

DANCE ATLAS OF GUATEMALA

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Introduction

Aware of the challenging task involved in delving deep into the Guatemalan dance phenomenon and armed with the knowledge gained through several years of dance practice in my region, I embarked on the endeavor to understand this phenomenon as thoroughly as possible. With only my salary from the Folkloric Studies Center at the University of San Carlos of Guatemala as my resource, I began a new phase of my work as an anthropologist researching traditional dances within the field of Ethnochoreology under my responsibility at the mentioned institution.

Before this, various steps had already been taken, such as the ethnographic compilations by Germans in the early twentieth century, the descriptions by the National Indigenous Institute of Guatemala during the revolutionary decade of 1944-1954 and beyond, and further compilations conducted and published by the Directorate General of Fine Arts in 1971 by the artist Dagoberto Vásquez.

As background, all the mentioned works and many others are irreplaceable and essential. However, by the end of the 20th century, I felt the need for something essential and profound that was missing in those studies—an element that could ultimately form a scientific criterion regarding the existence and relevance, structure and functionalities, their place in the class struggle process and in culture, as well as their reality as a socially cohesive phenomenon, producing identity and persistent cultural resistance since colonial times.

I became increasingly involved in this endeavor, which was primarily of a personal nature, like many scientific investigations. However, it gradually evolved into an anthropological research project that was funded by the General Research Directorate of the University of San Carlos during its final stage in 1992. This project was executed with the collaboration of two additional researchers: choreographer Judith Armas and technical draftsman Alfredo Román Morales. Together, we completed what I proudly named "El Atlas Danzario de Guatemala" or "The Dance Atlas of Guatemala," referred to as "The Atlas" from this point forward.

The objective was to establish an updated and comprehensive knowledge of the traditional dances of Guatemala. The result was an almost complete compilation of these dances, accompanied by various interdisciplinary studies aimed at providing a holistic view of the phenomenon. These analytical studies are based on specific research conducted in the field on certain dances, chosen for their popularity and unique characteristics, in various communities across the Republic of Guatemala.

The choreographic analyses crafted by experienced choreographer Judith Armas are of immeasurable value, as they represent the first serious study of the movements and meanings that, illuminated by Choreology, greatly inform us about

various aspects of traditional Guatemalan dance execution. Additionally, with the contribution of technical draftsman Alfredo Román Morales, an advanced student of Anthropology and Archaeology at the School of History of the University of San Carlos, we now have specific maps detailing the locations of traditional dance, organized into dance centers, neighborhoods, and populations, as well as diagrams of the respective dance movements.

In this regard, we have managed to identify important dance centers due to their historical and cultural tradition. By understanding the entire dance complex that has been identified, in addition to detailed classifications regarding the historical process of the tradition and the anthropological contents of the dances, we are introducing the concept of "dance families." This concept arises from relating a series of dances that are related or have similar characteristics.

Furthermore, it has been essential to document the internal and external organization methods, the specific participation roles of those traditionally involved in these activities within the communities—known as tradition bearers—including elder leaders (owners and/or representatives or creators), praying priests, and the dancers themselves, called "bailarines." It's also important to recognize the significant role of women and children during the organization and execution of the dances.

The existence of ancestral rites and religious ceremonies that underpin dance practices in these communities is confirmed, with significant elements of syncretism blending these practices with Catholic-Christian rites and ceremonies acquired through the historical colonial and contemporary processes.

The ethnological analyses and interpretations are beginning to emerge now that we can, through the abundant ethnographic information provided by The Atlas, reflect on similarities and differences in form and content, as well as in the historical processes of origin and development of dance conceptions that arose from popular creativity, often grounded in origin myths, heroic legends, nahualistic beliefs, imitations of sporting feats, ancient popular games, and ancestral religious rites related to hunting, agriculture, and cults of supernatural beings.

We now know that Guatemalan traditional dances, like those from other regions of Mesoamerica, Central America, and the rest of the continent, are inherently a human book. When we open it, we discover a whole range of interconnected social, cultural, and historical phenomena from which we can apprehend their reality in time and space. These patterns allow us, by understanding them, to understand ourselves in our specific identities, idiosyncrasies, and ways of thinking, being, and feeling.

We could organize the research findings from the Atlas in a way that allows us to delve into the understanding of the dance phenomenon in other parts of our Mesoamerican region. This would involve proposing them as guidelines for

research and study, given the cultural similarities that exist among our communities. Here is how we might proceed:

Formation of Traditional Dances in Guatemala at the End of the 20th Century

For a better understanding of the dance phenomenon in Guatemala, it is necessary to clarify certain concepts that are generally handled confusingly, aiming for a more cognitive approach to Guatemala's popular dance culture.

For example, traditional Guatemalan dances are known as "bailes de moros" or "folkloric dances". Here we will make an initial approach to understand the differences and similarities between the so-called "bailes" (dances) and "danzas" (dances). Another issue to address will be the significance of "moros".

For the study and practice of these dance manifestations, anthropologists recognize certain choreology and choreography specific to the dances. Over time and in a traditional manner, choreology (the study of dance) acquires specific characteristics that align with the connotations and needs induced by each culture. For example, traditional Guatemalan dances are performed in sacred times and places, with dance executions lasting hours for a single presentation. They involve literary texts called "originals," anonymously written during the colonial past. The music accompanying the dance varies, sometimes mystical (with flute and drum) and sometimes entertaining (with marimba). The dance movements (steps and turns) are learned orally and generationally, strictly calculated and also complex, but within an order determined by traditional practice based on imitation and oral transmission. The choreography (description of the physical and material aspect that composes the total dance structure) of Guatemalan dances includes a wide variety of costumes and masks made in specific tailoring workshops called "morerías." The complete attire with respective masks is rented from morerías for a certain time period, which includes the town's main festival where it will be used. The music is also rented, and musicians are paid to perform it. Before each dance, propitiatory rituals are conducted by an indigenous priest (prayer leader) responsible for blessing all material elements involved in the dance (costumes, musical instruments, masks, household altars, flowers, candles, ritual foods and drinks, the dance brotherhood's house, and the principal individuals and dancers). In this context, the role of women is crucial as they are responsible for feeding the participants. Additionally, women and children, in a supportive and communal attitude, accompany their husbands, sons, fathers, or brothers at all times during the dance festivities. This familial and communal attitude reflects the high degree of cohesion and ethnic identity prevalent in indigenous consciousness, demonstrated through these deep socio-cultural relationships within each ethnic group or community.

On the other hand, "bailes" (dances) lack such choreological complexities. Although they are learned through imitation and tradition, they do not require long preparations or specific sacred rituals. They are characterized by their spontaneous execution and are part of the context of a particular celebration, whether it's sacred

(associated with a brotherhood) or simply social (such as weddings, baptisms, birthdays, etc.). The "son" is a prime example of this, along with other dance styles like Fox Trot, 6x8, polka, waltz, cumbia, etc. (In Guatemala, the term "sones" is also used to refer to musical pieces played for both dances and bailes).

A second observation worth noting relates to the term "baile de moros" (dance of the Moors) used to describe traditional Guatemalan dances since colonial times dating back to the late 16th and early 17th centuries. This designation stems from one of the dances that Spanish colonialism brought from distant Spain to the American lands—the "moros y cristianos" (Moors and Christians) dance in its many medieval variations nourished by Spanish romances. This colonial influence imposed certain choreological elements onto the pre-Hispanic dances that still exist in purer forms today. Centuries later, this influence led the dominant groups (Spaniards, peninsulares, criollos, and mestizos) to label most traditional dances as "bailes de moros," as all performing groups at one point began using costumes and masks reflecting the attire of the dominant social groups of their time. The costumes made in the morerías (tailoring workshops) replicate the military uniforms of the Spanish colonial army, hence popularizing the term widely.

As we will see later on, the "bailes de moros" refer specifically to variants of the Spanish "moros y cristianos" dances. Apart from these, there are dances such as "danza del Venado" (Deer Dance), "danza de Toritos" (Bull Dance), "danza de la Conquista" (Conquest Dance), etc., which use similar costumes. Other dances include those depicting devils ("danzas de los Diablos"), those from the highlands ("danzas del Altiplano"), and processional parades ("convites"), which are not dances but pre-festival processions where traditional dances may participate.

Our specific proposal is to refer to these dance manifestations as traditional dances, using their specific names such as "danza del Venado" (Deer Dance), "danza de Toritos" (Bull Dance), "danza de Moros y Cristianos" (Moors and Christians Dance), "danza de la Conquista" (Conquest Dance), "danzas de los Diablos" (Devil Dances), etc. This would correct the general concept that exists regarding Guatemalan dances and bailes.

Administrative organization

Según la costumbre tradicional, en la comunidad hay uno o varios "autores" que poseen los originales (los textos que funcionan como libretos) de las danzas, donde se ha fijado la historia que se representará a través de parlamentos que los bailarines recitan o cantan en respuesta a los personajes de la historia, a su vez representados por ellos mismos. También existen los "dueños o representantes" que son las personas que deciden representar una danza específica, y que a veces también poseen los originales de dicha danza. Se reúnen varias personas que actuarán como representantes, generalmente de dos a seis, y después de llegar a acuerdos, se encargan de toda la organización y los costos que implica la representación de la danza (como gastos de comidas colectivas, alquiler de trajes,

compra de flores, velas, incienso, viajes, etc.). Se llevan a cabo sesiones periódicas y, cuando se acerca la fecha tradicional de la danza (la festividad religiosa que sirve como marco ritual), se realizan los ensayos respectivos donde los bailarines, previamente seleccionados y "hablados" por ellos mismos, ensayan la danza completa cada vez. Unos dos meses antes, los representantes eligen la morería a la cual acudirán para negociar el alquiler de los trajes necesarios para la danza, los cuales serán entregados pocos días antes de la representación oficial, en el día de la festividad tradicional. Además, ya han establecido contacto con los miembros de la Cofradía a cargo de la celebración religiosa quienes, según sus posibilidades económicas, contribuyen o no al pago de los gastos necesarios para la representación de la danza. Esta organización cohesiona todas las acciones y momentos de la danza, tanto dentro como fuera de ella, hasta llegar a su conclusión, generalmente durante la octava de la festividad o más tarde, cuando se realizan los ritos finales que incluyen la devolución de los trajes a la morería. Luego se despiden hasta volver a reunirse para el siguiente año y organizar nuevamente la representación de esta o de otra danza según sus preferencias para el próximo ciclo.

Organization of the Guatemalan Dance System

The traditional dances in Guatemala are rich in historical, political, social, and cultural content, as they are a blend where the stories and cultures of two or three continents come together. This is why these manifestations are an important and abundant source of information worthy of being known by scholars interested in the subject and by the common citizen who has so far overlooked them.

The different historical epochs that Spain, Mesoamerica, and specifically Guatemala have gone through have left their mark in one way or another on the configuration of the dances practiced here. These periods of development and exchange between both civilizations have provided distinctive characteristics over the years in terms of form, themes, characters, costumes, language, instruments, and ultimately the blending of beliefs and culture.

The historical epochs were important, especially in determining the themes of this entire dance manifestation. Much of the thematic content and many of the dances themselves arrived with the Spaniards in the 16th century. What previously existed in this aspect in the Mesoamerican territory was eradicated as much as possible, and what could not be suppressed was oppressed. In its place, the new was imposed.

Over time, the themes that existed before the arrival of the Spaniards, which were previously suppressed, resurfaced and merged with those brought by the invaders. Thus, a creole dance emerged; however, its external structure did not evolve—it remained trapped within the mold of Peninsular patterns brought by colonization. This means that regardless of the theme, dancers continued to follow

the learned pattern of two facing columns with the same figures and customary movements. This structural dance phenomenon continues into contemporary times.

The thematic content present in the dances of our territory is vast and cannot be fully encompassed. Suffice it to say that predominant themes include: Mesoamerican and Peninsular mythical and religious themes, ancient European and New World warriors, historical and legendary figures, agrarian themes, everyday life in both societies, creole themes, and topics that resonate across all of them.

One of the main characteristics in the configuration of the Guatemalan dance system is that certain themes gave rise to dance families, which developed and spread throughout the territory. These families have their core dance, or more than one, from which it is observed through structure or trajectory that others were derived. These families formed over time due to various regional and local circumstances and are dispersed throughout the Republic.

Guatemala has prolific dance families consisting of dances such as: De Venados (Deer Dances), De Toritos (Bull Dances), De Moros y Cristianos (Moors and Christians Dances), De La Conquista (Conquest Dances), De Diablos (Devil Dances), and others that are less abundant. Of course, there are unique dances such as Del Palo Volador (The Flying Pole Dance), La Paach, El Rabinal Achí, La Culebra (The Snake Dance), and others that are less well-known.

The families that are most abundant and widely danced across the territory, due to their popularity with dance groups or performers, are:

- 1. LAS DANZAS DE VENADOS.** of which there are 36 active.
- 2. LAS DANZAS DE TORITOS.** There are 78 groups that perform it.
- 3. LAS DANZAS DE MOROS Y CRISTIANOS.** There are 43 active groups.
- 4. LAS DE LA CONQUISTA.** With 34 groups keeping it active.

The number of groups mentioned here is that of the dances already cataloged up to today by the Atlas, although there is a possibility that there are still more not yet reported. Within these families, the name is generic for ease of filing, as within them there are variants and adaptations of the original that may even have completely different names. Each dance is performed by a group in its community, has its own text, even if it is a copy of another, and each version has its own particularities, so all are considered important.

General choreography of the dance families

The choreographic schemes of the majority of traditional Guatemalan dances are structurally similar to each other. There are few exceptions. They are a reproduction of an ancient and rigid theatrical pattern prevalent in Spain before and during the conquest. This pattern was introduced here by the first theater stage directors, possibly parish priests or missionary evangelizers, when the Spanish arrived and began to settle. Due to cultural isolation, this pattern remained unchanged for hundreds of years without anyone attempting to reform or alter it. This original theatrical style is still preserved in the dances, which constitutes their primary distinctive feature. The few exceptions are dances or games with ancient Mesoamerican residue that, in some form, while adapting to the imported pattern, retained some of their previous free structure.

Every traditional or original dance possesses a structure that characterizes it and provides cohesion. In the case of most Mesoamerican ethnic dances, it is the written text ("the originals") on which they are based that gives them cohesion. This text also directs the order of their development similar to a theatrical script.

The style of the presentations is traditional and depends on a mixed choreographic scheme - combining theater and dance - inherited from various sources of 16th-century society: the Church, the Military, and the Court. Its characteristics are:

- a) The alignment of the dancers in two symmetrical facing columns.
- b) The hierarchical order of the characters according to their importance. This distribution also determines the order in which their lines are spoken and how they move in the dance.
- c) A system of grouping and symmetrical movement through established routes and designs, which trace winding patterns along their path.

It is important to note that this legacy resides in the memory of the dance directors or owners and in that of the musicians, who have passed down this knowledge orally, through imitation and example, across generations. The texts have never included graphical directions for movement and music, which is now achieved at the end of the 20th century through choreological research using professional techniques of coded movement writing, as well as through the use of video cameras that greatly expand the possibilities for studying these dynamic expressions.

Wardrobe, masks and props

Traditional dances often use their particular set of costumes according to their own tradition. Therefore, it is possible to identify two types of dance groups: those that use their own costumes, masks, and props without needing to rent them from costumers, and those that need to visit costumers to rent the costumes, masks, and props used by the dance they represent.

Music, musicians and musical instruments

An indispensable element in traditional Guatemalan dances is their musical structure composed of the so-called "sones." This was also established alongside the choreographies and the originals, as each dance possesses its own original text, choreography, music, timing, and performance space. The ensembles are specific to the different dance executions. Musicians inherit the knowledge of which musical sound schemes correspond to the dances, as they have learned them by ear from the masters who taught them, and they specialize in different types of dance. The traditional musical ensembles include: drums and trumpets; whistle and drum; oboe and drum; simple marimba; simple marimba with saxophones; native violin (rabel) and adufe; small drums; and whistles, concertina, guitar, and guitarrón; violin, guitar, and concertina. More recently, electroacoustic instruments have been introduced in festivities.

Stage

The dance stages are open and take place in the streets, church courtyards, fraternity patios, houses, parks, and squares, as these are popular dances meant for expression and entertainment within communities, which has been their traditional role since ancient times.

Statistical synthesis

The statistical results from the final research of the Atlas tell us that the most important dances in Guatemala, whether primary or not, are twenty:

Venados (Deer), Toritos (Bulls), Moros y Cristianos (Moors and Christians), Conquista (Conquest), Palo Volador (Flying Pole), La Paach, Los Animalitos (Little Animals), Los Diablos (Devils), Las Flores (The Flowers), Rabinal Achí, La Culebra (The Snake), La Sierpe (The Serpent), Los Xecalcojes, Los Ixcampores, Los Curunes, Los Fieros, El Chico Mudo (The Silent Boy), Los Jicaques, La Pichona, Los Huastecos, and El Yankunú.

All of these are performed by a total of 232 dance groups.

Regarding dances, there are 7 types:

"Los Convites," "Los Gigantes," "Los Cabezones" or "Enanos," "La Chatona," "El Caballito," "La Punta," and "El Pororó." These are represented by 107 dance groups.

In total, 339 traditional dance groups have been identified throughout the Republic.

Conclusion

Our role in this Dance Atlas consists of attempting to encompass the entire dance reality of the country and to record in it all possible dances and performances as well as all the groups that execute them. We believe we achieved this to a great extent, although the current circumstances of internal war and religious strife between Catholic and Evangelical mayors did not allow us to achieve a complete percentage, as determined through the mail surveys we conducted.

With these findings and results, we are confident that the practice of dances and performances persists under certain conditions of endurance, in other words, in accordance with the economic and social fluctuations of national life.

However, the systematic study of their characteristics and particularities that impart their cultural heritage must be carried out and continued, and their results should be delivered to these groups of men, bearers of the dance tradition, who with this recognition will see themselves reflected with the importance that the practice of their tradition confers upon them, thus strengthening their conviction in their own culture as well as ensuring their identity with their past and present.

This study must also be undertaken to address other types of concerns regarding the validity and continuity of certain dance practices that, although they have indeed been reinterpreted through historical processes, are worth responding to. For example, why do dances like "Moros y Cristianos" or dances depicting the Conquest continue to be represented with such popularity as seen in the Atlas? What is the symbolic process through which these and others continue to be performed? And so forth.

We believe that this presentation of the Dance Atlas contains answers to many questions, and we hope that from now on, new studies surpassing our work will contribute significantly to supporting and revaluing this cultural phenomenon through new and effective cultural policies aimed at reaffirming the identity of our communities, and at a more effective resolution of our socio-cultural conflicts provoked by our unique historical process.

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