

LOS MATACHINES

A CENTURIES-OLD

FOLK CATHOLIC DANCE TRADITION

by Norma E. Cantú

On December 11, all over Mexico and Greater Mexico (what Don Américo Paredes called wherever Mexican origin people live), we remember and celebrate the apparitions of our Lady of Guadalupe to Juan Diego, a nahua Indian man, in 1531 on the hill of Tepeyac in what is now Mexico City. The matachines who pay tribute to “la morenita” as she is affectionately called, follow a centuries-old folk Catholic dance tradition. They participate in processions, attend masses, pray rosaries, and of course, dance in honor of Our Lady of Guadalupe. In locations as diverse as Chicago, New York City, Manassas Virginia, Kansas City, and of course all over the southwest the members of matachin dance troupes gather dressed in ceremonial garb that includes a *naguilla*, a vest, and sometimes feathered headdress.

I have attended matachin celebrations in Bernalillo, New Mexico, in the Tucson Yaqui Pueblo, and the Virgen de Guadalupe celebration in the Kansas City area where I documented ten different matachin groups that hailed from Texas as well as various Mexican states like Zacatecas, Coahuila, Nuevo León, and Michoacán. Most of my work has centered on the Matachines de la Santa Cruz in Laredo, Texas. In northern Mexico and Texas we find los matachines “de la flecha” who carry a stylized bow and arrow and a *maraca*, a rattle. On December 11, we can watch ceremonies from Mexico City’s basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe as a number of celebrities pay homage to Our Lady as she is affec-



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tionately called. Also gathered at the grounds of the shrine are hundreds of matachin and other *danzante* groups that have come in procession to honor and celebrate her.

In San Antonio, also on December 11, on the grounds of San Fernando Cathedral as well as in various parishes, we can see the matachines show their devotion and uphold a tradition that has been here for at least 200 years. Richly attired, the matachines dance for *la Virgen*. Most troupes dance *la novena*, dancing for 9 days prior to December 11, and some *la docenaria*, that is they begin the daily dance on December 1 and culminate on an all-night vigil or at least hours-long dancing on the 11th.

The indigenous peoples of the Americas held ritual dance events to honor deities and significant events. One theory holds that the Tlaxcalteca people that came with the Spanish and *criollos* to what is now Tamaulipas, Nuevo Leon, Coahuila and Texas brought the matachin tradition with them. The music, dance steps, and musical instruments used for the celebration point to a syncretic blending of indigenous and Spanish elements to create the core *sones*, or tunes. For the matachines de la flecha and de la palma, the one essential musical instrument, the drum, keeps the rhythm and plays a key role in the event, while in the New



Mexico Pueblo tradition as well as in the Arizona Yaqui tradition, the violin serves the same function.

Dancers join a matachin dance troupe for a number of reasons, such as to pay back a vow or a promesa, as thanksgiving for a favor granted, such as health, or even to have paid off a mortgage. The majority of dancers belong to families whose members have been dancing for decades; the tradition has passed from parent to child for generations. That is the case with the Ortiz family in Laredo, Texas whose Matachines de la Santa



Los Matachines de la Santa Cruz de la Ladrillera of Laredo, TX recently received a National Heritage Award from the National Endowment of the Arts.

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The group traces its origins to the 1800s to a mining area in Central Mexico, and then to Las Minas along the US-Mexico border, before establishing the tradition in Laredo in the early 20th century.

BIO: Norma E. Cantú is Murchison Professor in the Humanities at Trinity University, San Antonio, Texas. A prolific writer, activist and researcher of Mexican American folk life and literature, she is also on the Esperanza's Conjunto de Nepantleras.

Note: See back page for details on a livestream discussion on Dec. 12th of the Matachines-facilitated by Dr. Norma Cantú.

When People Confuse

Continued from Page 2

old women can get away with—knee-slapping howls and a few squirts of piss because why keep it in? They double over, tears streaming down their mysterious faces. They shake and dance. They howl and whistle. In the moonlight it becomes more evident just how old they are. The mountains tremble a little with all the commotion. Too much fun can set off earthquakes. The two give each other knowing looks and begin to quiet down.

In the chill of the night, they curl up with one another until it is impossible to know where one begins and the other ends. They watch the fire until it recedes into a faint glow. At dawn, the sky grows pink, and they disentangle themselves from each other. They dust off their cloaks and veils.

They set out on the path back to civilization, and Mary becomes wistful. “I do wish they’d give me more color and personality. At the very least restore me to my brown skin.”

Guadalupe squeezes her hand. “You know I’m not really offended that they call me by your name, right? I’m just glad they call me by whatever name they need me to be.”

They nod in unison.

“May they shelter in our cloaks.”

“May they feel the warmth of our arms as close as their very heartbeat.”

“May they allow us to hold them and carry them through the changes to come.”

“We are here. What need could there be for fear?”

They reach the place on the path where their courses diverge. They slide into their cloaks and drape their veils over their heads, restoring their youthful appearances.

It’s just easier that way for now.

BIO: Alicia Enciso Litschi, Ph.D. offers psychotherapy in Austin, TX. Alicia works from a mind-body-soul approach, providing an integrative and intuitive perspective on the healing process.

EDITOR’S NOTE: *This issue of La Voz is dedicated to the Feast Day of Our Lady of Guadalupe whom we call on to bless our community in these trying times.*



Fire Side by James Roderick