

Aztecs Dance On in Modern Mexico

"Concheros" represent a vital link with Mexico's ancient culture.

The Aztec Dance is part of daily life in 13 states of the nation and in the Federal District. Dancers go from town to town on holidays, bringing with them living memory of the culture that flourished in these lands before the Spaniards arrived. Coordination exists among the groups of dancers and a kind of military hierarchy is still preserved.

The dance groups are waited on in a special manner by the townspeople they visit. A complex traditional form of social organization takes care of their lodging, food and drink, and sometimes even helps out with the expenses of their trip home. Their pilgrimage corresponds to fixed ritual dates that coincide with the traditional agricultural calendar, although they are often asked to dance at different places on non-traditional occasions.

The dancers use percussion, wind and string instruments. Among their percussion instruments are the ritual *huéhueltl* drum; the turtle shell that is struck with deer-horns; the *teponaxtle*, wood drums carved into animal shapes, and many different types of rattles. On their ankles the dancers wear butterfly cocoons sewn shut with pebbles inside that accompany the dance with a sound like a huge rattlesnake.

The wind instruments used include mandolins and the *conchas*, built from the shell of the armadillo, which is why the dancers are also called *concheros* (shell = concha). The two wind instruments played are the sea shell—used mainly to call or begin the ceremony—and the reed flute, which is used to accompany some of the dances.



Photo by Rafael Bonilla

Rattles on their ankles are a distinguishing feature of the "concheros"

Rather than being in danger of extinction, the Aztec Dance seems to be constantly renewed. In a seemingly continuous process, groups are formed that pick up new features, preserving tradition even though they are not born of an Indian community. Alfredo Ponce, who for ten years now has been part of the *Santo Niño de Atocha's mesa* (the dance group dedicated to the Child Saint of Antioch; each group is devoted to a different saint), is a good example of this. He's a mathematician specialized in computer science, dedicated for over 15 years to developing the different genres of traditional musical rhythms. With time he has earned the respect and affection of his fellow dancers and musicians, and "his words are starting to be listened to", as some of them said.

We interviewed Mr. Ponce on July 25, 1986, the longest day of the year, during a break in the dance taking place as usual every year on that date in the atrium of the Church of Santiago de Tlatelolco, at the Plaza de las Tres Culturas (the Square of the Three Cultures: pre-Hispanic, colonial and modern) in Mexico City. His words are of special interest given that one of the main characteristics of the Aztec Dance is the jealously guarded secrecy concerning the meaning of the ritual's different aspects.

THE ORIGINS OF THE AZTEC DANCE

The Dance of Conquest is a very old tradition. It is the Mexican zodiac in which each person contributes his effort and intent, his faith and caring so that these traditions are preserved, so that this message and humble inheritance handed down to us by our ancestors are not lost. Through these traditions we can come to understand how the world moves and how we ourselves move. Through these dances we have come to know our people and ourselves, and how to walk, sing, dance...

These are millenary dances, dances of work created to revere the elements; fire, earth, water and wind. Although they appeared as dances of work, they were eventually absorbed into the liturgy they are part of today, along with all the Catholic saints and rituals. These are *chichimeca* dances: *chichi* means red, and *mecatl* is the *mecate*, the blood-bond through which we have come to do these works, with the help and guidance of our leaders who have taught us the tunes, the steps and the meaning of each dance.

Following the Cholula Massacre¹, the dance sought refuge in the mountains. Father Hidalgo left the town of Dolores to unleash the struggle for independence with the dance as an insignia, and at the sanctuary he added the banner of the Virgin of Guadalupe. Then the dance seems to have disappeared, and



The seashell is a distinctive pre-Hispanic musical instrument

Photo by Jackie Buswell

turns up again following the Reform Movement². The dances surge forth once more in Tlaxcala, where the leaders held a meeting on the hill of La Malinche, and the word was heard again. A series of further persecutions still took place, when the Cristero War³ raged. All of these things that old men have told us about don't appear in any book.

DECIPHERING A MUSICAL CODEX

The coreography of each of the dances is a constellation, enriched by the strenght of the dancer portraying it. This the solar rite, a very ancient one: the sun is at the center and perfumes the air with incense. Around the sun are the planets, and each one of us dancers is one of them. Each dancer has his own color, his own birth date, his profession, a town he comes from, forces that protect him.

The dance has taught us to "read". It is a musical language, a coreographical message. The remaining leaders —and we hope they will live for many years— have always taught us a

¹ The Cholula Massacre took place in 1559 and was ordered by Hernán Cortés, shortly after the conquest. Cholula was one of the main centers of pre-Hispanic life.

² The Reform Laws included, among others, the separation between church and state and the confiscation of church property. These laws were passed by Benito Juárez in 1859, when the civil war between liberals and conservatives came to an end. The leaders of the Dance held a meeting in San Luis de la Paz, Guanajuato, shortly after the Reform Laws were approved.

³ The Cristero War took place during the 1920's between orthodox conservative Catholics and the revolutionary government that was trying to enforce the separation between church and state.



Women also participate, both as dancers and musicians

way of being, a way of greeting we were formerly unfamiliar with. When I say, "How do you do?", it means "I come and present myself, and I am here to take orders, to work for this tradition, so that these Steps of Conquest are not lost."

The meaning of the dance varies from one dancer to another depending on his own field of work. The universal significance is that many of us with different ideologies, different beliefs and ways of struggling for survival, come together in a circle and join our strength to achieve a harmonious movement that at a certain point allows us to overcome fatigue —because group work or effort is the only thing that can really save us, isn't that so? We are worthless as isolated beings in the midst of humanity, lost in humanity.

Nobody pays us, nobody forces us to do what we do. The system of command for the dance, the way in which the orders are given is... —well, how would I say it— a very important inheritance that should be further studied to see how it can be helpful in meeting some of the problems we face today. For these are live traditions, not archaeological ones. Even though these traditions have been engraved in stone, they are alive because they have never ceased to be practiced, this work has never stopped, and we believe it never will. As you can see, over there are the children following in our footsteps and following in those of our grandfathers.

It is important that history be more than just a compendium of isolated events; we should see our country's live history. These traditions are closely linked to production. The people who have dances never go hungry, because they still respect the *tequio*, they still respect communal work and the images that are venerated. Even though the iconography has changed, the meanings remain the same: the four winds, the four elements. The numerology and mathematical information contained in the dance is incredible once you begin to study it. The coreography...there is much information in each of the dances... in the people who put them on, in the change of steps...it's an infinity.

PROBLEMS AND OUTLOOK

Most of the ancient leaders have disappeared, although there are still a few of them left. Not only must the dance struggle against financial hardship, it must also face up to the ignorance of many of our countrymen. Many people have helped the dance continue, but unfortunately, in our country the dance is mostly taken into account for folkloric events, and that is really not our intention. We are not artists. We are dancers of the Conquest. Our Indian world has been segregated mainly out of ignorance, and we still don't know ourselves today. The focus may be anthropological, archaeological or ethnological, but it is always fragmentary, it's never a broad focus. These are fragmentary focuses on our society which never truly encompass reality.

The people come together; when it is necessary to come together around a specific act or activity, they do so. We consider work a ritual, not a hardship or a drag. This is the concept of work, the idea of work that our countrymen —whatever ethnic group they may belong to— have preserved. We have seen how the people who have dances never go hungry because they always have work. And if you have a poor crop, or you lose your crop altogether, someone will help you out. Yet these are social interrelationships that can't exist unless our coexistence is kept alive. We believe the dance —even though our subsistence is precarious— is a still-burning ember of a brilliant culture, of a great culture we trust will rise again. ★

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