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Carnival Fiestas in Tlaxcala

Carnival is one of the state of Tlaxcala's most attractive, traditional fiestas, both because of its origins and because each year it brings together folk artists who dedicate their efforts to preserving a centuries-old tradition.

As a festival of relaxation and escape in the ancient Greek and Roman tradition, the celebration of carnival was unknown in pre-Hispanic Mexico. Like in most of Mesoamerica, the ancient inhabitants of Tlaxcala performed ceremonial, religious dances to honor their gods. Particularly noteworthy were those celebrated in the Ocotelulco fief, at the temple dedicated to the god Camaxtli, the main deity of Tlax-

callan. At that time masks were used to frighten away evil spirits.

With the arrival of the Spaniards and the so-called Hispanic-Tlaxcaltec alliance, both the meaning and the concrete manifestations of these celebrations changed, with the spread of Christianity playing a central role. The Franciscans, the predominant order in the state, repudiated the traditional fiestas and ceremonial dances dedicated to Camaxtli, which were gradually lost.

It is said that the way carnival is celebrated today is rooted in rebellion and sarcasm. The hacienda system began to be imposed in the state in the sev-



Los Charros headdresses, a display of color.

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enteenth century. Hacienda owners, Spaniards who missed Europe's life of luxury and splendor, organized sumptuous fiestas and dances to which they, of course, did not invite their peons or indigenous servants. In response, the poor went into the streets and plazas extravagantly dressed, covering their faces with white-skinned, blue-eyed masks and danced with strange movements, sarcastically imitating their landlords. Despite the anger of the hacienda owners, who asked the governor to prohibit these celebrations, the popular dances and their mockery continued. With time, music was added, interpreted on folk instruments, and each town developed its own distinctive dances.

The meaning, costumes and masks also changed so that each region took on its own characteristic touch.

A CENTURIES-OLD TRADITION

Today, Tlaxcala's carnival fiestas include different kinds of celebrations, but it is the more than 50 towns' dances that are the most attractive and popular. Carnival is celebrated on the Sunday, Monday and Tuesday before Ash Wednesday. To open the way for joy, the Friday before there is a ceremony to burn "the Bad Mood," which consists of setting



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The *Las Cintas* dance is one of the most colorful.

The dancers, or *huehues*, are the fiesta's main participants. Thanks to these folk artists, the tradition has not died out.

fire to a paper figure and the “coffin of sadness, rancor and anger.”

Voluntary labor —part of the pre-Hispanic community organizational tradition that survives in many places in Mexico— before the fiesta is fundamental: men, women and children participate in organizing, raising money house to house for the music, embroidering costumes, putting on rehearsals, choosing who will be in charge of serving *mole* and tamales to the dancers and the general public, etc.

The dancers, or *huehues*, are the fiesta's main participants. Thanks to these folk artists, the tradition has not died out. The *huehues*, organized in groups of 20 to 40, form a band; each band is given a specific name in accordance with the region, costume and the dances they perform.

The most representative performances and costumes of the state of Tlaxcala are *Los Charros* (The Horsemen),

Los Chivarrudos (The Rough Goats), *Los Catrines* (The Swells), *Las Cuadrillas* (The Quadrille), *Las Cintas* (The Ribbons), *La Danza de los Cuchillos* (The Dance of the Knives) and the play *The Kidnapping of the Magistrate's Daughter*.¹

The dances can be veritable plays distinguished by their region of origin, their meaning and the costumes and masks of the participating *huehues*. For example, the dance of the snake interpreted by *Los Charros*, has its origin in the legend of a beautiful, frivolous woman who sparks the passions of the region's young men. The people then pray to the gods to free them from her, and the gods, hearing their plea, make the maiden disappear amid thunder and smoke; but when the air clears, in her place is a disgusting snake that torments local inhabitants. The only way to appease it is a dance that uses long whips imitating the reptile's movements. *Los Catrines* is a reminder of the sarcastic



Different phases of mask making.



Ocotoxco huehue dancer.



Huehue couple.



Charro horseman's mask from Papalotla, Tlaxcala.

name used for the aristocrats who owned most of the land. Their costumes and masks are the finest and most enigmatic. *Las Cintas* is spectacularly colorful: the *huehues*, adorned with kerchiefs, serapes and multicolored hats, dance around a post festooned with as many ribbons as there are members of the band.

The *Las Cuadrillas* dancers from San Dionisio Yauhquemecan are particularly outstanding because of the number of *huehues*, their magnificent costumes and their fine, multicolored masks. Women do not participate in the *Los Cuchillos* dance, and so the men add braids to their headdresses to play the women's parts, and their costumes are different from the rest of the bands in Tlaxcala.

The most surprising thing is that the passing of the centuries has not buried a tradition that, despite having lost much of its social and critical con-

tent, continues to be a factor of community cohesion and pride. **NM**

NOTE

¹ The dances are performed in the following towns: *Los Charros* in San Francisco Papalotla, San Cosme Mazatecochco, Santa María Acuitlapilco, San Pablo del Monte and San Francisco Tepeyanco; *Los Chivarrudos* in Santa Inés Zacatelco; *Los Catrines* in San Bernardino and San Miguel Contla, San Bernabé Amaxac de Guerrero, San Nicolás Panotla and Santa Cruz Tlaxcala; *Las Cuadrillas* in San Pablo Apetatlán, Santa Anita Huiloac, San Antonio Cuaxomulco, Santa María Atlihuetzía, San Dionisio Yauhquemecan and San Salvador Tzompan-tepec; *Las Cintas* in San Juan Totolac and Santa María Tocatlán; *La Danza de los Cuchillos* in Toluca de Guadalupe and San Nicolás Terrenate; and the play, *The Kidnapping of the Magistrate's Daughter*, in Santa María Nativitas.

SOURCES

Dirección de Promoción de la Secretaría de Turismo del Estado de Tlaxcala, "Carnaval" (Tlaxcala, Mexico: Secretaría de Turismo del Estado de Tlaxcala, 2002).

"Carnaval en Tlaxcala, la versión indígena de las fiestas paganas en Europa," Tlaxcala Tourism Ministry website, <http://www.tlaxcala.gob.mx/turismo/Tradicional/carnaval.htm>

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Painting a mask.