



Indalecio Hernández

Flower portals, La Candelaria.

Patron Saints Days in Coyoacán

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The fiesta is a cosmic operation: the disorder, the bringing together of the contradictory elements and principles to cause a rebirth... The fiesta is a return to an estate both remote and undifferentiated, prenatal or presocial...

Octavio Paz

Coyoacán is a place with its roots sunk in the depths of time. It has developed through different complex processes, with breaks and continuities, emerging out of the struggle and integration of diverse cultures down through history. Today, Coyoacán is a vast, heterogeneous, modern place, where the traditional coexists side by side with the cosmopolitan; the community with the academic; the simple with the complex; the mestizo, the indigenous, the Spanish and much more. This synthesis can be seen not only in historical archives and monu-

ments, but also in one of the richest, most complex and creative manifestations of our culture: the popular fiesta.

The fiesta is the result of a fusion of pre-Columbian indigenous practices, the popular Hispanic Catholicism of the early colonial period, official Church postulates

and the incorporation of cultural elements that have come out of the process of transformation that Mexico City has gone through right up until today.

Whether we are talking about a religious fiesta or a popular celebration, the issue is keeping the memory alive through traditional folk wisdom that, although not tangible, is experienced, felt and enjoyed daily.

This tradition gives Mexico City its own countenance. What is paradoxical is how tradition lives side by side with the cosmopolitan, modern facets of this great metropolis. In that sense we can speak of a multicultural society in which conflict and cultural exchange coexist.

On the ruins of what the Church considered pagan temples, it built hermitages, chapels, churches, parish houses and cathedrals. But a new culture of mestizos also took root there and today, more than five centuries after the arrival of the Spaniards,



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Sawdust painting in the Santo Domingo neighborhood.

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Catholic services form part of the popular festivities in the town of Los Reyes.

it is still alive and kicking to the amazement, delight and admiration of Mexicans and foreigners alike.

Down through the centuries in Coyoacán, just like in many other parts of our capital city, a particular form of expression of the towns and neighborhoods developed: the patron saint's fiesta.

This is something more than a simple celebration. It is a ceremony of participation, cooperation, unity and fraternity, an explosion of jubilation, drunkenness and breaks, an expression of faith and, above all, a space for catharsis. With the merger of the Catholic tradition and pre-Hispanic beliefs and rites, the fiesta acquired a magical religious meaning, a sincretism closely linked to our roots that at the same time has become one with modern times.

"The Spaniards brought with them a way of understanding gods, temples and sacrifices that did not take into account that the fiesta was the basis of the indigenous religion: the opposite of idolatry was not the successful imposition of orthodox Catholicism, but a de facto sincretism that mixed indigenous practices and

beliefs with the Catholic liturgy and iconography."¹ The most classic example is Our Lady of Guadalupe.

Let us look at a couple of other examples of this hybrid culture: Xolotl and Micailhuytontli, two Tepanec gods, were worshiped in a similar way to what we now know as the Day of the Dead. Their ceremonies even had a similar name: the Fiesta of the Dead, or Fiesta of the Little Dead. Catholic festivities did not manage to eliminate the entire pre-Hispanic celebration, which gave rise, for example, to what we know today as the "greased pole" game (*Xocoltl*) that in the past represented a ritual of sacrifice and offering to the gods.

Salvador Novo wrote, "The fiesta of the Tepanec god was one of the 18 main fiestas of the solar year... and most probably it took place in that part of Coyoacán that because of its fertile orchards was called *Xoco(tl)*, or fruit."² The Tepanecs were one of the seven Nahuatl tribes who left Aztlán in search of the promised land and settled in the Coyoacán area.

The *andas*, structures for carrying the statue of the patron saint, adorned with



Easter Week in Los Reyes.

flowers and seeds, the personalization of the gods (which today could well correspond to any number of existing patron saints), and the processions were already practiced in fiestas as old, for example, as that of the offering to the goddess Xilonen, goddess of sweet corn.

In this way, celebrations, beliefs and rites all joined hands and dressed up the streets of Coyoacán in bright lights and colors, music and dance and flavors and aromas.

MOST FREQUENT ASPECTS OF COYOACÁN'S PATRON SAINTS FIESTAS

Coyoacán's patron saints fiestas last anywhere from a few days to more than a week.



Jaime Chaitia

The "greased pole" in Santa Ursula Coapa.

Each celebration is planned, generally for a year beforehand, by a *mayordomía* or council of sponsors or stewards (a form of organization handed down from the viceroyalty, whose functions have changed over time), or a celebrations commission. Participants in the commission take charge of distributing posts and tasks, for example, by naming a commission in charge of hiring the fireworks and the musicians, another for buying flowers, one for making the food, the multicolored sawdust and the floral portals, another for collecting donations, etc. Anyone taking on the responsibility of one of these commissions enjoys certain prestige in the community and often, the *mayordomías* become little strongholds of power, making them coveted positions in many places.



Jaime Chaitia

Aztec dance in the Cuadrante de San Francisco neighborhood.

Popular urban Catholicism pays little attention to the liturgical ritual during these celebrations. The priest is seen as a minister of the Church, but not as a mediator before God. That role goes to the patron saints.

The images and sculptures that represent them and around which all the festivities turn are the means to establish contact with the realm of the sacred.

In most cases community and religious authorities come to a certain understanding: the community is in charge of the popular fiesta and the priests of the strict religious services.

In the neighborhoods and towns where these fiestas take place, there are really two complementary, interrelated celebrations going on at the same time. On the one hand is the religious celebration, including masses, the classical Catholic ceremony, prayers and chants and the processions of the patron saints, who, when they parade through the main streets create an atmosphere of fervor and mysticism. Then there is the popular celebration, filled with sounds, colors

and smells in its music, dance, theater and folk art, food, fireworks, the "greased pole" game and the fairs.

At all the patron saints fiestas mariachi bands, or brass bands or, more recently, Norteña music groups sing *Las Mañanitas*, along with other popular songs, from midnight to 6 a.m.

Dancing cannot be forgotten either: the "Aztec dance," a modernized version of a ritual dance invokes ancient Mesoamerican deities; the colonial *chinelos*, with their colorful outfits, half indigenous, half Spanish; and the dances of the Moors and the Christians that symbolically and visually recreate the desperate struggle between these two enemy bands several centuries ago in which Christianity would come out the victor over the "infidels." Popular dances with more modern, catchy rhythms like the *danzón*, *salsa*, the *cumbia*, among others, reflect the incorporation of new proposals into the dynamics of the fiesta.

Another constant is the traditional burning of *toritos*, *canastas*, *castillos* (gigantic metal structures covered by hand with

fireworks), whistlers and *guirnaldas*, that all burst out into a thousand colors and briefly light up the evening or dawn sky.

The rivalry between sister towns is another outstanding characteristic of these fiestas and a big tourist attraction. This is the kind of singular duel of art and creativity between the people of La Candelaria and Los Reyes, both towns with pre-Hispanic roots. They compete in the manufacture of different items used in the celebration. There are the *andas*, monumental bases for carrying the images of the patron saints in the processions, made of wood, steel and other resistant materials, totally covered with flowers and seeds; the *tapetes*, pictures of passages from the Bible relevant to the fiesta made of flowers, seeds or colored sawdust; and portals, large arches placed at the entrance of the town's main street or to the church, covered with the same materials, congratulating the patron saint or welcoming him/her during his/her visit to neighboring saints. They also compete with each other to see which town or neighborhood sets off more rockets during their celebrations.

We cannot leave out the ceremony of the "hurrah," the loudspeaker announcement to music in the town's main streets, passageways and alleys of the celebration of the fiesta for a week before it begins. In some of the fiestas of Los Reyes, like the celebration of the Three Kings, January 6, and of Saint James the Apostle, July 25, this announcement is made together with a procession headed up by



Sawdust painting and flower portal in La Candelaria.

Isaias Noguez



Aztec dance in Santa Ursula Coapa.

Jaime Chaila



Our Lord of Mercies in Los Reyes.

Indalecio Hernández

a musical group known in the town as the *chirimía*, or Aztec band, hired from the nearby town of Texcoco, State of Mexico.

The tradition of the *chirimía* came to Mexico with the Spanish soldiers in the sixteenth century and still maintains the original structure, though with time a pre-Hispanic instrument known generically as a *huéhuatl*, a kind of low-pitched drum, has been included. So the *chirimía* band is made up of two *chirimías* (a double reed wind instrument), a snare drum and a *huéhuatl*. Its ease of movement as it plays and its broad, strident sound makes it impossible for anyone to not know that the fiesta is being announced.

Carnival rides and the contest to see who gets the prize at the top of the greased pole complete the celebration, while food and crafts stands offer the passerby all manner of snacks and sweets.

The saints day fiestas go on all year round in most of the neighborhoods and towns. The dates vary, however, since if the saints day falls during the week, the fiesta is held on the previous or following Sunday. **MM**

NOTES

¹ William Rowe and Vivian Schelling, *Memoria y modernidad*, Los Noventa Collection, no. 80 (Mexico City: CNCA-Grijalbo, 1993), p. 87.
² Salvador Novo, *Historia y leyenda de Coyoacán* (Mexico City: Editorial Diana, 1995), pp. 24- 25.