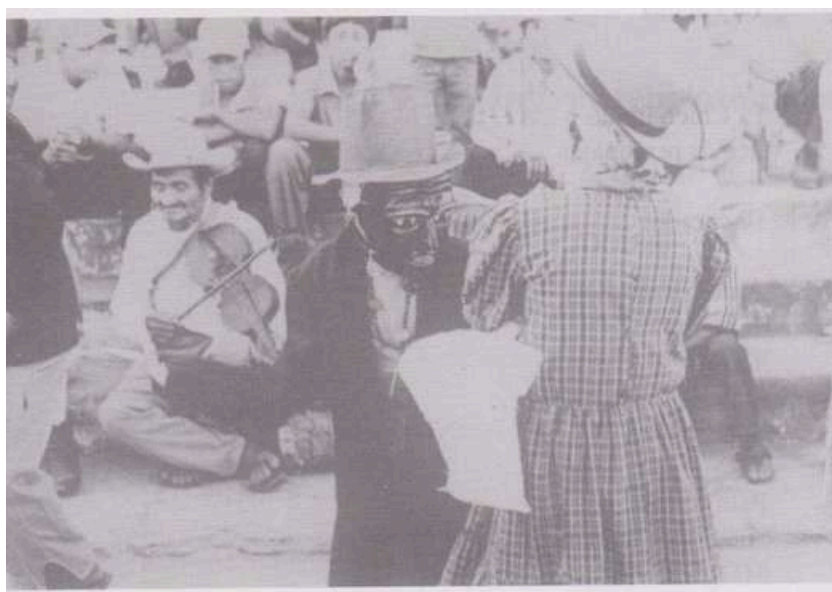
*El Costeño Dance. Rabinal, Baja Verapaz. June 1997.
Photograph by the author.*

In any case, the mask has to be carved with mustaches, sideburns, ears, and hair as a general rule. That of the patrons, in the dance of Toritos (the dance of the toritos is a traditional Guatemalan folk dance that features performers wearing bull-shaped structures, often accompanied by fireworks), needs to have wrinkles, beard and must be endowed with an expression that denotes seriousness. Furthermore, to illustrate the final shape of the mask, they will be customized by the client, changing the expression, be it be of happiness, seriousness, sadness or madness like it happens with the Spanish in the dance of the Conquest or the Moors and Christians. (If you want to go into more detail about the crafting of masks, consult Lesbia Ortiz, 1993)

Mask representations in Guatemala

Masks are represented according to the characters of the dance. Masks for human or anthropomorphic characters.

1. Masks for nahualistic and animalistic characters.
2. Masks for religious-moralizing characters that Lesbia Ortiz (1993:113) calls "mythic-ritual" (etic-emic).



Danza El Chico Mudo. Rabinal, Baja Verapaz. Junio de 1997. Fotografía del



For human or anthropomorphic characters

Dance

Rabinal Achí

flying pole dance

The conquest

The deer

Moors and Christians

Toritos

old men and Huehuechos

Coast people

the mute boy

the animals

pascarines

Xecalcojes

Ixcampores

Mexicans

Masks

Hob Toj, Ixoc Mun
Rabinal Achí, Quiché Achí
“skullcap with veil”
Eagle bearer
Tiger bearer

San Miguelitos or Moors and Christians

Spanish, Indigenous, Ajitz, King Kikab, Tecún Umán, Malinches, the princes.

Spanish, captains or young recruits, the old man and the old woman

Moor King, Christian King, moors, christians, Moorish wit, Christian wit.

Mayordomo, workers, ladies, blacks, cowboys.

Old men and old women

coast people, patrons, La Pancha

The mute boy and other characters

the hunter

Masters, cowboys

Everyone

Everyone

patron, workers, Adelita or Guadalupe, Margaritas (Masks with obscured lenses)



For nahualistic and animalistic characters

Dance	Mask
Rabinal Achí	“waist-level back masks”: bearer of the eagle shield Bearer of the tiger shield
Flying pole dance	Monkeys
The deer	deers, lion, tiger, dog, mico (small monkey)
The conquest	Tecún Umán Ajitz
Toritos	The bulls
The coast man	Bull
The animals	Tapir, Wild boar, Collared peccary, Coyote, raccoons, white-nosed coati, squirrel, rabbit, bull and/or Ox.
Pascarines	Bull
Mexicans	Bull
The serpent	Bulky structure: the serpent

Religious-moralistic masks

Dance	Masks
Demons	Demons
24 demons The conquest	Demons, the angel, death, the anima. the ajitz
Giants	Bulky structures: white and black giants
Big-headed, large-headed	big-headed



Morerías and mask makers

(These are places where folk dancers buy their costumes and masks for each performance.)

The case of *morerías* in Guatemala is very peculiar because they don't exist in other countries, except El Salvador, where we know there's one in San Antonio Abad, San Salvador.

According to Dr. Jesús Jáuregui (in Magnetophonic recording of the author, 1998), *morerías* have been working as standardized elements of costume traditions in what concerns Guatemalan folkloric dances; moreover, this homogenizing particularity of details, like costumes, masks, and paraphernalia, has been imposed by *morerías* and does not exist in Mexico. In addition, this could take away the creative personality of the Mexicans and the ways in which they elaborate and dress with their own costumes in their many folkloric dances. As previously reported in another paper (García Escobar, 1987) Guatemalan *morerías*, exclusive workshops for the crafting of costumes and masks arose at the end of the XVII century if not before, they took after ancient mesoamerican prehispanic traditions of feather rentals and feathering tools. Its purpose has always been the same. They developed in the XVIII and XIX century and that's how they reached modern times. Although it's true that the issue with rentals is a business in itself, the *morería* has been an important part in the ritual dance performing in many regions across the country until now, its permanency will keep thriving for a very long time.

In other regions, as in the department of Baja Verapaz, *morerías* do not exist and many performers have been crafting their own costumes and masks since ancient times conserving them as heirlooms and using them in their dances.

However, when it comes to Dance of the Toritos, we've noticed that they travel all the way to Totonicapán to rent their costumes and masks. The same happens in the east of the country, in departments like Chiquimula and Jutiapa, where the owners of this ancient dancing tradition craft their own costumes and conserve them from past generations as heirlooms of their dance brotherhoods.

Regarding mask makers, there are not a lot in existence. For the past 20 years, mask makers were tightly related to *morerías*, nowadays they have parted ways with them to work independently as a "commissioned mask carver, images and figures", at least in area of the K'achikel's. (Diana Ligia Letona et al. 1995). For her and his research team:

"The mask maker responds to the demand that concerns his handcrafted artistic creations as a temporary way of fulfilling the necessities of subsistence, transforming then "the mask" into a product with commercial purposes. With that change, the object, product of his creation, loses its historical meaning that, according to several references, it's not an economic type.

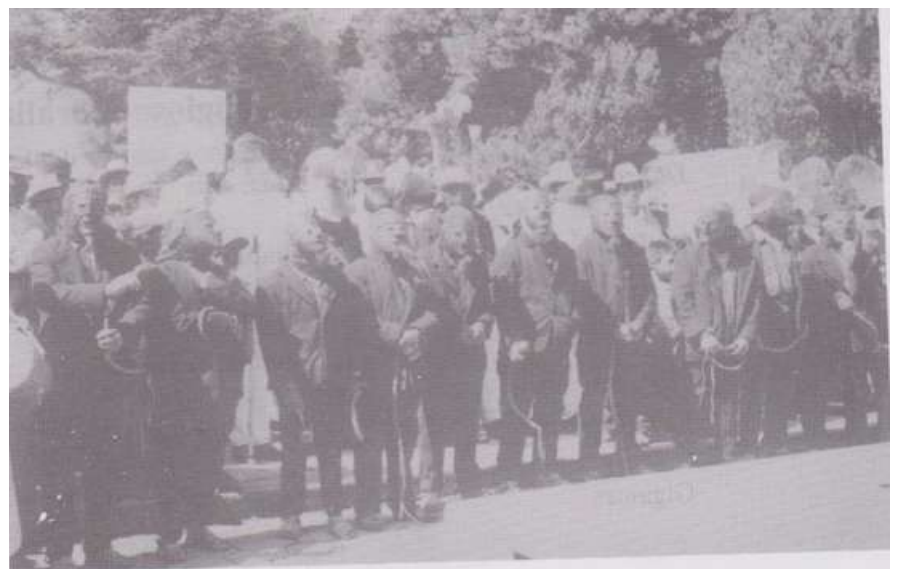
When his creation acquires another meaning, it facilitates its access to the walls of the houses, touristic centers, markets, etc."

According to our fieldwork, we've observed that the same is occurring in many regions of the country where *morerías* exist. (Among the most important ones are Totonicapán, Quiché, and Alta Verapaz).

In accordance with Lesbia Ortiz (1993:56) and García Escobar (1996:76) we've traced a map of all the places where mask makers are found up to 1996.

A few conclusions

The manufacture of masks is a handicraft and, as such, suffers from the social, economic, and cultural issues that affect all handicrafts in general. The deterioration of its values was induced by the general system imposed by the hegemonic sectors. That is to say, in the case of mask makers, the inflationary surge that affects the prices in general. Wronged policies in the use of exploited woods that, instead of



Los Xecalcojes Dance. San Miguel Totonicapán, Totonicapán. Year 1993. Photograph by the author.



greatly helping the big wood corporations in the exploitation of forests and even the illegal logging trade, the ones that are being affected are the craftsmen that use a minimal part of the wood for the crafting of masks, prohibiting them and selling them to you at a high price. In addition, craftsmen ignore the economic value of their creations, so they do not take into account their knowledge, workforce or time invested in the craft.

The fundamentalistic religious influence that disregards the historical meaning and the deepness of the product as well as the lack of interest of their descendants due to the fact that mask making only increases the workforce and the amount of time spent,

without a greater amount of remuneration to fully satisfy their needs and, among other things, the demands of the institutionalised tourist and international market that tries to impose non-traditional designs and exploits their production.

This is just to mention a few problems. Others can be deduced throughout this exhibition. Handicrafts in general, and in our case, dances and masks, as factors that produce historical, cultural and symbolic identity and social cohesion, must be the object of a profound reflection that values not only these products

but also their producers, the authentic bearers of these traditions, in the face of a near and uncertain future that threatens their extinction.



La Sierpe Dance. Rabinal, Baja Verapaz. June 1997. Photograph by the author.



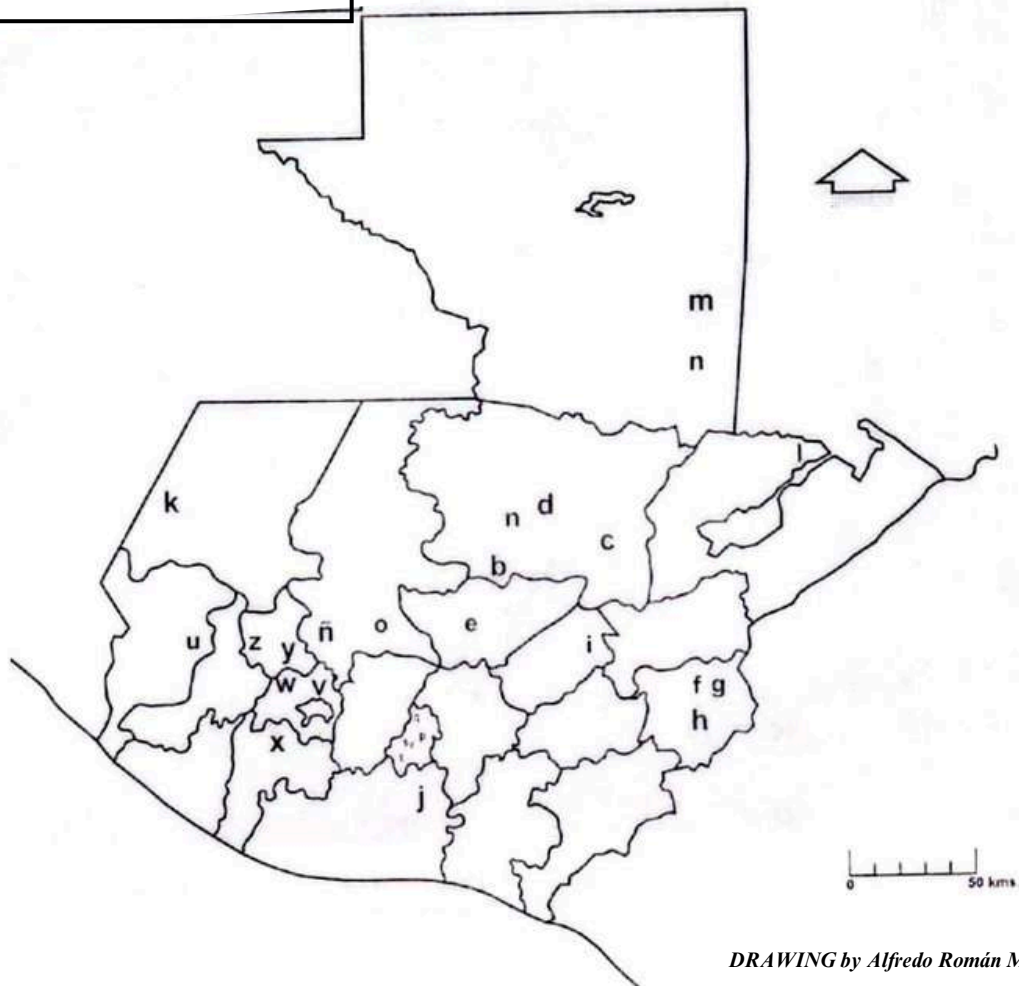
Dance of the Pascarines. San Francisco el Alto, Totonicapán. Year 1993. Photograph by the author.



<i>Alta Verapaz</i>	a.	<i>Cobán</i>
	b.	<i>Tactic</i>
	c.	<i>Senahú</i>
	d.	<i>San Pedro Carchá</i>
<i>Baja Verapaz</i>	e.	<i>Rabinal</i>
<i>Chiquimula</i>	f.	<i>Jocotán</i>
	g.	<i>Camotán</i>
	h.	<i>Quetzaltepeque</i>
<i>El Progreso</i>	i.	<i>San Agustín Acasaguastlán</i>
<i>Escuintla</i>	j.	<i>Palín</i>
<i>Huehuetenango</i>	k.	<i>Jacaltenango</i>
<i>Izabal</i>	l.	<i>Livingston</i>
<i>Petén</i>	m.	<i>Dolores</i>
	n.	<i>San Luis</i>
<i>Quiché</i>	ñ.	<i>Chichicastenango</i>
	o.	<i>Joyabaj</i>
<i>Sacatepéquez</i>	p.	<i>Antigua Guatemala</i>
	q.	<i>Sumpango</i>
	r.	<i>Ciudad Vieja</i>
	s.	<i>San Miguel Dueñas</i>
	t.	<i>San Antonio Aguas Calientes</i>
<i>San Marcos</i>	u.	<i>San Pedro Sacatepéquez</i>
<i>Sololá</i>	v.	<i>Sololá</i>
	w.	<i>Nahualá</i>
<i>Suchitepéquez</i>	x.	<i>San Bernardino</i>
<i>Totonicapán</i>	y.	<i>Totonicapán</i>
	z.	<i>San Cristóbal Totonicapán</i>

Mask makers

In different regions of the Republic of Guatemala.
Taken from the Atlas of Dance in Guatemala CEFOL -
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DRAWING by Alfredo Román Morales



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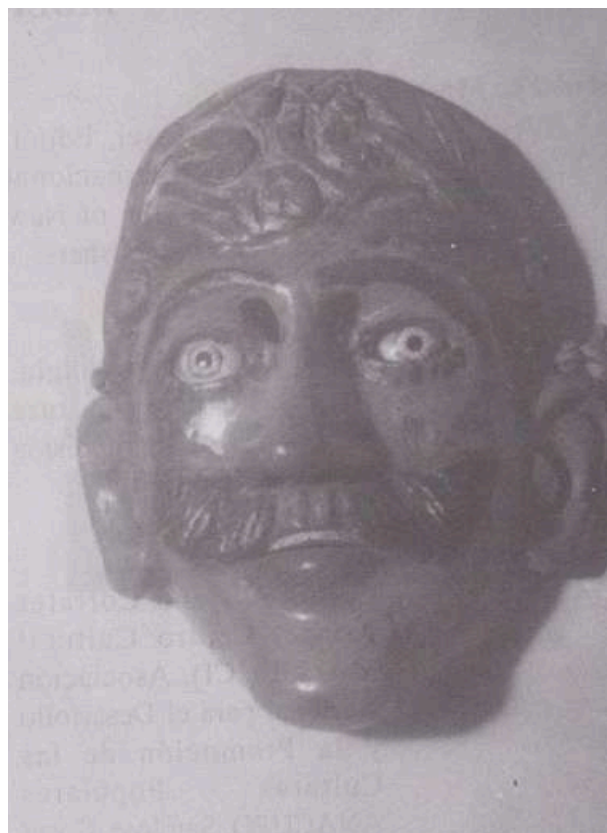
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URBADAN MASKS. Pedro Coronel Collection.



Dance of Mexicans. San Miguel Totonicapán, Totonicapán. Year 1986. Photograph by the author





The actor in the role of the vassal Ruperto in the Moors and Christians Dance The Spanish. Lo de Bran Village, Mixco, Guatemala. Year 1990. Photo by Rolando Alesio.



Spontaneous drawing of a mask of Moors and Christians by the artist Roberto Cabrera, for the author. Year 1997.



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Masks for the Dance of Napoleon, Siquinalá, Escuintla. Photo by the author, 1993