The Dance of the *Tastoanes*
An Expression of Indigenous Dignity

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In July, several indigenous communities in Mexico's state of Jalisco carry out celebrations in honor of the Christian figure, James the Apostle. The preparations take all year; members of the community make complicated masks and disguises; they rehearse with the actors and dancers who are to perform; they organize their own security; and, despite their own economic limitations, they use their ingenuity to raise considerable sums of money to pay festivity expenses.

The town of San Juan Ocotán, Jalisco, celebrates the day of James the Apostle on July 25. An "overseer"[1] is in charge of organizing this festivity around the figures of Christian saints. These celebrations involve both pre-Hispanic and Spanish cultural elements. An interesting example of the revaluing of the indigenous identity as well as of cultural syncretism is the "Dance of the *Tastoanes*."

Clay mask used in the dance.

Its origins are said to be rooted in a unique legend: the kingdom of Tonalá, in what is today Jalisco, was governed by Queen Tzaponzintli, who receives word that the conquistador Nuño de Guzmán, famous for his savagery in battle, is about to invade her lands.

Tzaponzintli, overwhelmed by the news, prepares a splendid reception for the conquistador, secretly hoping that her friendliness will blunt Nuño de Guzmán's fury and make him spare the lives of her people. However, the *tastoanes*, or captains of the realm, consider the queen's decision cowardly and they conspire together to oppose Nuño de Guzmán's forces. But, the Spaniards, forewarned of the conspiracy, prepare to vanquish the *tastoanes*.

* Mexican art and dance critic.

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The effects of Catholic evangelism can be seen at the end of the story: at the height of the battle many Tonaltecs see the image of James in the sky, frightening the *tastoanes* and aiding in the victory of Spain and Christianity over the indigenous people.

The *tastoanes* are played by nearly 60 men dressed as Spanish and French soldiers. This seems perplexing, but it should be remembered that in the first years of the conquest, indigenous people worked at different jobs and could accumulate certain sums of money, allowing them to dress as Europeans and even ride horses.

In the New World, horses became a symbol of prestige. For that very reason, as of 1700, indigenous people were stripped of all their rights; they were even forbidden to ride horses. The power of the image of the horse is easy to see in different artistic expressions of the Mexican people, such as dance, folk music and the famous "charra" fiestas.[2]

The actors playing the *tastoanes* wear monstrous leather masks trimmed in horsehair, which must be thick and resistent because during the dance, St. James' hatchet blows rain down on the *tastoanes* with great realism. They are guided by three royal figures dressed in satins and velvets, representing nobility, who wear similar masks and a crown. Another important figure is the Moor, who personifies Spain. His role is to pretend to be a friend and interpreter for St. James, when what he really wants is to sell him to the *tastoanes* in exchange for their lands.

The central character is the apostle, who rides a horse and uses his machete to defend himself from the *tastoanes*. "The captains" of the festival also play an important role as representatives of the indigenous military chiefs, responsible for maintaining order among the actors and for keeping the spectators at a prudent distance from the action. Both functions are necessary given that the players take realism to extremes, and it is not unusual for them to be injured during the performance.

Clay figure of a *tastoán*.

The dance represents local inhabitants' resistance to the Spaniards' expropriation of their lands.

The festival lasts three days. The first morning, the *tastoanes* carry the figure of St. James through the streets of the town on their way to the church. Immediately after, they return to the central plaza where the town priest blesses the ceremony and advises the participants not to drink too much or get carried away by the festivities.

The next scene represents the meeting of the Moor and the *tastoanes*. A group meets at a corner of the church, where the kings of the *tastoanes* argue with the Moor over the price for St. James. The Moor wants the *tastoane* land. With a stick, he draws the boundaries he wants and the *tastoanes* and their kings argue with him. They finally come to an agreement and the Moor gives them St. James in exchange for the land. All this is celebrated with a toast, repeated three times at each of the corners of the church, for which a barrel of beer has been provided. Once James the Apostle is in *tastoane* hands, they beat him to death. The Moor repents as he watches the scene, mourning the loss of St. James, and takes a switch to the *tastoanes* who remain indifferent to his attack, totally absorbed in their savage victory dance.

St. James is revived, whereupon he gets up and mounts his horse. Hatchet in hand, he prepares to attack his enemies, displaying the strength of Christianity.

The *tastoanes* represent the sinners that St. James must punish and purify by cutting off their heads. When they begin searching for their heads, they find only the heads of grotesque animals that they put on their shoulders.

This ritual dance is difficult to interpret: the *tastoanes* seem to symbolize the pagan forces resistant to Christianity, but they wear European clothing. Adding to the confusion, the *tastoán* kings, dressed in velvet, look like the figures of the king and queen of Spain. Apparently, this ritual does not represent the indigenous world's resis-

tance to Christianity, but that of the local inhabitants to the Spaniards' expropriation of their lands.

On the second day, the participants go through the town organizing ambushes neighborhood by neighborhood that last from 20 to 30 minutes each. On one side of the street is St. James, astride his horse; on the other side are the Moor and the *tastoanes*. Each scene is performed to music played on a flute called a *chirimía* and drums. The *tastoanes* make an oval in the middle of the street and the battle solemnly begins.

Dante Barrera

Clay figures representing the dance. (Artisan's House of Tonalá.)

Before attacking, the *tastoanes* show their solidarity through a ritual clash of arms. Then, they line up next to their kings and jump and shout ferociously, performing a simple dance step. The king selects one of them, taking him by the hair to give him instructions. Finally, he sends him to fight against James the Apostle.

The battle commences. The attacking *tastoán* tries to avoid St. James' horse and hatchet. The actors playing the *tastoanes* are not allowed to injure St. James with their arms, which they have to keep in front of their masks to protect themselves against his hatchet.

During the entire scene, the players speak a nonsense language that is supposed to represent Nahuatl. Any *tastoán* who speaks Spanish is punished, except if he uses swear words. They are allowed to pull on the reins of St. James' horse or snatch off his hat to enrage him, and he pursues them with his hatchet. At this point, the battle is almost real: frequently the *tastoanes* are severely injured. Whenever one is badly hurt or exhausted, another actor takes his place.

The *tastoanes* seem to symbolize the pagan forces opposed to Christianity.

The battle ends when the *tastoanes* begin to walk in a circle and strike their knives together. During rest periods in the celebration, the dancers smoke and drink large amounts of alcohol, arguing that the alcohol is necessary since it is the only way to stand the physical pain and exhaustion caused by their participation in the ritual dance.

The actor-dancer who plays St. James must stay in the battle the entire time, unless he faints during the performance. When this happens, one of the leaders or captains takes his place astride his horse and the battle continues.

On the last day of the festival the actor who will play James the Apostle the following year is selected. After a large feast in the afternoon, the participants gather at the home of the one selected and two overseers carry him through the streets of the town on their shoulders, followed by a marching band, while a spectacular fireworks display is staged. Some people take the opportunity to offer vows or promises of sacrifices to God. Others do penance, dragging themselves through the streets on their knees.

The new St. James is taken to the church, where the priest gives him a ceremonious welcome. The *tastoanes* enter the church pushing the masks onto the top of their heads, making an impressive picture: worn this way, the masks resemble monsters' faces looking to the sky for a divine sign. At the bottom of the nave is the great crucifix in the dim light of the altar. Seemingly, the celebration is at an end, but there is one more battle. In the soccer field, the *tastoanes* attack the new St. James en masse. After a brief skirmish, next year's St. James disappears, indicating the end of the festivities, and the dancers, exhausted, return home with their families, taking with them the benediction of James the Apostle. MM

Notes

[1] The overseer is a highly dignified and sought-after job because of its status.

[2] A "charro" is a Mexican horseman, typically dressed in an elaborately decorated outfit of tight-fitting pants, a jacket and sombrero. A "fiesta charra" is a rodeo-like event that includes displays of horsemanship. [Translator's Note.]