

Community Effort Makes Carnival Fun

Despite the economic crisis,
music and festivities are still
alive and well

Carnival in Mexico reflects the various cultural influences that make up the nation: Aztec, Mayan, Spanish, Moorish, African and modern. The Dance of the Moors and the Christians, dances that represent various animals and a variety of musical forms, illustrate this rich cultural blend that is today's Mexico. Gobi Stromberg de Pellizi is a U.S.-born anthropologist who has lived in Mexico for the last 15 years and has become an expert on the country's popular culture.

In Mexico, *Carnaval* is the time when daily life gives way to the celebration – the enacting and representation of the forces that emanate from the domain of the *carnal*, the flesh and the “material” world. Music, dance, spectacle, theatrical-type representations, costumes, masks, gestures, ritual enactment, staging, ceremony, procession, effigies, food, and drinks, all go into the production and ritual of Carnival.

As daily life is suspended, each entire village (and thus, the “universe”) enters a special dimension of time and space —one of wildness, humor, nature, and the instinct, in which animals and strange beings make their appearance. Some are terrifying, others ludicrous and sardonic: men dressed as women, dancers covered with sheepskins, paint, costume, and a motley of incorporated materials, including shoeboxes and paper bags. The corresponding behavior and staging gives the environment of Carnival its particular character. Wild creatures stalk young maidens, splattering their victims with red paint; men dressed in female attire join male partners, engaging in humorous sexual and lewd behavior; others mount bulls, run over fire, climb poles and ropes, while the community merges with the excitement and suspense of the event. The objects that are utilized include material structures (platforms, ladders, poles), flags, fireworks, dolls, sticks, sugar cane, horses, animal figures, and the traditional ceremonial objects, among others.



The Tarahumara Indians of Chihuahua cover their faces with white paste

Not only is daily life put aside, but the legal, political and religious institutions are also subjected to theatrical representation, spoof, and mockery. The same is true for social conventions; not only the local ones (marriage, authority, ceremony, etc.), but also those of outsiders, their behavior, appearance, and "modernity."

The forms that these events take are as varied as the cultures and regions that comprise the broad mosaic which is Mexico. Likewise, the wide variation in the celebrations reflects this diversity, and is manifested in each community's particular blend of historical roots and contemporary elements, whether pre-Hispanic, Spanish, Moorish, or African, or the spontaneous incorporation of modern-day items.

For instance, the day-long passion play, *Moros y Cristianos* ("The Moors and the Christians"), a version of Charlemagne's campaign to christianize "pagan" Europe and evict the Moors, prevails in the Nahua communities. Among the Chamula in the Maya Highlands, the *Carnaval* culminates with hundreds of men in costume, decked with pointed hats and streams of colored ribbons and flags, running across fire. In others, ancient ceremonies are enacted in which the

rites and behaviour are portrayed humorously and even ridiculed. Drawing on the vast repertoire of ceremonies, rites, music, and dances, each community represents its own. Usually, anywhere from 5 to 20 dances are included, some of which are specifically designated for this occasion. They might include for instance, dances of animals (*Tigres, Zopilotes, Venados*; meaning tigers, buzzards and deer), of old people (*Viejitos, Xochipisawa, Los ocho locos*), of strength and valor (*Pescados, Vaqueros, Moctezuma*), of young maidens (*Pastoras, Corona, Bola*), or conquest figures and other outsiders (*Moros, Chinos, Cimarrones, Gachupines*). All of the dances are imbued with an either overt or implied esoteric content, and are often delivered repetitively, for hours, evoking a trance-like state.

The stage of the Carnival is the entire village. The various events take place either sequentially or simultaneously at the home of the *mayordomo* (the fiesta's ritual sponsor), in the atrium or within the church, in the plaza, at the town-hall, at a ritual center, and in private homes. The Carnival is unremitting, never set in a single place; the crowds constantly move from one area to another.



The Dance of the Crown



The local band plays continuously for days in Xalitla, Guerrero

As is the case of other *fiestas*, some elements of Carnival are European, brought to Meso-America by the missionaries who used them to further the conversion of the Indians, the endeavor considered by some to be the "real" beginning of the Conquest. However, its adoption by the Indians hinged on the existence of certain cultural affinities, a "predisposition", or a coincidence between the existing and adopted (or even imposed) elements; a requisite for the adoption and the persistence through time of any new form. Carnival in Europe, still considered to be a "pagan" fest, is pre-Christian; while tolerated, what remains still

Aztec and Maya New Year (according to Sahagún), or at any time between the celebration of the Dead and of the Resurrection. In a few Mexican villages Carnival is even held during Holy Week, and as in most Mexican celebrations, includes some of the Holy Week elements, particularly the fertility and purification rites.

Before the Conquest, each of the 20-day Aztec and Maya months was associated with a deity in whose honor a monthly *fiesta* was performed, as well as a myriad of moveable feasts. We have detailed accounts of these *fiestas*



Photo by Andrea Carli

Dancers wear black and emerald plume and colored ribbons for the "Dance of the Crown"

exists outside the ecclesiastical confines. It may have had its origins as an end-of-winter celebration, the termination of the darkness, although it coincidentally precedes the Holy Week Celebration of the Resurrection. Through the rituals of the *carnal*, it provides a bacchanalian catharsis or discharge prior to the Atonement.

In the case of pre-Hispanic and contemporary Mexico, the issue is much more complex. While in many places Carnival is celebrated at the same time that it is in Europe, it often takes place in Mexico on the 2nd of February, the

provided by Bernardo Sahagún and Fray Diego Durán, among others, that describe elaborate purification and fertility rites, including cleansing ceremonies with water, smoke, and fire, ritual dances, chants, offerings, and human sacrifice. What is now known as *Carnaval* can be associated with the five days that remain from the 260-day pre-Hispanic calendar. Known among the Aztecs as the *nemontemi*, they were the superfluous, left-over days of bad luck and of non-being and coincide with the days between the 28th of January and the First of February. February 2nd marks the beginning of

the Aztec New Year, and is also the *Día de la Virgen de la Candelaria* and the day that the image of the Christ child, which many villagers keep in their homes, is taken by the image's owners and "godparents", to church to be baptized.

In spite of its spontaneous and wild appearance, Carnival does not just "happen"; it requires a singular, physical and economic effort by a large number of people. The preparations take place many months in advance. Certain elements, like the dances and the music, are learned and rehearsed on an ongoing basis and performed at other *fiestas*. Because of the dimension of the celebration, which includes not only the entire community, but many visitors, relatives and friends, the mere procuring of the necessary food and drink, aside from the music, fireworks, effigies, dolls, ritual offerings, flags, and the myriad of other items, represents an enormous effort by many.

Food represents one of the particularly ritual aspects. What is served adheres to the traditional and ceremonial prescriptions. *Mole* is the most commonly served ritual meal, although other ritual dishes also exist, such as *pozole*, meat broths, tamales, etc. Generally, the *mole* and the beans and rice are still cooked in huge clay vats on an open fire in the patio of the *mayordomo* and served on large tables or on *petates* (palm matting) on the floor to groups of 20-30 people, each in turn. Priority is given to feeding the most active participants and visitors. Some villages slaughter

one of the community's cattle to insure ample supply for those who travel to attend the celebration. All, and often the entire community, many hundreds, are fed at the *mayordomo's* home.

The preparation is elaborate. The *mayordomo's* wife is assisted by a small group of women who are bound by their *cargo* (socio-ritual position); but the actual preparation requires usually from 20 to 50 women to grind each of the many ingredients for the *mole*. The drink likewise, follows the traditional and ceremonial prescriptions; whether it be the Maya *posh* (made from maize and honey) or the Aztec *pulque* (made from maguey). Each community also uses its local recipes of blends and herbal *curados* (fermented fruit beverages).

Furthermore, the communities capacity to produce the Carnival depends largely upon the existence of the local social and economic institutions that make the organization of this highly-complex event possible. Like most other Mexican *fiestas* and ceremonies, the Carnival depends heavily on the *mayordomía*, the system of positions and responsibilities whereby certain villagers, often those who have been more prosperous or have demonstrated a particular capacity, are accorded by the community certain key organizational roles and a share of the economic burden; the provision and preparation of the great quantity of food for the musicians, dancers, and other participants, or for the entire village.



Photo by Francesco Pellizzi

Chamula Indians congregate in the church atrium with colored flags

When not the responsibility of the *mayordomía*, The Carnival's productions may fall within the domain of the local authorities —the *Municipio* or the *Comisaría* wherein the local officials assume the duties and responsibilities of the *mayordomos*, collecting the financial contributions, organizing events, and preparing the food.

Those responsible for a major *fiesta* like the Carnival have most likely already gone through a whole series of ascending positions or *cargos*, depending on the relative rank of the Carnival in comparison to the other

instruction, the collaboration of the musicians and rehearsals. The musicians are available for these *fiestas* either by payment of through a system whereby they fulfill a community *cargo* precisely by playing at the *fiestas*, and are exempt from their communal work obligations. Playing continuously for several days requires considerable stamina, which is fortified with a good supply of alcohol.

Thus, a not so visible but central feature of the Carnival is precisely the affirmation of the collective body which functions and operates as a unit. Through the strength of its organizational existence, the social unit is able to meet and overcome economic hardships independently from the dominant political and economic conditions and structures, for which the interests of the community may not be the central priority.

Contrary to the supposition that popular *fiestas* are on the wane, recent years have seen an upsurge and spread of *Carnaval*. Yet, the current economic crisis that has so strikingly affected the economies of the rural populations, presents a serious threat to the communities and to the celebrations that represent their identity as such. As the crisis intensifies, the *fiestas* have become harder to produce as the villages' meager surpluses vanish and increasingly large numbers of men (and women) leave in a desperate search for a living, either in the cities or as agricultural laborers, in other regions of the country or in the United States. Still, the luckier ones send back money not only to their families, but also to their communities, precisely through the *fiesta cargo* system. Many fulfill other *mayordomía* tasks as well, even when they are not able themselves to return to the *fiesta*. In these cases their relatives represent them in the ceremonial and ritual roles.

Tino López, a young master potter, friend and anthropological informant, appeared last year in his native Tlayacapan, Morelos, after six months' absence, on the opening day of Carnival. He explained to a group of students from the National School of Anthropology that in five days he would return to his job in Los Angeles. "All of us who are up there in the North come back home at least once a year for our *fiesta*; to be here, with our family and our pueblo."

As the rural communities have suffered increasing impoverishment over the past years, the outside observer may consider the *fiestas* and Carnivals to be an unjustified extravagance. In fact, *fiestas* distribute the limited wealth to the poorer. "Venga, aunque sea por esta vez, vamos a comer." (Come, at least for now, we shall eat.), has many subtle implications. Carnival is one of the many ways that Mexican people creatively transcend the different levels of life's trials and hardship. ★

Gobi Stromberg de Pellizzi



Photo by Andres Carli

A Huezquixtle, male in female attire, carries a rolled-up *petate* (palm-woven mat)

fiestas in each particular community. The hierarchy of the *fiesta* determines the rank of its ritual sponsor, and Carnival is always high in the list.

The dances, spectacles, theatrical and other representations are organized independently, usually by the older men or women, who seek out the adults or children whom they feel would be good participants, and organize