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Dancing in the *Altiplano*: K'iche' Maya Culture in Motion in  
Contemporary Highland Guatemala

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree  
Doctor of Philosophy

in

Art History, Theory, and Criticism

by

Rhonda Beth Taube

Committee in Charge:

Professor Grant Kester, Chair  
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Professor Eric Van Young

2009

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University of California, San Diego

2009

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- 2006 "Ritual Performance, Pageantry, and Ceremony in Ancient Mesoamerica" with Dr. John M.D. Pohl, College Art Association, Boston, February 24<sup>th</sup>.
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Nestled deep in the heart of the western highlands, Momostenango, Guatemala, is home to a variety of customary, ritual dance-dramas. These include the *Baile de la conquista*, the Dance of the Conquest or the *Baile de los Mexicanos*, the Dance of the Mexicans that are performed during the *féria*, the public festival dedicated to Santiago Apóstol, the patron saint of the community. Recently, however, new dances have gained considerably in popularity. Locals refer to these dances as *convites*, “invitation” dances or *disfraces*, “disguises.” Unlike the traditional dances that emphasize continuity and tradition, these new dances highlight change and innovation. Rather than relying on a script or practiced institution to guide them, the *disfraces* derive their inspiration from ever changing North American mass media and popular culture. They feature costumes that draw from film and television, including such characters as Batman, Freddie Kruger, and even Barack Obama.

This work explores how the contemporary events in Guatemala, such as the recently ended armed conflict, the consolidation and spread of globalized mass culture, and the rise of transnational migration to the United States have contributed to the development of the *disfraces* dances. It also questions how foreign images produce local meanings during the *féria* and which meanings are shared within society. The *disfraces* articulate a range of perspectives regarding current society. In addition to functioning as comic, festive events that feature foreign elements, these dances also operate as a site for the production of identity by signifying gender, class and ethnic affiliation. The organizational structure of the dance societies, the days on which the dances appear, and the types of costumes the dancers wear symbolize their place within society and how they

connect to the outside world. Whether one is Ladino, the dominant class, K'iche' Maya, or female, the dances will have different costumes and meanings. The dances reflect tensions that exist in society and function as a means of articulating difference.

## INTRODUCTION TO K'ICHE' MAYA HIGHLAND GUATEMALA

In July and August of 2004 I was studying the K'iche' Mayan language with my instructor Don Antonio from the western highland town of La Nueva Santa Catarina Ixtahuacan, nicknamed Alaska because it is the highest and coldest point along the pan-American highway.<sup>1</sup> Don Antonio was describing to me all of the different types of *fantasmas*, or ghosts, that continue to meddle in the lives of humans. There was *charakotel*, the ghost that haunts the crossroads, *ajtonka'*, who is invisible but can still make its presence known, and *cha'r ka't*, that can make objects move when it seems no one is there. But by far, the one that scared him the most was *chu ki*, a small child-like phantom that wreaked havoc everywhere it went, even sometimes killing. Don Antonio explained how *chu ki* gave him nightmares and his wife would often wake him up in the middle of the night when he was screaming in his sleep from fear of this terrible troublemaker. I was focused on writing all of this down, when he asked me if *chu ki* was still a problem in the United States. I stopped and sat confused for several minutes, while Don Antonio described in more detail how he had first seen *chu ki* on cable television and knew he was originally from the US. It finally dawned on me that he was referring to Chucky, the menacing character from the North American cult film Child's Play.

Our brief lack of communication, or slippage, had to do with my own incorrect expectations and assumptions regarding the level of awareness members of K'iche' society who live in small villages would have of the outside world. I was caught off guard with the idea that we could be discussing a character derived from North American mass media as opposed to an ancient, pre-Hispanic specter whose

alarm and fright continued through the years by means of rural lore. I had not expected to come across an indigenous form of knowledge regarding the nature of Don Antonio's experience in a globalized, wired world. This is a perspective that also maintains what Ed Fischer (2001) refers to as "cultural logic," interpreted from a specific, cultural site of understanding, one that regulates K'iche' social life and is borne out of locally produced definitions.

Don Antonio's idea of Chucky was real, and completely different from the fictional character and antagonist of the North American films with whom I was familiar. His type of translation of Chucky appears in other forms of popular culture in highland Guatemala, for example in the religious dances performed to commemorate and honor the patron saint of the community (Figs. I.1 and I.2).



Figure I.1 Chucky and the Bride of Chucky performed at a *disfraz* dance, Momostenango, 2008



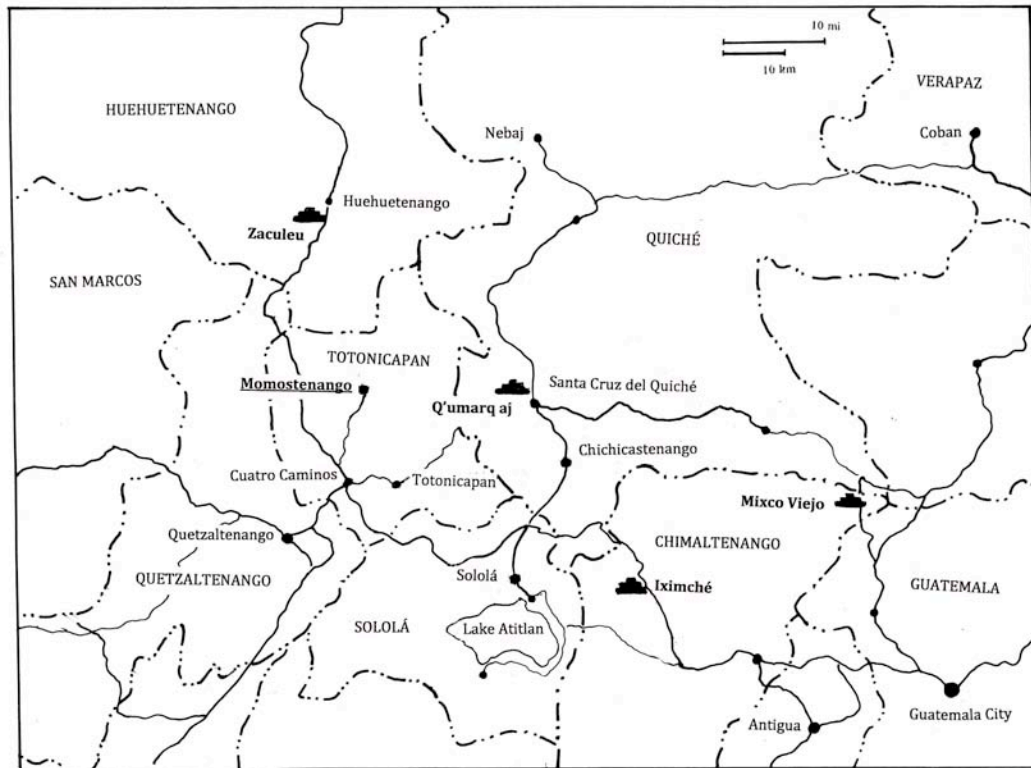


**Figure I.2 Small moving theaters feature films from North America during *féria*. Seed of Chucky is one of the featured films.**

Hearing his story and seeing these other manifestations of Chucky caused me to question whose version of knowledge counts in highland Guatemala, and what do these different types of knowing have to do with place, culture, ethnicity, and power. Don Antonio's Chucky provides an example of what Arturo Escobar (2008, 12) refers to as "border thinking," assessments of lived reality from the margins. His Chucky caused me to think more about how non-European forms of thought and interaction are equally valid and how they sometimes develop in this way, as part of the process of living on the edges of the "modern world." Although I moved on from La Nueva Santa Catarina Ixtahuacan to Momostenango in my research, many of these same questions and reflections persisted.

## Introduction to the Region and Momostenango

In an isolated area of highland Guatemala lies the Maya community or *municipio*, of Santiago Momostenango (Fig. I.3).



**Figure I.3** Map of the Western Highlands of Guatemala

Situated in the *departamento* (county) of Totonicapán, “Momos” is a standard rural Guatemalan town: scenic and rugged mountains, plush *milpas* and verdant woodlands surround it, and entrance requires patience and ballast while crossing the gully covered gravel roads through the mountains (Fig. I.4).



**Figure I.4 View of Momostenango, Guatemala**

The name Momostenango hints at the ancient and sacred nature of the community; *momoztli*, the root of the word is Nahuatl for “altar of the idols” or “shrine,” and *tenango* refers to “place of,” suggesting a rich and venerable spiritual life (Fig I.5) (Tedlock 1982, 16). Each year at the end of July and beginning of August the



**Figure I.5 The sacred, ancient Momoztli shrine from which the town derives its name.**

town hosts a festival honoring their beloved patron saint, Santiago Apóstol, and during this event the bucolic village briefly transforms into a bustling metropolis. The road to town does not clog up with automobiles and overloaded buses, nor is there any difficulty finding a space to park; yet, on reaching the periphery of town, the hum of activity is a preview of the cavalcade of sights, sounds, and smells in store at the *plaza central*. Like nearly every indigenous community in the western highlands, Momos boasts a special festivity that combines a stream of carnivalesque celebrations with simultaneous religious ceremonies (Fig I.6).



**Figure I.6** The market in Momostenango during *féria*

Momostenango is one of eight predominately monolingual K'iche' speaking *municipios* in the *departamento* of Totonicapan, Guatemala (Tedlock 1982, 13).

While the *cabecera*, or town center, is home to approximately 15,000 people, the *municipio* that includes four distinct *barrios* and thirteen official *aldeas*, or subdivisions, has a total population of around 110,000 people (Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy 2006, 5).<sup>2</sup> Today ninety-eight percent of the residents are indigenous, with eighty percent living in poverty and thirty percent in extreme poverty (*ibid.*). Over half of the population, fifty-nine percent, are still illiterate in both K'iche' and Spanish (Carmack 1995, xviii). This is not surprising, as Guatemala ranks among the lowest of all Central American countries in general quality of life; it is classified by the World Bank as a "low to middle" income country, but among this category, has one of the highest economic disparities between rich and poor (Carmack 1995, xix; Dunn 2000, 109). However, in spite of its lack of economic wealth, Momostenango is home to an opulent cultural heritage.

Momostenango boasts a long-standing and widespread reputation as home to a community of fierce soldiers. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Momostecans had gained a reputation for dissenting against Spanish administrators and "dominating religious figures" (Tedlock 1982, 20). In 1824, the citizens of Momostenango joined a rebellious movement that would allow México to take possession of the western highlands. Their courage and determination brought the land grant that created the local territory, El Palmar, in 1871 (Tedlock 1982, 20-21). What these events imply is Momostenango's political conservatism and their status as a population of warriors; the community escaped the worst of the counter-insurgency war of the 1980's, and was never a stronghold of guerilla activity. In fact, the

government of Guatemala gave Momostenango favored treatment for its loyalty to past military regimes (Carmack 1995, xviii).

In addition to bearing repute as home to political and civil combatants, Momostenango also maintains a status as a major ceremonial center dating to before the Spanish conquest (Tedlock 1982, 1). Its principal importance among anthropologists comes from its prominence as a place that rigidly adheres to tradition. Many scholars celebrate and investigate Momos for its unusual “folk-Catholicism” that preserves much of its native flavor. In fact, it boasts close to a thousand functioning Daykeepers, religious specialists responsible for keeping the count of days according to the ancient, sacred ritual almanac (Garrett Cook, pers. com. August 2, 2009). Like other K’iche and Ixil communities, Momostenango’s religious calendar functions according to the 260-day Tzolk’in, the Prehispanic Maya version consisting of thirteen numbers and twenty day names. By far the most famous ceremony observed is a new “year” ritual performed every nine months on the day 8 Batz’ in the native calendar. According to Barbara Tedlock (1982, 13), this is the “largest and best-known ritual in all of Mesoamerica that is scheduled according to the Prehispanic calendar.”

Various scholars often cite the use of the indigenous calendar as a reason for the strong sense of “traditionalism” that pervades Momostecans’ lifestyle. In the 1930’s, Aldous Huxley (1939, 192-193) discussed the rather high percentage of Momostecans who served as part of the National Guard in the capital, all the while consistently sending money home to fund the recitation of prayers on their behalf. Huxley also thought it significant that Momostecan soldiers preferred to return to

village life in their hometown after the termination of their service, rather than stay on in the big city. As one local put it, it is the “weight of days,” or significance of the calendar, that pulls natives of Momostenango back to their community regardless of how far away they travel. Momostenango’s traditionalism is also maintained by the lack of plantations and cattle ranches that have flourished in other parts of the small country. This has encouraged its residents to continue *milpa* farming alongside the pursuit of wage labor. More recently, Momos is best known for its fine woolen blankets and is the center of wool production in the highlands. Although many Momostecans travel widely peddling their wares, most guidebooks tout the Wednesday blanket market as the main reason for a sojourn there.

### The Dances of Momostenango

In Momostenango there are two main categories, or types, of dances that appear during the summer festival of the patron saint, Santiago Apóstol. They are the *danzas tradicionales*, traditional dances, and the *bailes convites*, the “invitation dances,” or as locals refer to them, *disfraces*, meaning disguises. Although both words *danza* and *baile* translate in English as “dance,” in Momostenango, as in other highland communities, there is a distinction between the two. Locals generally use the term *danza* to refer to performances of traditional, devotional public dance-dramas, such as the *Danza de la Conquista*, the Dance of the Conquest, or the *Danza de los Mexicanos*, the dance of the Mexicans. *Danzas tradicionales* appear in the plaza directly in front of the central parish church, and right besides the *Momoztli*, the ancient, sacred K’iche’ altar. These dances follow a narrative plot, or story, and

feature music played on a drum and a *chirimia*, a double reed, wind instrument brought to the Americas by Europeans that today is generally associated with religious worship. The performance of *danzas* emphasizes continuity from one year to the next through the reoccurring reliability of the sequence of events, the characters, and their function in the tale, as well as the overall consistency of the costume elements.

*Baile*, although also bearing the possible translation of “ballet,” most usually refers to *convites*, an “invitation” or “banquet” dance. *Convites* dances, unlike their traditional counterparts, highlight innovation and change. Like the *bailes*, they also appear during religious festivals, *convites*, however, have no storyline or plot that unfolds before the audience. *Convites* dancers circumambulate through and perform in the streets, as opposed to *bailes* dancers who perform in the church plaza. The participants compete among themselves for the most original costumes, and the individual characters that appear may derive from politics, sports, cartoons, television, or contemporary events, instead of the standardized characters that appear in *bailes*. In addition, the *convite* performers dance in front of the commercial plaza that today features among other things, a bank, an ATM machine, a bakery, and a cell phone store. The music that accompanies *convites* is Colombian *cumbia* or other contemporary popular music.

These two types of public dance performances, *danzas* and *bailes*, feature large groups of participants who dance throughout the whole day as a demonstration of their devotion to Santiago Apóstol. They often occur at the exact same time, and may even draw participants from the same groups of people. In spite of this, they are



quite different in their presentation and outcome. The social character of the *danzas tradicionales* is ethnically Maya in religious content and meaning, while the *convites* represent the dominant Ladino culture. In addition, the *disfraces*, the localized K'iche' version of *convites*, are challenging the national rhetoric of Ladino dominance by demonstrating Maya willingness to engage in contemporary popular culture.

In Guatemala, *Ladino* refers to either a person of Hispanic descent, of mixed blood, or a Maya who has chosen to live as an acculturated Westerner. As Charles Hale (1999, 298) notes, in Guatemala the term Ladino covers a great heterogeneity and generally refers to anyone who is "not Indian." In other words, anyone who is Ladino identifies with European culture and heritage (Hale 1999, 299). Guatemalans always use the terms Ladino and Maya or *indigena*, in contrast to the other. Many of the dominant culture regard the Maya as obsolete, defined by their commitment to traditional culture and lack of ability to combine this tradition with technology (Nelson 1996, 298-299). As Diane M. Nelson notes (1996, 300), the Maya who are transnational, become technologically savvy, learn to read, live in cities, and do intellectual work, are appropriated by and automatically become "Ladinos," indicating this is not a "racial" divide as much as one of cultural identification (Nelson 1996, 300).

#### *Disfraces* dances and media imagery

I first saw the *disfraces*, or "disguises" dances in Momostenango, Guatemala in 2003 and immediately knew that I wanted to make them the focus of my research. At the same time, Maury Hutcheson was finishing his doctoral degree at the State

University of New York, Buffalo, focusing on the dance of Saint George of Rabinal, Guatemala. As part of his investigations as a graduate student and Fulbright scholar, Hutcheson spent a year in Guatemala documenting various festival performances. In his dissertation, he was the first person to record and critically consider the social and cultural significance of the *disfraces*. Though they were not the focus of his study, he provided a brief but extremely perceptive description of the dances.

They are spectacular, rather than dramaturgical, and take as their semiotic domain the contemporary, globalized flow of media imagery ... As striking as these inherently postmodern diversions may be, and as much as they undoubtedly have to tell us about the ways in which the Maya of Guatemala are coming to terms with globalization and modernity, the new *disfraces* performances nevertheless remain closely linked to the “traditional” bailes and dance-dramas, which as a class provide the social and presentational templates on which the new performances are modeled (Hutcheson 2003, 4-5).

I use Hutcheson’s description as a foundation and an underlying interpretive mode for this study. I pick up and begin from where he left off by adding my own questions and observations about the *disfraces* dances from experiencing the event during which they are performed on eight separate occasions over six years in Momostenango.

#### Research questions on the subject of the *disfraces*

These are some of the issues addressed in this study: how are class and gender relations, national politics, and Guatemalan identity played out during the *ferias*, the festival for the patron saint of the community? Are the different dances truly competitive - and if so, are they acting as a social mechanism that reduces tension between Ladinos and Mayans, or do the dances actually increase tensions?

What can we learn about the ways that figures of popular culture and modern historical personages are understood and used by people living in relative geographic isolation? How has that changed with the introduction of video movies, the Internet, easily accessible cell phones, and TV (Figs. I.7 and I.8)? And finally, how is local meaning produced with foreign imagery, and which meanings are shared within the local community and larger society?

While it may not be possible to completely answer all of these questions at this time, I hope to open the field for discussion regarding how dance is used to elaborate complex issues regarding race, class, and gender in contemporary highland Guatemala.



**Figure I.7 Traditional Monkey dancers rile up the crowd, 2008**



**Figure I.8 Tradition and technology collide in Momostenango, 2006**

I follow Victor Montejo's (2004, 231-2) discussion of the possible ways Maya people strive to maintain their cultural essence, or way of life, in the face of a "massification of modern technology" (Montejo 2004, 232). Montejo's study suggests the possibilities for integrating ancestors into a globalized world and makes the case that Maya people and technology are not incompatible opposites. The indigenous people of Guatemala are not victims of technology and change, but rather, are appropriating it while immersing themselves in a cash economy. I focus on one aspect that illustrates some of these changes in highland K'iche' Maya society in Guatemala. How the *disfraces* dances fit into the distinct process the Momostecans employ to articulate their place in a changing, globalized world.

In this study, I use globalization to refer to the transnational phase of capitalism, as well as its undergirding political philosophies. Christopher Chase Dunn (2000, 113-114), a specialist on world's system theory who has written about

the post-war Guatemala, provides two main definitions of globalization; the first entails international economic, political, and cultural integration. The second meaning is the concomitant political-ideological discourse on global competitiveness combined with an emphasis on deregulation and open market that creates a transnational capitalist class (Dunn 2000, 114). Anthony Giddens (1990, 63) defines globalization as the “the “intensification of worldwide, social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa.” In practice, these two meanings imbricate and become reliant on one another creating a situation of hegemonic and international corporate control whereby local cultures suffer. They are not just integrated into the system they become more homogenized. The particular socio-political phenomenon where the events taking place in commodity markets influence local neighborhoods is without a doubt, taking place in the western highlands of Guatemala.

One of the underlying assumptions of the effects of globalization on Guatemala is the loss of the peasant and artisan classes in favor of a new class linked to a global economy (Robinson 2000, 93). As Nestor Garcia-Canclini (1993) adeptly demonstrates, when corporate and political interests have a tight grip on national, cultural production, popular forms of art and culture do not disappear. In fact, they seem to only grow stronger as a means of providing an outlet that has no other space. Although Garcia Canclini tends to overemphasize hybridity, I extend his general argument to include public ritual, as well as artisan and craft production. The effects of globalization have not undermined the popularity of the festival for patron

Santiago Apóstol, rather, they have provided new avenues for expressing devotion and faith.

### Previous Studies on Maya Dance and Other Festival Performances

Prior studies that focus on highland Maya festival performances tend to disregard the *disfraces* in favor of *danzas tradicionales*. Assessments of the *disfraces* have not yet appeared as the main focus of an intensive study. Detractors of the *disfraces* dances tend toward moral critiques of these performances in particular, and Maya society as a whole. Some scholars see the *disfraces* as a substitute for “real” ritual posed by an imposter of mass consumerism. They see the K’iche’ Maya as manipulated or induced by outside forces, forever casualties of foreign powers. While none of these opinions have been stated in print, I have heard this type of comment on numerous occasions when discussing my research topic with a variety of professionals. With this biased lens, those who decry the importance of the *disfraces* fail to recognize the underlying religious structure and accept the creative power and force behind the *disfraces* dances, the significance they have for the specific individuals who participate, as well as for the community at large. Moreover, they sidestep the various processes through which the dances and their costumes produce local meaning.

Critics of the *disfraces* ignore how these dances function within society as both markers of social and cultural affiliation and difference, and how they create a dialogue with the dominant culture. While the *disfraces* do emphasize consumption practices, they also provide an avenue for emphasizing identity value (Bourdieu 1984,

2, 6). Consumption is, in the end, a material and symbolic act of communication. Material products serve as signs for social position, financial resources, and cultural capital. The *disfraces* maintain all of these meanings while supporting the foundation of customary public ritual. They serve as a means of eliminating the boundary lines between racialized distinctions of social classes, what Bourdieu (1984) refers to as demonstration of “habitas.” By claiming access to globalized material goods, K’iche’ Mayas are eliminating a cultural difference constructed through consumption of different goods. In other words, through the *disfraces*, they are attempting to invalidate conventional social divisions and resist outdated modes of classification.

Other studies of performance outside of the Maya region question the degree to which symbolic performances of identity carry over into dancers’ everyday lives. I would flip the cause and effect and suggest that changes in everyday life largely transform the nature of live performances. As I see it, it is nearly impossible to separate the two. In her work on festival performances in the Peruvian Andes, Zoila Mendoza (2000) suggests that strong connections exist between symbolic performances of the self and lived, cultural realities. She argues social hierarchies and sexual identities are made and remade through performance. Though I largely agree with her line of reasoning, I suggest shifts in sexual identities and social hierarchies, on the ground, reverberate in performative genres. While this may seem to be splitting minor hairs, this shift allows me to place a strong emphasis on the lived, historical experiences of highlands Guatemalans as a source from which the dances draw their inspiration. The reality of sexual identities and socio-political hierarchies do not develop in a vacuum formed by a performed, prototypical ideal,

but rather, exist as part of a society's engagement with their genuine lived environment.

This is not to discount the effect live, public dances have on the mindset of the community at large. David Guss (2000) and Mendoza (2000) discuss how performances that distinguish ethnicity, class, and gender often fall along the fault line of folklorization when an elite, intellectual state claims indigenous activities as part of the national culture and pride while dispossessing the very people who originated these enactments. Folklorization in Guatemala functions as an aspect of *indigenismo*, the Guatemalan national rhetoric that the country will not be able to progress as long as a separate Indian community exists. From this perspective it is argued that the indigenous people represent backwardness and antiquity; they function as a scapegoat for many of Guatemala's economic problems. The Maya, it is argued, are incompatible with the modern world. The *disfraces* belie these notions, they are part of the modern world yet set apart from meanings driven by the dominant class, the Ladinos. They exist outside of the desire to see indigenous culture as folkloric, in need of preservation. They reflect the shift to modernity, the change from a local economy that was once characterized by subsistence agriculture and is now moving into a monetized market-driven economy.

#### A Brief Summary of the Chapters

That is the point where I begin this study. It is situated deep in questions that regard different ways of understanding the contemporary world, such as technology, rapid telecommunications, mass media, and indigenous culture's place within these articulations. Chapter 1 provides an overview of the methods and theories that form a



foundation for this research project. In it, I provide more detailed definitions of the setting and characters involved, as well as full descriptions of variety of dances performed in Momostenango and the main proponents of each type. Chapter 2 places the current trends of community dance within a historic perspective. I treat the *disfraces* as a natural development of expressive culture that is historically tied to previous hybrid versions of popular performance. Chapter 3 directly concerns the dances, themselves and the various ways in which they are interwoven with and representative of numerous emergent ideas regarding ethnic identity and social class in the western highlands. These are feelings and thoughts that developed in the postwar years following the signing of the 1996 Peace Accord. In Chapter 4, I consider the role of the costume shops as cultural mediators that produce and regulate the meanings of the dances. They are central figures that are responsible for forging the various strategies mobilized to create ethnic affiliation through *disfraces* and *convites* costumes. In Chapter 5, I look at the nascent role of indigenous women's participation in the *convites* and how this reflects a shift in highland Maya gender roles. These gendered changes are directly related to the events of *la violencia*, or the violence, the thirty-year Guatemalan civil war. This chapter explores how women's involvement in the festival celebrating the patron saint yields novel and unexpected results.

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<sup>1</sup> K'iche' is one of the Mayan languages of the K'ichean family that includes Kakchiquel, Tzutujil, Pokomam-Pokomchí, Uspantek, and Kekchí.

<sup>2</sup> Each aldea, in turn, is divided into local hamlets called *parajes*. Each *paraje* bears the name of a local feature of the landscape, a founding lineage, or a historical event (Carmack 1995, 295-296).

## CHAPTER 1: DON ROBERTO

This work is about intersections, incongruities, and the development of new social structures. It is about tradition colliding with innovation and spawning something unique and entirely unexpected (Greenblatt 1991, 4). It is about the sources of inspiration that mobilize these changes, and the profound effects that they can have. It is about societies adjusting to a new way of life while clinging to the old, keeping one foot steeped in tradition while the other irrevocably steps forward. But most of all it is about the people, the citizens of Momostenango in particular, who feel the “weight of days,” a force that guides them home no matter how far they roam, even if it means they never left town. It is the sense of distinctiveness that is at all times in flux, shifting, growing, and even hardening, but that constantly provides a sense of place. As Stuart Hall (1990, 222) notes, “identity is a production, which is never complete, always a process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation.” The manifold ways in which the citizens of Momostenango construct their identities and choose to represent them is at the heart of this work, and this is my description and interpretation of them as seen through my own experiences. The footing that supports this constructive process is best illustrated through the words of Don Roberto.

It began late in the afternoon, but sometimes continued into the night. The menace arrived and wreaked havoc on this quiet, pastoral community. They drove their trucks too fast through town, broke the windows of storefronts, and assaulted a couple of the local residents. They were gang members or, as the locals know them, *maras*, from the capital city carrying pistols. They left, and the community heaved a big collective sigh of relief, only to have them return once again the following night.

Next time the damage caused by the vandalism and thievery was far worse. Fear entered into the hearts of the population, a community still reeling from the widespread effects of the recently ended and extremely violent national civil

war. This was now personal, the troublemakers arrived repeatedly, uninvited and unwanted, and the townspeople knew they must do something. However, they waited and accepted the disturbances and the nuisance caused by the ominous rabble-rousers, for the time was not yet right.

Then, finally, the appropriate day arrived, *tijax* in the native almanac, a day for passing suffering and pain. Its congruence is determined by a calendar of great antiquity, one that reaches far back before the arrival of contemporary languages, customs, and religions. It was a day for changing the course of misdeeds, one mutually agreed upon and influential. This was a recurring day in a cycle of time that had, at last, reappeared. The townspeople gathered. They waited. Soon night would fall. This time when the familiar and daunting trucks pulled into town, they were ready; they armed themselves with sticks and machetes. In that spiritually sanctioned, calendrically auspicious evening, they cornered the menaces and chased them out of their town, accompanied by their ancestors and the spirits before them. This was final; the sacred calendar destined these events and the priest that locals refer to as “Day Keeper” divined it. The *mara* never returned.<sup>1</sup> [*personal communication, July 19, 2005*]

#### Dance as stories that mediate the effects of “others”

I can think of no better or more natural place to begin my study than with this story. Don Roberto Vicente *abuelo* (“the elder” or literally “grandfather”) recounted it to me in the summer of 2005 in Momostenango, Guatemala (commonly referred to in the highlands as “Momos”). In telling these true events, Don Roberto thrust me into the heart of my research, exposing many of the intertwined threads that I hoped to unravel regarding contemporary life in the western highlands. He revealed to me the significance of community, not just a group of people who live in the same area, but a group of people pulled together through common bonds with shared backgrounds, interests, and relationships woven into one another’s lives. This story reminded Don Roberto, personally, of the importance of his way of life, and that all things have an appropriate time and place. It prompted him to remember to always act accordingly to maintain harmonious balance within the community. It also calls to our attention to the magnitude

of tradition, the importance of adhering to the ancient ways and respecting the ancestors as a guiding force through the routines of daily life, its unexpected tribulations and unaltered sacrosanct events. Yet, at the same time, Don Roberto could not avoid encounters with modernity, or shun the inevitable intersecting with novel ways of life and even sometimes aggressive and cruel behaviors and practices that rise anew. Regardless of how insular the community might be, today there are outside pressures that hold sway over one's small mountain society, forces that invade and compel a response.

This narrative takes place in an example of Mary Louise Pratt's (1992, 7) "contact zones;" places where one feels the effects of a dominant metropolitan culture emanating to the periphery. Located in a mountainous topography and nestled at 7,200 feet, Momostenango is that margin, and its response was to find strength in the familiar, the steady, and the customary, an oft-recurring reaction in rural townships throughout the western highlands of Guatemala.

Don Roberto spent several afternoons imparting to me the significance of the ancient Maya calendar, the meaning of traditional ceremonies to celebrate marriage or to commemorate days of creation, and about the magnitude of nearby locales that bore sacred meaning since time immemorial. He spoke K'iche as a first language, the most widely known of twenty-two Mayan languages still used in Guatemala today. K'iche' is the *lingua franca* of the contemporary Maya world; it was the language spoken by the last great pre-Hispanic empire in the western highlands and often functions as a cultural tag. However, Don Roberto is also an evangelical Christian, speaks only Spanish in the home or on the street, and has college-educated children. Like other distinguished gentlemen of Momos, he assumes the title "don" before his name indicating his

acceptance of European-derived forms of courtesy (Carmack 1995, 265). Moreover, he sports a suit, “western-style” clothing, in favor of traditional Maya male garb. His oldest son, Roberto, runs a business, a language school, and sends his children to the nearby urban city of Quetzaltenango to attend a grade-school level music conservatory. His daughter, Amalia, studied English in the United States, now often wears traditional female native clothing, or *traje*, and is active in Maya cultural revival. Their experiences stretches the boundaries of local life to include issues that are national, international, and now transnational.

#### My place in the community...why I chose Momostenango

Telling Don Roberto’s account of these events prompts me to consider my own role in this project. In sharing this tale with me, he has given me a gift that is now mine to give to others. I mediate the information, formulate the statements on the page, and situate the sentences from my home in the United States; I am the translator, interpreter, and narrator telling his story in my own words and giving meaning to his experiences through my representations. I began my fieldwork in Momostenango with an exploratory trip in the summer of 2003. Since that time, I have spent several summers and part of a winter living among the residents of this highland community, totaling approximately eight months. The townspeople regarded me as *la gringa dos*, or “female foreigner number two.” The only other North American in Momos was a Peace Corps volunteer who also happened to be a woman, she was *la gringa*, and hence I was the second. I lived with two different families over the course of time, the families Vicentes and Pasabals, experiencing domiciles with two completely different socio-economic situations, levels of education, and religious faiths. Before I left the States, I had arranged

to stay with the Vicente family, the Pasabals I met and befriended once I was in Momostenango. Considering the differences in their lifestyles allowed me to articulate many of the issues that appear in this study. They shared their stories with me, introduced me to their relations, and cared for me as kin. They were my gateway to understanding, and I appreciate the sheer generosity of them all. Like Don Roberto, they all have anecdotes about their lives that they willingly disclosed.

### Social Structure and Self-identification – Underlying Issues that Frame the Dances

Don Roberto's story is also significant for what he does not say. His tale makes no distinctions between the members of the community regarding ethnicity, class distinctions, or socio-economic status; rather it highlights the substance and value of local village affiliation over difference. Anthropologists from the mid-twentieth century would consider Don Roberto a "Ladinoized Indian," as he maintains a connection to native society and culture by observing his responsibility in the upper echelon of civic government administration, and behaving as a respected member of the local community (Adams 1956, 24-25).

In recent years, North American scholars question the use and validity of both of the terms Ladino and Indian, as they are not neutral nor do they provide a transparent reality, rather they are both together constitutive of a largely political discourse (Wade 1997, 5). Loosely applied, Ladino refers to anyone in Guatemala who does not self-identify as "Indian," identity here is distinguished by what it is not, marking difference and exclusion between these two groups. In reality, the Ladino population is heterogeneous in terms of religious, economic, and ethnic diversity; they occupy a wide

range of positions from landowners to manual laborers (Nelson 1999, 7; Little-Siebold 2001, 178; Hale 2006, 3). Being Ladino is a self-identifying category that constructs the indigenous as Other. Yet, in all cases, they are dominant in relation to the indigenous majority, they have systematically and structurally subordinated the Maya (Hale 2006, 11).<sup>2</sup>

Ladinos associate themselves with “Western culture” and North American lifestyles and dress and transnational Latino culture, yet in reality are typically of mixed blood, themselves (Smith 1995, 725). As Carol Smith notes (1990, 3), most indigenous in Guatemala are descendants of the ancient Maya, but so are most Ladinos given the small amount of Europeans who emigrated to the Guatemalan highlands during the Spanish colonial period. Both designations are external essentialisms that people do not usually use as a self-identification. In other words, few Guatemalans categorize themselves as either Ladino or Maya. Ladinos tend to refer to themselves as either *mestizo*, being of mixed ethnicity, or *chapín*, a contemporary slang term conveying affiliation with middle-class, urban culture. Likewise, most indigenous express their ethnic associations primarily according to their village of origin and their language group.

Many North American scholars in the social sciences continue to use the term “Indian” to describe people who recognize and associate themselves with the continued practice of native traditions. Although this is a literal translation of the Spanish word *indio*, which is a pejorative term and is rarely heard in Guatemala, its use in English more closely relates to *indigena*, as an alternate to indigenous.<sup>3</sup> “Ladinoized Indian,” therefore, suggests Don Roberto is a native who conducts himself otherwise by disregarding indigenous culture. Nevertheless, these distinctions are not so simple.

Adams (1956, 18) suggested the distinction between these groups is easy to make, all someone has to do is ask. However, these designations are sticky, they are weighed down with a history of prejudice and social privilege. Asking one their social status stirs up problems and uncertainties regarding Guatemala's recent history of socio-cultural relations, lack of economic opportunities, resentment over land-rights, and the dense residue of racism. Notably, these are all issues that did not bubble to the surface in Don Roberto's story.

#### Don Roberto's family's place in society as an example of self identification

The story of Don Roberto's family is typical of the Guatemalan highlands in the twenty-first century, an area that covers approximately 1/3 of the country, but is home to more than half of the entire country's rural population (Smith 1990, 6). Their tale is one that defies easy categorization and questions preconceived notions of the complex workings of cultural and ethnic relationships, as well as the varying aspects of identity formation. Is Don Roberto Maya? Is he Ladino? Is he middle-class, or is he a peasant? Is he traditional or is he innovative and modern? The answers to these questions often depend on who is doing the asking, indicating the possibility of shifting responses not fixed in definition. Carmack (1995, 264) employs the phrase "petty bourgeois Indian" to refer to an individual of Don Roberto's status, a wealthy, potentially upwardly mobile or affluent middle-class native who is part of a social bloc that is successful at challenging the Ladino economic status quo.

The Vicente family lives the "hybrid" lifestyle, making it impossible to distinguish pure ethnic formations, illustrating the potential for the variety of crossings and mixtures that can occur (García Canclini 1995).



### Dance as a metaphor for social relations

In this project, I access these identities through the format of dance and public performance. Although of seemingly straightforward design, community presentations of dance and drama defy singular or simplistic explanations and interpretation. However, their polysemic qualities provide a gateway to understanding a wider set of cultural relationships. In his seminal work “Rites of Modernization” in 1968, James Peacock called for anthropologists, in particular, and scholars in general to pay more attention to representative performances, noting that analyses that ignore cultural public displays tended to “fail to grasp the essence of symbolic performances” and fall short of a “full appreciation of social dynamics” (1968, 256). In other words, we must be attentive to the ways in which dance and masked public performance represent common meanings and values that relate to the social structure of society. How do these dances produce meaning and which meanings are shared within society? Are these implications contested and what other possibilities circulate within the group? Dance and public performance provide the mechanism and language that signify local meaning. These modes of signification have long functioned as, and provided a system of representation for, a process of producing and constituting meaning within the native community, allowing foreign and recent elements to enter into the local social orbit. Masked performance is a site of public discourse, a metaphor for approaching the unknown. It is the particular way in which these dances appear in the community that imbues them with their significance.

The local dances by their very nature are not simply a visual manifestation; they are also embodied practices conveying relevant social information. Groups of people perform before an even larger group of spectators. The field of scholarship called performance studies very often explores the nature of ritual, popular culture, and performances that are fleeting (Turner 1990; 1982; 1969; Schechner 1993; 1989; 1985). Approaches in this field of analysis include the study of animate, yet transitory artistic works presented to an audience. At times, this thesis will be calling on these works, but in general, will emphasize social and cultural methods.

### Recent theory

Recent performance theories and methods of investigation explore not only the structural analysis of the body in motion and the semiotics of costume and staging, but, more importantly to this study, the agency of performers and the cultural contextualization of the particular events. The methodologies of Peacock (1968) Drewal (1992) Ness (1992) and Kapferer (1997) provide a road map for investigating how these danced and public images are bearers or symbols of community knowledge and how these dancers, and their public movements, create meaning for a wider social audience.

### Expressive Culture and Symbolic Action in Three Dances

This study approaches the question of dynamic social processes through the symbolic action of three particular forms of dance (Geertz, 1973). Often colliding in time and space, these three sites, or performance locations, have distinct positions, trajectories, and ventures in the larger collective context of local and national relations. They provide

the framework for identifying the vastly different, yet often overlapping, modes of engaging with the community from which Momostecans choose. The three different types of dances I followed are full of the cultural incongruities of present-day Momostenango. All make use of wild, often garish, costumes and masks of bright colors and dazzling design.

Sacred dance – and dance that is commentary on the “sacred”

The first kind of dance, the *danzas tradicionales*, or “traditional dances,” are sacred events celebrating the mutually beneficial relationship the Momostecans have with Santiago, their much-loved patron saint for the past five centuries. They are part of a heritage that began with an original act of hybridity, the fusing of European and native culture that found a mutual intelligible playing ground in pageantry and performance (Mace 1985, 154; Burkhart 1989). The Spanish institution of these folkloric dances rests on the colonial creation of blessed Catholic feast days as a means of interaction and conversion among the indigenous populations of the New World. Once foreign themselves, these hoary events ground the community within an immediate cycle of renewed cultural inheritance.

On the other hand, the patron saints’ *ferias*, the holidays wherein such dances are performed, are also carnivalesque festivities replete with bawdy behavior, satire, licentiousness, and reckless abandon. They provide a core example of condensed hybridity *par excellence*, the focal point of attention in this study. They exemplify Bakhtin’s (1988, 358) mixture of different social languages in a single encounter, being internally dialogic and set against one another in the praxis of festival.

*Disfraces*: combining custom and innovation

In fact, this is not the only blend or social combination that occurs during these celebrations. There are others that should not surprise us given Momostecans' propensity to bring together unique, often thought disparate, elements of contemporary life, that is the second type of dances in this study, the masquerade *disfraces*, or "disguises." The *disfraces* create a new ground for cultural expression while circling back on their indigenous origins. In her exploration of Brazilian dance, Barbara Browning (1995, 28) discusses the relative similarities and differences between *canbomblé* and *samba*. For Browning, *canbomblé* functions as an invocation, and is notable for the presence of a divine force that gives the dance its religious significance. *Samba*, although reliant on *canbomblé* for its basic form, is instead evocative; the movements of the dancer's bodies provide the dance's meaning (Browning 1995, 32).

I believe this framework of invocation versus evocation is appropriate for a comparison of the *danzas tradicionales* and the *disfraces*. The *danzas tradicionales* invoke the Maya ancestors and deities in prayer, demonstrating the community's seriousness of belief. As a form of expressive culture, they are penitential and devotional while creating an environment for the demonstration of faith. Maya ancestors and deities are brought forth through an adherence to traditional manifestation of dance and worship. The *disfraces*, on the other hand, though reliant on the basic forms of traditional dance, deviate from their sacred content while establishing an equally mythical representation of the United States. Through their artistry, they create a vibrant *imaginaire* of North American popular culture. They evoke or summon vivid images of things not present within the community—though accessible for specific members.

In the *disfraces*, the Momostecans not only combine revelry with the consecrated and revered, but also combine the customary and established with the innovative. For the dances, do not just feature individuals and creatures well known to all, they include the original and the unique, albeit inventive. These dances highlight recent arrivals to Momos, characters familiar to us in North America from cereal boxes, CD covers, and plastic gifts with Happy Meals, and plastered on clothing, billboards, and television. These iconic figures are the new ideal, the *imaginaire* of the next millennium, arriving in the guise of Batman, Blue's Clues, Fidel Castro, Daddy Yankee, and Chucky.

#### Ladino pop culture *convites*

The *disfraces*, with their festive manifestations, appear among the Maya of Momos as an arrogation of an independent, dynamic and vigorous Ladino form of expressive culture, one rooted in the appropriation of Maya traditional spiritual expression, yet presented as cartoon characters—yes, cartoon characters. The Ladinos call their dance the *Convite Navideño*, the “Christmas invitation” dance, as their current form originated in the streets during the middle of the twentieth century as a way to bring happiness and joy while encouraging more local holiday participation. The Ladino *convites* are the third type of dance I explore in this tripartite study. Spanish clergymen introduced *convites* to Guatemala and based them on farcical Iberian theater. Their European forms had no religious significance, yet the clergy translated them into liturgical performances as a means of ridiculing indigenous Maya religious practices as well as native rulers (Sandoval 2006, 16). They also functioned as a means of announcing the upcoming festivals to celebrate both the Virgins of Conception and Guadalupe on the eighth and twelfth of December. Originally, the dances featured wild

and domestic animals, carnivalesque clowns and buffoons, and other sundry characters both locally known and attributable only to the imagination of the costume vendor. With the arrival of television and cinema to the western highlands, various personalities from these new modes of communication began to appear in the *convites*, “reflecting ideas of a new era” (Pedro Roberto Rodas pers. com. August 8, 2006). Today, Ronald McDonald, Santa Claus, Shrek, and Darth Vader all perform together in the same public plaza.

The Ladinos created this pop culture, festival dance to bring joy and happiness at a time that appeared to be politically tenuous, as the country was rapidly moving in the direction of liberal reform. Ladinos in Santa Cruz de Quiché, Guatemala were the first to perform this extravaganza as a means of distinguishing themselves from and setting themselves above indigenous society (Zamora 2003), albeit by using a native folkloric form—the public spectacle. This interconnected maze of borrowing, of influences and inspiration, of manipulation and direct plagiarism between cultures, circles back on itself and reveals much about the tenuous, zealous, and often difficult relationship that exists between these two groups of people. Public dance is now the proverbial stage for playing out the Guatemalan national drama of race, class, and ethnicity, choreographed with the Maya and the Ladinos as the entwined partners performing this tangled tango of identity. Each suspicious of one another, and irrevocably entangled, the Maya and the Ladinos are not, however, on the same footing.

### The Signs and Symbols of Transculturation

The advent of these foreign signs and symbols in native Maya dance provides an example of the process of *transculturation*, the complex cultural transmutation that potentially

occurs when different or foreign cultures interact and adopt one another's cultural products, often resulting in something new and original (Clifford 1988; Taylor 1991; Pratt 1992; Spitta 1995; Miller 2004, 16). Sylvia Spitta (1995, 2) defines transculturation as, "the complex process of adjustment and re-creation—cultural, literary, linguistic, and personal—that allow for new, vital, and viable configurations to arise out of the clash of cultures and the violence of colonial and neo-colonial appropriations." I use the term transculturation<sup>4</sup>, as opposed to syncretism or *mestizaje*, as it acknowledges the mutual processes of influence between different social and ethnic groups that bring about new cultural phenomena.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, it hinders interpretations that focus on cultural influence moving only in one direction, usually from the top down. It also implies active engagement on both the transmitting and receiving end of the synthesis, as influence flows over many courses.

#### Power and the use of cultural icons

In Mary Louis Pratt's (1992, 7) description, transculturation captures a subject group's capacity to "select and invent from materials transmitted to them by a dominant or metropolitan culture." As Diana Taylor (1991, 91-92) notes, transculturation theory does not only concern construction and negotiation of meaning, but also exemplifies political positioning and selection while accounting for "historic specificity and artistic originality". This explanation accounts for the creative agency, socio-political engagement, and free flow of ideas of subordinate groups. As Silvia Spitta (1995, 4) recognizes, foreign influences are invariably present in Latin America and a "new" culture never is achieved but is always in the making. As Spitta notes (1995, 8), vital cultures always transform themselves over time and often under the impact of foreign

influences. The *disfraces* are transcultured events, whimsical and capricious, relying as much on change and variation as the *danzas tradicionales* appear to depend on long established custom. In this regard, they are a form of popular culture, located in between what Stuart Hall (1981) describes as the structure of the dominant power-bloc and the constantly shifting local social allegiances, their meanings consented to at a local level.

The Maya *disfraz* dances are a site of dreams, a location of a kind of existence, or universe, where the imaginable can happen and any couple, however impossible in reality, may appear and perform together, publicly displayed for the community's perception and reaction. In a dance in 2007, Efraín Ríos Montt, the military dictator responsible for the scorched earth policy that heralded the worst period of counterinsurgency violence, and Rigoberta Menchú Tum, the K'iche'-Maya indigenous rights activist and the 1992 recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize, appeared together in a *disfraz* dance as a couple. This was intended as a humorous pairing, and clearly, the irony was not lost on the crowd. Similarly, on January 4, 2004, George Bush and Saddam Hussein arrived in public, hand in hand, cordially hugged one another, and danced together for several hours in the city of San Francisco El Alto, Totonicapán (López Yuman 2004, 12). Meant to ring in the New Year with happiness, these performances publicly acknowledge recent events and at the same time blur the boundaries between politics and parody, permitting us to visualize the unimaginable.

#### Responses to power

As Michael Taussig (1993, 13) notes, “in some way or another the making and existence of the artifact that portrays something gives one power over that which is portrayed.” What specifically then is this power? Is this biting social commentary or is



this burlesque theater and vaudevillian slapstick? Contrary to either view, this is in fact sacred, public ritual and a demonstration of faith wrapped in the guise of caricature and parody, with a dash of cabaret.

Over five centuries of conquest and conversion, Guatemala's indigenous have honed their ability to adapt--and respond--to the varied efforts to change their way of life. Globalization is nothing more than the latest in a long, unbroken chain of attempts at domination. Today, the *conquistadores* happen to be North American corporations endeavoring to educate and to convert--the twin pillars of conquest--the indigenous into consumers. They are the cultural intermediaries of the twenty-first century, producing the lifestyles the K'iche' realize they now desire (Bourdieu 1984).

What were the global dynamics under which the dances developed regarding the process of interaction between the United States and Guatemala? Today U.S. products, tourists, cultural forms, and dollars are ever present in Guatemala. As are the memories of such recent events as the U.S.'s involvement in the political coup of 1954, the land ownership and prosperity of the United Fruit Corporation, and the Central Intelligence Agency's participation in and contributions to the thirty-six year Guatemalan civil war, which included a state policy of organized violence against its own citizens (Dunkerley 1988, 427-431). As Dunkerley notes, the majority of targets and victims of political violence in Guatemala were indigenous Maya. These issues and events are all submerged, albeit shallowly, just below the surface of the social experiences of the *disfraces*. Nevertheless, just how and why did the K'iche' Maya elect to employ some of the most commercialized forms of North American popular culture to express their own

engagement with the global flow? Why did they choose to imitate these specific images and distinct characters of mass media at this time?

The Postcolonial, Mimesis, and Momostenango

Although the K'iche' Maya perform and are associated with the *danzas tradicionales*, they are also appropriating and mimicking the Ladino created *convites* as a site of opposition and challenge to the dominant culture's claims of ethnic exclusion and difference. The *disfraces* dances, although at some level do provide a position of resistance, are not an illustration of what Frantz Fanon famously argued was a perverse attraction to the culture of the colonizer, one played out as a publicly performed internalized self-hatred. In other words, they are not examples of the colonized, or dispossessed group, colluding with their subjugators and attempting to replicate their social forms. Rather, the K'iche' *disfraces* exemplify mimesis as an aspect of what Homi Bhabha (1994, 86) discussed regarding the ability of postcolonial tactics to unsettle the limits and relations of authority. That is, they create a level of uncertainty in the face of Ladino dominance by using the very weapons--dance and public performance--intended to repress the Maya. As Bhabha (1994, 86) notes, "The success of colonial appropriation depends on a proliferation of inappropriate objects that ensure its strategic failure, so that mimicry is at once resemblance and menace." Furthermore, the shift that takes place when instruments of control are integrated into the indigenous society's expressive culture may be very different from what was originally imagined by the dominant culture.

The *convites* dances, intended as a form of social domination used by the Ladinos to clarify their superior, technologically modern culture are in fact destabilized with the production of Maya *disfraces*. K'iche' *disfraces* dances provide the indigenous highland

communities an avenue for defying the anachronistic roles attributed to them as inchoate versions of the perfect whole, while also offering creative opportunities for identity construction through mimetic forms. Walter Benjamin (1978) explored some of these issues in his discussion of the relationship a copy bears to its original. In his explanation of the mimetic faculty as a fundamental human quality, he suggests mimesis is defined by representation.

Nature creates similarities. One need only think of mimicry. The highest capacity for producing similarities, however, is man's. His gift of seeing resemblances is nothing other than a rudiment of the powerful compulsion in former times to become and behave like something else. Perhaps there is none of his higher functions in which his mimetic faculty does not play a decisive role (Benjamin 1978, 333).

As Michael Taussig (1993, 33) notes, the performativity and physicality of alterity, or the compulsion to Other, form major components of Walter Benjamin's assessment of the mimetic faculty.

Taussig (1993, 33, 42-43), questions what this compulsion to Other implies for one's sense of self, suggesting the power to falsify is an interplay with magic and, therefore, an ambiguous power that takes us "bodily into alterity" (Taussig 1993, 40). This desire or impulse to Other, however, may also lead to "mimetic excess," a condition that occurs when it is perverted through capitalist production, and Benjamin's mechanical reproduction, leaving us with a "mimesis of a mimesis" (Tausig 1993, 245-246). The mimetic representations of the K'iche' *disfraces* are not simple performances mimicking North American behavior. The dances, set within a cultural-symbolic religious system, illustrate K'iche' attempts to manage and conceptualize a changing society, while also endeavoring to attain the goal of racial parity.

The K'iche' Maya do not endeavor to challenge the Ladinos through immediate contact and imitation, rather, their dances in many ways decidedly bypass the Ladinos in order to create a direct connection with the culture of the United States. The *disfraces* demarcate and define an affiliation with North American materialist culture, and by extension, assert K'iche' claims to social rights as full members of a wider society usually denied by the Guatemalan dominant culture. The K'iche' are not simply appropriating North American material goods as a means of imitating the US but, are also articulating their place in the global social order. Their acquisition of North American popular culture provides an opening to press their claims for opportunity and equality within Guatemala.

#### Why Momos is a good place to study power/cultural icons and their use in dance

Some of the questions of this study are especially puzzling in the case of Momostenango, as recent anthropologists have selected the community as a place of ethnographic study, either because of its citizens' purported adherence to a traditional way of life, or even as a direct corollary to pre-Hispanic forms of religious practice (Tedlock 1982; Carmack 1995; Cook 2000). Although Momos has no cinema, no urban coffee shops, or upscale restaurants, it nevertheless boasts several Internet cafes, competing cell phone shops, and has numerous cable TV subscribers. I recall in the summer of 2005, calling on a friend at home and meeting her mother who spoke no Spanish, only K'iche', while her brother blasted rap music videos on MTV the entire time I was visiting. New millennium Maya are wired, they are moving from a pre-industrial culture into the realm of mass media in a bewildering and yet disarming way in

Guatemala. This alone, however, does not explain the appearance of technology inspired and North American popular culture in religious dance festivals in a K'iche'-Maya town of 4,000 people. However, as Fiske (1989, 2) notes, popular culture is “made by subordinated peoples in their own interests out of resources that also, contradictorily, serve the economic interests of the dominant.” The *disfraces* dancers continuously create significant events outside of social control that reflect consequences beyond the interests of North American capitalist ideology by offering meanings relevant to the everyday lives of the Momostecans.

*Disfraces* dances suggest a sense of modernity and at the same time are utterly anachronistic. They have ties to dances of the past, or are similar to traditional dances, but circulate around a discourse of the new and the imagined, creating a unique platform for Maya cultural identity, representation practices, and consumption. The *disfraces* revel in entangling characters and genres, confusing allies and adversaries, abrogating North American levels of distinction and hierarchy within high and low culture. They celebrate the superficial and the approachable, displaying a fascination with mass-produced images and common everyday products, blurring the line between the creative and the commercial, the external surface and the profound and the mysterious. They completely disregard narrative structures of dance in favor of an irreverent sense of ostentatious flaunting and display, all to the blasting beat of *cumbia* and *meringue* dance tunes. The *disfraces* appear at the interface between two opposing definitions of Maya culture, as static and “authentic” or thriving and adaptive. They are absolutely popular and exciting. Everyone in town knows when they will start and where and when the climactic moment, or crescendo, will be.

### Ladinos: race and power

Ladinos are the dominant culture in Guatemala, but in reality, only dominate the Maya, a situation that has long historical precedence and one I will discuss more fully in a later chapter. Ladinos do hold the monopoly on the vast majority of positions in district and regional politics, yet are not the nation's ruling elite. Guatemala's national authority lies with an oligarchy of wealthy, white *criollo* families of European descent born in Guatemala (Smith 1995, 725). Although the Ladinos constitute a smaller percentage of the population than the indigenous, they comprise a large, provincial voting bloc that affects the nation on various local levels (Handy 1988; Hale 2006, 48-49). As suggested above, Native Central Americans have occupied the institutional position of Other from a very early date (Wade 1997, 3), underscoring the fundamental political, economic, and social inequalities that structure Guatemalan daily life for indigenous people. Many scholars—and Guatemalans—today accept that biological race is a cultural construct (Hale 2006, 24-25). This fact does not lessen the effects of racism and racialized ideologies that influence and hamper the relationship between Maya and Ladinos. Although many Guatemalans say race really is not the issue, what are some of the underlying differences that separate these two groups, two self-identified, distinct cultures that share a common history and national space?

### A sense of belonging, an identification of place

Wade (1997, 18) coins the phrase “place perspective” to define ethnic difference, suggesting a sense of place is what constitutes our cultural makeup. This is similar to what Michael Taussig (1987, 253) refers to as moral topography; a sort of cultural geography that roots us in a particular time and location from which we draw our sense of

identity. While we certainly see this is the case with either the Maya or the Ladinos of Guatemala discretely, the situation becomes much more complex when we consider these groups of people who occupy the same geographic territory, but also see themselves as separate ethnic or racial types. Their commonalities exist in the shared experiences of day-to-day life, while signifiers produce identity differences through a system of symbolic and social representation. Public dances have become the site for enunciating these cultural dissimilarities. Barth (1969, 10) noted that ethnic distinctions do not depend on an absence of social interaction across ethnic boundaries, but rather, are often the foundation on which societies build these systems. So, even though Maya in their daily lives are distinct in the choices they make about how they dress, what they wear, and how they present themselves, their public performances express an interest in Ladino cultural capital, leveling the economic playing field in both symbolic and real forms (Bourdieu 1984, 177). This creates unrest and what Hale (2006, 11) refers to as “racial ambivalence” among many Ladinos who feel leery of Maya cultural fluorescence. The Maya ability not only to recover from the civil war, but also experience a small degree of social justice indicates a tenacious spirit of survival, one that arouses misgiving among some Ladino populations.

#### Dances of “the sacred time of the beginning”

A prevailing Ladino concept, one I often heard in conversations throughout my travels in the western highlands of Guatemala, assumes that the ancient and contemporary Maya are unrelated. For the Ladinos, the ancient Maya were transcendentally wise, lived in harmony with nature, and built amazing pyramids, the ruins of which are visible today. These prolific and intelligent ancient Maya are, however,

extinct. This belief is combined with a condescending view of contemporary Maya whom they see as primitive, backwards, and often view as preventing Guatemala's economic and social progress (Nelson 1996, 298). In addition, this dual view at once allows the government institutions to capitalize on archaeological parks featuring pre-Hispanic cities, and legends regarding the Maya-K'iche' warrior hero Tecún Umán, who was defeated by the Spanish conqueror, Pedro de Alvarado, as foci of national pride and a means of attracting tourists from Europe and the United States. This casts ancient society in the role of harboring sentimental fascination, while at the same time denying their contemporary indigenous descendants a voice in politics, and rationalizes the years of violent history waged against Guatemala's indigenous.

At one time, earlier in the twentieth century, Guatemala's elite and dominant groups shared a dream of *indigenismo* or assimilation; a culturally homogenous, modernized government reflected in its unified, ethnic collective wherein everyone was equal before the state, as long as they were either *criollo* or *mestizo*, that is (Smith 1995, 735). The Maya, however, have organized to protect their interests and indicate that they are ready, willing, and able to participate in national politics. What is the result of the K'iche' asserting their cultural independence? In terms of the Maya participation in the *disfraces*, this brought about what one interviewee, Don Francisco Arevalo, a Ladino *convite* costume maker from Santa Cruz de Quiché, referred to as a *choque*, or a "collision" between them and the Ladinos. Both groups want ownership and control of the dances. In the past, the Ladinos prohibited Maya groups from performing *convites* or *disfraces*, bringing about a crash and a clash when the shift occurred. The conflict's site of impact provides a showcase for the meeting place of the old and the new, things from



the past and current trends ushering in the future. It is a tool for analyzing Guatemala's recent history, while at the same time exploring its upcoming opportunities, its hopes, and its expectations. The *disfraces*, after all, are not just a way for the K'iche' to shed their history, but offer a way to carry it on towards new potentials that exist within a paradigm of their own making, regardless of what new intruders arrive. The Ladinos may feel anxiety about Maya *disfraces* performances as an inappropriate social enterprise, but they nonetheless are now willing to accept them, even if grudgingly, as a regular part of highland Maya festival life.

### The Contingencies of Circumstance in Momostenango

This study articulates several social interactions and their outcomes as connected to the practice of *disfraces* performances. These are by no means absolute or essential, but are, as Stuart Hall (1996) notes, linkages “whose conditions of existence or emergence need to be located in the contingencies of circumstance.” A combination of disparate processes may create these temporary unities that connect distinct and often unrelated elements. In Momostenango, dance and performance have long functioned as a language or system of representation, a process that produces and constitutes meaning; one that allows social tensions to orbit within the community through a familiar public language. For the *disfraces* to have local meaning, they must appeal to the audience, they must engage and have a conversation with pre-existing performances while creating an opportunity for identification with the immediate audience. Aside from the numerous internally-constructed individual discourses floating throughout the festival, the dances cluster around three specific, repeated themes. First, they appear to be reviving the

indigenous community festival system, rather than eroding it, as both *costumbristas*, practitioners of conservative native religion, and scholars suggest. In personal conversations with several different individuals, both local and foreign to Guatemala, I have noticed concern and dismay expressed by many over the “loss of culture” the *disfraces* result in. Throughout the several years I have been traveling to Guatemala and experiencing the *férias* first hand, I have seen the performances grow. They are lively, injected with new blood and attracting many dancers and viewers who might not otherwise participate.

#### Participation in *disfraces* as an alternative to cargo obligations

Next, the *disfraces* dances provide young men and youths an opportunity to shift the social boundaries and achieve notoriety within the community outside of the traditional modes of status stratification. They challenge the conventional established forms of social discipline by eliding the structured men’s *cofradía*, “brotherhood” or cargo system, the civil-religious hierarchy that holds a monopoly over religious rites and codes, and create new and separate opportunities for public acclaim and advancement. The *disfraces* dances allow men, and women, to bypass the financial burden and physical requirements of festival preparation as part of their *cofradía* duties. This is not the first time some indigenous have sidestepped the *principales* or elders in the community in order to take advantage of an opportunity that presented itself. According to Arturo Arias (1990, 232-233), as the mid twentieth century project of modernization expanded transportation and telecommunications, many K’iche in the highlands sought to consolidate their own economic power through commercial activities outside of locally sanctioned agreements, causing some of the power of the *costumbristas*, defenders of the

customs, to erode.<sup>6</sup> As in the situation today, those that circumvented the *principales* found a way around the pecuniary strain of imposed ceremonial services and religious rites.

Last and directly related, the new dances do undermine indigenous traditional culture. I do not mean to present a romanticized view of culture while sending a warning signal to herald and save an “endangered species.” Rather, it is a confrontation of the current situation in the western highlands. The *disfraces* may reflect the traditional dances, but they take something that is an investment in one’s spiritual future and transform it into something leisurely and fun. I often heard people describe the *disfraces* as *diversión*, “amusement” or “recreation.” In addition, many people have openly expressed their opinions to me that the primary reason young men no longer wish to participate in *danzas tradicionales* is shame. They have internalized many of the negative national public discourses they have read and heard over the years regarding the backward nature of native ritual. They now want to participate in the world that extends beyond the village and the *disfraces* is one mode for articulating this desire and transporting themselves there.

Reflecting on the *disfraces*, I think they are in many ways much like Don Roberto’s story; they are informed by their traditional culture, reflecting a heritage that is always cognizant of its own history. Yet, at the same time, they both confront intrusion and change according to what Edward Fischer (1999) refers to as “cultural logic,” in keeping with social rules and principles that internally make sense. They are also different in one very important way. Unlike the menace, the *mara*, which appeared in Momos at night to wreak havoc and which locals chased out of town, the *disfraces* are

locally grown and seem to be gaining considerably in popularity. Rather than destroying what people value through fear and intimidation, the dances emphasize pleasurable and amusing activities. Both situations, however, have the same result of bringing the Momostenango community together. Within the *disfraces* there are numerous dances taking place and various partners participating. These include the dance between traditional festivals and the new *convites* and *disfraces* within community, the dances between Ladino performers, who take the lead, and indigenous dance groups who follow, as well as the dance between the different conceptualizations of what it means to be Ladino and Maya in the twenty-first century, both from within and outside native communities. This combination of factors contributes to an environment that at times seems surreal and at other times makes perfect sense. The K'iche' Maya *disfraces* dancers wear the costumes that have been taken out of their original context in the US, and reformulate them as emblems of devotion that relate to concepts of play, pleasure, and leisure, as well as spiritual work.

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<sup>1</sup> Since the end of the civil war, *linchamientos*, or lynchings and other forms of vigilante justice through localized, violent action have continued to be a problem in indigenous communities throughout the highlands. Jim Handy (2004) discusses the complex set of issues that contributed to this situation. As Handy notes (2004, 539), these included the extreme poverty of the people and the apparent ineptness and ineffectiveness of the police, as well as a judicial structure that does not at all, or only inadequately address the needs of the indigenous communities. Moreover, Handy (2004, 545-546) suggests the overall failure and perceived illegitimacy of the national justice system in Guatemala is one indication of the country's failure to extend hegemonic state power to the rural areas. He likens Guatemala's *linchamientos* to Foucault's notion of "punishment as spectacle," as the violent acts appear before many and continue for hours, symbolizing putative acceptance of these brutal deeds. Handy uses these events as a sign of the limitation of the state to order discipline.

<sup>2</sup> Hale (2006) also notes that many Ladinos opt out of the category and prefer the term *mestizo*, for mix or blend, or simply refer to themselves as members of a specific community or town.

<sup>3</sup> Public use of the term *indio* has recently been banned by law in Guatemala and is now potentially subject to fines (Maury Hutcheson pers. com. July 28, 2009).

<sup>4</sup> Transculturation is a neologism first coined by Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortiz in the 1940's (Ortiz 1940). As the title of his book, *Contrapunteo cubano del tabaco y azúcar* suggests, Ortiz intended it to be a counterpoint, in particular, to the theory of acculturation. In his opinion, acculturation did not sufficiently

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explain the mutual interaction of dominant culture and colonized in Latin America. Rather, it only accounts for a one-way imposition of culture, from the top down, and implies a complete loss of native culture.

<sup>5</sup> Nestor Garcia Canclini (1995, 11) avoided using the terms *mestizaje* and syncretism, he argued that *mestizaje* tends to be limited to racial mixings while syncretism usually refers to a religious assimilation, specifically a religion one imposed over another. Canclini prefers the term hybridity, as it encompasses the object and the process of mixing. However, as Dean and Liebsohn (2003, 24) note, use of the term hybridity can be <sup>misleading</sup>. They argue that all cultures are to some extent hybrid. In addition, hybridity theory has a tendency to downplay the active choices that people make in choosing what they want to mix and match.

<sup>6</sup> According to Ricardo Falla (1978, 427), Acción Católica, or Catholic Action, who arrived after the 1954 coup, assisted those who wished to bypass the *costumbristas*. One of their goals was to bring about the disintegration of the *costumbrista* structure.

## CHAPTER 2: THE HISTORY OF DANCE IN MESOAMERICA

In this chapter, I discuss contemporary Guatemalan dance expressions, both Maya and Ladino, within their socio-historical contexts. Dance, theater, pageantry, and public drama formed mutually intelligible meeting grounds for the original act of hybridity, the merging of indigenous societies of the New World with their European conquerors. Dance, in many cases, transcended language as a means of communication between people who spoke entirely different languages and practiced widely different social customs. However, Europe and the New World each boasted traditions centering on a rich, community festival life that involved various populations in harmony with one another. This section focuses on three cultures, recognizing that this is but a small window into the variety of indigenous populations brought together in the New World.

First, I will review the festival practices of the Spaniards, as they had an extensive religious festival cycle and tradition of dramatic theater, referred to as a “complex multi-act art form” (McKendrick 1992, 16). The Spanish conquerors and friars were responsible for importing European traditions to the Americas. The Spanish mendicant friars intentionally introduced the combination of Old World dance and drama as a means of supplanting indigenous religious beliefs and practices. Next, I will provide an overview of the dances of the Aztecs, as they were the original culture of the Conquest and the focus of the first proselytizing efforts in New Spain. The initial relationship between the Aztec and the Spaniards provided a blueprint for the conquest and conversion of other Indigenous American cultures, often through

feast celebrations and theater. Finally, I will explore the ancient and contemporary Maya public performances, for this is the primary region of my study. Here I will provide an overview of Mayan activities that will create a historic lens through which we can view contemporary cultural expressions.

The public *bailes*, Spanish for “dances” that generally refer to devotional forms of public performance, and their festivals that are so much a part of the social and artistic life of Guatemala’s indigenous and Ladino communities derive from a variety of sources. They represent a complex repository of Spanish and New World cultural practices that began with some of the earliest encounters between Europeans and the inhabitants of the New World. Although Spaniards, Aztecs, and Maya spoke very different languages, worshipped extremely dissimilar entities, and expressed their beliefs through disparate cultural patterns, dance and performance provided an arena where these very divergent traditions could converge and share experiences. Dance, from all cultures, celebrated past accomplishments and reworked history with each new performance. For Spaniards, the Aztecs, and the Maya dance was a way of “organizing, interpreting, and expressing their visions of the past” (Scolieri 2003, 17). Many scholars recognize that the Spaniards, the Aztecs, and the Maya, as well as other Mesoamerican groups, used dance as an allegorical format for transforming and revivifying history (Epton 1968, Harris 2000, Broda 1989, Clendinnen 1991).

For a number of years, scholars tended to view early colonial New World performance as “synchronistic,” suggesting the dominant and victorious layering of Spanish Catholic worship over indigenous religious traditions (Madsen 1957, Bode 1961). More recently, scholarship has moved in a new direction, preferring to read the

survival of indigenous “resistance” and agency in public performance (Bricker 1981, Harris 2000, Krystal 2001). While both of these approaches illuminate explicit sets of information, neither methodology successfully answers what types of information survived or what different groups intentionally perpetuated, and to what gain. This interstitial space speaks to cultural adaptation and selection and provides the site for outlining cultural logic on the ground. It is therefore important to explore the sources of contemporary dances for specific characteristics in order to determine what particular elements of dance survive from these early convergences.

### Dance in Spain

In Spain, the Catholic Church held sway over medieval and Golden Age theatre as early plays, or *autos*, performed on feast days made use of allegories and fables to illustrate and teach religious principles. McKendrick (1992) noted how *enseñar deleitando*, “teaching through pleasure,” was a dedicated principle of Spanish medieval literature, and by extension its expression in theatrical form. The Spanish conquistadores and mendicant friars readily understood Aztec dance and its concomitant festivals as a means of constructing and negotiating hegemonic power. It easily corresponded to the Spaniard’s definition of triumphant and religious performance that involved the entire population in concert. The Europeans also transported to the New World a number of their own celebratory theatrical events, including *auto sacramentals*, allegorical dramas centered on the Eucharist. In addition, they imported a variety of Spanish humorous pieces including *loas*, *entremeses* and *sainetes*, and *mojigangas*. Illustrious Golden Age Spanish authors



such as Lope de Rueda, Pedro Calderón de la Barca, Félix Lope de Vega y Carpio, Luis Quiñones de Benavente, and even Miguel de Cervantes, contributed to the popular and comic genres by scripting their own *loas*, *entremeses*, *sainetes*, and *mojigangas* to be performed during breaks of longer works staged in Spain (Harney 2002, 310).

*Loa*, which means, “to praise,” was a short dramatic work that could appear during the celebration of the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin, the festival to celebrate the feast day of a particular saint, or during Holy Week (Correa and Cannon 1961, 5). *Loas* functioned as the beginning of any religious drama, either as part of the main play, or as a short preceding it. Eventually the *loa* became separate from the main drama, and had its own regulations and rules providing a guide to its structure and content. It branched off into a variety of different forms, including sacramental, royal, and even private (ibid.).

*Entremeses*, *sainetes*, and *mojigangas* were short comic plays usually comprised of one act, performed during the intermissions of a longer, more dramatic work. They often included music and dance, which differentiated them from the serious theatrical event. The *entremés* usually followed the first act and the *sainete* appeared between the second and third acts (Kany 1926, cited in Harney 2002, 310). The *mojiganga*, also called *fin de fiesta*, “end of the festivity,” expressed a more festive flair than the *entremeses* or *sainetes*, as it appeared at the end of the drama, marked the conclusion, and brought closure to the entire theatrical event (Bergman 2001, 18; Buezo 2005, 21). The intent of the *mojiganga* was to be festive, to be “happier, louder, and more colorful than the rest of the festivity” (Bergman 2001, 8).

All consisted of a series of satirical and farcical scenes that portrayed everyday life and popular culture, such as defiant daughters and cuckolded husbands, presented in a combination of pageantry and comic relief (Bergman 2001, 9; Harney 2002, 310-311). McKendrick (1992, 138) notes they were exclusively comic, simplistic in plot, and placed in settings reflecting “plebian” or lower class folk. While the chief dramatic event featured respectable men and virtuous women, the *entremés*, *sainete*, and *mojiganga* highlighted shady, decrepit, and gluttonous characters of questionable integrity and dubious morals (Bergman 1970, 34-35). They provided a site for popular topics and tastes as well as unsavory characters inappropriate in the larger theatrical presentation. In other words, the audience’s appetite for humorous topics drove the production of the short plays, often outside of the approval of the Church (Harney 2002, 312).

Spaniards, especially on the southern part of the Iberian Peninsula, had a longstanding tradition of using dance as a means of expressing ethnic, religious, and racial conflict with, for example, Jews and Moors (Ivanova 1970, 59). The best example of this type of Spanish celebratory dance is the *moros y cristianos*, which told the tale of the reconquest of Spain that began in 1085 CE with the fall of Toledo (Harris 2000, 31). One significant campaign occurred between the years 1227-1248, when kings of Aragon-Catalonia and Castile-Leon simultaneously drove the Moors south. Eventually Granada fell to Ferdinand and Isabella in January of 1492. The Spaniards commemorated the triumph and success of this event on a regular basis, reminding themselves of their hard won accomplishment.

Max Harris (2000, 32) suggested the earliest versions of the performance of the *moros y cristianos* was probably based on a combination of the tournament and the epic poem and not dances, since prior to 1492, there were very few accounts of mock battles between Moors and Christians. He draws a comparison between the *moros y cristianos* and the numerous 12<sup>th</sup> century poems dedicated to El Cid (Harris 2000, 34). These however, were not romantic ballads merely attended by a stringed instrument, rather they were probably performed epic poems accompanied by dramatic mock battles (Harris 2000, 35). Harris additionally argues that the Spaniards based these presentations on the popular French tournament *mêlée*, an organized, armed fight. Despite its military origins, one feature of the *moros y cristianos* is to incorporate the enemy into the dominant hegemony and live in peace (Harris 2000, 39). According to Harris, “Christian victory is characteristically gained, in the festivals of Moors and Christians, not by superior military prowess but by supernatural intervention, and the victory is manifest not in the slaughter of the enemy but in their conversion” (Harris 2000, 39). This ambivalence towards power is a theme that I will return to later.

Fiestas of the *moros y cristianos* were produced in association with a pious tutelary being and were often celebrated in their honor. They originally coincided with the festival of St. George<sup>1</sup>, as he was the saint invoked during the siege of 1276 over Moorish leader Al Azraq, who, like the dragon, was slain during battle (Epton 1968, 43). However, in Spain the association was with Santiago, who was the patron saint of the battle against the Moors, and later of the Conquistadors. “He displaces St. George in Spain as *the* saint who could be relied upon to slay the Moors,” hence, his other moniker, Santiago *Matamoras*, or Moor Slayer.<sup>2</sup> In Spain, the festival of

Santiago is a weeklong event with much “panache and pageantry” (Epton 1968, 146). This affair was ultimately combined with the *autos sacramentales*, or liturgical dramas that commemorated the Eucharist. Most *autos*, or plays, in Spain were originally designed for Corpus Christi and were later incorporated into other church festivities (Ravicz 1970, 29). Even today in Spain, processions and festivals in honor of Santiago are most closely associated with the festival of Corpus Christi in Spain (Scolieri 2003, 22). At least thirty-two different towns and villages in Spain celebrated *moros y cristianos* dating back to at least to the 15<sup>th</sup> century (Epton 1968, 44).

### Prehispanic Mesoamerica: The Aztec

At the time of contact and into the early colonial era, numerous Spanish *conquistadores*, missionaries, and intrepid explorers turned author to describe the discovery of Aztec civilization, including indigenous ritual theater. Many sixteenth-century Franciscan friars studied the Aztec annual, sacred festival cycle in order to understand its elaboration through public ceremony, dance, and song. Both Pedro de Gante and Toribio de Benevente, or Motolinía, recognized the cultural significance of ritual performance and its capacity to record and present a variety of information detailing various mytho-historical events (Boone, 2000). De Gante was unsuccessful at getting Nahuas, people of indigenous descent after the fall of the Aztec empire, to attend Mass until he discovered song and dance were indigenous modes of prayer. As a result, he incorporated melody and drama into the Christian display (Madsen 1961, 377; Trexler 1984, 193).

Since I had seen this (pagan songs and dances) and that all their songs were dedicated to the gods I composed a very solemn song about the law of God and faith...I also gave them patterns to paint on their mantles so they could dance with them because this was the way the patterns had been used by the Indians...In this way they came to show obedience to the church and the patios were full of people [quoted in Madsen 1961, 377].

Motolinía (1973, 129) corroborates de Gante's descriptions of the significance of colonial indigenous ceremony: "They began to adorn their churches and make altarpieces and ornaments and have processions, and the children learned dances with which to enliven the latter" (1973, 129). In addition, he was quite possibly the first friar to choreograph and direct a New World Catholic passion play (Trexler, 1984, 193). Fluent in Nahuatl, Fray Bernardino de Sahagún took a keen interest in all things Aztec, and in his voluminous study, *Historia general de las cosas de Nueva España*, devoted an entire volume to the sacred fiestas and ceremonies dedicated to the indigenous gods. However, Sahagún's perspective reflects more cynicism concerning the nature of Nahua song and dance, "'And if...they sing some songs they have composed, which deal with the things of God and His saints, they are surrounded by many errors and heresy" (Sahagún 1950-82, 13:81). Fray Diego Durán's *Historia De Las Indias De Nueva-España Y Islas De Tierra Firme* provides unparalleled vivid descriptions of the annual ritual calendar and its celebrations that he considered deep-seated habits in need of extirpation.

Sixteenth-century mendicant friars, such as Diego Durán and Bernardino de Sahagún provide the majority of information that exists in primary documents concerning dance and performance in pre-Hispanic Aztec religious observation.

Unfortunately, Durán's and Sahagún's works often carry information that is conflicting or incomplete. As Max Harris (2000, 75) point out, "the two narratives lack sufficient points of cross-reference." Either alone or in concert, neither source provides a comprehensive synthesis of pre-Hispanic Aztec or post-conquest Nahuatl religion. Moreover, a number of different authors point out the asymmetrical power relations that generated these manuscripts (Klor de Alva 1988, Mignolo 1995). A further complication to this issue is Durán's fusion of, and reliance on, a variety of sources from a number of different Central Mexican communities, as well as Sahagún's own inconsistent rephrasing and additional annotations that provided the information for his Spanish *Florentine Codex*. Nonetheless, the friar-chroniclers' information depends on the testimony of indigenous informants that were old enough and of high enough status to have either witnessed or participated in a number of the different ritual ceremonies they recorded; and thus, they imparted invaluable information that might otherwise be completely lost to modern scholars. Moreover, archaeological finds often support much of the information they collected.

The Aztecs timed their agricultural and interrelated festival cycle according to their solar-year calendar known as the *xihuitl*, or *xiuhpohualli*, consisting of a 360-day period plus five extra days. This ritual schedule followed a sequence of eighteen *veintenas*, indigenous months consisting of twenty days. Each *veintena* featured a particular patron deity and concomitant celebration, comprised of various ceremonial activities including fasting and feasting, public singing and dancing, mock battles, processions, deity impersonations, as well as blood sacrifice. Mexica military traditions shaped the visual spectacle of their festivals. The Mexica's scripted battles

in Tenochtitlan involved “impersonation, costume, script, dance, and a festive context that flowed through the streets and surrounding countryside, engaging all the senses” (Harris 2000, 74). Johanna Broda (1989, 70) discusses the enactment of Mexica myth as taking place within a very theatrical setting. According to Inga Clendinnen (1991, 248): priestly organizers of ritual were “contriving, by very different means, the kind of delirium we associate not with high reverence but with carnival.”

In recent times, numerous scholars on both sides of the Atlantic have worked with indigenous manuscripts that illustrate and describe in their painted form various Nahua festivals and rites. Those early authors who contributed to a better understanding of the *veintena* cycle--the festival round that determined religious ceremonies and performances--and laid the groundwork for analytical and comparative research include Eduard Seler and Francisco de Paso y Troncoso. Seler’s (1960-61) seminal studies at the end of the nineteenth and early part of the twentieth century form the basis for much of our understanding today. Additionally, his investigations brought Sahagún’s writings to scholarly attention. Seler made numerous translations of texts, presented in depth analysis of imagery, and provided an example of tireless methodology, all of which are central to any interpretation of ancient Mexican culture and are still important to scholars today. Likewise, Paso y Troncoso (1898) spent over two decades gathering source material and numerous facsimiles of painted manuscripts, many of which he published, making them available for scholarly investigation. Additionally, he intensely studied almost every aspect of the Codex Borbonicus, including its physical condition and visual qualities.

Like Seler, Paso y Troncoso's work is fundamental to the study of ancient Central Mexican codices and their celebratory content.

Samuel Martí and Gertrude Kurath (1964), concentrate on the structure and significance of dance choreology and ethnology, focusing much of their attention on the interpretation of pre-Hispanic Aztec performance. They were the first scholars to write a book-length study of pre-Hispanic Central Mexican dances, including their character and style. In addition to her work on Aztec dance, Kurath (1960) also established the theoretical and methodological considerations within the field that she titled "dance ethnology." However, as noted by Paul Scolieri (2003, 26), contemporary readers of ethno-historical texts have a tendency to highlight European issues and themes when approaching the study of Aztec performance, and assume Western preconceived notions concerning the nature of public ritual. This is primarily because the same bias is present in the early contact sources. An additional cause for this assumption is due to the striking similarity shared by both cultures in terms of their organization of the ritual festivals according to the solar-year agricultural cycle. Moreover, like the Spanish, representing political domination was one of the goals of Aztec performance, as they absorbed ritual and military choreographies of defeated city-states (Scolieri 2003, 29). However, the motivation and underlying principles of the Aztec and Spanish ritual dance were quite different: it was movement not narrative, and creation, not expression that drove Aztec choreography (Scolieri 2003, 26). In other words, Aztec public ritual emphasized collective participation over the portrayal of a particular storyline or sequence of events.



## Prehispanic Mesoamerica: The Maya

For the ancient Maya, dance and drama represented fundamental beliefs concerning relationships linking people, ancestors, and spiritual entities. The Maya characterized and articulated these concepts through a cluster of activities that included re-enactments of creation mythology, ritual pageants, and even irreverent humor. These events defined human communities, expressed the responsibility of rulers, and rejuvenated the deities. For the ancient Maya, it is clear that dance formed a conduit linking the living to the gods, ancestors, and other supernatural beings (Houston and Stuart 1996). Found among the Classic Maya, are not only meticulous renderings of distinct forms of dance, but also the accompanying glyphic texts that provide exact terms for particular dances. Epigrapher Nikolai Grube (1994), identified and deciphered the glyph indicating dance, which possibly reads as *ak'ta*. After this expression appears another glyph that signifies the particular variety of dance, and among these are dances with staffs, an axe-like scepter recognized as the god K'awiil, and even live serpents. Additionally, there are allusions to a ballplayer dance and military dances.

Until recently, the variety of depictions of dance had been overlooked. Scholars identify dance in Classic Maya art through the accessories and paraphernalia carried and worn by the dancers, which include masks, rattles, and fans. Rosemary Joyce (2000, 15) noted that the objects sported and carried by royal dancers most certainly accumulated potency of their own through time, assuming an heirloom quality. In addition, attendants such as singers and musicians, who play drums, trumpets, flutes, and rattles frequently accompany dancers. However, perhaps the

clearest indications of dance are the poses adopted by these performers, a three-quarter position with arms bent and raised (see Taube 1989; Taube and Taube 2005).

Imagery depicting performances by nobles and other actors adorned in ornate attire abound in Maya art. Numerous media, including carved stelae, polychrome frescos, painted ceramic vessels, and small-scale exquisite objects of shell and stone illustrate aristocrats participating in acts of public display. The use of this variety of materials to represent theatrics, from luxury objects of carved jade to figures in clay indicates that these motifs were available for both the common folk and the upper stratum of society (Taube and Taube 2005). Local artisans mass produced popular objects, such as figurines, and disseminated their wares equally throughout the metropolitan cores and rural peripheries, which must have expanded the interest in and taste for these important ceremonial events.

Members of the royalty participated in specialized dramatic acts in order to publicly affirm their ancestry, identity, and current place within courtly society. Matt Looper (2009) argues royal public performances allowed rulers a platform for demonstrating forged political alliances while also displaying their monopolies on the trade of foreign, luxury goods. Moreover, he suggests that royal pageantry and performance was directly related to a variety of pre-Hispanic socio-political realities, such as privileges related to rank and status.

From numerous magnificent works of art located in such renowned Classic Maya centers as Copan, Palenque, and Yaxchilan, it is apparent that rulers, additionally, frequently identified with and embodied gods, representing their unique link to the supernatural world (Houston and Stuart 1996, Houston and Stuart 1998).

Maya kings often impersonated and embodied particular deities. In Maya inscriptions passages that accompany these scenes may be read “in the famous image of” (Houston and Stuart 1996, Houston and Stuart 1998, 75-77). The name of the particular deity portrayed follows these texts. Such royal dancers were deemed not merely as accomplished performers but rather the spiritual incarnation of conjured beings. Moreover, Maya kings and other nobles undoubtedly reenacted stories and myths recounting the creation of the universe. For example, Michael Coe (1989) suggested that kings probably performed tales like the 16<sup>th</sup> century Popol Vuh at every royal palace throughout the Classic period.

Maya dance also celebrated military victories and such dances concerned the flaunting and parading of war trophies, including body parts, displaying the strength and virility of the male warriors. The Franciscan friar, Diego de Landa, mentions such war dances as the *Holcan Ok'ot* and the *Batel Ok'ot*. These intense physical performances involved hundreds of warriors that would dance in long strides in perfect unison to the beat of the drum and must have resembled the Maori “Haka” war dance. Landa also points out that during the month of *Pax*, combatants would dance with the jawbones of the defeated enemies they had slain in battle. Likewise, various Classic Maya painted vessel scenes portray elaborately dressed warriors with captives, severed heads, and other remains, accompanied by musicians, probably representing scenes of celebratory war dances. One of the more elaborate portrayals of this type of triumphant dance is found in Room 3 of Structure 1 at the site of Bonampak', Chiapas, Mexico.

Aside from royal demeanor that the elite classes presented for admiration and respect, all members of society were vulnerable as subjects in Maya dance that frequently satirized and ridiculed inappropriate behavior (Taube 1989). Masked and costumed performers highlighted conventional models of conduct through burlesque and clowning, which is the direct opposite of the generally established rules portrayed by other dancers, quite frequently at the same occasion. “Ritual clowns are commonly portrayed in figurines of the Late Classic Maya, portable images that may well have been passed out at festival events as mementos” (Taube and Taube 2005). Often, such characters appearing in these farces and works of “popular” art represented aged beings that displayed brutish and inhuman facial and physical features. In addition, they wield dance rattles or fans, identifying them as performers. At times, artists paired these bestial and generally unpleasant creatures erotically clinched with attractive and youthful women scenes certainly meant to be comical and entertaining.

Our understanding of the relationship between contemporary performance and Pre-Columbian dance would not be complete without the recent epigraphic and iconographic breakthroughs that have elucidated detailed information concerning the sacred and social nature of ancient pre-Hispanic Maya dance. In his article *Ritual Humor in Classic Maya Religion*, Karl Taube (1989) observes the importance of lampooning and farcical behavior among the ancient Maya. Michael Coe (1989) was the first to suggest that great epic tales of creation, like the sixteenth-century Popol Vuh, were performed in public before a courtly audience, and may have held many of the same social connotations as the Ramayana in South Asia. David Freidel, Linda Schele, and Joy Parker’s (1993) book Maya Cosmos: Three Thousand Years on the

Shaman's Path, devotes an entire chapter to ancient Maya festival and pageantry. In it, they delineate specific dance positions from monumental art, as well as a number of different forms of dances, such as a Snake Dance and a Dance of the Rebirth of the Dead, two significant types that dancers continue to perform even now. In addition, masking and impersonation were not concepts introduced by the Spanish friars, but, rather, existed in pre-Hispanic times as well. Houston and Stuart (1996) demonstrate the importance that donning the guise of a supernatural or ancestral spirit held during the Maya Classic period. Although most likely restricted to rulers and nobility, masking and incarnating, or alterity, was an established religious practice recorded in hieroglyphic inscriptions and portrayed in monumental art.

### Early Colonial New World Dance

Indigenous Central Mexican performances and performers fascinated the conquistadores that arrived in the New World and equally caught the imagination of the royal court back home in Spain. Chronicles and letters from contact period Mexico illustrate the variety of Prehispanic New World plays combined with dance and music (Mace 1985, 153). As early as 1529, Cortés sent dancers, jugglers, and acrobats to perform in the palace of Carlos V (Cline, 83-5). It is no surprise then, that the conquistadors kept a close eye on their hosts, given the language barrier that existed between the indigenous residents of the New World and the Spanish arrivals, “bodily behaviors, gestures and stances become paramount in their interpretation” (Scolieri 2003, 16). Conversely, many Spaniards felt the Aztecs could use some

elegance and finesse in their physical composure. Among the variety of soldiers that accompanied Bernal Díaz del Castillo to the New World, were three dance masters (Acta de Cabildo, México, October 30, 1526, cited in Scolieri 2003, 15). In 1526, two of them, Maese Pedro and Benito Bejel attempted to open a dance academy to edify the natives with refined dances brought from Spain. Soon the Church appropriated dance as a heuristic tool for proselytizing New World novitiates on a mass scale.

As part of the Papal bull of 1537, all subjects of New Spain were required to observe twelve Church festivals during the year (Mendieta 1980, 213). However, most ecclesiastical authorities in the New World had already begun the process of developing liturgical theater as an instrument of the proselytizing effort. Starting with the early evangelical efforts, the mendicants commemorated feast days of saints with theatrical events. Two of the most important feasts celebrated were those in honor of Santiago, the patron of the Spanish armies and St. Hippolytus, the patron saint of New Spain.<sup>3</sup> Although the festivals celebrated the historical and dogmatic mysteries of Catholicism, the mendicant orders isolated certain aspects of Prehispanic drama, using and transforming them into instructional and moralizing didactic devices to make them more appealing to the Nahuas (Burkhart 1989, 16).

Fray Pedro de Gante, the Flemish mendicant, arrived in the New World in 1523 and many scholars credit him with giving rise to and authoring some of the earliest New World missionary dramas. In fact, Mace (1985, 154) suggests he was the first to organize a *baile* in New Spain for Christmas in 1526. De Gante recognized his lack of success attracting natives into the church patios for mass. Once he finally discovered the Nahuas considered singing and dancing forms of prayer, he

incorporated them into the Christian liturgy (Trexler, 1984, 193). This suggests he recognized the modes of Aztec worship and was willing to meet the natives on their terms in order to get across his message. Likewise, José de Acosta, a sixteenth-century Spanish Jesuit who traveled as a missionary in both Peru and México, discovered natives praying to altars at home that kept them from going to church. He developed dance and music as a part of mass to attract indigenous worshippers (Trexler, 1984, 194). Thomas Gage, the Irish Dominican friar who traveled to New Spain illegally as a stowaway in 1626, commented on liturgical presentations he observed. Gage related how dancers appeared to believe they had transformed into the both the saints and the impious characters they represented during a performance (Gage 1958, 54).<sup>4</sup> Dance dramas appeared to be the only dependable way to assure the natives would attend religious sermons and at the same time give them a tangible form to help them understand the mysterious tenets of the new religion.

In Guatemala, colonial indigenous theater incorporated didactic theological and moralizing *loas* that shared a special connection to the especially popular Marian cult in the celebration of Corpus Christi (Correa and Cannon 1961, 7). When brought to the New World, Spaniards associated *loas* not only with particular professions, such as vendors, but also with the indigenous populations (Correa and Cannon 1961, 7). *Loas* are folk dramas, in what Correa and Cannon (1961, 7) refer to as “cultural frontiers,” a tradition that reaches into the margins of society. In Guatemala, numerous dances began during this period that borrows their form and even dramatic content from their Old World predecessors as a means of proselytizing. They were important in the process of supplanting pagan religion with Christianity. They include

The *baile de los animales*, *baile de San Jorge*, *baile de los costeños*, and the *baile de moros y cristianos*, among others (ibid.). *Loa* performances included dance and music and lasted approximately twenty-five minutes. They were most usually associated with the veneration of one of the Virgins and glorified various saints as well (Correa and Cannon 1961, 6). Their production featured a variety of supernatural and ethereal characters such as archangels and *diablos*.

*Entremés*es, *sainetes*, and *mojigangas* also traveled to the New World and were most often associated with the activities of Carnival. They must have provided a site for the perfect complement of Spanish comic interludes with the indigenous taste for theatrical satire, all the while educating indigenous masses on the new faith. In Spanish America, the farcical episodes lampooned, amused, and provided suitable levels of parody. Father Bartolomé de las Casas, referred to *mojigangas* as missionary theater with the acceptable function of evangelization, allowing a wide berth of activities, as the ends justified the means. They spilled out of the theater and into the public roads of the towns, becoming a form of comic street theater with wild costumes and gigantic figures, eventually separating from religious performances altogether. *Entremés*es also continued to supply secular relief to long, drawn out, and involved religious performances. Through their popular appeal, they also provided episodes that combined amusement and edification for the viewing pleasure of the indigenous religious novitiates (Pasquariello 1952, 44). Their original intention was to convey religious messages, but they also shifted focus when necessary to include satire and buffoonery, sometimes even directed at civil authorities (ibid). Many triggered heated struggles and encounters between the civil and church authorities that required royal



intervention (ibid.). Even secular subject matter served the evangelizing mission of the church, as skits often undermined indigenous culture and practices, such as healing and “witchcraft,” in favor of an affirmation of Christian faith (Pasquariello 1952, 52). Most all ended with the religious illumination of the various characters over their previous errant ways and an avid acceptance of the new faith.

### Present Day

In spite of the fact that drama and theater in the New World developed as a way to attract neophytes to Spanish Catholic mass, it continued and flourished after the era of independence from Spain. Convinced that indigenous theatrics were a creation of the devil, Spanish priests tried to stamp them out or substitute new Christian dances (Mace 1985, 154). *Danzas tradicionales*, or “traditional dances” still play an important role in popular celebrations throughout México and Guatemala (Luján Muñoz 1985, 97). I will be covering the highland Maya generally, noting that there are great varieties and diverse practices when it comes to different people and communities. Both indigenous and Ladino townships even now perform the *bailes* during Christmas, Semana Santa, Corpus Christi, and the local saint’s day of a community. Some have their thematic and narrative origins in pre-Columbian times, but all underwent some form of modification with the arrival of Spanish missionaries.

Various dances, such as the Rabinal Achi, “the Lord of Rabinal” or the *Xajooj Keej*, the Deer Dance, maintain much of their Prehispanic antecedents (Tedlock 2003; Akkeren 1999; Janssens and Akkeren 2003). The same Maya communities that

scholars study for their adherence to traditional culture also perform other dramas such as *Pascal Rey*, or “Easter King.” Although they bear a strong indigenous character, these particular dances were introductions from the Old World. In some cases, however, scholars of contemporary dance read too much pre-Columbian meaning into contemporary Maya dance, disregarding the natural shift cultures make over long spans of time. Reading and interpreting *Xajooj Keej* through the lens of strictly Classic period art treats the Maya as a static culture frozen in time and elides all possibilities of recognizing the resiliency of the Maya and their ability to successfully adapt to their changing surroundings. At the time of European contact, Maya culture had already experienced serious disruptions to its socio-political and religious life, it shifted away from the adulation of the centralized authority figure of the *ajaw*, or king, who determined much of the spiritual practices of the community. Also, the tendency to view indigenous culture, of any era, as a static object and not a process fails to recognize the creative capabilities of its adherents. These dances, both in spite of and because of colonial dominance retain a complex layering of meanings.

Victoria Bricker (1981, 130-133) notes how the dances of Chamula, Chenalho, and Zinacantan of highland Chiapas are a historical and cultural pastiche. She argues for the existence of a thematic disjunction between costume and role, costume and action, and costuming (Bricker 1981, 133). During the festival of Carnival that occurs before Lent, all festivities appear to concern the passion of Christ. However, upon closer inspection, there are a number of different events commemorated spanning a great deal of time and sometimes even geographical space. Entertainers prefer the costumes overlapped, with various costume elements coinciding from completely

different historic eras, either remains from a previous dance genre, or the layering of attire from different time periods altogether. For example, the masks donned by the performers will be worn with a military coat and a busby headdress (a tall fur hat worn by British military guards), while the distinction between characters being performed is blurred. “Blackmen”, monkeys, demons, Frenchmen, Turks, and even Ladino soldiers represent much more than the face portrayed on their masks. As Bricker (1981, 133) points out, it is the theme of ethnic conflict much more than the historical order that structures the message of the drama. In this way, dance provides a platform for constructing identity through alterity, the dance’s power come from its ability to capture and merge these fantastic types, all contrasted from the people of the community in which it is performed.

The performances of the dance dramas are collective, at times involving numerous characters from various dances simultaneously (Thompson 2000, 194). As Bricker notes (1981) they do not just present overlapping dances, but overlapping times, as well. She refers to this as a “telescoping of time,” a feature that allows various pasts to co-exist with the present and the future, yet always becoming, in present progressive tense (Thompson 2000, 191). This is what Barthes (1981, 7) referred to as imaginary narration, one outside the linear form of “scientific” historical narrative. In relaying a history, they accelerate or decelerate time and zigzag through different points in a particular period. In Maya performances, *bailes* such as the Deer and the Monkey dances that are based on original Prehispanic events also run in tandem with Spanish history; even though the Dance of the Conquest is derived from the dance of the *moros y cristianos*, both continue to be performed at the same time,

suggesting they represent different historical acts. “The present has become an arena of performance for many histories as they have collided and bled into one another” (Thompson 2000, 197). Bourdieu (1980, 92) suggested that a ceremony is a practice that “can only be grasped in action,” and for the Maya of Mexico and Guatemala, this is certainly the case. The Maya describe these dances as theirs, their history and *costumbre*, or custom, their performance is what makes them real. The dances imitate common problems and current issues such as, old age, deformity, deafness, animals, drunks, the insane, languages and costumes from other provinces, corrupt officials, disobedient children, illness, affairs, merchants, coughs and diseases, as well as phallic and erotic humor (Mace 1985, 153). Through dance, the Maya perform their history, greatest concerns, and religion simultaneously.

Accompanying the rehearsals of the dance are various types of prayers, as dancers offer their *bailes* to mountain gods, rain gods, the lord of the animals, and Christian saints (Mace 1985, 149-50). In many Guatemalan communities, the preparations, practice, and public presentations of the *bailes* are the most important events of spiritual and social life and constitute community building (Mace 1985, 150). They help link the present and the past, as they evoke deceased performers, observers weigh productions against each other, and the elderly reminisce abandoned dances. Families carry the continuity from one year to the next through maintaining specific characters of the dance. However, the *bailes* themselves are also a form of prayer; spirits of ancestors, nature, and animals are all present for the dances and breath new life, energy, and essence with their annual performances. In the Maya community of Chamula, in Chiapas Mexico, one week before Carnival a prophecy that

merges figures from several historical eras foretells the events to come, another way the past is connected to the forthcoming year (Bricker 1981, 135). The Dance of Conquest contained elements of several dances and people spoke of performers from different dances as members of same dance, demonstrating that even dances are collapsed into each other (Bricker 1981, 151).

Following the tradition of Martí and Kurath, Matilde Montoya (1970) wrote a study focusing on the Dance of the Conquest that explored Guatemalan traditions after the arrival of the Spanish. Likewise, Barbara Bode (1961) wrote a monograph exploring the Dance of the Conquest in Guatemala. Although Bode's work is rich in ethnographic detail, she appears to have misunderstood the overarching ideological significance dance carries in most Maya communities. Rather, she likens it to a pastime that relieves the monotony of peasant life. Rene Acuña (1978), on the other hand, wrote a seminal study of the festivals, games, and farcical dances of ancient Yucatan that captures the nuances of public ritual and continues to maintain its timeliness.

A pioneer in the comprehensive analysis of indigenous Guatemalan dance is the ethno-choreologist Carlos García Escobar (1987; 1989; 1990). Not only did he study a large variety of contemporary dances and their specific costumes, but also identified a number of dance studios and costume rental shops, provided explicit diagrams of choreography, and applied the Labanotation method of dance notation to indigenous forms of performance. One of his contributions is noting the significance of *pasitas*, the direction and order of dance steps as a means of constructing sacred space. At approximately the same time that Escobar was producing his ground-

breaking work, Luis Luján Muñoz (1987), the former director of the Museo Popol Vuh, published a seminal study on the origin and background of masked dances in Mesoamerica from Pre-Columbian times to the present. His discussion includes the first survey of the institution of the *morería*, the dance-costume rental shop unique to Guatemala. The name for the shops probably derives from the dance of the *moros y cristianos*, one of the earliest and most well known New World productions. Muñoz identifies all of the known *morerías* in the twentieth century, as well as the most renowned mask makers' signatures and identifying marks. The *morerías* are the tradition keepers; they manufacture, sell, and rent the costumes for the different *bailes*. They also provide the continuity from one generation to the next, maintaining designs and dance choreography in the same location. In Chichicastenango, the proprietor of the *morería San Tomas*, Miguel Ignacio Calel, is also an internationally renowned dance master who has composed a great number of dance arrangements. He is the inheritor of a mask-making dynasty that stretches back into the middle of the nineteenth century. His position of great prominence and the esteem the local, national, and international community hold for him suggests the significance of his profession within and outside of Guatemala.

#### Contemporary Western Highland *Danzas Tradicionales*

Among the Aguacatec Maya of Totonicapan, Guatemala, as well as in other communities, the dancers do not perform primarily for enjoyment. It is very expensive and involves large sums of money to cover dues, costume rental, supplies and food for the festival, and payment to the religious leader (McArthur 1977, 10). For the majority of the men the cost equals approximately three months wages, a cumbersome

sacrifice for most *milpa* farmers. However, it was a custom left by the ancestors, passed down from father to son and the performers believe they will die if they do not dance, as it fulfils the wishes of the dead (McArthur 1977, 10-11). Likewise, in Rabinal, in the state of Baja Verapaz, Guatemala, the dances delineate the reciprocal relationship and profound mutual interaction that exists between the living and the dead (Janssens and van Akkeren 2003, 9-13). The dances redirect the spiritual energy of the ancestors to positive community effects by exhibiting their remembrance (Janssens and van Akkeren 2003, 10-11).

The Aguacatec Maya, like other groups in the highlands, do not consider their deceased relatives dead, but rather “bound” or “imprisoned” (McArthur 1977, 12). It is through the ritual of the dance that the living temporarily dies, switching places with their predecessors, as they are “untied”, allowed to walk around again in places where they lived. Moreover, it releases the dead from the suffering caused by the binding in the afterlife (McArthur 1977, 13). According to McArthur (1977, 13), “the exhilaration of liberation is intensified by the atmosphere of conviviality created during the festival, to which the dead participate with the living in dancing, eating, and drinking, and often in accompanying them on the long trip to obtain costumes.” Nevertheless, the relationship is not so straightforward, only the offspring of a specific past dancer has the capacity to release his ancestors (McArthur 1977, 13). This explains why descendants perform only in the same specific character their forbears played and they refer to the costumes as the property of the dead (McArthur 1977, 14-15). Thus, the *bailes* are gifts presented to the ancestors and the patron saints of Aguacatan in exchange for health, wealth, and long life (McArthur 1977, 16).

Maury Hutcheson (2003) explores the significance of cultural memory as an underlying component of identity construction present in dance-dramas among the Achi Maya of Rabinal, Baja Verapaz. Hutcheson argues that during two specific types of dramatic events, history is remade with each performance. In this regard, the past is continually available to those witnessing these events, while creating a site of negotiation and confrontation of present day identity. Hutcheson addresses the shifts that have occurred in Maya society due to globalization, changes in labor, as well as evangelization and suggests that contemporary theater, although largely secularized, also addresses ways of maintaining tradition and a conservative vision of Mayan culture.

In Momostenango, the *cofradía*, a group of four senior men, organize the annual festival in honor of the saint (Cook 2000, 35). They are the symbolic counterpart to indigenous governance and mediate the world of the spirits as opposed to the political realm (Cook 2000, 50). Through participation in these events, the men elevate their status to *aj patan*, “burden carriers.”<sup>5</sup> The *alcalde* pays for the fiesta and in return does not have to perform other tedious responsibilities, such as, sweeping the church (Cook 2000, 35). Each *cofradía* has a meetinghouse called an *armita*, an additional financial burden for the *alcalde* that stores the saints’ image and serves as the space for gatherings. The *armita* also provides an additional hub of focus and activity for the saint’s day. “The saint is carried in procession from the church to the *armita* and back again for the fiesta on a litter (*anda*) by the *cofrades*, who wear flower crowns” (Cook 2000, 36). During the procession, the *alcalde* leads the assembly holding the silver *cofradía* emblem on top of his staff (Cook 2000, 37). In



addition, the *chuch axels*, the highest ranked women, flank the procession and, identified by the flower necklaces they wear.

Their procession through the town demarcates the sacred space of the community and establishes town borders. People wait in their doorways for a view of the saint to slowly amble by, held as an enormous burden by the *cofrades*. In this manner, they constitute what Lefebvre (1994, 73) refers to as a “social space.” This process “combines the city’s reality with its ideality, embracing the practical, the symbolic and the imaginary” (Lefebvre 1994, 74). They are organizing the logical order of the community, with all citizens as participants, either through the act of circumambulating through town with the litter, or by witnessing it passing past their homes and through the streets. This process establishes the form of the community, creating a juncture between inner experience—both past and present—and the physical nature of social space (Lefebvre 1994, 19). They create a shared, oriented space through the movement of their bodies, and the participation of the viewers (Schefflen and Ashcraft 1976, 6). The actions are both constructing sacred space and time, and bound by them. This procession is always on the most important day of the festival, July 25, the actual feast day of Santiago. This act connects the contributors and observers, as well as the boundaries of Momostenango as a sacred place, directly to the patron saint, and by extension, to the larger cosmological order.

Accompanying the processions in Momostenango are various types of dances that add to the feeling of conviviality and joy. As in Aguacatan and Rabinal, in Momostenango the dancers stage the festivals in honor of their patron Santiago and other saints in order to sustain the community’s bond with the supernatural entities

(Cook 2000, 51). Enrollment in a dance troupe is voluntary, based on the desire of an individual to form a closer relationship with a protective spirit. “For these dedicated ritualists, service to their deceased predecessors (*primeros*) and the saints is a series of ordeals fraught with initiatory symbolism and the search for personal supernatural power. Those whose ritual is adequate and who serve an image and the *primeros* with total devotion, being of one heart, are rewarded with life, health, and prosperity” (Cook 2000, 63). Within indigenous Maya communities throughout various parts of Guatemala, dance opens and maintains the channels of communication between the living, their ancestors, and the realm of the spirits. Thus, at the dances, observers behave correctly, demonstrating harmony in the presence of the saint in order to bolster their supplications.

Dances in Momostenango function within the community much like Hopi *katsina*, or “spirit being” dances, they combine responsibility with pleasure (Kealiinohomoku 1988, 58). For the Hopi, through its energy-building acts, the dances must bring joy to all, and create a sense of what Kealiinohomoku (1988, 59) refers to as “withness,” or a feeling of close-knit community, which requires audience participation from all members of the community. As Kealiinohomoku (1988, 60) notes, non-dancing participants are essential, their vigor attracts the spirits and pleases them, which in turn brings vigor and renewal back to the community. In Momos, similar attitudes and concerns about the dance and participation are present. For example, in the dance of the *Monos* and *Animalitos* (monkeys and little animals), it is crucial for the costumed animal dancers to spill out into the audience, interacting with as many spectators as possible. The lions, jaguars, and monkeys perform tricks, beg

for money, and generally provide comic relief. They especially seek out young children, partially as entertainment, and partially to inculcate them into the religious fold. Moreover, their interactive street antics involve the community as much as the high wire acts they later perform as a demonstration of faith and as feats of bravery. The more the audience is involved in the event, the more successful it is.

### Los Mexicanos

Momostenango regularly features three types of *danzas*, Los Mexicanos, also known as *los vaqueros*, the “cowboys,” *los monos*, “the monkeys,” and a traditional *convite*, or invitation dance. The summer of 2008 a fourth type of dance returned after a fifteen year hiatus, *la conquista*, or “The Dance of the Conquest.” All four dances start mid-morning and appear for a couple of hours. The dancers break for lunch, and then later appear again for the afternoon. All in all the dancers may spend as much as eight hours performing in the main plaza directly in front of the Church. In the summer of 2008, all four dances appeared side by side at the same time creating a critical mass of public performance. Once the dances begin it is near impossible to either move into or out of the plaza, as the streets are completely crowded.

The “*Mexicanos*” appear every year, and provide bawdy and burlesque humor with minimal narrative, although there are some basic underlying sequences and plot structures. The dancers wear the garb of *mariachis* or *charros*: sequined sombreros and black bolero jackets emblazoned with elaborate gold or silver embroidery representing the Mexican eagle across the back, their slacks flaunt silver conchos down the side of their legs. They carry red, white and green rattles, the colors of the Mexican flag, which display the words “Viva Mexico.” They sport pistols and whips, and bear large Mexican flags. Their carved and painted wooden masks are brown or dark, earthy red, and feature a long, protruding phallic-shaped nose, intended as a means of visually lampooning Mexican culture (Pieper 2006, 199).

The use of *mariachis* may also suggest the continuing tension between the two countries. The Momostenango *danza* performance of *mariachi* dancers, most noteworthy in Mexico as a symbol of the Mexican Revolution (1910-1920) and one readily connected to Mexican national identity, portrays them as wild renegades, boastfully strutting about. Mariachis derive primarily from Jalisco in Northern Mexico, the opposite end of the country from Guatemala. The summer of 2005, I repeatedly asked my friends and family, “Why Mexicans, why not Guatemalans?” They always shrugged this question off with an answer that suggested Guatemalans simply like to imitate people. Nevertheless, in separate conversations about Mexico, Guatemalans openly expressed hostility towards their neighbors to the north, indicating they still harbored resentment over losing Chiapas to them in the early and mid nineteenth century.

In the dance, *los patron*, the landlord boss, accompanies the Mexicanos. His costume is much more refined, with a white button-downed shirt and a cowboy hat. His mask is similar to the type used for *la conquista*, with white skin, and white or golden hair, and a pointy beard. The *patron* is also the dance leader and is responsible for keeping all of the dancers in step and following the performance structure using his whip. His wife, Margarita, accompanies him, and her being there is the source of most of the ribald humor, namely lewd physical jokes and slapstick. A man always portrays her, as all of the dancers are male. The Margarita performer does not presume any overtly feminine characteristics rather she looks like a man in women’s clothes. Her obvious masculine attributes and swagger certainly add to the humor and make this type of clowning possible, breaching norms of social comportment between the sexes. Margarita, like the Mexicanos, also wears a sombrero, coupled with a female skirt, and a *huipil*, a indigenous blouse, that in this case, sports a large Mexican eagle on the front. Her painted mask is daintier than the male masks, and is white with rosy

cheeks, feminine features, and either golden or light brown hair. Her presence prompts the dancers to all try to sexually tease and molest her throughout the dance in a series of scripted and impromptu gags.

The Mexicanos enter the plaza and line up to dance in two rows facing each other. The rows culminate in a red, white and green stage set, decorated to look like a cantina, again painted with the words, "Vive Mexico." The performers dance two at a time, swaying back and forth to the marimba music, equally frequenting both the prop cantina and the real bar conveniently located directly across the street. Closest to the stage bar is the *patron* and Margarita, dancing and swaying along with all the other performers.

While the performance of the Mexicanos highlights humorous sexual romps, the preparation and rehearsals for the dance are extremely serious business. Men who wish to participate must make their intentions known by November 1, All Saints Day. That is when the participants hold their first meeting, eight months before the festival (Cook 2000, 56). Immediately, *costumbre*, traditional religious practices, begin at the four sacred mountains around Momostenango that represent the cardinal directions (ibid). The dancers hold rehearsals for the next eight months, practicing regularly and maintaining their commitment to *costumbre*. For sixty days before the festival, in addition to practicing, they must abstain from sexual intercourse and light a candle every day. On July 18 three days before the *féria* begins, they venerate the costumes through drink, dance, and prayer (Cook 2000, 56).

In the summers of 2005 and 2006, I was lucky enough to see the opening day of the festival and attend Mass with the dancers. On the very first day of the *féria*, the Mexicanos, in full garb, circulate through town, parade through the market, and dance into the main church in the center of the central plaza. Once inside the church, they paraded right up to the images of Santiago, patron saint of Momostenango, and San

Felipe, his secretary and kneeled before them. A priest said a blessing over all of the dancers as a group, and then each dancer approached the saints individually and made an offering. The priest blessed each dancer separately with a bundle of flowers, which they kissed before leaving. The dancers who would perform on alternate days, followed the Mexicanos who appeared in full-blown costumes, carrying their masks and folded garb into the church and the priest blessed them in the exact same manner. Next were the musicians, all of whom carried their instruments up to Santiago for blessing. The last were the wives and mothers of the dancers. Everybody then returned to the plaza, and the dancing began.

### Ladino *Convites* in Guatemala

Community performances in Guatemala, such as *la conquista*, or the Dance of the Conquest, are not exclusive to indigenous communities of the western highlands. Numerous towns populated primarily by Ladinos throughout the country also participate in producing and presenting these dramatic festival performances. In addition to partaking in some of the same festival dances as the Maya, the Ladino community is responsible for inventing a new, hybrid form of dance called the *convite* that continually gains in popularity. Although the word literally translates as “invitation” or “banquet,” in reality, *convites* refer to much more. They are comic parades that pass through the streets of many different towns in order to invite all of the neighbors to the local festivities where participants will perform wearing disguises and masks. According to Carlos Rene Garcia Escobar (cited in Sandoval 2006, 16), *convites* dances are the contemporary version of *mojigangas*, the comic street theater of the colonial era, reworked for the Twenty-First century audience. Like *mojigangas*, *convites* provide an opportunity to direct satirical and lampooning performances at

specific institutions or individuals. Locals often say the *mojiganga* dances began as a way to make fun of the Spanish colonial authorities, and then in the later era after independence, civil servants or members of the community whose improper behavior drew attention and was in need of correcting. *Convites* continue this tradition of satirizing a variety of local, famous, and infamous individuals.

Citizens of Momostenango claim to have one of the longest standing records for performing Ladino *convites*, at 100 years, which they celebrated in 2006 (Perez 2006, 15). Different communities began organizing and presenting *convites* at different times, and new versions still appear from time to time. In Totonicapan, the *convite* dates to 1946, when residents claim it was a sad holiday season (Espinoza 2006). Ángel Pérez Quiroa began the dances as a way to bring joy to the community and to announce the holiday festival was about to arrive (ibid). According to his son, Miguel Pérez Rivera (ibid), the first years of the dances the disguises featured primarily wild and domestic animals and his father made the masks with old newspapers or clay, and covered them with fur and paint. He fashioned the costumes in a similar manner, and began a new tradition in Totonicapan. With the arrival of television and cinema in Guatemala, as well as the development of fiberglass and manufactured textiles, the costumes have changed in a dramatic and brilliant way, leaving behind the simpler animals and things of the natural world. Costume designers drew inspiration for their creations from a variety of local and international characters, lending an added air of excitement to the events. The dances emphasize novel and original attire that changed with each new performance.

As indicated by Pedro Roberto Rodas, proprietor of “Mascaras y Alquiler de Disfraces Toto,” the *convite* costume shop in Totonicapan, Guatemala, *convites* started in Ladino communities as an amusing imitation of traditional indigenous performances and dances (Pers. com. August 3, 2006). The founders of the dance intended this tension, and it still underscores the dances today. One of the characters that often appears in costume in Ladino *convites* of both Totonicapan and Momostenango is dressed like a traditional K’iche’ Maya. In Momostenango, Ladinos celebrate the *convites* every year on the 8 and 12 of December, the feast days of the Virgins of Conception and Guadalupe. During the colonial era, *loas* appeared at this time, suggesting *convites* drew inspiration from these performances, as well as *mojigangas*. According to Francisco Pineda (cited in Sandoval 2006, 16), member of the organizing committee in Momostenango, *convites* dances began there at the very beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as a way of ridiculing people who benefited from the tithe, namely the indigenous population. Yet, the basic form and structure of the dances borrow directly from indigenous festival dances, highlighting the differences between the two groups. As an example of the pastiche of hybridity, *convites* provide a perfect illustration, as they borrow from Spanish, Hispanic America, and indigenous sources at the same time they interlace a discourse regarding global culture. However, as we will see in the next chapter, the Maya are able to beat the Ladinos at their own game.

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<sup>1</sup> St. George, who was associated with Richard the Lion Heart, was also the Crusaders’ saint and his apparition provided protection during the storming of Jerusalem.

<sup>2</sup> Santiago is Spain’s patron saint. He came to Spain to evangelize and entered at Padrón, at the mouth of the Ría de Arosa. He remained several years in Galicia (Epton 1968, 144).



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<sup>3</sup> St. Hippolytus, an obscure saint became important because the Spaniards conquered Tenochtitlan, the Aztec capital, on his saint day.

<sup>4</sup> “When I lived amongst them it was an ordinary thing for him who in the dance was to act St. Peter or John the Baptist, to come first to Confession, saying that they must be holy and pure like the saint whom they represent, and must prepare themselves to die. So likewise he that acted Herod or Herodias, and some of the Soldiers that in the dance were to speak and accuse the Saints, would afterwards come to confess of that sin, and desire absolution from bloodguiltiness” (Gage 1958, 54).

<sup>5</sup> Numerous ethnographers have written about the burden of *cofradia* service as a means of leveling wealth in the community (for example see Evon Vogt’s 1969, *Zinacantan: A Maya Community in the Highlands of Chiapas*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press). However, in Momostenango, the opposite appears to be true, the cargos of the saints legitimate wealth-based stratification. After serving in the *cofrades*, consequently, dancers say they become wealthier because of their service—they are free to act more boldly in commerce (Cook 2000, 50).

### CHAPTER 3: FOREIGN CHARACTERS: VISUALIZING IDENTITY IN THE GUATEMALAN HIGHLANDS IN THE 21ST CENTURY

When most scholars discuss highland Maya dances of Guatemala, they are probably referring to the well-known dances, *danzas tradicionales*, or "traditional" dances performed at various holidays and festivals throughout the year, such as the Dance of the Conquest, the Deer Dance, or the Dance of the Mexicanos. The dances have captured the attention of academics, tourists, and locals alike for good reason, as they provide insight into, and function as an analytical tool for, understanding the complexities of Maya culture and religion. Recently, however, numerous indigenous people from the western highlands have developed another form of dance that has gained in popularity. The Guatemalans refer to these two types of dances as *convites*, "masquerades" or invitation dances, and *disfraces*, or "disguises." The *convites* and *disfraces*, like the *danzas tradicionales*, appear during the annual festival dedicated to the community's patron saint. The dances feature non-indigenous, untraditional, and pop-culture characters seen on North American mass media outlets, such as; horror film creatures Freddie Kruger, Alien, and Predator (Figures 3.1-3.2); Mexican movie star Cantinflas (Figure 3.3), as well as a host of children's cartoon characters (Figure 3.4). Figures from contemporary politics such as Osama Bin Laden, Saddam Hussein, Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama are also seen (Figure 3.5).

Anthropologists often lament the *disfraces*, or else ignore them altogether, otherwise interpreting them as antithetical to cultural authenticity (Howes 1996, 2).<sup>1</sup>



Figure 3.1 Freddie Kruger, Momostenango, 2004



Figure 3.2 Alien vs. Predator, Momostenango, 2005



Figure 3.3 The Mexican movie star Cantinflas, Momostenango 2005



Figure 3.4 Rugrat behind Freddie Kruger, Momostenango, 2004



Figure 3.5 Barack Obama, Momostenango, 2009

Nevertheless, the dances not only relate to recent Maya history and are expressive of local cultural logic, but also represent Guatemalan identity politics, and provide insight into indigenous-Ladino relations, as well as the effects of neoliberalism and transnationalism on Maya communities (Fischer 1999). Identity construction in the western highlands is a dynamic, plural process involving not only the influx of foreign elements, but also shifting agendas that reflect changes in national policies. This chapter explores the *convites* and *disfraces* of the K'iche' Maya community of Momostenango, and views them as a social field indicative of the contemporary socio-political situation in Guatemala; one that provides a platform for the K'iche' to negotiate, redistribute, and validate local knowledge and power.

Unlike the traditional dances, the indigenous *convites* are based on a form previously developed within the population of the Ladinos, the Guatemalan dominant culture. The Ladino *convites* borrow the form of Maya dance yet instead of retaining the same primary function of public performance have imbued their dances with a superficial entertainment value, meant to highlight wealth within the community. I analyze the Maya *disfraces* and Ladino *convites* as a means of distinguishing differing perspectives regarding the construction of a national, ethnic cultural identity. In other words, in the dances one can clearly see the different processes each group uses for negotiating the viability of their role in the contemporary social, economic and political spheres of Guatemala today. Festival theatrical dance is a platform for entertainment, but also expresses values and provides symbols to use in identity construction linking national identities to patterns of consumption of North American mass media.

In discussing how the act of consumption creates consumer meaning, Grant McCracken (1988: 74) notes, "One of the most important ways in which cultural categories are substantiated is through the material objects of a culture... {objects are} created according to the blueprint of culture." In other words, local goods function as cultural markers that provide the framework for perception and make social interaction possible (Howes 1996, 2). David Howes (1996, 2) parallels this concept with Jean Baudrillard's (2001, 13) "system of objects," a social assemblage with a coherent set of meanings that always say something about their users. However, Howes also goes on to consider what the situation is that occurs in cross-cultural consumption. "For when goods cross borders, then the culture they 'substantiate' is no longer the culture in which they circulate" (Howes 1996, 2). In today's world, it is common for goods to travel and

to cross national borders, destabilizing the concepts of code, markers, and intended system of objects. Recently, the logic by which different societies receive these goods is understood as a transformation in order to communicate local values that are accorded by their destination culture (Howes 1996, 5; Thomas 1991). This is not a particularly novel concept, but useful for understanding how goods are often changed in harmony with resident standards and ideals (Howes 1996, 5).

In discussing the phenomenon of cross-cultural consumption, Howe uses the term *creolization*, to refer to the in-flow of foreign goods, their reception, and local domestication (Howes 1996, 5). Developed as a socio-linguistic theory of the 1970's, *creolization* refers to when a simplified contact language becomes a fully developed primary native language, articulating the global versus the local. In terms of cross-cultural consumption, *creolization* emphasizes the creativity of the consumer, and highlights how consumers contextualize goods by inserting them into particular social relationships (Howes 1996, 5-6). Other scholars employ the term *mestizaje* to refer to the unique combinations born out of a blending of the global with the local. Yet, as Garcia-Canclini (1995, 11) notes, *mestizaje*, a term borrowed from biological models, often implies--intentionally or not--a mixing of races. Garcia-Canclini (ibid) prefers the term *hybridity* as it includes forms of hybridization that extend beyond the racial and religious to include various types of social and ethnic intermixing. However, one aspect of receiving and domesticating foreign goods and services that *creolization*, *mestizaje*, and *hybridity* all bypass are the processes that takes place during this act of cultural translation.

In the article "Translation and Discursive Identity," Clem Robyns (1994) discussed the problems that arise when translating texts from one language or culture to another. However, much of what he discusses is apt for an understanding not only of the transformation goods undergo when moving from one culture to another, but also concerning cultural concepts and practices. Robyns (1994, 405) argues that confrontation with the non-identical and the act of highlighting difference with others is a tactic groups use to denote themselves as groups. Stuart Hall (1997, 21-22) writes about a similar notion in his discussion of what it means to be "English," how the English create their identity against the backdrop of the "Other." Hall states (1997, 21), "Identity is always...a structured representation which only achieves its positive through the narrow eye of the negative." People who feel they fit in with or link themselves to a particular culture have this idea because they rely partially on a shared set of norms. However, the awareness of such a common system is achievable only through the confrontation with its absence, according to Robyns (1994, 406-408) and Hall (*ibid*), as seen in other cultures. Individuals always negotiate their own identity against difference. Therefore, the forces that produce cultural self-definition involve continuous contact between cultures. Moreover, those relations are generally devoid of parity; rather, they form an intricate network of relationships created by the superposition of political, economic, scientific, and cultural associations.

Robyns goes on to suggest that the asymmetrical nature of intercultural relations is directly linked to imbalanced power relations, involving an ideological aspect of identity construction. In other words, in establishing its identity through cultural practices, a group conceptualizes, replicates, and even challenges social interests and



power relations. The self-conception of a common cultural practice or identity implies that there is also an attempt to preserve this identity, and hence, the culture. For the K'iche' Maya of the western highlands, public dance-dramas sanctify specific locations and make them community places that lie at the core of one's identity. It forms a part of the sense of belonging to a community of like-minded people. It creates an "us" which can be distinguished from "them," in essence saying, "we do this." These sacred places form a reservoir of meaning, which people can draw upon to tell stories about and thereby define who they are.

### Ladino *Convites*

According to Pedro Roberto Rodas, proprietor of the *convite* costume shop in Totonicapan, Guatemala, contemporary dances in the highlands, such as the *disfraces* and *convites*, began among the *Ladino* community approximately sixty years ago as a reflection of indigenous *féria* performances and dances (Pers. com. August 3, 2006). Although the ruling elite in Guatemala is composed of Ladino families, most Ladinos are middle-class, salaried workers, and low-end bureaucrats (Smith 1995, 734). As noted in Chapter 1, one indicates his or her Ladino status through Western-style dress, speaking only Spanish, and employment away from the *milpa* and wage-labor outside of the community. Many Guatemalans have made a distinction between these two groups, conceptualizing Ladinos as part of mass or urban culture versus the Maya, who represent folk or rural, traditional society. The indigenous versus Ladino ethnic division has traditionally underpinned the social order of Guatemala, more specifically, it congealed indigenous identity as defined by characteristics that are distinct from those of Spaniards and people of European descent (Annis 1987, 17).

In spite of the fact that Ladinos and indigenous K'iche' have coexisted in highland communities such as San Miguel Totonicapan since the 18th century, it is the Ladino population that is identified with "modernity" (Zamora 2003, i). The Ladino community equates modernity in this regard with progress, while tradition is viewed as backwards and ignorant. Ladino *convites* may have developed as a reflection of Maya festival dances, however, as Marcelo Zamora (2003) suggests, Ladinos in the western highlands, especially in predominantly indigenous areas, employ *convites* dances as a means of both elevating themselves above, and distinguishing themselves from, traditional Maya society and culture. Zamora (2003) suggests this is another form of Ladino response that has developed since the middle of the 20th century, to an elite commercial K'iche' that causes Ladinos to question the validity of this modernity with which they have traditionally associated themselves. Today many K'iche' are breaking out of the mold of romanticized, traditional rural dwellers and are asserting their rights to have access to a modern lifestyle and its conveniences. They constitute the rising group of urbane, city-dwelling Maya.<sup>2</sup>

Recently, the new urban indigenous have been achieving the same levels of success and the modernity of the Ladinos: for example their level of education, dress, language, and economic power. Zamora (2003) argues that the Ladino community that resides in San Miguel Totonicapan has been rearticulating their supposed modernity, which they represent in a local dance called the *Convite navideño*<sup>3</sup>(Figure 3.6).



**Figure 3.6** *Convite navideño*, Tonicapan. Photos courtesy of Pedro Roberto Rodas

A *convite* is a comic parade where all the participants wear disguises and masks, it passes through the streets to invite neighbors to the local festivities and all the. Ángel Pérez Quiroa of San Miguel Tonicapan founded *Convite navideño* in 1946 (Espinoza 2006). According to his son, Miguel Pérez Rivera, Pérez Quiroa was concerned at the lack of participation and happiness within the community at Christmastime. He was the first Ladino to use costumes of animals and movie stars to bring people out of their homes in unity and celebration (Espinoza 2006).

In this particular community the Ladinos no longer constitute an elite hegemony, but through their discourses and social practices incorporate elements of global culture and mass media in order to redefine their identity. According to Zamora (2003), the Ladinos want to be different from the indigenous populations who they define as traditional. In this way, Zamora suggests the *convite* should be seen as a project of modernity; the Ladinos intend to distance themselves from the indigenous populations,

and to construct a tradition that permits them to address the hegemony that they used to monopolize, including government administration, economics, and social life.

One manner in which the Ladino community distinguished themselves through the *convites* was to prohibit indigenous participation. The Ladino *convites* were and still are managed and organized according to strict rules that govern the membership and conduct of the contributing dancers (Pedro Roberto Rodas Pers. com. August 3, 2006). Male couples intending to dance must belong to a society that arranges group rehearsals and submits applications *en masse* to the *cabildo*, the local municipal government, for performance eligibility. About a year before the festival, the dancers begin to meet in secret and select who their dance partners are going to be. At this advanced time, they begin to formulate a design for their masquerade that they next present to the costume shop. In addition, the dancers who are not going to perform must request permission to be absent. Otherwise, they are subject to a fine and may lose the right to dance in the future (Zamora 2003, 57). Likewise, dancers must participate in all organized performances throughout the year.

A second way that Ladinos employ the *convites* to highlight difference is through an emphasis on their unique access to North American mass media. Through the *convites*, Ladinos attempt to highlight their transnational status, their knowledge of such characters as Shrek, Santa Claus, and even Scooby Doo. They are the members of the community who can afford to buy cameras, DVD's, iPods, and cable television. They are part of the global "flow," connecting disparate regions to media images, standards of living, and discourses of human rights founded in the United States (Appadurai 2001, 6). In addition, appearing side by side with the cartoons are masked dancers performing as

the *borracho* (Fig. 3.7), the drunken indigenous man who signifies the backwardness, uncultivated quality, and ignorance of the K'iche' population (Zamora 2003, 117). The sadness associated with the indigenous K'iche' character is the antithesis of the cheerful entertainment provided by the animated creatures, drawing another line of distinction between the two groups. The costumes the dancers select connects them to the world outside of the pueblo<sup>4</sup>. Gandalf the Gray from Lord of the Rings, Yoda from Star Wars, Suley Monster from Monsters' Inc., Stuart Little, and a host of additional cartoon characters, both current and vintage, appear in recognizable form (Fig. 3.8). Although they defy North American notions of incorporation, they symbolize an insider status to their audience and function as a sign indicating knowledge beyond the immediate community.



**Figure 3.7** The *borracho*, the drunken indigenous man from *Convite navideño*, Totonicapan. Photos courtesy of Pedro Roberto Rodas.



**Figure 3.8 Gandalf the Grey from Lord of the Rings, Momostenango, 2005**

Guatemala's recent connection to global society began under ominous conditions. During the most violent phase of civil war, it suffered a pariah status; the international community became involved in peace negotiations, bringing delegates from numerous countries to Central America<sup>5</sup>. MINUGUA, the United Nations Verification Mission in Guatemala, is still visible today<sup>6</sup>. Established in 1997 to verify and ensure the cease-fire between the government and the URNG (Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca), and created for only a three-month period, it continued its institution building activities in support of peace until December of 2004. Guatemala entered the peace process at same time the world was transitioning into a global-market economy, and nations were crossing borders through economic ties (Jonas 2000, 218). This paved the way for the inroads of neoliberalism: the rise of policies concerning privatization of state owned enterprises, deregulation, the lifting of trade barriers, an almost exclusive

focus on export to the world market, a harsh critique and dismantling of internal markets, and a dismantling of welfare institutions or state supported social programs.<sup>7</sup> All of these elements were efforts to attract investment by foreign capital by adhering to the International Monetary Fund's economic policies (Jonas 2000, 219). As Guatemala attempts to maintain its participation in global economics and attract foreign investors, one technique the Ladino community employs to demonstrate its awareness of international affairs is through public performances and dance.<sup>8</sup>

The use of dance as a Ladino medium of expression is at once an appropriation of an indigenous cultural form, and a mimicry of Maya sacred public space and tradition. As noted by several authors (Bricker 1981; Krystal 2001, Zamora 2003), public dance for the Maya has also functioned as a site of indigenous cultural resistance in the face of numerous threats over the years. Ladino dances bypass these concepts, reducing public performance to a stage for ethnic competition. On the surface, Ladinos embrace the new social equality the K'iche' have experienced since the civil war, they still see it as a novelty, as new contrasts with old (Hale 1999, 299). Much of this animosity is fueled by Ladino concerns over "la violencia," the violence of the civil war; they still feel the presence of the insurrection by the indigenous populations, and are concerned that civil strife may happen again (Hale 1999, 300).

### Indigenous *Convites*: the *Disfraces* of Momostenango

My first trip to Momos was with my husband Karl during the summer of 2003, shortly before the much-contested presidential election featuring the infamous candidate and former dictator, *el general*, Efraín Rios Montt. As we drove up the winding

mountain roads blanketed with pine trees, I was struck by the overwhelming number of trunks painted with the blue and white FRG, the *Frente Republicano Guatemalteco*, the Guatemalan Republican Front, the acronym for Rios Montt's ultra-rightist political party. He headed the military dictatorship of 1982-1983 and presided over the worst phase of the scorched-earth counterinsurgency-genocidal war program.<sup>9</sup> I felt trepidation venturing into the western Maya highlands for the first time, generally, as this was an area greatly affected by the consequences of the civil war. Unlike other communities in the region, Momostenango was relatively unharmed during these trying and violent times owing to its allegiance to the president and long-standing commitment to the conservative government (Huxley 1939; Tedlock 1982; Carmack 1995). Recent events in the capital added to the already mounting concern I was experiencing, as only a week prior we were bystanders to the latest and one of the most aggressive political demonstrations in Guatemala's recent years, rumored to have been instigated by none other than *el general* himself, "el jueves negro," or "Black Thursday." Nonetheless, we made our way to Momostenango.

The path leading to the town center (*cabecera*) is spotted with bright pink, yellow, and turquoise painted buildings supporting signs and banners that display the names *Sol* or *Gallo*, depending on the owner's beer of preference. Turning a street corner, we spot the procession of *alcaldes*, or town elders, *regidores*, or aldermen, the *deputados*, and the *chuch axels*, highest ranked women's positions bearing the effigy of Patrón Santiago (Fig. 3.9). The small pale-faced, black-bearded equestrian image representing the saint bears a sword in his upraised right hand. San Felipe, a lesser known scribal saint, accompanies Santiago on his excursion and functions as his secretary, as Santiago cannot



read or write and some say he only speaks K'iche' and thus requires a Spanish-speaking translator (Cook 2000, 77).



**Figure 3.9** The procession of the altar of Santiago through the streets of Momostenango, 2005

The pious support the elaborately decorated red, green, and gold palanquin that holds the effigy of the two saints on their shoulders and ambulate through the cobble stone streets accompanied by a small band of musicians that play horned instruments, drums, wooden flutes, and the marimba. Other devotees carry ornate staffs indicating their status in the *cofradia*, the men's association. The perfume-like smoke of copal incense billows out from the hands of other faithful that swing *incensarios* directly before Santiago's path. This is one of the days when the saint leaves his home in the church and seeks out his followers in their realm, a reversal of the proscribed rituals and personal veneration that normally take place between the worshippers and Santiago in the privacy of his *ermita*, a small chapel that houses the saint in his aldea. Here today he is in public,

available to all. The church, the prayers, and the offerings explicitly relate to the political, social, and of course religious life of many Momostecans.

Preceding the solemn procession is a group of costumed dancers and performers,



**Figure 3.10** *Mexicanos* precede the procession, Momostenango 2006.

some dressed like *Mexicanos* (Fig. 3.10), representation of mariachis, holdovers from an earlier time that function today as a sacred symbols of power (Manuel Jaminez Tambriz pers. comm., August 9<sup>th</sup>, 2004). Other dancers are costumed while still more sport attire representing various animals of the wild including monkeys, lions, and jaguars. These characters interact with one another in a completely different manner; they antagonize, chase, and whip each other for their lascivious behavior. They spill over into the group of onlookers, instigating humorous reactions and soliciting amused and mirthful responses from the children (Fig. 3.11).



**Figure 3.11** The *monos y tigres*, monkeys and tigers capture young boys and tie their shoes together, Momostenango, 2008

They form an integral part of the festivities, as they are the dancers that tell the story of the *Xajooj Kej*, the *Danza del Venado*, or Deer Dance. Through music, distinct gestures, arranged poses and *pasitas*, or steps, they enact the tale of the hunter who respectfully entreats the Lord of the Animals and successfully pursues his prey. Many suggest this dance has its origins in the pre-Columbian past (Janssen and van Akkeren 2003), possibly a performance reserved exclusively for elite or royal members of society.

Ironically, within the Maya community, public dance-dramas exhibit the tenacity of Maya culture and at the same time, its flexibility. Dances and performances that have

their origin in pre-Hispanic culture easily mix with Spanish liturgical theater combining native forms of worship with Catholic saint's days. The marimba, the sacred instrument of the community performance, has its origins in Africa, a by-product of slave culture (Navarette Pellicer 2005, 70-74). However, because of their years of native organization, choreography, design, and instrumentation, most scholars consider them indigenous in nature. The Maya have customized these dances and modified their execution over time, with local and culturally determined preferences highlighted. The first time many North American and Europeans, including myself, experience the dances in an indigenous community, we feel dismayed at the lack of narrative cohesion and organization expressed. My initial reaction, after standing around for 45 minutes was, "when are they going to start? I was surprised to find out I had been watching the dance that entire time. This is because, regardless of the hybrid nature of the dances' origins, the Maya produce them to conform to their own tastes and criteria.

We run through the streets following the mobile pageant around the four sides of the *cabecera*, eventually returning to the *parque central*, or central park, the main plaza and vital hub of activity. The crowds are teeming; packed so tight it is hard to move. Karl looks back at me over his shoulder to make sure I am still there and spots me in spite of the half a dozen people that have wedged their way between us. We reach the main courtyard where the dancers will arrive, and much to our astonishment, another completely different type of performance is taking place.

At 5'5" I tower over most Maya, yet during my first experience with the *disfraces* I strained to stand on tip-toe just to catch a glimpse of the scene that was about to unfold. The music began and immediately I was surprised. This was not the *q'ojom*, or marimba

that I had come to expect, but rather the blasting sound of contemporary *cumbia*. Indeed, I recognized the song as a popular hit off the radio. The dancers appeared and the crowd, that surrounded me on all sides, surged forward to watch the spectacle. However, these dancers were unexpected; they did not sport the garb of the *milpa* farming campesino that bears the heavy weight of choreographic history. Rather, these were members of the community wearing costumes impersonating key players in North American and global politics. I recognized someone clad in a mask of Arnold Schwarzeneger, but on second glance, there were actually two Arnolds. In fact, there were dancing paired duplicates of all the costumed characters. Similar to the traditional masquerades, some of the performers appeared to wear masks that local artisans made. Others resembled rubber Halloween visors or even the attire of an amusement park caricature. The dancers did not carry incense, they do not circumambulate around the community to the four sacred directions, and their movements did not relate a narrative. They performed a couple's line dance, side by side, two of a kind.

During my first extended stay in Momostenango during the June, July, and August of 2005, a local indigenous family hosted me. Eligio and Apolonia, my hosts, lived across the street from *Pa' Sabal*, the sacred and ancient Maya altar discussed by Barbara Tedlock as the site of 8 *Batz'* ceremonies (1982). My first time in their house I could not help but notice the extremely large Blue's Clues cartoon character heads hanging from their rafters. Because of my interest in them, they obligingly took them down from the ceiling and donned the complete costume in order to perform on my behalf. Having seen the *disfraces* dances the previous two summers, I was under the false assumption that they were part of an anti-Catholic movement to undermine the

traditional dances, such as the *Mexicanos* or *Danza del Venado*, that run concurrently. However, Eligio is a *guia espiritual*, a “spiritual guide” or Maya *sacerdote*, or priest (Fig. 3.12).



**Figure 3.12 Eligio performs a Maya ceremony at the sacred site of Pa’Sabal, Momostenango, July 2005**

He practices the cultural activist version of indigenous religion, which includes some Catholic imagery and ideas. His training and beliefs are specific to a newly institutionalized and officially anti-syncretic, or purified, Maya spirituality. He is a practicing spiritual guide and performed a ceremony for the success of my research. Moreover, he regularly participates in the *disfraces* dances, rather than in the traditional dances. He, his father, and his older brother have performed for years as a variety of different characters. The cartoon that I knew as "Blue's Clue's," they referred to as *Chuch Panador*, "Baker Dog," indicating the loss of translation. For the Eligio’s family, the

baker dog was a comical character reflecting their understanding of our common dog biscuits. In a land where most people often cannot afford to buy baked goods, the idea of “cookies” for dogs represents the wealth and overindulgence of the United States.

The characters that appear during the disfraces combine a Guatemalan fascination of popular culture with an indigenous flair for the imaginative that extends beyond the Ladino *convites*. In recent years (2003-2009), I have seen such noteworthy real-life figures as Fidel Castro and Che Guevara (Fig. 3.13),



**Figure 3.13 Fidel Castro and Che Guevara, Momostenango, 2006**



**Figure 3.14** Ace Frehley from the rock band Kiss, Momostenango, 2006.

Ace Frehley from the rock band Kiss (Fig. 3.14), and as previously mentioned, Hillary Clinton, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Osama Bin Laden, and Alvaro Colom, the



**Figure 3.15** Alvaro Colom, President of Guatemala



**Figure 3.16** Harry Potter



president of Guatemala (Fig. 3.15), and Harry Potter (Fig. 3.16), have all danced. In addition, the fright creatures Alien versus Predator, and Freddie Kruger from "A Nightmare on Elm Street" have appeared in the *disfraces*. Cartoon characters that are a popular favorite among the Ladino dances do not appear with as much frequency in Momostenango, although I have seen characters from the Rugrats and Blue's Clues perform. The Momostecos prefer a variety of hybrid creatures and figures from locally known proverbs. For example, *Niño Perdido*, the "Stray Child," or street urchin, who has no shoes to wear or bread to eat because his parents spend all their money on alcohol. Although meant to be humorous, it is an indication of a Guatemalan reality. Some characters are based on well-known types, such as Gladiators and Ninjas. The costumes the dancers appear in have an inimitable and distinct appearance, unlike any representation I have ever before seen. Other unique characters include *Las Espias de las Mentes Siniestras*, the "Spies of a Sinister Mind (Fig. 3.17),"



**Figure 3.17** *Las Espias de las Mentes Siniestras*, The Spies of the Sinister Mind, Momostenango, 2006

and *Las Chicas de las Estrellas*, "Star Girls." They are the invention of the dancers who wear the costume, or the "author" of the dance, a dance master that choreographs the moves and coaches the group. Although these characters are complete fabrications, the K'iche' dancers and dance masters refer to them, and all the recognizable figures as *dioses y reyes*, "gods and kings," indicating their supernatural quality. Some of them are real kings and old local heroes from other towns. One featured and recurring character from the past is *El Rey de Maiz*, "the Maize King," a contemporary adaptation of Prehispanic characters, as distant and imaginary to the K'iche' today as many of the cartoon characters.

As a formalized institution, the Ladino *convite* societies among the western highlands easily regulate and limit their membership. That is, until approximately ten years ago, when Maya dancers began to form their own *convite* groups, generally referred to as *grupos de disfraz*, or "groups of disguises." Coincidentally--or not--this was the approximate time of the signing of the 1996 Oslo Peace Accord, a significant document that ensured a cease fire agreement, and provided the greatest degree of hope for reconciliation between the Ladino and indigenous communities in Guatemala. It was also the final document signed that officially ended the thirty-year Guatemalan civil war. On the surface, this end to civil strife may have opened the doors for new dances in indigenous communities; although not directly related it provided the sustenance for new opportunities among the K'iche'. Despite the fact that Momostenango has maintained a conservative way of life, the popularity of the *disfraces* dances indicates a growing interest in things of the world, particularly North America (Hutcheson 2003).

The K'iche' version of the *convites* combines the Ladino fascination with the mass media and characters of the United States with a local cultural logic inherent in Maya dance. The dancers follow many of the same rules that formalize the Ladino societies of performers. They select their partners in private, maintaining as much secrecy as possible; they practice together for eight to nine months before the dances; they put considerable contemplation and thought into the design of their costumes; and they pay a substantial sum for the privilege of participating. The *disfraces* societies perform on special days during the festival of Patron Santiago. I have seen many community dances in the highlands before, but never have I experienced such a packed plaza as during the *disfraces*.

The analysis of the Ladino versus the Maya *convites* lies in a comparison of the types of discourses created through these public performances, in other words, in what ways are the dances constructing a conversation about the United States? What are the different interpretive frameworks and what are the narratives that comprise these conflicting historical geographies of the imagination (Davenport 1997)? The *Ladino* dances very markedly represent a place and space enabling participation in the global market place (Appadurai 2001). The bodies of the dancers themselves play out the connection of the *convites* to commerce, as they perform for a set price before the wealthy family's homes and businesses. In almost all cases, the dance costumes represent characters and products from North America, Ronald McDonald, Santa Claus, Shrek, generating a discourse about the production, distribution, and consumption of these goods. The *convites* characters primarily connect to children's movies, cartoon characters, and stuffed animals, one of the United States' foremost playgrounds of

consumerism, representing a commonly held concept of the United States as a place of financial *imaginaire*. Moreover, the creatures are all directed towards the attention of the youth, juvenile in subject matter, creating a sub-text that the *bailes convites*, and by extension *danzas tradicionales* that they are modeled after, are childish or child's play.

For the Maya, the dialogue created by the dances and costumes centers on a socially constructed geography that is consistent with indigenous conceptions of space, a site of geographical imagination, a dream world that has shifted to "simulacra" in mass-culture, yet retains social logic and meaning. The constructed geography represents an abstract conception of place, a mythical United States only slightly related to the geographic location. This is the new "Tollan." For the Aztec Empire at the time of Spanish contact Tollan was a collective vision of a previous, remote, and superior space, a mythical place with a glorious, abundant and creative past (Carrasco et. al. 2000). Garrett Cook (2000, 23) likens the Momostecans conception of "Spain" in the colonial and post-colonial era to Prehispanic constructions of Tollan as a "distant city from which ultimate authority and its local symbols...emanated. Spain is the Tulan (sic.) of the post-conquest mythology." More recently, the emphasis on the "Spain" of Cook's description has transferred into and is projected onto the United States as an imagined geography and source of definitive influence and power. The Maya access and process this space through the internet, yet it is still full of supernatural, otherworldly, and underworld characters. Tollan, Spain, the United States are places where anything is possible and the *disfraces* dancers represent denizens of this magical-religious realm.

That the *disfraces* characters assume a magical and mysterious aspect in Momostenango indicates the participant's belief that their contribution in the dance is an

act of penitence and faith and a public display of their piety, underscoring a fundamentally Maya worldview (Juan Tzoc Lajpop pers. com July 31, 2006). As a demonstration of their devotion and commitment to God, the dancers perform *costumbre*, or religious customs, two days before the dances in front of the altar to Santiago. They ask the spirits for health, luck, and success in the dance (ibid.). Moreover, before the dances begin the performers salute the four directions and acknowledge the presence of the spirits. These expressions connect the *disfraces* to the community's traditional public performances; although both types of dancers physically perform in separate plazas, they compete with one another temporally, as the two run concurrently and overlap in time.

The K'iche' *disfraces* are a reflection of the Ladino convites, which itself, is a reflection of Maya ritual public performance. However, K'iche' *disfraces* are more closely related to indigenous cultural logic; ritual performance and theatrical dance have long functioned as an open site for critically reconstituting social practices in Maya history. This takes place through public commentary, articulated through public dances and performances, that distinguishes proper choices one must make in response to a rapidly changing local environment (Bricker 1981; Tedlock 1982; Krystal 2001). Ritual clowning has long been a component of Maya dance and the *disfraces* may well be a new face of this type of event (Bricker 1973; Taube 1989).

This is not to suggest that the *disfraces* are fundamentally similar to the traditional dances of Momostenango. Aside from the obvious differences of the costumes and characters, the *disfraces* are a competition, of sorts. They are a "competition of egos," as the community recognizes individuals for their dancing skills. One highlight of the

disfraces, borrowed from the Ladino *convites* is when the dancers reveal their identity (Fig. 3.18).<sup>10</sup>



**Figure 3.18** The most exciting moment is when the *disfraces* dancers reveal their identities.

The viewers and dancers consider this the most exciting part of the dance, the crescendo of the event, when after dancing all day long the performers remove their masks. This is such a significant aspect that fireworks accompany the dancers' disclosure, followed by a dance in the town hall that is open to the public. In addition, the dancers perform all day to contemporary *cumbia*, not the traditional marimba. This emphasis on new music accompanies the prominence of new costumes; they must change every year and are part of the attraction. Unlike the traditional dances, *disfraces* performers do not dance in the same costumes as their fathers or grandfathers. Moreover, both sexes may partake. In fact, this past summer in Momostenango, one of the pairs participating was comprised of women. In the summer of 2007, a group of women danced *Convites*

*Femininas*, “women’s convites,” for the very first time in Momostenango. Groups of women dancers have been performing in Santa Cruz de Quiche for about 15 years. The emphasis among the viewers is not on joining or involving themselves, but on taking in the visuals, emphasizing not a true communal event, but on distinguishing and glorifying individuals for their unique abilities.

The Ladino response to the K’iche’ *disfraces* is primarily of derision.<sup>11</sup> There is an overt attitude of superiority and separation that emerges when discussing the indigenous *disfraces* with Ladinos, one that is internalized by some indigenous people, as well. Flavio Pérez Zárate is a local Momostecan from a wealthy and influential urban indigenous family who referred to themselves as “*civilizado*,” or acculturated and sophisticated Maya (Garrett Cook pers. com. Jan. 6, 2009). He falls under Carmack’s (1995, 264) category of *petite bourgeoisie*, an affluent middle-class indigenous citizen. He wrote disparagingly of the indigenous *disfraces* in the local publication, *Qab Antajik*, *Nuestra Identidad*, “Our Identity,” a Spanish-K’iche’ bi-lingual venue that appeals primarily to K’iche’ speakers.

El convite “Ladino” era una armonización de ritmo, orden y preocupaba mucho lo plástico para que la presentación final mostrara creatividad en lo bello y en la forma de danzar buscando ser refinado al máximo posible. Y el convite Indígena? Su enfoque trágico caminaba sobre el riesgo de la ridiculización de diferentes personajes y actores ... provocaban malestar ... era grotesca [Zarate 2006, 4-5].

When the Ladinos dance the convite, they display harmony, rhythm, order, and a concern to demonstrate creativity and beauty in a dance that is as refined as possible... The indigenous convite? It is a tragedy risking ridiculousness of different characters and actors ... and is bothersome...it is grotesque [translation by the author].

The motive behind Zárate's article is unclear, but it brings attention to the fluidity of identity construction, with its variables depending on social context. His desire to dissociate himself from the indigenous devotional practices of the *disfraces* is, however, very clear. Is he trying to align himself with a Ladino perspective in order to bolster his already comfortable position in Momostenango? In a national context Zárate may fall under the category of Ladino, himself, but to what effect in his hometown? Is he hoping to capitalize on a Ladino dialogue and confrontation as a strategy of accruing more globalized cultural capital?

The Ladinos want to highlight their international status, yet, the Maya are the true transnationals who comprise the majority population of transnational migrants to the United States. Because there are no tax reforms in Guatemala to finance social goals, and no peace dividend in the form of land or jobs, the only choice of many Guatemalans is the transnational solution (Jonas 2000, 225). This involves migrating to the United States and includes remittances from Guatemalans working in the United States. Guatemala's working/indigenous populations are transnationalized on an unprecedented scale (Jonas 2000, 225),<sup>12</sup> largely the result of racism, civil strife, and the violence they endured during the years of the civil war.

...the Guatemalan diaspora (primarily in the United States, but also in Europe) played a central role in determining what stance the international community would take in relation to Guatemala's peace negotiations. The fact that the Guatemalan diaspora was so largely made up of victims of army brutality delegitimized the army and indirectly helped the URNG win the international diplomacy wars... [Jonas 2000, 225-226].

Immigration to the US, as well as Canada and Mexico, was motivated by the events of the brutal civil war. These events brought international attention to Guatemala and



transnationalized human rights (Jonas 2000, 226). Because of the very nature of the relationship the Ladinos have with the indigenous population, the indigenous possess the global connections the Ladinos desperately want. One paradox that exists here, as the K'iche' attempt to be consumers in the global market and highlight their international status through dance, at same time they are still strongly attached to desiring basic needs. I spent the summer of 2005 in Momostenango during a potentially violent uprising regarding K'iche' access to water. The local government decided to charge for the use of *pilas*, clothes washing stalls indigenous women make use of. This brought about discussions within the community about the ownership of water, land, air, and the sky, for in the K'iche' lifestyle, these are commodities that only God can own.

### Conclusions

In their attempts to capture traditional society, many anthropologists regard the customary expressions of indigenous culture as endangered, on the verge of extinction (Annis 1987, Akkeren , Hawkins 1984). Other theorists see the introduction of mass media as an incursion of information technology from an external and foreign center of production, one so strange and unrelated as to be considered incongruous to and even undermining the conventional Maya community.<sup>13</sup> While it is true that the production and dissemination of telecommunications lies far outside the immediate indigenous town, their introduction to the region has not, however, caused values and identities to disappear by acculturating North American sensibilities. No one viewing the disfraces dances would confuse them with any level of corporate culture or Western characteristics. Rather the spread of mass media to the indigenous areas of the

Guatemalan highlands has spawned a new brand and opportunity for identity construction, one that is creative and viable, reviving traditions with new forms of self-representation and enhancing cultural mobility. Many scholars, such as Horkheimer and Adorno, wrote about the negative effects of mass media and globalization. I would argue the *disfraces* are a response to globalization and the dances strengthen values and identity rather than erode them. According to Jesus-Martin Barbero (1993, 19), assimilating popular culture in Latin America is a means of ensuring continued existence, "...the popular classes assimilate what is available and recycle it for their physical and cultural survival." The dancers are continuing a practice and process that began with the arrival of the first Europeans, adopting new or foreign forms and maintaining native meaning. Through the *disfraces*, the people of Momostenango have created an venue for maintaining the past at the same time they demonstrate they are clearly rooted in the present.

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<sup>1</sup> Although brief, an astute, mention was made of them in the Maury Hutcheson's (2003) doctoral dissertation, this is not the norm. After presenting an early version of my research, one anthropologist who works in the highlands, was very dismissive toward my investigations. He stated very clearly that what I studied was decidedly not Maya, and I may as well just study New Orleans Mardi Gras.

<sup>22</sup> Although, as Diane M. Nelson (1996, 300) notes, as soon as most Maya in Guatemala achieve the same level of education, socio-economic status, and health they are appropriated by the *Ladino* class.

<sup>3</sup> The Ladino citizens living in Momostenango and Chichicastenango at Christmastime also celebrate this same type of Ladino *convite*.

<sup>4</sup> In addition, as Zamora (2003, 56) suggests that for San Miguel Totonicapan, the community views the dancers as having attained an international status, as they have had the opportunity to travel to Mexico to dance in the Carnaval de Veracruz on three separate occasions.

<sup>5</sup> Countries that contributed military observers: Argentina, Australia, Austria, Brazil, Canada, Ecuador, Germany, Norway, Russian Federation, Singapore, Spain, Sweden, Ukraine, United States, Uruguay and Venezuela.

<sup>6</sup> Although the mission officially ended, I often see MINUGUA vehicles in Guatemala as recently as August 2006.

<sup>7</sup> The Arbenz government that was toppled by the civil war and US involvement was for agrarian reform, regulating foreign monopolies, raising wages for workers and peasants and providing organizations with equality, justice, and equity.

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<sup>8</sup> Although Ladino communities attempt to connect themselves to the global community, in reality it is the elites that are the true transnationals, linked to world markets, the peace accord was a victory for the hegemony of their power (Jonas 2000, 223).

<sup>9</sup> From 1981-1983 440 Maya villages were entirely wiped off the map, 150,000 civilians were "disappeared," and over 1 million persons displaced through the deliberate destruction of large areas of the highlands (Jonas, 2000 24). Rios-Montt's aim was to eliminate the guerillas' support base within indigenous communities and destroy the Maya culture, identity, and communal structure

<sup>10</sup> My host, Eligio, did not participate in the last set or the removal of the masks. Although he is proud of participating, he was concerned that revealing his identity might infringe on his business (pers. com. August 1, 2006).

<sup>11</sup> Although on the surface, the Ladino community insists the years of prejudice are long gone. As Charles Hale notes, in adopting anti-racist language the Ladinos shut off any true multi-cultural discourse (Hale 1999, 302).

<sup>12</sup> At least 1 to 1 ½ million Guatemalans, 10% of the population now lives in the US. The financial remittances sent in home equals \$1 billion/year (*Prensa Libre*, Sept. 6 1999). This is a significant contribution to Guatemala's economy and is the second largest source of foreign exchange after coffee exports (Jonas 2000, 225).

<sup>13</sup> For a contrasting opinion on the subject see Diane M. Nelson's work on Maya "hackers" and the pan-Maya movement's use of the internet as a means of networking in Nelson 1996.

CHAPTER 4: INTRODUCTION TO THE *TALLERES DE DISFRAZ*  
COSTUME SHOPS

Michel de Certeau (1984, 129) wrote, “what the map cuts up, the story cuts across,” suggesting some of the ways cultural collectivity and shared knowledge transcend the politically imposed boundaries that separate people. While it is important to recognize that these borders appear “from above” (Conquergood 2004, 369), and often have little bearing on localized knowledge, this statement elides the issue of translation that takes place as these narratives traverse varying landscapes. While he does consider travel and migration, de Certeau’s comment, however, do not go far enough for my purposes. He does not explore the dissimilar, distinctive, and special ways particular groups use the same tales or performances to say something unique about themselves, whether intentional or not. As Michael Taussig (1993) notes in his discussion of mimesis, when one group imitates another it often demarcates how different they really are rather than the similarities they mean to capture. In addition, Taussig (1987) recognizes how indigenous American groups combined pre-modern folklore and magic with a high degree of contemporary social awareness to create their own form of history.

These types of engagements with external, commodified symbols and their restructuring with local value-theories appear with the *disfraces* dances in Momostenango. The act of mimesis evident in the fantastic costumes separates their meanings, values, behaviors, and religious function from the United States--from where they draw their inspiration--and provide an impetus for local meaning. The relationship of Guatemala to the United States is a central motif in the *disfraces*

costumes, yet the Momostecan portrayal of North American imagery suggests they made them in response to their own needs, articulating their disparity from the original (Escobar 1995, 92). For example, during a grade school festival parade young K'iche' boys in Momostenango dressed as either cowboys or Apache "Indians" that the locals referred to *pieles rojos*, or "red skins" (Fig. 4.1).



**Figure 4.1** Nefi Poroj dressed as a North American Apache, Momostenango, 2005

These costumes indicate an ethnic disjunction, they were popularly portrayed not because of their indigenous association to local native cultures, but rather for their appeal as something distant, foreign, and most importantly from the United States. In emulating the childhood pastimes of North American children, however, the

distinctions between the two groups are made even clearer. In this particular case, the map actually cuts across the story.

The *disfraces* dances and costumes play an important local role in limiting in scope and fixing in place the significance of a number of foreign characters and elements that appear during the festival and beyond. For these varied images to have importance within the community, they must appeal to the audience and provide an avenue for an association to develop between the performers and the viewers. Likewise, they must allow an opportunity for a connection to develop between the participants at large and the foreign elements they represent. At the same time, they must engage with pre-existing meanings of dance and public performance creating a new routine girded on the foundation of a stable practice. The Momostecans achieve a balance or harmony between these disparate influences through the embodied costumes that symbolically merge the real with the imaginary, the familiar with the exotic, the relevant with the unrelated. This particular emblematic language operates on the fantasies and desires of two distinct ethnic groups in Guatemala, the Ladinos and the Maya. Individuals of both groups use the costumes and dances to construct separate, unique identities. Although both groups share a strong interest in connecting to the external, international world through social representation, their discrete enunciations highlight very different societal concerns. As Carol Smith (1995, 724) notes, social categories in Guatemala are linked to distinct social practices; how an individual self-identifies in the western highlands leads not only to how one views ones self, it also determines what ones social conventions will be. Both the Ladinos and the Maya articulate these characteristics in quite dissimilar ways.

In order to understand the complexities of Guatemalan society and the various ways racial and cultural distinctions are constructed, this chapter will focus on the Ladino and Maya *disfraces* costume shops as an avenue for locating social difference. First I will provide a brief and basic introduction to the issue of race and racialized groups in Guatemala. Next, I will discuss the basic function and nature of the *disfraces* costume shops. Following that, I will explore how the owners of these businesses successfully modeled them on the previously existing tradition unique to Guatemala, the *moreria*. Finally, I will turn to two particular stores, one Ladino, whose proprietor is Pedro Roberto Rodas, and the other K'iche', owned and operated by the brothers Juan Carlos and Manuel Zacarias, to argue that the dissimilar ways they are run as well as the unique types of costumes of each may be read as metaphors for ethnicity within Guatemala. Since the Ladino community of Totonicapan originated the *disfraces*, I begin with the costume shop in that location before shifting to Santa Cruz del Quiché and the Maya version. Their varying commercial practices make the costume vendors the social mediators for their constituent ethnic groups. As ethnic difference and boundaries are the underlying theme of this chapter, discussions of how race is constructed, maintained, and mobilized in Guatemalan will be threaded throughout this chapter.

### Race and Ethnicity in Highland Guatemala

Costume shops function as cultural intermediaries and industries manufacturing different forms of identity for their constituent groups. At the same time, they generate the functional meanings of the dances, all the while creating new

cultural capital. Most of the country's heritage of class and race relations began in the colonial period and is at the heart of prevailing systems (Handy 1984, 15). While sexual union between Spanish men and native women was common, marriage was not, thus creating a new category of person, the Ladino, who existed without legal titles or inheritance yet with an economic and social position above the native (Martínez Peláez, 1970, 355-360). Jim Handy's (1984) study illustrates how many of the same problems or issues that existed in the colonial past, including the segregation and domination of, and discrimination against, the indigenous populations, are still present, even today in highland Guatemala. These divisive notions of ethnic disparity provide an avenue for maintaining difference, allowing Mayas and Ladinos to engage a place in each other's imagination and intrude on self-contained notions of identity. The two groups converge while occupying the same national space.

How people see themselves, or culturally identify, is not always in keeping with the more recent national rhetoric of *raza*, or race. On the surface, or to an outsider, rather, the Ladinos and the indigenous of Guatemala share many external characteristics, prompting Richard Adams (1956, 17) to instruct anthropologists on how to tell them apart. They share a religion, Catholicism, a spoken language, Spanish, a colonial history, and to some extent a cultural background. John Hawkins (1984, 23) went so far as to suggest the two groups actually shape a single culture standing as opposite poles to one another.

<sup>i</sup> However, this is merely a superficial reading, as within Guatemala, the differences--what Inga Clendinnen (1990) refers to as "unassuageable otherness"--far outweigh the similarities<sup>ii</sup>. Most native Maya, in fact, speak an indigenous language,



one of twenty-two that survive today. In addition, the Maya practice an indigenous-Catholicism that openly relies on their pre-Columbian spirits and ancestors as a guiding force, one that provides a sense of rootedness within the community and is still based on an ancient pre-Hispanic calendar system. For women, the greatest marker of ethnic affiliation today is still dress: indigenous women wear *huipiles*, native hand woven or manufactured multi-colored blouses.

Although the terms Indian and Ladino tend to be used more by people who are not considered part of either of these groups than by those who would be seen as fitting within these loosely applied categories, their usage does suggest a distinct set of social differences. People who identify as either Maya or Ladino do not determine their cultural or ethnic background based on a calculation of racial mixing, but rather on social recognition, by how one distinguishes him or her self within the community. Moreover, as Marta Casaus Arzú (1992) argues, issues of race are intimately tied with notions of class. This greatly determines how they live their life and the social relations they have. People who participate in the *disfraces* dances follow a similar pattern when making racialized distinctions. The dance troupes group themselves according to these categories, and the K'iche' Maya do not participate in the Ladino versions of these dances. In fact, until very recently, municipal law prohibited Maya groups from participating in these dances at all (Ricardo Zárate Guix, indigenous business owner, Momostenango, pers. com July 19, 2005). Likewise, the families that own the costume shops, although catering to both categories of dancers, identify as Maya or Ladino.

### The *Disfraces* in Society

In Guatemala, there are four national-level *disfraces* costume shops, two of which are located in the western highlands. One is in Totonicapan, about an hour's bus ride from Momostenango; the other is in Santa Cruz del Quiché, about four hours distance by bus. They are family businesses run by brothers and cousins and include more than one generation contributing to the venture. Both of these shops manufacture complete costumes for sale and rental, including the modeling and painting of the masks, which are made of fiberglass. Likewise, in both cases the proprietors of the shops make the costumes themselves, they stitch by hand or sew on a small, personal-sized sewing machine. They do not work from pre-existing patterns or plans. They create the design, assemble and construct the outfit, and rent and distribute the costumes on a local and regional level in one all encompassing enterprise. Although production greatly determines the social experiences, as previously mentioned, the costumes are not mass-produced, instead, artists sew them by hand. One of the costume shops that I will discuss is run by a Ladino family, the other is run by a K'iche' Maya family. Both shops rent and sell costumes based on imagery from North American popular culture.

The costumes for the *disfraces* dances are locally-produced ensembles that draw their inspiration from contemporary media. In many cases, stimulation for the costumes comes directly from the United States, as North American products and cultural forms are always present. Derived from concepts regarding the function of

mass entertainment, the costume designers' aims for the elaborate and gaudy outfits and attire are for the highest possible visual impact to ensure the community's peak amusement.

Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno (2002) prioritize the nature of production in their analyses of culture industries. Their theory of mass culture emphasizes the primacy of the capitalist mass-market over cultural forms of expression. They argue this would result in the conversion of those unique cultural forms into homogeneous products that reduce the consumer's capacity to think critically or to acquire experiences that transcend the status quo. In other words, they maintain that through mass production of entertainment, pure amusement and authentic art would be lost to deceptive business practices and false individuality. The *disfraces* costumes and dances are not, however, inauthentic entertainment, tainted by the hand of mass production (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002), but rather production turned on its head. The costumes do not signify a decline in collective activity, rather, they are used in collective activity. The costume shops bypass the original producers of the characters and their imagery, the North American corporations, modifying and distributing their wares in an inventive and unexpected way. Their handmade quality lends an air of uniqueness to every performance.

Walter Benjamin (1968) explores the relationship of art and technological expansion under capitalism in his seminal essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." Although he deals particularly with film as the art form for contemporary society, his ideas apply to many of the issues apparent in the *disfraces* dances. In his writing Benjamin is interested in how forms of mass

communication are made possible by the introduction of technologies that allow the reproduction of images to become accessible to a wider audience. He argues mechanical reproduction destroys the “aura” of a work of art, that is the specific qualities that render it unique and authentic. For Benjamin, the loss of aura is unavoidable and in some ways even a positive thing, as it allows art to be torn from the “fabric of tradition” (Benjamin 1968, 211). In this way, art loses its deceptive value. Additionally, as Benjamin (1968, 224) notes, “For the first time in world history, mechanical reproduction emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual,” be it secularized, magical, or religious. Benjamin envisions a situation whereby authenticity is no longer applicable, in fact it becomes irrelevant, as a standard for evaluating artistic production.

Benjamin argues the loss of aura allowed art to “begin to be based on another practice—politics” (Benjamin 1968, 224). He anticipates art and mass media merging while also rejecting the traditional cult value of art in favor of a new form of art that straightforwardly relates to contemporary political struggles, one that has a more direct function within society. In applying Benjamin’s line of reasoning to public dance-dramas of the Guatemalan highlands, a striking parallel emerges where both the structure and content of the performances inevitably change. If the *danzas tradicionales* form the authentic theatrical art, the “fabric of tradition,” then the *disfraces* are the present-day version that emerges out of mechanical reproduction to correspond to and symbolize a significant political struggle. With the shift from *danzas* to *disfraces* the aura of the unique original is lost and the reproduced images--based on accessing the mass communication available through the Internet—provide

the basis for a more direct and purposeful form of public interaction. The *disfraces* provide a contemporary platform for the K'iche' to rework their identity as a means of asserting their place within Guatemalan national society.

For Benjamin, the mode of artistic production and communication is determined in large part by the level of technological development. Advances in technology directly result in the progress of social forms of art. In the Guatemalan highlands, the last fifteen years has been witness to the influx of globalized mass communication spawning a rapid shift in creative forms of expressive culture. These changes allow the resourceful and imaginative modes of production of the *convites* and *disfraces* costumes. Their significance is not in their adherence to the *danzas*, but in their ability to connect to larger political purpose.

Marxist theorist Jean Baudrillard (1988, 45, 90) also argues meaning does not reside in the original object. For Baudrillard it is vested, however, in how the object is used. If we are to assume he is correct, then the highland Guatemalan shop owners who create the outfits for the public performances are responsible for producing much of the social meaning of the *disfraces* dances. They attach the attire to the lifestyles with which different Guatemalans identify (Bourdieu 1984). In this way, the costumes are part of a material culture providing an identity value, one that may or may not serve the interest of consumerism. In one sense, the costume-makers are working outside of the system, "pulling one over" on the multi-national corporation. They are de Certeau's (1984, 26) "tricksters," in the act of the "guileful ruse." The costume makers, dancers, and the audience consume the images, but not the place or the actual commodities, detaching them from the economic system that originally produced

them. As de Certeau (1984,18) notes, there are “innumerable ways of playing and foiling the other’s game . . . that characterize the subtle, and stubborn resistant activity of groups which, since they lack their own space, have to get along in a network of already established forces and representations. People have to make do with what they have.” In constructing their own costumes, the vendors create an alternate economic system that defies the originally produced commodified imagery. As de Certeau (1984, 39-40) suggests, it is an example of the weak putting one over on the strong and not behaving according to their rules. By making do with images and characters already in circulation, the costume designers create an identification between the costumes and the audience by inscribing the dance outfits with multiple, layered meanings. It is only through the resultant medium of dance and performance that these foreign characters and images attain local-social meaning. The costume makers mobilize these foreign elements as signification of Guatemalans’ ability to interact with consumer networks. In addition, they stay close to an already existing socio-economic cultural practice, the *morería*.

#### The *morería* in Guatemala

Unique to Guatemala, *morerías* are the shops that rent masks and costumes to the dancers who participate in *danzas tradicionales* or “traditional dances.” These shops were already established by the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century and appear in Spanish documents through the colonial era (García Escobar 1987; Hill 1998). Like their colonial predecessors, the owners of the existing *morerías* are family members that construct all aspects of the costume by hand, as well as rent and sell from their storefront shops, usually attached to an extended family compound or home. Family

and the household form a central part of the business plan (Krystal 2001, 49). Although they are considered master craftsmen, their mask and costume designs must follow established protocols so that they are recognizable, with facial characteristics and dress patterns that previous generations have used. In this manner, the emphasis is on continuity of design. Some of the K'iche' Maya consider the *moreros*, the shopkeepers, as the caretakers of the masks, and concomitantly the custodians of tradition, memory, and folklore (Lujan Muñoz 1985). They are community stewards transmitting local knowledge from one age group to the next. The *moreros* often participate in the dances, either as *maestros*, the masters of the dance who may or may not perform but instruct others, or as choreographers composing the entire composition for all (Miguel Angel Ignacio, proprietor of *Moreria San Tomás*, Chichicastenango, pers. com. July 25, 2005). Today, *morerías* from different highland communities are relatives through marriage and share ideas and techniques with one another while maintaining a certain amount of healthy competitiveness. The *disfraces* costume shops emulate these types of relationships with one another and the larger public.

By layering the system of the *disfraces* costume shops, and their function of rental and purchase, over the pre-existing institution of the *morería*, both Ladino and Maya shop owners create a “homologous relation” (Barthes 1975, 240). In other words, they establish a clarification of the collection of the different elements that go into the two systems of organization. This in tandem, allows one avenue for highland Guatemalans to “make sense” of foreign elements and introduce them into the local, social orbit. Although the work of the *disfraces* shops emphasizes inventiveness,

imagination, and creativity of design, they nonetheless modeled themselves after the intermediary social role the *morería* plays in indigenous highland communities. They created significance for their businesses through their similarity to the *morerías* providing a specific cultural context and by extension, meaning. The members of the highland communities are already familiar with dance as a language of public discourse (Muñoz 1993, 97) and the shopkeepers use this socially structured practice for the community through their stores, providing the metaphor or analogy that allows acceptance.

Rather than using imagery and characters from folklore, the *disfraces* shops take their inspiration for costume designs from film, television, music, and the Internet (Juan Carlos Zacarias, K'iche' costume designer, pers. com. February 1, 2008). They borrow images from media that individuals often enjoy anonymously in darkened movie theaters, in private, or in small group settings—such as a family living room—and open them up to the public for the entire village to freely and visibly appreciate. In this regard, they follow the example of the *morería* by creating a greater sense of community and stronger social bonds through the shared experience of common practice (Chambers 1990, 2). Watching MTV, the Bride of Chucky, or a soccer match usually occurs in a private or personal space and goes unnoticed and un-applauded. The costume vendors create a site for social acclaim of cultural currency. As Bakhtin (1984) notes, in carnival the repression of everyday life can be broken when society admits the pleasures it normally denies. The shopkeepers create an opportunity to celebrate imagery and characters from mass media. The use of foreign characters set against day to day experiences allow the Maya to become familiar with elements of



mass media, articulating the multitude of ways North American cultural and technological developments insinuate themselves into Guatemalan life and provide alternative ideological systems.

As the source of inspiration, growth, and elaboration for the costumes, the shopkeepers expand the semantic network of dance to include new connotations and new social discourses. As opposed to the *morerías* that involve long-standing ritual practices and tradition, the *disfraces* costume shops and their wares imply youth, wealth, leisure, entertainment, diversion, new technology, urban living, fashion, sports, and popular music, among other things. Almost all of these articles arrive in various packaging from the United States. The shopkeepers have taken the form of the traditional dances in native society that function as investments in ones' spiritual future and transformed them into something leisurely and fun, emphasizing recreational activities and relaxation. In this way, they are reorganizing local time-space relations of highland societies; they are turning spare time—previously through lack of employment-- into visible leisure time to watch movies or television. In the past, Ladinos openly considered a K'iche' Maya with spare time as lacking labor, indolent, and guilty of shirking their responsibilities. These biases tethered the indigenous to the life of the peasant, to confinement and subordination. The public performances of the dances and their costumes now provide an avenue for emphasizing identity value through leisure. According to Pierre Bourdieu (1984, 2, 6), consumption is ultimately a material and symbolic act of communication. It refers to social position, financial resources, or cultural capital. The public display of the dance costumes provides a very public site of discourse regarding leisure,

entertainment, and liberating pleasures, separating those who participate in a commodified society from those who do not.

The traditional dances imply the concepts of inclusion and community bonding; through their use of foreign, expensive elements, the *disfraces* imply social difference. This differentiation can only succeed through its reliance on the *morerías* and the production of traditional dances. As Barth (1969, 10) notes, groups create ethnic, and in this case social, difference through the representation of marked juxtapositions that appear in daily interaction. For an object of social differentiation to exist, it must have something against which it is compared. New technologies provide this distinction and rely on their comparison to traditional objects as the backdrop of dance. They have transformed certain aspects of K'iche' society. Phones, radios, cameras, video recorders, televisions, iPods, compact disks, DVD's, personal computers, photocopiers, fax machines, cell phones, and internet cafes provide new sources of significance and value within the community for those who have access and can afford such luxuries. Their popularity suggests they bear relevance to highland life today.

The *disfraces* receive significance and acclaim from the public not only because the costume designers stay close to previously existing cultural practices, but also because they forge a link between the old and the new dances. Many of the new costumes, although inspired by contemporary mass media, bear a resemblance to the traditional or folkloric dance costumes worn during public festivals. The attire donned by dancers who participate in the Dance of the Conquest, the Mexicanos, or the festivities during *Semana Santa*, or Holy Week the time of Easter, provide examples

of what Victoria Bricker (1981, 130-133) refers to as a “cultural pastiche,” indicating the Maya’s desire to jumble elements as a comic and entertainment device. They freely mingle components from different times and places including pre-Hispanic Guatemala, colonial Spain, 18<sup>th</sup> century France, and recent K’iche’ society. In addition, they combine loud garish colors with elaborate decoration, regularly making use of feathers, sequins, studs, velvet and fringe. The various costumes often overlap time, geographical space, and genres; as do the performances themselves, they are jocular, irreverent, bawdy, and yet at the same time venerable and pious appearing only during titular religious festivals.

The performances of the religious traditional dances, although well practiced and choreographed, will still never be the same twice (Artaud 1988). They rely on comedic improvisation and extemporization within the tightly held reigns of the dance master and the welcoming expectations of the viewers. Nevertheless, the skillful repetition of choreographic elements provides the necessary illusion that time is reoccurring. Watching the dances brings family members together again and provides a sense of continuity from one time to the next. Over the years, as I have observed these dances, many people have shared with me the feelings they have experienced. They have felt once again reunited with distant relatives and long deceased loved ones, as extended family members return once again to the home community to be near their relations, both living and dead. Watching the public performances is a means of revivifying the ancestors (McArthur 1977; 1986 Hutcheson 2003); it is a time for reminiscing and melding the times spent in the *féria* crowds over the years. Performing the dances, likewise, attaches participants to their family connections who

once wore their exact same costumes. Within the *danzas tradicionales* exists a tension, for audience and dancers alike, between discrete historical accuracy and chronological hodgepodge, between sacred religious institutions and profane, lewd humor, as well as between the constancy of a centuries old custom and the unavoidable variety of live performance in a public setting (Drewall 1992). These dialectics allow all involved to experience the performances from a variety of perspectives and to draw their own social and personal meanings.

Within the *disfraces* dances, however, the costume shops manufacture much of the significance with which they hope the viewers will identify. By appropriating and reforming Maya cultural performance, the costume designers are attempting to make *disfraces* dances conform to a middle-class ethos. At the same time, the Maya shopkeepers are in the process of taking the traditional dance form that centered on religious penitence and release and adapting it to recreation. Public performance is no longer part of a liminal ritual, performed outside of and completely separate from daily life, but reflects rather a controlled emphasis on leisure. In addition, one can understand how the designers encode some of the costumes with particular meanings by focusing on the massive expansion in the range of costumes available for the dancers. The costume designers have augmented previously known types of traditional and Ladino dance costumes, as well as added to the range of *disfraces* costumes in recent years.

Originally, when the dances first began, there were no costume shops. People who wished to participate in the performances made their own attire, usually formed from whatever materials were available and usually not representing known public

characters (Sergio Raúl Martínez, Ladino costume designer, pers. com. August 8, 2006). Gradually, and reflecting a Guatemalan tenacity for survival and ability to readily adapt to changing social conditions, specialists in the construction of costumes emerged. These designers fabricated many of the costumes not only for themselves but also for others simply to be funny or bring joy to the community (Pedro Roberto Rodas, Ladino costume shop owner, pers. com. August 8 2006). They introduced a variety of characters into the mix including those from television and cinema in addition to well-known locals.

The costume designers were specialists in “life styling” or marketing to their spectators, they created imagery that would appeal to a particular target audience, young, and relatively affluent. As the costume designers assumed more and more of the responsibilities for creating and making the costumes for the performances, the viewers expanded as well. The dances drew a wider variety of diverse people than the originally intended children and urban youth. Similarly, the costume designers expanded the subject matter of the performed characters to include such diverse individuals as sports figures, musicians, movie stars, politicians, both local and international, as well as local sayings that refer to social ills, for example condemnation of women who drink too much in public or corrupt officers of the law. The larger variety of characters incorporated into the *disfraces* repertoire demonstrates the designers’ ability to respond to their audiences and tailor or customize costumes to appeal to a multiplicity of spectators and to larger segments of society. In this way, they were both motivated to drive the new system and at the same time flexible enough to act in response to their patrons interests. The direction this reaction takes

and the types of costumes that the designers chose to create do fall along the fault lines of ethnicity in the western highlands.

### Ladino Identity in Highland Guatemala

Ladinos in Totonicapan may celebrate traditional Maya religious practices as part of their own tangible, national heritage, yet clearly set in a space apart; the Ladinos have appropriated and glorified Maya culture as a tourist commodity yet never accept it as a living, vibrant tradition (Nelson 1999, 300; Watanabe 1995, 36). Much of this biased orientation against indigenous populations is borne out of prejudice and fear (Watanabe 1995, 30-31). Ladinos have long dreaded the possibility of an indigenous insurrection and rationalize a variety of racialized pre-emptive strokes meant to dominate, exploit, and disparage natives who they see as a threat to their way of life (Carmack 1988; McCreery 1990 108-109; Smith 1992, 2; Watanabe 1995, 31)<sup>iii</sup>. This attitude underscores the continued and prevalent beliefs the Ladinos maintain regarding ethnic difference and boundaries that exist between the two groups, as well as the embedded system of stratification this difference implies.

The definition of who is Ladino and who is indigenous in Guatemala and what qualifies them for either designation is often a vague, complicated, and murky concept to sort out, especially given that most Maya are not easily distinguished from non-Maya on the basis of phenotype alone (Smith 1995, 723). Intense and divisive notions of ethnic difference survive and are quite prevalent despite the country's state policy of native assimilation.<sup>iv</sup> This topic and associated concepts have merited numerous

book-length studies as well as a plethora of journal articles, conference sessions, and academic papers over time (e.g. Tax 1941; Adams 1956; Martínez Peláez 1970; Hawkins 1984; Smith 1990a; Carmack 1995; Hendrickson 1995; Little-Siebold 2001; Hale 2006). As noted by several scholars, Guatemala's definition of Ladino and indigenous are always made in contrast to the other, they are mutually constitutive (Nelson 1999, 7; Little-Siebold 2001, 177).

In the early part of the twentieth century, Sol Tax (1941, 27) was one of the first to suggest that the distinctions had more to do with language and cultural practices than any other—biological—factor. Tax recognized the road to becoming a Ladino existed, but was often an ambiguous route depending not on strict laws, but rather on where one worked or lived. The concept of Ladino as an ethnic group in Guatemala has a very long history dating back to the Spanish colonial period. Van Oss (1986, 72) suggests that the European parish priests had a very material interest in ethnic classification for their parishioners, as they were required by law to charge natives less for their services, prompting them to record fewer and fewer indigenous worshippers. In addition, the secular clergy lived off the tithes paid by the Spanish and people of Spanish descent, including those of mixed blood (Sanchiz Ochoa 1989, 45). Their entire economic system relied on their parishioner's ethnicity, over which they exerted considerable control as the primary originators of all birth documents. As is the situation today, the line between these groups was often porous, externally determined, and flexible in definition. <sup>v</sup>

As discussed in Chapters 1 and 3, Ladino is an exceptionally thorny term and can at times imply a number of different meanings, not usually expressing a

significance anyone is openly willing to admit. As a cultural or ethnic label, the term Ladino assumes various implications that may shift through time or over geographical space, often reliant on the particular situation and according to those involved. It is, however, always inextricably tied up with notions of race, class, skin color, education and linked to social practices (Smith 1995, 724). Regardless of how one defines Ladino, most scholars, and indigenous Guatemalans, agree that this designation greatly affects one's status, relationships, income, and upward mobility (Hendrickson 1995, 33). In other words, the Ladinos, however categorized, have all of the economic and social advantages over the indigenous populations in Guatemala.

Non-Maya, then, benefit from a higher standard of living and have many social advantages over their indigenous counterparts. At the same time, many non-Maya recognize the tenuousness of the supposed differences between themselves and indigenous people. While it is common for Ladinos to brag about a lack of indigenous ancestry (Little-Siebold 2001, 181), others do claim some native blood in their family heritage. Whereas many Guatemalans admit they understand racial differences between themselves and the Maya do not biologically exist, they still justify the continued practice of these distinctions (Hale 2006, 4). According to Charles Hale (2006, 4), people identified as Ladino “generally have absorbed an ideology of racial superiority in relation to Indians: viewing themselves as closer to an ideal of progress, decency, and all things modern, in contrast to Indians, who are regrettably and almost irredeemably backward.” Today most Ladinos accept the idea that indigenous people deserve better treatment than they have received in the past, but also experience deep anxieties about this social shift. They acknowledge and accept that racism is wrong



and they should not tolerate it, but still want to benefit from being socially and culturally superior, at the same time criticizing Maya for not adapting and blending in to society at large (Hale 2006, 11). While staying in Quetzaltenango, the urban hub of the western highlands and a dominantly Ladino city, I often heard people say “we are all of mixed heritage.” This type of expression and its underlying meaning is similar to the situation Charles Hale (2006) wrote about regarding the new rhetoric of multiculturalism in Chimaltenango. This recent national discourse articulates the dialectic that still exists in Guatemala regarding racial ambivalence and undergirds a racial discourse predicated on the notion of assimilation.

Despite the current national discussion regarding ethnic equality, the Ladino community, nevertheless, are the originators of the *disfraces* dances created as a means of distinguishing social difference (Zamora Mejía 2003). The dance costumes, through their emphasis on contemporary characters and original concepts of design, help perpetuate the myth that the Ladinos are contributing to national progress while the Maya are obsolete, defined by their commitment to tradition and incapable of combining their outdated customs with technology (Nelson 1999, 298). Moreover, the Ladino performers portray the Maya, both in the dances and in real life, as continuing to develop in opposition to the dominant ideological direction of the nation (Arias 1990, 230). The dances are fraught with issues of place-making and the politics of difference. They subordinate Maya forms of knowledge and cultural practice to North American forms, implying that they--and by extension Ladino versions--are inherently more valid. This is an example of what Enrique Dussel (1992) refers to as the *encubrimiento del otro*, the “covering of the other.” The *disfraces* provide Ladinos an

avenue for distinguishing themselves through their consumption practices, both individually and as a group

*Máscaras y Alquiler de Disfraces Toto* “Masks and Costumes for Rent in Totonicanpan:” Ladino Identity and Costume Shops

Pedro Roberto Rodas is the proprietor of the mask and costume shop located in San Miguel Totonicanpan, Guatemala, the capital city of the department of Totonicanpan in the west-central part of the country (Fig. 4.2).



**Figure 4.2 Totonicanpan Costume Rental Shop *Mascaras y Alquiler Disfraces Toto*, “Masks and Costumes for Rent in Totonicanpan”**

Situated in the *altiplano*, or western highlands, the town of Totonicanpan, or “Toto” as the locals call it, features a rough and varying landscape. It includes numerous hilly chains to expansive mountainous terrain, and contains a dense municipal core. Before

the conquest it was the second most important city of the K'iche' Empire and was the nerve center for their ill-fated general, the culture hero and most important historical K'iche' figure, Tecún Umán, who famously and dramatically died at the hands of the Spanish general Pedro de Alvarado, ending the War of Conquest. Today the population is approximately 110,000 people, with about 14% residing in the urban zone (XI *Censo Nacional De Población Y VI De Habitación: Censo 2002*). The remaining 85% of the population comprise the rural majority. Of the total population, 98.9% are indigenous, primarily living in the rural outliers (XI *Censo Nacional De Población Y VI De Habitación: Censo 2002*).

As in many cities in Guatemala, the minority, the Ladinos, own the majority of the businesses and control the town government through a monopoly on positions in public office. Although Ladinos form a smaller socially defined group, their ability to maintain their identity and status in a predominately native community attests to the significance of this ethnic split within the social strata of the western highlands (Carmack 1995, 300). Cultural difference is emphasized within the communities despite the “extensive interchange” (Carmack 1995, 301).

Historically through the colonial era the western highlands were the stronghold of indigenous populations; territories were geographical constructs of the Spanish viceroy borne out across racial lines. However, in the nineteenth century, as part of the governments desire to promote an export economy in the region, non-indigenous were resettled in the area to function as a “structurally privileged class of labor recruiters” and state officials (Warren 1998, 11; see also Smith 1990b, 84-87). They typically were people of mixed blood who identified with Spanish language, dress,

and customs and considered themselves above indigenous populations in terms of social-racial hierarchies. This forced interaction between the new-comers and natives helped shape the new category of person in Guatemala, the Ladino, who functioned as an intermediary agent between natives and the ruling oligarchic elite; thus, the current formation contrasting Ladino urban elite with rural native labor developed. More recently, many K'iche' speaking Maya have relocated into the urban core in search of better employment opportunities, creating an environment for much cultural interaction and mixing. As is typical of colonial and post-colonial societies, all of this social interaction takes place in the language of the dominant culture, Spanish (Colby and van den Berghe 1969, 92-93).

Similar to other cities and regions of the western highlands, Totonicapan features a rich variety of traditional dances, boasting a Centro de Estudios Folklóricos designed to preserve and house folkloric performances and accoutrements as part of the process of *folklorización*, or folklorization. This refers to efforts of metropolitan, advantaged politicians and other social elite to revalue the cultural performances of subaltern groups by refashioning them as regional or even national folklore (Borland 2006, 10; Mendoza 2000)<sup>vi</sup>. The *disfraces* costumes and dances are excluded from the municipally-run dance costume cooperative, *Casa de Cultura*, or “Culture House” and the *Centro de Estudios Folklóricos* that safeguard these folklorized categories of public dance and performance. Although invented as a reflection of indigenous forms of public festival and dance (Pedro Rodas pers. com. August 8, 2006), the *disfraces* exist outside of the folkloric traditions, representing a new, modern public institution (Zamora Mejía 2003). This suggests that within Totonicapan, locals view Maya ritual

activities as part of a crumbling cultural pursuit on the verge of dissolution and worthy of preservation and protection. As Katherine Borland (2006, 11) suggests, conserving these enactments in this manner often sanitizes and domesticates these popular practices. Meanwhile, they see their own Ladino ceremonial performances as more contemporary, up-to-the-minute, and cutting-edge and not in need of any special safeguards. However, they are not yet codified or fixed as part of national heritage. This regionally sponsored separation and protection of the Maya traditional culture industry sustains their “folklore” status within society and helps perpetuate the bias against the possibility of indigenous progress.

Pedro Roberto Rodas, the proprietor of the costume shop “Máscaras y Alquilar de Disfraces Toto” takes a creative role in shaping these cultural artifacts and providing their meaning (Fig. 4.3). Robert Carmack (1995, 262) would categorize Pedro Roberto Rodas somewhere between a “petty bourgeois Ladino,” and a Ladino-elite merchant due to his middle-class orientation and identification, as well as his engagement with a wide range of commercial activities. Rodas has more than one business; in addition to the manufacturing, renting, and selling from his costume shop, his family also owns a storefront bakery and runs a supplementary business making children’s birthday piñatas to order out of his home. Among Ladinos, the greatest difference in terms of class usually has to do with access to higher levels of education and luxury goods, such as technology. As Carmack (1995, 261) notes, capacity to master an industry in Guatemala has a profound impact on position in the overall class structure. The combination of Rodas’ artistry and business acumen has opened doors to a more comfortable lifestyle, a higher social station, and a variety of household

consumer goods. He owns several color televisions, a VCR, and a digital video camera, as well as a couple of automobiles and a van. In addition he is articulate, refined, and quite savvy.



**Figure 4.3** Pedro Roberto Rodas, Proprietor of *Mascaras y Alquiler de Disfraces Toto*.

Rodas has clearly maintained a strong sense of control over his designs and their dissemination. He claims total ownership of his work, regardless of the fact that they are recreations of characters invented by others, figures that typically appear in other forms of media from another part of the continent. He emphasizes the artistry of his work and the creative qualities that went into modeling the costumes. He specializes in furry or plush cartoon characters and corporate mascots (e.g. Ronald

McDonald or Tony the Tiger), tailoring his designs to children, who especially love to see the fuzzy animals appear live during the festivals (Barreno 2008, 32) (Fig. 4.4).



**Figure 4.4 Totonacapan furry convite costumes and bakery van. Photo courtesy of Pedro Roberto Rodas.**

He bypasses North American notions of copyright by insisting that he alone has possession of the costumes, yet creates attire that very closely approximates the original creatures and personalities. Because of his television and VCR, Rodas has seen all of the movies he draws inspiration from and knows the original context of their stories. He is, however, using the resources provided by the social order and detaching them from the system that produced them (de Certeau 1984, 18). In this case it is in order to claim personal and exclusive possession and some degree of market control.

Rodas claims to own the designs. This has caused him to lock horns with the dancers on numerous occasions regarding the costumes' appropriate circulation beyond the *convites* or *disfraces* performances. As the costumes are enormously popular with children, Rodas' business sense led him to create an opportunity to make some extra money on the side; he rents them out for birthday parties in Totonicapan. This resulted in confrontational situations between Rodas and the Ladino dancers, the latter were upset as they felt the use of the costumes at other functions diminished their prestige and undermined the dancers' "consumerist masculinity" (Gonzalez 2000, 332). Rodas refused to relent his control; he made the garments and made it very clear that he would rent them to whomever and whenever he pleased. This set of circumstances represents Rodas' attempt to dominate the spaces of symbolic expression and monopolize collective imagination. In meeting with Rodas, he repeatedly emphasized that the costumes are an art form and what he does is an artistic activity, part of the culture of Guatemala, and likened to the original act of creation (pers. com August 8, 2006). He does not appear to find irony in his claims of exclusive rights to someone else's original artistic conceptions.<sup>vii</sup> This episode also highlights another way the dances and their costumes are connected to mercantilism and consumerism. As a business owner, Rodas uses the costumes as a means to extend his influence and affluence. He both manages their potential participation throughout the community and expands his personal financial prosperity, while creating an alternate form of local history, one that emphasizes his particular role.

Rodas costume business has allowed him new ways to articulate local power in an effort that affirms his progress and modernity, meanwhile providing a means by



which he may arrive at or maintain his self-definition or ethnic affiliation (Zamora Mejía 2003). His commercial activities indicate he forges an active role in the process of cultural production in his attempt to form and foster, legitimize, and corroborate his social standing, suggesting its tenuous existence. It is not a fixed, static system but rather one that is hotly contested in Guatemala today, otherwise continuous attempts to legitimize his position would not be necessary. It is what Escobar (2008, 15) refers to as a “place-based yet transnationalized strategy,” that is, he is in a position of creating social norms and meaning-making with signs and symbols from beyond the immediate community in order to define the local terms and values that delineate his position in society. Rodas’ approach reconciles the contradictions and inconsistencies of ethno-racial exclusion, preparing the representations and signifying practices used by the dominant culture to validate their advantaged position.

### Maya Identity in Guatemala

In the summer of 2006 I assisted my K’iche’ friend Dominga in the bank in Quetzaltenango. She had a large sum of cash to add to her account, the equivalent to over two hundred US dollars, and was leery of going alone; she wanted to make sure she was accurately credited for the entire amount she deposited. Having a *gringa* along for the transaction would certainly add substantive influence to the situation. While on the hour-long way there, we were chatting happily about life in Guatemala and sharing a little *chisme*, or gossip. During the conversation that ventured into the differences between Guatemala and the United States, she proudly showed me her government issued identification card, *cedula* that she would need to present as proof

of who she was once we were in the bank. On it, clearly spelled out was her national, legal designation: *indígena, iletrado, y ignorante*, “indigenous, illiterate, and ignorant.” I was completely taken aback by this collection of harsh classifications stamped on her authorization papers.

Yes, Dominga self-identifies as indigenous, she uses overt markers of dress, language, and ethnic customs to signify her affiliation (Hendrickson 1995, 30) and distinctiveness from other communities and from Ladinos (Smith 1990c; Watanabe 1992)<sup>viii</sup>. She speaks K’iche’ as a first language and she wears *traje*, women’s traditional clothing that includes a decorated woven *huipil*, or blouse. Yes, she is illiterate, like the majority of Maya women; as part of the lowest grade of traditional stratified society, she never learned to read or write in either K’iche’, her first language, or Spanish, her second language that she speaks fluently (Carmack 1995, 306-307). Ignorant, however, she is not. She runs not only her multi-generational household, but also controls her family business of buying and selling traditional *santos* or saint images, dance costumes and masks. She travels the country purchasing old items from various families and shrewdly turns them for profit. She conducts much of her business in Spanish, but also has learned a few key phrases in a variety of languages, including English, Italian, and German.

In the government’s system of categorization, regardless of what native language she speaks, or the distinct local community she claims as home, Dominga is less than human, eternally *indio*, “brutish, uncivilized, fit only to toil and obey” (Watanabe 1995, 30). As James Dunkerley notes,

Those who dominate Guatemala are still prone to describe the Indians who comprise over half the population as ‘animals’ and more generally view them as a primitive people, eternally resistant to progress, indigenous to the land and yet inhabitants of a world alien to Hispanic culture and polity that constitute state and nation [1989, 432].

As Dunkerley’s statement suggests, Guatemala’s dominant culture is loath to recognize the heterogeneous complexity of their indigenous populations or grant them the rights of full citizenship. Nevertheless, the internal class structure of the Maya is much more complex than that of their Ladino counterparts (Carmack 1995, 264) adhering to a traditional, self-contained system of rank and status.

Dominga is not the owner of a *disfraces* costume shop, but her story is nothing out of the ordinary for many of the Maya who live in the western highlands today. “The Maya” refers to a large, abstractly conceived group and is not a term one hears used in daily conversation in Guatemala to refer to indigenous people (Hendrickson 1995, 31).<sup>ix</sup> As a people, they do share historical, cultural, linguistic, and spiritual bonds (Warren 1998, 8). Technically, the Maya are intensely and keenly differentiated into twenty-two ethnic groups separated by distinct languages and dress. The indigenous of Guatemala do not usually identify solely with their language group or *departamento*, but may also associate with the local *municipio*, especially if they are in opposition with another one nearby. They may, however, also view the *municipio* as threatening or exploitative, particularly if they live in a rural area. Rather, and much more typical, Guatemala’s indigenous identify primarily with their immediate, local community, next they align themselves according to their language group, and finally as indigenous (Nelson 1999, 5). The Ladinos, on the other hand, identify primarily with the town center, and will still prioritize ethnic affiliation, which

supersedes their association or connection to a particular town (Carmack 1995, 278), always enunciating their privileged socio-political position over the Maya.

Such persistent ideas of racial difference and indigenous racial inferiority have been implicated in the violent legacy of state-sponsored terrorism against the Maya in the past half-century. For the Maya, the organization of the colonial system in the western highlands forced many natives to maintain their imposed lower status through time. However, at the same time it provided a means for some indigenous people to retain their cultural identity (Smith 1990, 14). The *encomiendas* established by the colonial government in New Spain provided gifts of Indian labor to European settlers to manage that were organized around the preexisting territorial units from which many natives drew their identifications (ibid.). Severo Martínez Peláez (2006), a well-known Guatemalan Marxist historian, considered the issue of Guatemala's colonial socio-economic structure and its continuation into modern times in his seminal study *La Patria del Criollo*, or "The Creole Homeland," a required read in Guatemalan universities and the foundation for many national discussions regarding race. Martínez Peláez (2006, 470-471) argued that the combination of the conquest with the evangelization efforts of the mendicant orders and successive colonial systems of the sixteenth-century, such as *encomiendas*, eliminated Maya civilization in Guatemala. According to Martínez Peláez, what remains of indigenous culture today is an ethnic transformation created during the colonial period.

For Martínez Peláez, the existence of indigenous society will always serve as an anachronism, a sign of the persistence of the colonial order. Through speaking separate, "less developed" languages, Indians were held in "cultural stagnation"

(Martínez Peláez 2006, 493-494) Although Guatemala has not ever had a state ideology comparable to Mexico's broad reaching ethnic principle of *mestizaje*, he argued Guatemala would not ever progress beyond its colonial heritage until the indigenous populations had been *fully* incorporated and integrated. Thus, he proves Carol A. Smith's (1990a, 4) point that even Guatemala's 1970's era Marxist academics supported assimilation in a perceived attempt to make the country more "civilized." Kay Warren (1998, 5) observes that approaches like these promulgate "monoethnic, monocultural, and monolingual images of the modern nation." Likewise, John Watanabe notes (1995, 31) the current national rhetoric of cultural transformation suggests the only future for the Maya is to disappear. As he states: "To become skilled, educated, influential, or simply part of Guatemalan society, it would seem Maya must first cease to be Maya." Martínez Peláez (2006, 471) adopted a similar, albeit earlier, theory of Ladinoization,

Bien se entiende que un indio que viste de lona y calza botas ya no es un indio. Y lo es menos si junto al castellano maneja otros idiomas modernos. Y todavía menos si cambia la cofradía por el sindicato, y el "temescal" por los antibióticos, y si arroja de sí la quejosa chirimía y desanuda su garganta para entonar cantos de altiva confianza en sí mismo [Martínez Peláez 2006, 503].

It follows then that an Indian who wears jeans and boots can no longer be called an Indian. And he is less an Indian if he knows how to speak Spanish as well as he handles other modern languages. And also less if he trades the cofradía for the union, the sweat-bath for antibiotics, and if he gives up the sound of the chirimía to clear his throat and sing in a high voice of his confidence in himself [Translation by author].

To help advance this strategy, the state has recurrently attempted to create a melting pot ideology for a "national hegemonic culture" as a means of restraining and managing civil society (Warren 1998, 10; Smith 1990a).

As part of the state's policy of *indigenismo*, a body of theory that blamed the country's inability to develop on the presence of its large indigenous population, as well as promoting the subordination and evaporation of native culture, the Guatemalan government waged war on its own citizens in a thirty-year civil conflict pitting the military against the peasant. The United Nations-supported Historical Clarification Commission, responsible for collecting and publishing accounts of massacres, found the majority of the victims of the documented 42,000 abuses of human rights were indigenous, leading the commission to conclude that the military purposely directed these actions primarily against native populations while perpetrating intentional acts of genocide (Fisher 2004, 81). The climate and contradictions in Guatemala under the scorched earth, counter-insurgency program corresponds to Michael Taussig's (1992, 13) idea of the chronic "state of emergency" of what he titles the Nervous System in the practical world of power relations (McAllister 1994). It is terror as usual, the "normality of the abnormal," the illusion of order "congealed on fear" (Taussig 1992, 2). The state intermittently makes use of random government sponsored violence including torture, killing, forceful and vicious village raids, and disappearances. This is all part of the state's tactic to create an environment of fear and to conceal martial control over the native highland communities (Handy 1991, 43). As Jim Handy (1991, 45) argues, dating as far back as the nineteenth century, the only state institution with a real presence and definitive goals in the highlands was the military.

In spite of the violence Guatemala waged against its own people, and to some extent in reaction to it, the Maya today are revitalizing cultural forms and promoting ethnic pride and asserting themselves in the national space (Fisher 2004, 83). Fisher

(2004, 84) observes how some Maya currently view the violence of the 1980's as part of a larger, cosmological cycle. The blood and sacrifice of the civil war that has seeped into the earth has brought about a new era of economic prosperity and growth. In the face of the government 's widespread efforts to synthesize cultural diversity and eradicate indigenous contributions to society, Guatemala ratified the International Labor Organization's Convention 169, requiring that indigenous groups be given sovereignty over their own economic development and greater self-determination in national affairs. In 1996 the Guatemalan government and the *Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca* (URNG, the National Revolutionary Unit of Guatemala) signed the Peace Accord ending the thirty-year civil war. The Peace Accord included a special "Accord on the Identity and Rights of the Maya People" that addressed civil liberties of Mayan peoples. Its intention was to secure Mayans' rights, specifically including access to education in indigenous languages, emphasizing linguistic conservation and the role the indigenous languages play in cultural identification, as well as the right to practice indigenous forms of religious worship and widen participation in public affairs.

Pan-Maya activism for cultural resurgence after the civil war made use of regional, national, and international networks established through transnational activities and the involvement of international Maya-focused Nongovernmental Organizations (NGOs) in Guatemala's peace process (Warren 1998; Fisher, 2004, 84). Kay Warren (1998, 4) notes, the involvement of these international organizations and NGOs are at times paradoxical; they call for a social alteration that involves discussions regarding class, race, gender, and religious diversity, at the same time they

pressure the government to reduce social services in the name of neoliberal economic policies. On the other hand, they have also provided an opportunity for indigenous communities to eclipse the Ladino population and interact with funding bodies associated with the United Nations, as well as human rights organizations from around the globe.

During the harshest years of the civil war, in the 1970s and 1980s, approximately 350,000 indigenous Guatemalans fled the country seeking political asylum (Warren 1998, 52). Finding their way to the United States, Mexico, or even Europe, these refugees were some of the first transnational indigenous populations out of Central America forging new international relations. The conferring of the Nobel Peace Prize to a K'iche' Maya woman, Rigoberta Menchú Tum, in 1992 for her work to bring about awareness of the violence and human rights abuses enacted against Maya people illustrates the enthusiastic international concern for indigenous rights. The ferocity and brutality waged against indigenous populations was also the cause for global alarm and a resounding universal call for the end of violence. These events sparked worldwide interest in and attention on Maya society in Guatemala.

The K'iche' Maya have proven resilient in sustaining their culture in the face of adversity and have demonstrated an ability to adapt to and accommodate new religions, political systems, forms of subsistence, and technology; and even creating and maintaining successful businesses. An emerging "Indian" bourgeois-class of highly successful merchants are challenging the economic dominance of the Ladinos (Carmack 1995, 265). Thus, on some level, many Maya see the United States and its exports as a way to demonstrate their affiliation with a strong foreign power while



bypassing Ladino control. In the Guatemalan highlands today, one may find some wealthy indigenous rural merchants. Their main difference with the Ladinos is that most Maya either have difficulty converting wealth into a contemporary standard of living, or simply chose not to (Carmack 1995, 270). As Robert Carmack (1995, 270) noted, many Maya still live quite rustically. Dominga, in spite of the fact that she is quite a successful merchant and antiques dealer with boutique owners and other clients that travel from both Europe and the United States to conduct business and negotiate with her, still lives in rough conditions that, from the outside, appear to be at the level of rural, abject poverty. As Carol Smith states,

Despite their incredibly meager political and economic resources, Guatemalan Indians have provided a powerful block of opposition to all attempts to draw them into national life on any terms other than their own, their terms being those of continued political and economic autonomy[1990a, 17].

That is, until today with such multi-media events as the *disfraces*. These dances provide an avenue for K'iche' to demonstrate their capacity to participate in the modern-day, existing nation-state as drivers and consumers of contemporary culture.

*El Trajes de Predador: Se Alquila Trajes Para Convites* “The Predator Costume Shop: Costumes for Rent for Convites”

Maya identity and costume shops

Located about fifty miles northwest of Guatemala City, the capital of the department of Quiché, Santa Cruz del Quiché, is located along a highway that traverses striking western highlands terrain including the dramatic canyons and pine forests of the Chaucús Mountains before reaching a densely packed urban core that forms the city center<sup>x</sup>. Travelers make their way past Laguna Lemoa, that local legend

says was created by the heartbreaking tears shed by the wives of the tragically defeated and slain K'iche' kings. The Spanish founded the city nearby, about two miles to the east immediately following the fall of the capital city of the Late Postclassic K'iche' empire, Q'umarq aj, also known by its Nahuatl name, Utatlán, meaning "Rotten Cane" (Tedlock 1996, 213). As Q'umarq aj was abandoned, Santa Cruz del Quiché grew, receiving its official blessing in 1539 by the first archbishop of Guatemala, Don Francisco Marroquin (Ximénez cited in Recinos 1950, 217). Spaniards subsequently began to occupy the town, and built the Roman Catholic cathedral, as well as other public buildings, from the stones of the ruined K'iche' temples and palaces. Santa Cruz del Quiché is also known as the site where during the sixteenth century several surviving members of the K'iche' nobility composed in K'iche' using the Spanish alphabet, the spiritually significant *Popol Vuh*, or "Council Book," of the K'iche' Maya. Many scholars refer to the *Popol Vuh* as the Mayan "Bible" (Tedlock 1996), a sacred text derived from pre-Hispanic religious beliefs and customs and most likely transcribed directly from Mayan hieroglyphs.

As a capital city of a department, Santa Cruz del Quiché is the regional hub of commerce, transportation, education, and the nucleus of the local and regional government. When I first entered the city proper, its urban feel and the lack of folk charm typically found in indigenous communities was striking. Having visited the nearby town of Chichicastenango numerous times, a place known for its distinct Amerindian appearance and dominant native customs, Santa Cruz del Quiché gave the impression of being like any other large Guatemalan town. However it appeared on the surface and regardless of my romanticized expectations, Santa Cruz del Quiché is

predominantly a K'iche' city, as the indigenous comprise almost eighty percent of the population, many of whom live in the urban core (Lewis 2001, 124). It is nonetheless, a city of contradictions. Despite its indigenous components and recent history as one of the hardest hit departments during the government sponsored counterinsurgency campaign, eight out of the fourteen current municipal authorities belong to the *Frente Republicano Guatemalteco* (FRG) political party of the former dictator Efraín Rios Montt.

Certainly one of the most unexpected aspects of the city for me was the existence of the *Taller de Predador*, the “Predator Costume Shop” owned and managed by three brothers, Juan Carlos, Francisco, and Manuel Zacarias (Fig. 4.5). Located only a few blocks off of the main strip, the Predator Costume shop caters specifically to dancers participating in the *disfraces* dances. The two brothers, along with a variety of other family members, all live in the same building in which they invent, design, and manufacture the myriad characters available for rental or for purchase. In this way, they are responsible for producing and circulating the content and meanings associated with the costumes to larger constituent groups within society. They create and respond to the language of the dance while expressing their relationship to larger institutions or even the state, including values, behaviors, and beliefs within the different K'iche' communities.



**Figure 4.5** *El Trajes de Predador*, The Predator Costume Shop in Santa Cruz del Quiché.

This system of representation allows the costume makers to burlesque varying aspects of life through the lens of foreign elements while making sense of things beyond the village or town level. Through the cultural practice of dance, the brothers construct a signifying system of meanings and bring them into the social orbit of the community, including cartoon characters, student revolts, recent news events and numerous other forms of mass media.

This process, however, is selective; the Zacarias family creatively incorporates North American novelties into the current, pre-existing cultural system actively discerning, and sometimes rejecting, inspiration for images from powerful global networks, such as the internet and movies (Borland 2006; Guss 2000; Harris 2000). Juan Carlos Zacarias (pers. com. February 1, 2008) describes his role in this manner,

“*Nos imaginamos de las películas y otros dibujos que sacamos del internet y creenciamos los otros*” (“We visualize them [the costumes] from movies and take the designs from the Internet, others we think up” translation by author). As the disfraces were a Ladino invention, modeled on indigenous forms of public ceremony, the Zacarias brothers’ work is a transcultural borrowing, appropriating imagery to incorporate into the reappropriated format of dance and performance. In addition, the Zacarias brothers also inject their costumes with shared meanings and values expressed in particular characteristics. As Manuel Zacarias says,

*Tal vez viene una película con tal figura pero nosotros significamos mas, que les dan mas significado, les dan mas color para un disfraz. Miramos una película fijamente solo una camisa y un pantalón algo y, que les dan mas nosotros significamos mas cada un disfraz mas que todo* [pers. com. February 1, 2008].

Maybe a movie comes with a certain figure but it means more to us if we give it more meaning, more color for the *disfraz*. We saw a fixed movie with a guy with a shirt and pants but we added more to the costume, every *disfraz* means more to each of us, most of all [Translation by author].

In this regard, the brothers map local meaning onto the language of mass media, which engages with pre-existing forms of dance and public performance in order to appeal to previous social relations.

Meaning is produced in the community by similarity and differences to both traditional and Ladino dance costumes, all of which telescope time and mingle various genres. The characters that Rodas, (the Ladino shop owner and designer), makes recreate and reflect typical North American imagery, such as Chewbacca, Santa Claus, and Ronald McDonald primarily appeal to children. While these types of figures may mingle with and appear in Zacarias brothers’ costumes, their designs expand beyond

the original concept of characters made among Ladino communities to please and attract a wider, complete audience of all ages.

Unlike Rodas' costume inventions and design, the Zacarias brothers' connect to K'iche' social identity through the addition of several key, constantly repeated themes that accentuate indigenous forms of subsistence and lifestyle. The Zacarias brothers make use of the same raw materials as Rodas, such as fake fur, sequins, and feathers, but with a very different result. For example, the overarching majority of the outfits and gear relate to nature, animals, and hunting, by affixing whole stuffed animals, furry pelt fabrics designed with animal markings, animal headdresses, or animal insignia emblazoned across the chest of a costume (Fig. 4. 6). While they may appeal to children because of their fluffy, downy characteristics, they also suggest the mythical importance and continuation of hunting as a means of survival in the highlands. Similar types of imagery are also popularized in such traditional dances as the *Danza del Venado* that features deer, lions, dogs, and huntsmen, and *Los Monos*, the high wire monkey dancers that perform with lions and tigers that are not part of Ladino folklore.



**Figure 4.6** Examples of animal designs in *disfraces* costumes, Momostenango.

In a similar tradition, Victoria Bricker (1973, 49-57) documented Tzotzil Maya performers in Zinacantan, Chiapas, Mexico, who celebrate the festival of St. Sebastian in a public festival.<sup>xi</sup> During this time, they dance in jaguar and other costumes and carry a variety of paraphernalia that include stuffed animals and animal pelage. In Zinacantan, the stuffed animals are tossed about and represent the alter egos of various members of the community and relate to responsibilities in hunting, survival, and ritual behavior. The Zacarias brothers' inclusion of stuffed animals and animal attire allows the designs they create to forge a bond with previously existing concepts of indigenous lifestyle, constructing identification between performer and audience.

In addition, the *disfraces* costumes play an important role in fixing the meaning of a number of unique local characters that also materialize only in indigenous dances. Homeless, hungry children and filthy shoeshine boys, drunken and irresponsible mothers, and corrupt and ineffective police officers and soldiers are all realities in highland society and frequently appear in costumes (Fig. 4.7).



**Figure 4.7 Drunk women and police officers, Momostenango, 2008. Photo courtesy of Robin Blotnick.**

Their prevalence among the population is much higher since *la violencia*, the Civil War, which saw a military intentionally set on destroying the fabric of native community and household either through the death or disappearance of the male population—creating over 100,000 widows and innumerable orphans—or the complete destruction of an entire community (REMHI 1999). Yet their use in the festivals is not meant to be cheerless and distressing, rather, they provide an



opportunity not only for indigenous to make social commentary about proper forms of behavior and comportment and social ills, they also function as ritual clowns, bringing humor and release to an unfortunate situation (Bricker 1973; Taube 1989; Taube and Taube 2009). Not surprisingly, these characters, however, are absent from Ladino versions of the *disfraces* dance, indicating a cleavage in the lines of identity construction along ethnic boundaries. That Maya society is able to make use of performative metaphors as a means of looking inward, and producing characters that are at once comic and tragic, parallels the folkloric performances of *la conquista*, the Dance of the Conquest, that has been recreating their own defeat at the hands of Europeans for centuries.

Additional extremely popular types of character that the Zacarias brothers create are indigenous figures—albeit influenced through the lens of North American media (Fig. 4.8).



**Figure 4.8** *Disfraces* “Apocalypto” costumes, Santa Cruz del Quiché.

The Ladino disfraces often feature the sad, drunk indigenous old man in *traje*, native costume, as a reminder of the backwardness and unsophisticated character of the indigenous communities in an attempt to limit their participation in civil society (Zamora Mejía, 2003). In the book *Love and Hate*, Eric Lott (1993) discusses the rise of blackface minstrelsy among white working class society as a means of counterfeiting, deriding, and controlling antebellum-era black communities in the United States. By generating their own version of black culture, whites were able to “master” black cultural practices in order to keep it “safely under wraps” (Lott 1993, 112-115).

Ladino costumes that caricature indigenous Guatemalan society provide a parallel function of calling up and burlesquing another culture to restrain it. In addition, Virginia Garrard-Butler (2000, 342) observes how the public language of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, imbricate drunkenness and “Indian” in the national Ladino discourse of *indigenismo*, providing long historical breath to this bias. Their portrayal of Mayas as inherently inferior and in need of acculturation for the good of society highlights a trope of “nativeness” they intend to suppress, making it essentially racialized and political. This creates and perpetuates another fissure or boundary in Guatemala along ethnic lines and meanwhile suggests “authentic” or genuine native culture is also lower status.

In response, the K’iche’ have a variety of positive and strong Pre-Columbian costumes that feature kings and deities, such as Manco Capac, the Inka ruler, Aztec Maize Gods, and a host of ancient Maya figures to affirm their connection to pre-Hispanic traditions (Fig. 4.9).



**Figure 4.9** Precolumbian king costume, Almolonga San Pedro *féria*, June 29, 1998. Photo courtesy of Maury Hutcheson.

These efficacious and optimistic depictions of confident and historic native personages are, however, mediated through North American media; Maya rulers are fashioned directly after the costumes in the film *Apocalypto* (Juan Carlos Zacarias pers. com. February 1, 2008) and a much admired picture in a magazine inspired the costume of Manco Capac (Domingo Tzoc Poroj, President of *Revolución 2008 disfraz* dance group, pers. com. January 31, 2008). The Zacarias brothers actively contest the Ladino version of the *disfraces* that places indigenous culture strictly as a substandard, primitive expression without knowledge of or access to technology.

These costumes create a site of production and contestation of public “Indianness” (Lott 1993, 38-39). Performers indigenize ethnic encounters into

imitative entertainments that mirrored the romanticized, North American vision of the pre-Hispanic other rather than celebrating native achievements and pride as seen through various local vantage points, such as pan-Maya activism. These dances highlight the social-ethnic relations of “racial” production, the structural, and at times poignant, tension of forces in Guatemalan society that created a cultural self-commodification of “Indianness,” one that is publicly celebrated by the indigenous themselves. The potency and credibility, or cultural capital, of these images derive from their ability to be mediated and distinguished through such foreign media as Hollywood films and *National Geographic* publications, as opposed to internally within K’iche’ society. These are the representations of Maya society available to non-Maya, lending credibility to non-indigenous imitations to native culture. These manifestations are not simply a means of getting along in a constricted world, they are the result of cultural exchange between Ladinos and the K’iche’ that play right into the national rhetoric of a dialectic opposition of the ancient wise native and the contemporary wizened and outdated indigenous culture of today. The costumes provide the necessary material of an exchange system of cultural signifiers that produce and mark the authenticity of indigenous heritage as being located summarily in the past. They also provide an example “Indianness” on display, allowing K’iche’ performers to burlesque their own cultural heritage and themselves at the same time they seek cultural belonging and legitimacy (Mendoza 2000, 165).

The ambivalence of these characters and their commodification correspond to a fundamental contradiction within K’iche’ society, how to maintain local identity and be part of the new, global post-war Guatemala. The nature of the *disfraces* allows the

costume designers to include any aspect of contemporary society they see fit in order to define and redefine native identity. They emphasize, discard, and replace components in a symbolic practice that appeals most to the spectators while contesting negative ethnic stereotypes that appear in Ladino dances. Their choice of pre-Hispanic characters recognizes the local need to seek prestige in indigenous identity, even if mediated through mass communication. The search for old ethnic certainties provides a platform for forging new cultural identities; the dancers in performing in pre-Columbian costumes are in the act of becoming “Maya” (Hall 1997; Nelson 1999, 5, 11). These costumes articulate what Frantz Fanon (cited in Hall 1990, 223) described as “ directed by the secret hope of discovering beyond the misery of today, beyond self-contempt, resignation and abjuration, some very beautiful and splendid era whose existence rehabilitates us both in regard to ourselves and in regard to others.” In addition, incorporating these characters into the *disfraces* dances creates a sense of transformation—as opposed to conservation—and social renewal for the K’iche’, as they appear during the annual festivals dedicated to the patron saints of the community.

Other figures and costumes are abstract, conceptual creations found only in the “*pura imaginacion*,” or vivid imagination, of the brothers, indicating a variety of features and specific elements they consider important in the festival context (Juan Carlos Zacarias pers. com February 1, 2008). These costumes represent various gods, kings, old protagonists or folk heroes from other towns, as well as completely fabricated creatures (Juan Tzoc Lajpop pers. com July 31, 2006). Many combine the

appearance of historic warriors and enemy combatants, such as spies, gladiators, musketeers, crusaders, and samurai in a hodgepodge of costume elements (Fig. 4.10).



**Figure 4.10** Warrior/gladiator combination costume, Momostenango, 2006

They never adhere to a strict concept of type that makes use of specific features and behavior unique to any one identity. Rather they defy precise classification and mix and match costume elements for visual effect. They are fantasy beings that may even combine human and beast, such as some that I have seen that are half human and half ape, or half human and half jaguar. They may cross time, space, and even species.



**Figure 4.11** Warrior/samurai combination costume, Momostenango, 2006

## Conclusions

In the Guatemalan highlands issues of race, ethnicity, and social opportunity and class are a dance between the Ladinos, the dominant culture and the K'iche' Maya. As unwilling partners, both groups use the format of *disfraces* in public performances in an attempt to lead their own cultural expressions and social interactions. In terms of the discussion of the two costume businesses I have explored for this study, both Ladino and K'iche shops closely follow the model of the *morería*,

a retail business unique to Guatemala, in order to forge identification between the new *disfraces* costume industry and previously existing patterns of dance costume rental. The tension of these rival ethnic competitions is, however, evident in the different types of costumes available for the rental and purchase for the dances. The costume shop proprietors function as cultural intermediaries, producing both the context and the meaning of the dances. Through their ability to design and manufacture specific types of costumes for their constituent audiences, the shop owners allow spectators and performers alike to construct different identities through the viewing of these dances.

A central motif of both types of costumes is Guatemala's relationship with the United States and by extension, its products and lifestyles. For the Ladino community this is a statement of leisure and wealth, access to a variety of new technological products and the lifestyle they promise. Many figures are meant primarily to appeal to children, (Barreno 2008, 32), those most influenced by global media. While the Ladino *disfraces* are a statement of consumerism, the Maya versions emphasize *communitas*. This is not to suggest that all members of K'iche' society approve of and interpret the dances in the same manner (Guss 2000), rather this implies that the dances do not necessarily serve the interest of the dominant culture. Instead, they highlight fundamental K'iche' ideas regarding appropriate ritual practices and their need to be reified by the immediate public. In other words, they outwardly appear to emphasize consumption within society, however, Maya *disfraces* function according to a fundamental cultural logic outside of overtly consumerist practices that instead stress shared forms of knowledge and resources. Today the K'iche' use the *disfraces*



as a means of breaking with the colonial past and negotiating their encounter with the global projects and ventures. The K'iche' costume shop has expanded the types of costumes produced and used, and by extension has increased the variety of meanings. As the true transnationals of Guatemalan society due to the events of the civil war, the Maya appropriate a variety of North American forms, rework them to fit their own needs, and restructure them in their own image as a device of national ascendancy.

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<sup>i</sup> While Hawkins (1984 347) did recognize that both of the categories Ladino and indigenous exist only in relation to one another, he also suggested that Spanish colonizers were responsible for shaping much of native culture and that indigenous society merely lived in opposition to their dominators. This denies Maya society the ability to shape responses to European control (for a different view from Hawkins, see Warren 1978).

<sup>ii</sup> As Inga Clendinnen (1990) notes in discussing early colonial Mexico, much of the early repugnance and the cultural divide that began at the time of the Conquest and during the early Colonial era continues in the racism that still discriminates against indigenous populations today.

<sup>iii</sup> As John M. Watanabe (1995, 30) remarks, a small part of this fear is based on actual rebellions that took place in the nineteenth century as well as the revolutionary activism that was part of the mid-twentieth century, such as the Patzicia uprising of 1944 that resulted in the death of 15 Ladinos and an unknown number of indigenous (Adams 1990, 146).

<sup>iv</sup> As Carol A. Smith (1995, 735) notes, the Guatemalan state will only confer full political rights on indigenous who fully assimilate and sever all ties with their native communities. This is similar to the situation in Mexico, where the federal government supports the idea of ethnic equality for its indigenous populations, but is not borne out on the local, municipal level.

<sup>v</sup> The mendicant orders, which dominated the western highlands, relied on large flocks of indigenous worshippers to rationalize their proselytizing efforts. Van Oss (1986, 77) suggests the religious orders of the regular clergy intentionally impeded the process of "Ladinoization," as this would have undermined their *raison d'être*. This may also explain why indigenous culture continued to thrive uninhibited for so many years during the colonial period, and after, in the western highlands, an area controlled primarily by the Franciscans.

<sup>vi</sup> The ill-fated indigenous-culture leader Tecún Umán provides another example of this exact type of folklorization in Guatemala. In an attempt to minimize his indigenous meaning as a symbol of resistance to the dominant culture and national hegemony, the government has championed him as an official, national hero, one that is celebrated by Ladinos and whose history is taught as part of primary school curriculum.

<sup>vii</sup> As Robin Blotnick (pers. com. June 6, 2009) notes, this argument is similar to one made by the pop-artist Andy Warhol.

<sup>viii</sup> Numerous scholars emphasize the ancient, pre-Hispanic origins of these customs, while others contend they are colonial or even more recent inventions. Regardless of whether they are historic or contemporary cultural manifestations, these *costumbres*, or "customs," are widely recognized ethnic markers today.

<sup>ix</sup> The exceptions to this rule are tour guides, archaeologists, and employees at language schools.

<sup>x</sup> The current population of the municipality of Santa Cruz del Quiché has reached over 62,000 people, with approximately one third of the citizens living in the town's urban center (XI Censo Nacional de Población y VI de Habitación, 2002).

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<sup>xi</sup> As part of the Central American Federation, Chiapas was originally part of Guatemala. After the dissolution of the CAF, Mexico annexed parts of Chiapas. The remainder of the state was taken in the late 1880's, a continuing sore point in Mexican-Guatemalan relations today (Handy 1984, 36).

## CHAPTER 5: THE QUETZAL-FLOWER MEETS XENA WARRIOR PRINCESS: K'ICHE' PERFORMANCES OF FEMALE GENDER IN HIGHLAND GUATAMALA

Throughout this study I have been concerned with dance and public performance as a strategy for the K'iche' Maya of Momostenango to manage, conceptualize, and experience the influx of changes brought about by the shift in highland society from an agricultural or *milpa*-based based economy to one that is monetized through wage-labor. These modifications are combined with the flood of technological advances that allow the K'iche' to connect to a globalized system of communication and representation. Based on a technique of indigenous knowledge--dance--*convites* and *disfraces* make use of North American commodities as magico-religious implements of local, cultural power. These events, however, are largely dominated by men and overwhelmingly express male social concerns. Something absent thus far from the discussion of the *disfraces* of Momostenango is how women fit in to these cultural enactments. In this chapter I addresses the topic of gender roles in K'iche' Maya cultural enactments and analyze the significance of women and the role female gender plays in masked costume performances. I explore issues regarding the changing role of women in contemporary K'iche' society: how they are represent and reveal themselves in the *disfraces*, and, in turn, are portrayed by men. Here I explore the social realities of being female in Momostenango, the existence of separate, gendered spheres, and women's responses to a globalized, mass-culture.

Field Notes July 20, 2005, Momostenango

After lunch I went to my friend Conchi's house for another cooking lesson in Guatemalan food. On the way there I noticed a demonstration was taking place in the central plaza with about 300 people gathered together. Conchi told me it was something about the water, but wasn't offering too much information. I hung out and cooked *rellenitos de plátanos*, little stuffed bananas, with her for several hours and left to go home a little after 5 p.m. When I got up the hill near the central plaza, there was a large group of teenage boys running wildly through the street looking for places to hide. It scared me a bit, but then I saw the National Civil Police and my first instinct was relief. Immediately that changed to apprehension, as I realized they are not a common presence in the quiet town and that they were prepared with riot gear. I reached the main corner of the Paclom and saw at least 3,000 people, all men, in the plaza protesting. Right at that moment my cell phone rang, Conchi was calling me to tell me to go right home as she heard the demonstration was getting dangerous. The protest had, in fact, turned quite serious. The *alcalde*, or mayor, Victor Manuel Xiloj was trying to privatize all of the water-- including the river—and charge money for it, which would greatly affect women's ability to do laundry in the public *pilas*, or washbasins, as well as many other domestic activities. Even though Momostecans were against it, he signed the agreement anyway. People were saying nobody owns the river, or the rain, or air, or clouds, and nobody can charge for it. Several people asked, “*y el próximo va a tratar de cobrar me un quetzal por cada respiración?*” “And next, what will he (the *alcalde*) do next, charge a *quetzal* for every breath I take?” (A *quetzal* is Guatemalan currency, one *quetzal* is approximately twelve cents). The protestors were chanting and denouncing the mayor. His assistant came out and asked everyone to calm down, said they could talk it over. But the group turned into a mob, they beat him up and he had to be taken to the hospital and they later burned the mayor's house. The protestors stayed in the plaza all night, even through the rain, until the *alcalde* resigned and they put a new one in place [Author's field notes].

“Candles for the Missing” *Prensa Libre*, November 3, 2004 excerpt:

Incense, yellow flowers, candles, tears, portraits of the disappeared and, above all, hope, characterized the march (of women) to remember the victims of armed conflict in Comalapa, Chimaltenango. [Fig. 5.1].



**Figure 5.1 CONAVIGUA-organized widow's march in Highland Guatemala. Photo courtesy of James Rodriguez at mimundo.org.**

Gilberto Reyes, Gregorio Cutzal Javier Tuyuc, Isabel Bal Cux are just some of the 179 first and last names that are inscribed in the stone monument that was erected in the Comalapa cemetery. From there, the 300-family convoy departed yesterday to the former military garrison, where there's another clandestine grave with 179 skeletal remains that have been found in 49 excavations. The work of exhumation, which began in August this year by the Forensic Anthropology Foundation of Guatemala, concluded just last week with a Maya ceremony.

More than 300 families walked four miles with prayers, songs, rose petals, floral crosses and photographs to make an altar. "We do not feel defeated, we continue looking for our relatives who were brought to these places. They talk to testify," said Rosalina Tuyuc, director of the Guatemala National Widows Committee (CONAVIGUA).

Who To forgive?

"How do you forgive and forget if we do not know who to reconcile?" said relatives of the victims during the rally. Tuyuc, who seeks her father, Javier Tuyuc, and her first husband, Rolando Gomez, said that if one day the guilty assume their responsibility, women, orphans and brothers may decide to forgive. Yesterday, living and dead tried to communicate once

again [Translation by author].

### Social Realities of Gender in Highland Guatemala

I use these occasions as an opening to discuss concepts regarding gender roles in highland Guatemala. A sensitive reading of the first incident indicates a number of issues related to categories of gender and their associated responsibilities in contemporary indigenous society. The main motivation for the protest concerned what is typically regarded as women's work, collecting water for cooking and bathing, and washing clothes at the *pila*, yet water is provided by the administration of municipal public services, run by men (Carmack 1995, 282). Much of the shouted chants and discussions at the demonstration revolved around the impact on women, as Christine Eber (1995, 235) argues, for the highland Maya of Chiapas, water is associated with females. Water does, however, fall under the traditional authority of men who are responsible for ensuring an abundant supply and providing for its ritual care by performing religious ceremonies at key water sources (Carmack 1995, 320-324). It was only men that arrived on the scene of the public demonstration to protest new laws that will affect the domestic field, and by extension their own lives. My story relates what may at first appear to represent the separate, gendered realms actually highlights the emphasis on mutual responsibility and interaction. Moreover, two months later women did take part in an even larger, but less physical, protest that blocked a stretch of the Pan-American Highway for twelve hours (Espinoza 2005).

### The gendered spheres in Maya society

As a key to the organization of social life in Latin America, previous studies used to suggest that this type of example falls along a public-private fault line that separates the genders in Guatemala. Men, it was argued, are involved in the active world of politics and employment, or economics, outside of the home and are considered providers and as such part of the “public” sphere. While women are relegated to tasks related to the stewardship of family and the household, or the passive domestic, and hence, “private” realm as housewives.<sup>1</sup>

More recently, numerous scholars have argued for a more nuanced reading of these two spaces and contend the boundary between them is actually quite blurred (Bossen 1983; Favre 1984; Ehlers 1991; Eber 1995; Rosenbaum 1993; Cubitt and Greenslade 1997). Recognizing that gender and sexuality supply basic narratives through which identity and labor are fashioned, these studies present cases that underscore the complementarity between the sexes. They emphasize how many highland Maya families are concerned with spiritual strength based on collective achievement of the family, as opposed to independent accomplishment by gender. This is not to suggest that there are not concrete notions that separate the two genders in Maya thought and practice, yet they are in the process of shifting as women assume innovative ways of engaging society at large.

The second occasion above from the Guatemalan national daily newspaper, *Prensa Libre*, covers the march of CONAVIGUA, the Guatemala National Widow’s Committee. It also involved women, whose courageous actions constitute new social realities for indigenous females throughout the highlands. These women are creating new symbolic signs representing what it means to be female and indigenous in

Guatemala; today Maya women contest the previously reified status of gender at the same time they are forging new definitions of femininity and self. In their roles as activist widows, bereaved mothers, and dispossessed daughters, K'iche' women dynamically take part in making sense of their own experiences, and of who they are in post-war Guatemala. These circumstances compelled them to move the parameters beyond what was previously acceptable for Maya women. Their actions challenge and redefine femininity and create an atmosphere rife with the possibility for future changes and emergent meanings in the appropriation of male-dominated space, the public forum. These activities create novel representations that produce original meanings for themselves and their communities.

#### Gender's symbolic context

This chapter places gender in a context of symbolic meaning and in relation to specific historical and socio-political forces shaping highland society. I explore local K'iche' notions of femininity, on gender parity and relations, and how various criteria of status and stigma are being reworked in the globalized dynamic of postwar Guatemala. Experiences and images of gender are measured, expressed and altered in different ways through original symbolic systems that respond to new venues of mass media and communication. Since the signing of the Peace Accord, rapid economic expansion in the core, Guatemala City, have not always reached the periphery, the highlands, creating a "stunted modernization" (Nelson 1999, 351). That is because this "growth" is also accompanied by a crumbling infrastructure, immense poverty, and continuing human rights abuses that cause many contrasts in lived experience. These trigger what Pred and Watts (1992, xiv) refer to as a "multiplicity in experienced modernities." This situation



provides the motivation for Guatemalans to continuously negotiate and shape their identity--including gender roles--and its place in an atmosphere of intermittently and inconsistently experienced socio-economic development. This also suggests traditional gender roles, and their associated meanings, are now subject to some level of give and take, a bartering if you will.

### Gender as performance

Judith Butler (1988) argues gender in European and North American post-industrialized society is a performative and negotiated terrain. In Guatemala, it is not only negotiable but also evolves in local secular and religious expressions, albeit in surprising ways. Years of civil war, the presence of international nongovernmental organizations, as well as the influx of global businesses and their products have made space for new cultural understandings of what it means to be male or female. Changing fields of power appear as women enter the public spheres and popular consciousness of society, such as the 1992 conferring of the Nobel Peace Prize on an indigenous woman, Rigoberta Menchú Tum.

Diane Nelson (1999) has discussed the ways body images form a nexus of shifting authority and control and are used and managed by the state and members of dominant society in a series of knowledge-power schemes (Foucault 1979). In other words, how male and female bodies, and their localized representations, speak social dominance, who has it and why. Nelson's study primarily concerns how these types of discourses are imposed from the outside and used as a means of intimidation and racial discrimination. In this chapter, I will discuss how female images are used and managed from within K'iche' society, how they are reworked in the era of mass communication

and trans-nationalism, and what these re-workings signify to larger society. In what ways are representations of gender and femininity evolving, and what shifts of power and authority do they signal, if any, from within indigenous culture?

Xena, alcoholics, and queens: gender performed

There are three phenomena and their related themes that have recently appeared in Momostenango. First is the formation of *Convites Femeninas*, or “Women’s Costume Dances,” performed for the first time in 2006 (Fig. 5.2).



Figure 5.2 “2 de Agosto,” “2nd of August” female *disfraces* group Momostenango, 2008

Second is the rise in popularity of the *Charamilera*, or “Female Alcoholic” costume in the male *disfraces* dances that has appeared over the last couple of years (Fig. 5.3).



**Figure 5.3** *Charamilera*, "Female Alcoholic " from Momostenango, 2008.

**Photo courtesy of Robin Blotnick**

Last, is the creation of the *Reina de Disfraz*, or “Queen of the Disfraces” dance by the dance group *Revolucion 2008* in Momostenango, that presides over all of the male dance performers (Fig. 5.4). All three of these events, or moments as I call them--directly related to the *disfraces* and their concomitant costumes--highlight the performance of a particular representation of “femaleness.” In one case, they are performed by men, and in the other two, women are responsible for their imagery. These moments reveal conflicting portrayals of femininity: are they positive and laud women’s grace, beauty, and strength or do they rally to redirect inappropriate behavior through the public scorn

of negative female stereotypes while producing a fault line demarcating ethnic affiliation?



**Figure 5.4 "The Queen of the *Disfraces*," and the "Queen of the Society of Friends"  
Momostenango, 2009**

In all three cases, a new premise regarding femininity is emphasized; the role of women and their place in society takes center stage. Yet, this shift reveals a site of new formations indicating a change in knowledge-power schemes with women directly involved in the construction of their own meanings. As such, these moments are all competing partners in the dance of gender representation. Likewise, they all provide examples of the blurring of the public and private spheres that constitute separate gendered activities: women perform public rituals that were once considered a male

activity, women become the central theme in male public performances, and a woman openly presides as an “authority” figure and spiritual guide to the male dancers.

This chapter explores what these different representations say about the varying role of women in K’iche society. First, I will discuss aspects of what many scholars have referred to as the traditional gender roles of women in highland Maya culture as a basic structure of K’iche’ society. Then, as a way of anchoring my study in recent events in Guatemala, I turn to the changes brought about in highland society due to the civil war and the dramatic increase in the number of widows in Maya communities. I look at what effect the loss of so many men, husbands, fathers, brothers, and sons has had on Maya women’s lives. Next, I discuss the role of participation in social movements in involving women in what is typically regarded as a male dominated sphere--the public. Next, I explore the effects globalization and transnational migration has had on women in highland communities. Finally, I will explore how these relate to the three specific cultural manifestations mentioned above, *Convites Femeninas*, *Charamileras*, and the *Reina de Disfraz*.

### Traditional Highland Maya Gender Relations

In discussing the Tzotzil Maya of highland Chiapas, Teresa Marrero (2003) has argued that patriarchal indigenous societies, derive their definition of woman primarily through behavioral models: “Women are deemed subordinate to men sexually, socially, and politically by virtue of their ‘femaleness’” (Marrero 2003, 315). In this definition, as Marrero notes, there is little room for an indigenous woman to participate in creative ways in formal religious institutions within the socio-political confines of her own

community, nor beyond its borders. This statement parallels the established, customary gender roles of rural, highland Guatemala. The civil religious structure of K'iche' society intertwines community worship and secular power, both of which are male-dominated spheres (Zur 1998, 51).

Although women play an important role in the *cofradía* system--associations of Catholic traditionalists sometimes referred to as *costumbristas*--and participate in organizing the annual festival for the image of the Catholic saint (Cook 2000, 35), women do not hold any positions of true authority, only men hold official position as elders (*principales*).<sup>2</sup> Men allow women to take part as a demonstration of respect (Zur 1998, 52).<sup>3</sup> While in many K'iche' communities, women hold an equal number of offices (*mayordomos*) as men, (Zur 1998, 52), in Momostenango, men outnumber women three to two (Tedlock 1982, 36).<sup>4</sup> Although within the *cofradía* system male and female positions correspond to create complementarity, the highest ranked women's position is, nevertheless, conceptually situated below the lowest ranked men's position. Not only in civic-religious societies, but also throughout a Maya woman's life, she is subordinate to a man, her father, brother, or a son (Bossen 1983; Rosenbaum 1993; Zur 1998; Nelson 1999). Still, neither one can exist without the other and in addition, each gender has a separate sphere of activity.

In the *cofradía*, both males and females must be married to serve (Zur, 1998, 52), suggesting marriage functions as a means of demonstrating a longstanding commitment to the community. Betrothal and marriage are quite elaborate rituals that involves navigating through a number of negotiations and ceremonies that require the assistance of a *c'amal be*, the "road guide" or marriage spokesman (Bunzel 1952, 113; Tedlock 1982,

156; Cook 2000, 75). It is important to have a go-between or spokesman who can prognosticate the outcome of a marriage, make offerings on behalf of the betrothed couple, and say the appropriate prayers, as marriage is an extremely expensive endeavor and involves the exchange of an abundance of food, liquor, cacao, and other gifts (Bunzel 1952, 25, 113-117; Rosenbaum 1993, 91-97). One of the foremost considerations the parents of a young man must make in their decision on a prospective wife is financial, as they must consider the contributions she will bring to their household (Bunzel 1952, 25, 113). Cooking, washing, tending of small animals, and weaving will be a young bride's principal daily activities, which may all have an economic effect on the household. This explains why during the courtship and marriage rites, the young woman is often referred to in metaphor not only as a beautiful thing, but also as a luxury good or commodity of the domestic realm (Bunzel 1952; Townsend 1980).

#### Patterns of Maya courtship and marriage

In the Ixil city of San Juan Cotzal, in the department of Quiché, a verbal wooing of the groom's father and family ensues as part of the marital courtship.<sup>5</sup> During this time the "road guide," who speaks on their behalf, repeatedly refers to the potential bride in literary couplets as a quetzal bird and a flower (Townsend 1980, 3-8). In Momostenango, the ceremony for the separation of the bride from her family is called *kopinic cotz'ij*, "to cut the flower" (Tedlock 1982, 156). These references to flowers clearly intimate the young woman's attractiveness, refinement, and fragility. The mention of the quetzal, on the other hand, implies expressions not only of beauty, but also of prosperity and finery, as the resplendent quetzal bird is a longstanding symbol of wealth, splendor, and functions as a symbol of Maya identity throughout Mexico and

Central America. Specifically in Guatemala, it is the name for the national currency underscoring its connection to all things economic, such as trade and exchange. Likewise, in the K'iche' community of Chichicastenango in the state of El Quiché, the betrothed female is alluded to in couplets as a "the woman's skirt, the woman's blouse" (Bunzel 1952, 116), referring to her weavings. As her textile garments are the only possessions that she will take to her new home, this references an important source of family income since once she is there, her handwoven items are also for vending (Bunzel 1952; Hendrickson 1995, 19-23, Little 2004). In this way, the bride is regarded as something precious and delicate, a creature of beauty like a flower, but also a symbol of riches as an important financial contributor to the household. Marriage is a partnership; in K'iche' households, division of labor guides ideals of complementarity, corn production defines a man, transforming it into food defines a woman (Zur, 1998, 60). As with weavings, selling homemade comestibles may also provide an outside source of income.

Both men and women are not considered full members of society until they have married (Rosenbaum 1993, 94; Zur 1998).<sup>6</sup> Judith Zur (1998, 8) remarks how marriage is of central concern in K'iche' social relations, as it provides women both spiritual protection from otherworldly threats and tangible, physical defense from other men, creating a socio-religious condition of dependence. Once a Maya woman has entered into a marriage, she is under the protection and control of her new spouse. "K'iche' are socialized to think of women as being supported and protected by the man on whose land they live, be it father, brother, husband, or son" (Zur, 1998, 127). Carol Smith (1995) notes, despite the constraints, there are, however, many social advantages Maya women



assume once wedded. Although, as Smith notes (1995 738-739), Maya women bear the burden of maintaining the main markers of ethnic identity and are expected to assume a modest demeanor, they also enjoyed a certain amount of social independence.<sup>7</sup> “Maya women, unlike other Guatemalan women, were relatively autonomous subjects...they inherited their own land, usually had their own sources of income, and were relatively free to move about (within the community)” (Smith 1995, 739). In addition, they could seek a divorce and expect help from their community in the case of an abusive husband. Smith’s discussion points out the strategies Maya women have employed as active agents determining their own social status. They were freer than any other Guatemalan women and were active in generating their own identity. As Judith Zur (1998, 51-65) suggests, Maya men may have more external power, but they recognize women’s important contributions to religious institutions, household economics, and the immediate domicile.

### Convites Femeninas, Momostenango

On Saturday August 2, 2008, I arrived in the central plaza around 9 a.m. and waited for the *disfraces* dancers to appear. As this was the twelfth day of the *féria*, the organizers were pretty used to me staking out my spot and let me inside of the ropes that cordon off the spectators from the dancers. It was hot today and many people brought umbrellas to provide their own shade. After about an hour, the *cohetes* or “firecrackers” sounded off announcing the arrival of the dancers. The dancers appeared, although this time looking very different from what I had seen before during the previous five years, for today women were performing. They arrived in the courtyard in pairs holding hands, similar in action to the males. Their costumes were surprising and amazing! I knew this was going to be a women’s group, but was not really prepared for what I saw (see Figure 2). While the men generally perform in a variety of characters and costumes, the women appeared in what looked like sexy warrior garb with ultra feminine masks. Their outfits seemed to take inspiration from Xena Warrior Princess, Eowyn from the Lord of the

Rings, and Keira Knightly's Queen Guinevere all rolled into one. Their masks appeared to represent an idealized version of a *gringa*, looking *canche* (like a tourist or "blonde"). I have never seen anything like this before in a K'iche' community, women dressed in revealing, militaristic looking costumes! They were wearing mini skirts and showing a lot of leg, and midriff, and shoulder, and back—in fact a lot of skin! Totally different from my expectations of what a traditional Maya female would ever allow herself to be seen in, in public no less! Where did this idea come from? Why on earth were these women, some of whom I know outside of the dances, performing in public as hybrid-Xena warrior babes? Given the recent history, especially regarding women in the region, this is utterly astonishing and even slightly disturbing [From Author's field notes].

### Widows, Collective Action, and Transnationalism

As many studies have observed, society in highland Guatemala is rapidly changing (Arias 1990; Watanabe 1992; Carlsen 1997; Nelson 1999; Cook 2000; Nash 2001). Individuals are altering their work patterns, their relationships with their immediate family and their religion, and their ties to the local community as a response to a variety of contemporary issues. These transformations are caused by shifts in subsistence and changing patterns in the production and consumptions of goods (Brintnall 1979; Little 2004), the rise of Catholic Action and evangelism in the past generation (Falla 1978; Garrard-Burnett 1998)<sup>8</sup>, and the growth of transnationalism (Kohpahl 1998; Loucky and Moors 2000). Moreover, the thirty-year civil war undermined or completely eroded numerous community institutions (REMHI 1999, 40-44), and caused a recent rise in crime, adjustments in economic and political policies, and prompted numerous social struggles relating to race, class, and gender in Guatemala (Warren 1998; Nelson 2009; Little and Smith 2009). In addition, these experiences have brought about changes in women's social positions, as the complexities of Guatemalan

society have caused women to assume a variety of new roles and forge new identities. They are faced with functioning as heads of households as well as participating in new forms of local, state, and global economic interaction (Little 2004). At the same time, mass media provides indigenous women an opportunity to change their imaginary of contemporary society and their place in it; they are now asserting their position in the symbolic social system through such mediums as public performance, even though in the case of the *convites femeninas*, they are ironically disguised as *gringas*. What follows is an explanation of the circumstances under which K'iche' women created these dances, how they are tied to recent historical events, and the social reality of lived experiences.

#### K'iche' Maya Civil War widows

One of the most dramatic events triggering rapid changes in identity for the lives of Maya women has been coping with widowhood (Green 1999). From roughly 1975 to 1995 over 120,000 Guatemalan women--mostly indigenous--found themselves widowed as a direct result of the civil war (Zur 1993, 27; REMHI 1999). As Zur (1998, 8) observes, "For almost every man killed or kidnapped, a dependant woman—wife, sister, mother, or daughter—was left without male protection, a crucial concept in K'iche' social relations." As noted above, being without a man is a dangerous situation--loss of one's marriage partner indicates loss of full adult status in the community (Zur, 1998, 127). Women's clearly defined pre-war gender roles radically altered to accommodate the new, forced, and unwelcome independence many Maya women faced during wartime and post-war years. K'iche' war widows experienced a variety of responses to their predicament; in many cases they found themselves at the edge of society, in a marginalized position, as their husband was not confirmed dead, but rather

disappeared, their whereabouts and existence unknown, their status un-validated (Zur, 1998, 128).

Women's bodies became part of the terrain in the frontline attacks on Maya society during the civil war (REMHI 1999, 73-80; Nelson 1999). The government ensured the broad militarization of highland society through the Civil Defense Patrols (PAC) that functioned as a means of imposing local authority through the use of violent force (REMHI 1999, 45). Moreover, by compelling the participation of Maya men, the government ensured the culpability of indigenous males in the acts of atrocity carried out against their villages. In this regard, they undermined community relations by pitting neighbor against neighbor, family member against family member.<sup>9</sup> The Civil Defense Patrols controlled and monitored the movement of indigenous bodies and had enormous influence on community dynamics. Moreover, through the civil patrols, individuals distinguished themselves through participation in violent actions. As part of the counterinsurgency's terror tactic, they employed rape, sexual torture, mutilation and humiliation of indigenous women (Zur 1993; 1998; Green 1999, 31). Moreover, during the war, women were under the "pervasive gaze of a violent oppressive state" (Zur, 1998, 20). The village patrol system was a completely male organization that aimed to monitor every aspect of village life, placing villagers, specifically women, under the direct and terrifying watch of armed, and often sadistic male authority figures.

#### Maya women under the gaze of the state

Does living under the watchful stare of the state cause women to perform their gender roles differently? In discussing the climate during the armed conflict, Diane Nelson (1999, 97) uses the metaphor of Michel Foucault's "Panopticon," where the

prisoners become the wardens; society polices itself as a means of surviving under the surveillance of the Nervous System (Taussig 1992, also see Chapter 4), which pits members of the same communities and families against each other in a constant state of fear. The Nervous System created a climate of terror, dread, and mistrust in highland communities infiltrated by the military apparatus. Walter Little (2000) discusses Kaqchikel Maya women performing as Kaqchikel Maya women for tourists as a way to survive, as a form of newly conceived household theater. As Little (2000,168-169) notes, these events developed in the late 1990's in Sololá, an area subjected to extreme levels of violence waged against indigenous people during the civil war. While he does not suggest these enactments developed in any way as a response to, or because of, the armed conflict, Maya women playing Maya women, their ability to adapt to performing themselves may have developed, or at least been fine tuned, as part of a coping mechanism from the days of state scrutiny; from a time when indigenous citizens performed as both perpetrator and victim. Because of the violence, women have radically re-functioned their relationship with the state, and by extension all of its apparatuses (Taussig 1992, 49), including as Little explains, INGUAT, the Guatemalan National Tourism Institute.

#### Collective female identity in postwar Guatemala

Like some of the Kaqchikel women in Walter Little's study, K'iche' women are taking an active role in reconstructing a collective identity for themselves in postwar Guatemala. Of the whole country, the province of El Quiché was one of the most harshly affected areas during the government's scorched earth counterinsurgency campaign, receiving 46% of the total violence and leaving approximately 11,000 widows in this

department alone (CEH, the Commission for Historical Clarification; Zur 1993, 27).

Before the violence, gender roles were more clearly defined (Zur, 1998, 51), yet with the loss of a large percent of the male population the postwar period created openings that allowed women an opportunity to respond in new ways to both local and global culture. Clearly, one of these manifestations is the *Convites Femeninas* that began in El Quiché, a region of extreme terror for women. In the *Convites Femeninas*, K'iche' women openly disregard the established pattern of gendered conduct through new performative modes, activities that typically lie outside of female gender norms. They created new social codes for expressing gendered and sexual behavior in public performances that featured a variety of novel costumes and accoutrements. Rather than retreating into the background, they made female sexuality a vital site of social self-regulation. New signifiers that appear in both symbolic and social forms mark their identity. Women's *disfraces* work outside of the previously assumed, socially scripted behavior.

The loss of a large portion of the male population alone, however, is not enough to explain the rise in *Convites Femeninas*, or female participation in public ritual performance. The violence in El Quiché disrupted the daily lives of its indigenous citizens and left a vacuum in the practice of things that normally define who they are, in other words, their identity. In the aftermath, women constructed a new sense of themselves as widows, daughters and mothers of the dead by sharing stories with others who shared their experiences (Zur 1998). As Judith Zur points out,

They construct a self image or 'face' ...which can only be constructed, deconstructed, or reconstructed socially or intersubjectively. The widows' self-image is sometimes a fictitious one. It needs to be in order to counter not only the image painted of them by the forces of repression but also their own image of themselves and to create a sense of continuity.

Constructing fictional identities protects the suffering person by minimizing the need for radical shifts in self-concept and by providing a sense of continuity[1998, 179].

One of the ways Zur (1998, 170) notes that women coped with the aftermath was to disclose their accounts to other women thus making them public as oral testimonies, confessions of their personal experiences. Michel Foucault (1990, 58-59) discusses the strength and importance of confession as an action through which identity is produced, a means of signifying and acknowledging ones own actions and thoughts. The widow's declaration or "confessing" and speaking the testimonials of their experiences during the time of violence produced more self-confident women and provided a means to achieve stronger sense of identity. As Zur (1998, 179-180) points out, many of the women began to speak of their own heroic qualities and their courage and boldness in facing their abusers and their own unknown fate. In their testimonials, women could present themselves as good mothers and defiant to military authority.

#### Female empowerment through social movements

The strength of personality is also evident in K'iche' women's affiliation with social justice movements and widows organizations. Women have played a pioneering role in demanding respect for human rights and dignity by finding a number of socially active organizations aimed at discovering the fate of their disappeared relatives and supporting people displaced by the events of the civil war. CERJ, the Council of Ethnic Communities, and CONAVIGUA, the Guatemala National Widows Committee, are but two of the groups that began in the department of El Quiché in the 1980's. Indigenous women were founding members of several of the advocate organizations that formed in the region (REMHI 1999, 84-85). Women, who have long been unnoticed members of

society, turned social activist, pressuring the government and the military to answer for their actions. In addition, for the first time prominent women became public figures for their work on advancing the agenda of human rights and dignity for all citizens of Guatemala and indigenous people of the world. Rigoberta Menchú Tum, Rosalina Tuyuc, and Nineth Montenegro are but a few of the female “protagonists of change” who work on behalf of human rights (REMHI 1999, 85).

The successful structures and actions of women’s social movements, such as the reclamation of the disappeared by CONAVIGUA, adds to women’s empowerment and creates an atmosphere of greater self-confidence (Safa 1990). Helen Safa (1990, 354-369) argues that in the case of Latin America, women’s participation in organizations concerned with female social action increases their participants’ awareness of gender subordination and provides them an avenue for demanding incorporation into the state, which is most usually achieved through male dominated agencies (Safa 1990, 355). In a similar manner, Elizabeth Jelin (1987) asserts that women’s personal self-awareness directly increases with involvement in social movements. For many indigenous women who contributed to social movements, they were actively pushing the boundaries of gender norms.

For Mexico, however, Katherine Logan (1990, 152) suggests that women’s decision to partake in the public arena, “arises not from consciousness of a new role, but rather from a desire to perform the traditional roles well.” This, too, may be the case with the K’iche’ and Kaqchikel women discussed so far, as their original and primary purpose in involving themselves in the public sphere was, in their responsibilities as wives and mothers, to address the transgressions of the state regarding injustices incurred. For



example, many highland women who participated in public protests, demonstrations, and marches organized by CONAVIGUA underscored their roles as wives and mothers by carrying pictures of the dead and missing for whom they sought justice (see Figure 1).

As Michael Taussig points out,

The actions of the mothers of the disappeared... create(s) a new public ritual whose aim is to allow the tremendous moral and magical power of the unquiet dead to flow into the public sphere, empower individuals, and challenge the would-be guardians of the Nation-State, guardians of its dead as well as its living, of its meaning and of its destiny [1992, 48].

Through their participation in these social movements, indigenous women's socio-political confidence grew and developed in a variety of ways, including their contributions in the creation of new public rituals, as well as their demand to contribute to preexisting religious festival performances in more meaningful ways.

#### Transnationalism, globalization, and NGO's

An added phenomenon of the post-conflict period was the arrival of international nongovernmental organizations (see Chapter 4), or NGOs, creating a climate of what Christopher Chase Dunn (2000, 110) refers to as "social globalization." Organizations, such as the Guatemalan Human Rights Commission (GHRC) founded in 1982, or the United Nations' Mission for the Verification of Human Rights (MINUGUA) established in 1994, monitor and report on human rights abuses. Under the watchful eyes and support of such NGOs, widows' organizations developed and expanded their influence alongside associations and groups dedicated to the civil liberties of workers and indigenous rights (Dunn 2000, 110).<sup>10</sup> Many of these organizations grew as a necessary response to transnational progression. William Robinson (2000, 89) defines the transnational process as "the economic and concomitant social, political, and cultural

changes associated with incorporation into global economy and society.” In other words, transnationalism affects a reorganization of production on a global scale. As part of this course of action, the economic restructuring of Guatemala created new forms of employment for highland women. Concomitant to these new forms was their increased participation in the labor force, combined with more demanding responsibility in the home (Menjívar 2006, 86).

As part of the effects of globalization and economic restructuring, many Maya women have been faced with working outside of the home. More and more women from highland Maya communities are choosing to migrate to the southern coast for seasonal agricultural work alongside the male members of their families (Kohpahl 1998, 41). In addition, indigenous women are forced to seek work in other communities, or in large urban cities in Guatemala, as domestic laborers for upper and middle-class families (Kohpahl 1998, 41). In extreme cases, women unable to find sufficient work--or women escaping political violence--have resorted to leaving the country as a means of survival. Women are choosing transnational migration in increasing numbers. Indeed, Guatemalan immigration to the United States is now female dominated (Donato 1992, 161). As a result of migrating to the United States, women are experiencing more egalitarian gender relations and finding better employment opportunities than they would have been able to in their home community (Menjívar 2006, 88). Laboring in the United States has a homogenizing effect on Guatemalan transnational migrants, including women (Menjívar 2006, 92).<sup>11</sup>

### Cultural capital from the United States

In addition to transforming gender relations, working abroad exposes indigenous women to the lifestyles of the receiving country (Menjívar 2006, 90). They, in turn, return to their countries of origin with new ideas and behaviors that provide them with what Peggy Levitt (1998, 930) refers to as “social and cultural remittances” in the form of cultural capital. In other words, migrants may bring with them their own interpretive frameworks as to how to survive in their host society, yet, the ideas, behaviors, and identities learned away from home, in the form of social capital, are sent back to their communities of origin, as a form of social reciprocity. In Guatemala, the excess of products from the United States, including mp3 players and music, fashion, movies and television shows, and cars and license plates, are visual reminders of the social significance of cultural remittances. Images and ideas regarding the United States are ubiquitous in the highlands. I recall seeing buses painted with the Statue of Liberty, a taxi painted with the skyline of Manhattan, bands performing during the *féria* in Momostenango from Los Angeles, and storefronts that take their inspiration from North American popular culture (Fig. 5.5). In many conversations, Momostecans explained to me that they had either been to the States or had a family employed there. With one family that I had become friendly with over the years, I never met the mother until very recently, as she was working as a nanny in Colorado. As Carol Hendrickson (1995, 71) says, for Guatemalans the United States is “the fountainhead of progress and abundance, the shape of things to come.” In this regard, imagery and commodities from the United States are not just signifiers of a movement across space, but time, as well, pointing to the future.



**Figure 5.5 Electronics store in Momostenango with "Guns N Roses" logo , 2008**

In the summer of 2005, I lived in Momostenango with an elderly indigenous couple, Don Elizeo and Doña Rita, whose five children had all grown and moved out of the house. At first I assumed they were all in the nearby city of Quetzaltenango or possibly even the capital, Guatemala City. As it turned out, all five were living in Houston, Texas. Over the course of the summer, many an evening passed where Don Elizeo, who grew up speaking K'iche', would explain to me, in incredible detail, a political analysis of the United States, and even numerous particulars regarding the state of California, where I reside. His interest in these topics was sincere, but also it was an exhibition, or a performance, of the social and cultural capital he had accrued through his children's relocation to the United States. Moreover, many of the dancers I work with repeatedly ask me for souvenirs from the States. *Algo, cualquier cosa*, "something, anything" from

the United States adds to their social prestige and bolsters their cultural capital within Momostenango and represents their enthusiasm and anticipation of the future. That women form the majority or are the primary transmitters responsible for disseminating this type of clout parallels their importance as the central figures for maintaining their traditional markers of ethnic identity. Indigenous women, however, are not just empty vessels for storing and projecting the symbols of traditional or contemporary culture; they are increasingly involved in what Stuart Hall (1981, 237) refers to as the cultural “battlefields.” They take the commercial paraphernalia--the commodified products of North America--and actively rework them into original forms that bear local meanings. Women are deploying new expressive cultures, appropriated from foreign places, to address external forces once thought injurious to the traditional community, but now are a sign of a prospering indigenous society ready for the world to come.

### *Convites Femeninas: Women’s Dances and Xena Warrior Princess*

In February of 2007 a small group of women in Momostenango held a meeting and discussed ways to celebrate their devotion to Santiago Apostol, the patron saint of the community (Silvia Elinda Perez Akabal, founding organizer of the group, pers. com. January 31, 2008). They chose to form a *Convites Femeninas*, a female dance group to perform in public during the annual festival in honor of Santiago. Despite the fact that each woman would be responsible not only for procuring her own costume--the rental of which could easily exceed two months wages at Q600 (approximately eighty US dollars)-

-but also for contributing to the cost of the live marimba band, every adult or teenaged female they invited to participate agreed to do so. Remaining relatively peaceful during the civil war, Momostenango's history is quite different from Santa Cruz del Quiché where the dances began. Nonetheless, the K'iche' women welcomed the opportunity to be part of this collective female organization. Women from Momostenango have a reputation for being sophisticated and independent, so it is not surprising that they would select this type of devotion on their own. Over the years that I have been studying the festivals in Momostenango, I have often heard people say that because the men were repeatedly traveling throughout the country peddling the famous weavings and blankets from the area, that women got educated. Unlike other K'iche' communities in the western highlands, such as Santa Catarina Ixtahuacan or Nahualá, most women in Momostenango speak Spanish in addition to their indigenous language. This is also a statement of the relative peace of the region, the men were not afraid to leave their wives and daughters unprotected.

From their decision to participate, the women rehearsed in private and spent the next six months preparing for their debut performance. Before they could officially participate, it was crucial that they carried out traditional ceremonies petitioning Mother Earth for permission to dance by offering copal incense, flowers, and candles as well as prayers to the four directions. This is important as most of all, participation is a demonstration of faith. Although the women perform as a group in masqueraded, matched pairs, like the male *disfraces* dancers, their costumes are entirely different, both conceptually and visually. The men's dance costumes highlight a variety of specific characters from North American popular culture, local and foreign politics, and sports, as

well as fantastic creatures from the wild imagination of the costume designers (see Chapter 4). In contrast, the female outfits include *briantes, unas faldas, y pelo largo* “sparkles, some skirts and long hair” (Silvia Elinda Perez Akabal, pers. com. January 31, 2008), and are decidedly feminine (Fig. 5.6).



**Figure 5.6 An example of the short skirt and sparkles typical of female *disfraces* costumes, Momostenango, 2008**

The women perform in high-heeled over-the knee-boots, short skirts, and exposed midriffs. With breastplates, armbands, weapons, and helmets, their outfits bear striking similarity to the well-known small screen character, *Xena Princesa Guerrera*, or “Warrior Princess,” who became popular in Guatemala through broadcasts of the American television show (Paiz and Garzón 2007, 278).

[Xena, Warrior Princess in Guatemalan popular culture](#)

Representations of Xena Warrior Princess appear in other forms of Mayan popular culture and folk art (Fig. 5.7). Made by local artisans in Guatemala, she is featured in a number of hand-carved wooden slingshots that I have seen from the K'iche' region, tools indigenous men use to protect corn from rodents and birds (Paiz and Garzón 2007, 27).



**Figure 5.7 Xena, Warrior Princess slingshot, Chichicastenango, 2008**

The slingshot is an object that signifies maleness and as one of a hunter's first weapons, connects him to the process of learning how to pursue prey (ibid.). They often appear carved in the shape of a variety of images and icons associated with masculinity, such as soldiers' revolvers, voluptuous women, and ferocious, predatory animals. Depictions of Xena on wooden slingshots indicate another form of influence of women's social organizing combined with mass communication on highland society, one that celebrates the strength and power of women, as opposed to the traditional marital



rhetoric, mentioned above, that admires women for their precious, graceful, and delicate qualities.

#### Xena and the search for salvation

The theme of the television series Xena may partially explain its popularity in Guatemala. The plot concerns Xena, the Warrior Princess' search for salvation and release from her previous existence as a heartless military leader. She chose to leave behind her life of leading a ruthless army, attacking innocent villages, and stealing people's land--all events that happened not so long ago to the Maya. She now uses her skill as a warrior to fight evil as part of her personal mission for redemption. Moreover, the episode plots address such varying themes as the value of life, taking responsibility for past actions, retribution and justice, self-sacrifice, as well as the importance of friendship, for example the bond that forms between Xena and her sidekick, Gabrielle. Given the recent history of the civil war in Guatemala, these are all themes that resonate in a time of reconciliation. The act of watching involves digesting moral issues and consciousness-raising (Nelson 2009). In her discussion of the popularity of horror films in postwar Guatemala, Diane Nelson (2009, 113) refers to these experiences of being acted on by external forces, as "living simultaneously as victim, victimizer, witness, and survivor, in the aftermath of civil war." While Xena is not of the horror genre, each episode involves a conflict, violence or action, and some form of resolution, all wrapped up in an hour. The benefit of this type of media, however, is the ability to turn it off or to walk away at the end of the episode, unlike in the Nervous System, where uncontrollable terror permeates all around, where violence and reason are conjoined, and always denied

(Taussig 1992, 115). Xena's aggression and fighting is just and situated on the side of right.

Xena as "tough" girl and K'iche' role model

Sherrie Inness (1998) suggests that Xena falls under the category of "tough girls" in popular culture, female heroes that contest traditional male gender roles. According to Inness, Xena in particular is a positive role model helping to change how society perceives the relationship between women and being tough. Inness (1998, 161) suggests that Xena's toughness is not diminished through subordinate status or faux-toughness, like other female characters, such as Charlie's Angels or Dana Scully from the *X-Files*. Instead, she represents "one of the strongest challenges to the dominance of the male hero." The popularity of Xena, however, also provides some paradoxes indicating the characters' ambivalent nature in Guatemala. The show highlights her physical appearance and sexual desirability as much as her strength. She is super-powerful, and "upholds the convention that woman superheroes should be attractive... and white" (Inness 1998, 176). That the image of "tough" Xena is mobilized as an icon during female K'iche' forms of public worship indicates that Maya women are in the process of establishing new collective identities, one that counters the previously male-dominated sphere of public ritual performance and centers on strong, positive female characters. Virginia Antonieta Itzep Quiej (pers. com. August 2, 2009), one of the female performers who has participated since the dance's inception in Momostenango, said, *Me gusta bailar como Xena porque ella es un mujer muy fuerte y le gusta ayudar la gente*, "I like to dance like Xena because she is a strong woman and she likes to help people."

The costumes the *Convites Femeninas* dancers wear feature masks with non-indigenous physical characteristics, in other words they intentionally invoke an Anglo or white appearance. Maya women use the masks as part of a magico-religious masked performance that represents something powerful from outside the community, which suggests their “toughness.” Masquerades are an opportunity for both identity construction and identity critique; they represent otherness, its inversion, and new possibilities for transcendence (Tseñon, 2001, 4-6). The image of numerous Xenas performing at the same time for the festival of Santiago is contextually bound, embedded in local knowledge regarding adulation of the community patron saint.

Yet, these public portrayals also allow women to question the over-determined image of the passive, indigenous female plodding away at home. The *Convites Femeninas* creates a new symbolic system within highland Guatemala for demonstrating the possibilities of what Maya women can become. As Judith Butler (1988, 519) contends, social agents constitute their own social reality through language, gesture, and symbolic social signs as gender and identity are produced through a stylized repetition of acts including gesture, movement and social enactments. Butler (1988, 520) says, “If the ground of gender identity is the stylized repetition of acts through time...then the possibilities of gender transformation are to be found in the arbitrary relations of such acts...in the breaking or subversive repetition of that style.” If gender roles do not exist prior to these acts, but are constituted by them, then changing the actions changes the definition of gender and its cultural signs.

### Cultural logic of the Xena dances

These repetitive acts of gender must still, on some level, conform to a socially scripted structure or logic, otherwise they will not agree with any common principle and will be rendered culturally untranslatable. For example, although the K'iche' women performed in completely provocative clothing, the men I talked to in the crowd who were watching the *Convites Femeninas* were quite impressed and proud of the women who participated in the masquerades as part of the festival. Many male members of audience were videotaping their wives, sisters, daughters, and friends. The two main female organizers of the group are married to *guias espiritual*, or spiritual guides, men who participate in purified Maya spiritually and perform indigenous ceremonies. Both men were there in the audience watching in support of their spouses. The day before, as part of the celebration a band from Guatemala, Los Primos de la Sierra, who played Northern Mexican Durango style *banda* music, performed. Accompanying the musicians were two dancing females clad in shorts, halter tops, and cowboy boots and hats who had no other function than to strut on stage (Fig. 5.8).

Although the clothes of the *banda* dancers were no more risqué than what the Xena dancers wore, many people repeatedly commented to me about how scandalous they found the women's outfits. One good friend even said how shameful it was as there were children present. Women clothed as North American fantasy figures in bronze bras and bearing weapons was completely acceptable while other women, dressed as Mexican sexy cowgirls, were disgraceful. The difference was not the degree of sexuality rather it was the context. The Xena dancers, performed in a collective during the culturally acknowledged arena of devotional ritual. Lidia Eufemia Itzep Quiej (pers. com. August 2,

2009), one of the Momostecan female *convites* dancers explained that her participation was all right with her husband, *Él confía en mí, porque lo hacemos como grupo, todos juntos*, “He trusts me because we do it in a group, all together.” The *banda* women, on the other hand, set themselves apart, quite literally, central stage for maximum attention.



**Figure 5.8 "Shameful" behavior of the *banda* girl, Momostenango, 2008**

Even Momostecan women disapproved of this particular form of gender display as evinced by the equally censorious comments they made through the day. Moreover, these costumes create a chasm of ethnicity, the *banda* girls represent *Mexicanas* or *Ladinas*, while the *Xenas* signify North America, a “Tollan” (see Chapter 3) of gender homogeneity and equality.

### Maya women reshape their identity

Transnationalism imagery of Xena offers an avenue for opening the symbolic system and reshaping local identity, adding fresh images to the pre-existing system of representation regarding Maya femininity. Carol Hendrickson (1995, 60-70) explains how *traje*, traditional loom-woven, indigenous cloth functions as cultural texts throughout much of Guatemala and bears a number of meanings derived from indigenous women's social reality. For example, *traje* functions as an expression of pride in ethnicity, as a place-specific reference, or as an emblem of pan-Maya solidarity. Most of all, it is closely associated with women as the retainers of tradition. What, then, is the significance when Maya women appear in public without their *traje*, dressed like Hollywood *gringa*-babes, but acting like Maya women participating in *costumbre*, religious customary observances? Women's lack of access to official political life allows them to engage important issues in extralegal ways.<sup>12</sup>

Carol Smith (1995) points out that any adult or teenage indigenous female seen in public without her *traje* is immediately regarded as someone who is sexually indiscriminate, or even a prostitute. Is it the use of the mask--the deliberate partial covering, the disguise in full view, the concealing of the wearer's identity--that makes these performances acceptable and extremely popular with men? As Efrat Tseëlon (2001, 2) notes, the masquerade is always a statement about the wearer and at the same time it is a dissimulation of authentic identity. Regarding masquerade, Tseëlon (2001, 6) goes on to say, "To place oneself as Other or as masked is already to position oneself in a resistive position, whereby difference is threatening to ... the established order and its defined categories." The image of Xena, or in this case the costume and its masked

performance, creates a symbolic defiance against previous conventions--the quetzal and the flower--that determine what Maya women may do with their own bodies. The masks conceal while the costumes reveal, the outfits the females wear are intentionally sexual and revealing. They provide an opportunity for K'iche' women to emphasize their roles as wives and sexual partners--not as mothers--and in doing so to create a space to take control of their own sexual identity and rights. Maya women are shirking off stereotypes and cultural baggage of their colonial heritage that cast them as the eternal raped woman of the conquistador (Marrero 2003, 312). They are pushing these roles to the limits in order to present their own concerns, and doing so in public during festival allows them the opportunity to establish and reify the function of these new social positions.

Shameful Behavior: *Charamileras y Cama de Piedras* “Female Alcoholics and Stone Beds”

As cultural performances are always contentious and ambiguous (Guss 2000, 9), they enable participants an opportunity to call for change in either subtle or more obvious ways. Festival is a time for communities to reflect on their own social realities and to understand and even criticize their worlds. David Guss (2000, 9) questions, however, whose reality is it that is being portrayed? He suggests a number of different ideas, intentions, and interpretations may be present during the basic structure of an event. The *disfraces* and *convites* dances in Momostenango reveal that even within the same community festival, there are conflicting representations of femaleness contradicting and challenging one another. Contemporary gender theory recognizes that “woman” does not

exist outside of discursive systems, and is constructed, internalized, and enforced through representational practices (Grosz 1995, 21). Paralleling the discourses of gender in larger Guatemalan society, Momostecan masked public portrayals of femininity and females during *féria* maintain a social dialogue regarding proper roles and mores.

#### Public critiques of female alcoholism

One of the more insidious characters to appear during the *disfraces* dance celebration of Santiago is the *charamilera*, the Guatemalan slang term for a female alcoholic (Fig. 5.9).



**Figure 5.9** *Charamilera*, "Female Alcoholic" from Momostenango, 2008. Photo courtesy of Robin Blotnick.



The word derives from *charamila*, an inexpensive, and at 60-120 proof, highly potent grain alcohol, or *aguardiente* that rural vendors water down to increase their profits. Its affordability and particular marketing techniques that feature “*la indita*,” a little female Indian in *traje*, or else a *venado*, or “deer,” the indigenous, pre-Hispanic symbol of the *Xajooj Keej*, the Deer Dance, make it especially appealing to indigenous festival celebrants (Fig. 5.10).



**Figure 5.10 Hand painted sign of Quetzalteca, ethyl alcohol, in Guatemala.**

**Photo courtesy of Linda A. Brown.**

Its ready availability makes it a staple at festivals, ceremonies, weddings, baptisms, funerals, and any important event. The advent of masked performers portraying female drunks is a send-up of a social reality that is on the rise in the highlands. Nonetheless, it is a critique of women’s gendered behavior and searing commentary of their neglect of domestic and community responsibilities. As stated above (see Chapter 4), these types of

characterizations perpetuate the rhetoric of *indigensimo* that mingle indigenously with alcoholism. Typically these paradigms that conflate indolence, recalcitrance, and ignorance with drunkenness in indigenous society focus on male behavior (Garrard-Burnett 2000). The rise of a female *charamilera* character indicates more shifts in recent highland Guatemalan society and the male need to respond.

*Féria* as a place for shaping gender

During *féria*, it is a common festival practice for men to assume the roles and *traje* of women during masked public performances. These cross-dressing masquerades are sometimes sexually ribald and lewd, for example the Dance of the Mexicanos that features a rancher's wife who must fend off the continual, bawdy advances of his hired help. This is an image that perpetuates a dominant belief that men cannot trust their wives and their sexually licentious behavior is in need of constant need of scrutiny and rebuke. In opposition are the conventional *Convites* dances performed by men that portray ideal couples from all over the highlands who wear the *traje* from their home communities (Fig. 5.11). These performances reproduce and reinforce the traditional role of indigenous women as always paired--or subordinate--to their male counterpart and, as mentioned above, as the transmitters of ethnic identity through their comportment and garb. They affirm the pre-war, community-sanctioned model of femininity.

In practice, female *charamileras* that appear during the *disfraces* dances fall under the category of the inverted, carnivalesque ritual clown, whose representation signifies the tension between turmoil and order (Bakhtin 1984). It is a figure whose license for liberation actually enforces the existing structure. Costumed presentations of men lampooning women's behavior have long been part of Maya public performance.

Victoria Bricker (1973, 20) describes how during the cargo ceremony celebrating Christmas in the Tzotzil community of Zinacantan in highland Chiapas, the men go so far as to ape specific women in order to scold them for being poor spinners and weavers.



**Figure 5.11** *Convites tipicos*, performance of ideal couples in Momostenango, 2008

In fact, Evon Vogt (1969, 532) adds “A farce it is and amusing to everyone but the women singled out; yet it is also a pointed lesson, providing guides to Zinacanteco women on how to be good, hard-working, model wives.” These types of parodies enforce conventional images of women; the female satirical masquerades contribute to the maintenance of beliefs regarding male dominance and the proper roles and social context of gender. The *charamilera* functions in much the same way.



**Figure 5.12** *Charamileras*, female alcoholics roll around on the ground, Momostenango, 2008

Irresponsible women and the *Cama de Piedra*

The *charamilera* performers wear costumes that emphasize inappropriate female behavior; the dancers have disheveled hair, dirty, tattered, or ill-fitting North American clothes, a frilly and filthy apron that signifies female domestic labor, and the pervasive bottle of *Quetzalteca*, ethyl alcohol, in their hands. Their masks feature toothless grins and numerous creases or wrinkles emphasizing their filthy, haggard or aged, and unpleasant qualities (see Fig. 5.9). Though their dance does not attempt to provide specific lessons regarding the importance of weaving and work to their household or community, it is nonetheless a harsh statement warning against female irresponsibility and imbibing in public. One of the unfortunate and quite common sights in Guatemala is

the *cama de piedra*, literally “bed of stone” that refers to an inebriated person being so under the influence they slept off their bout of intoxication right on the exact spot where they passed out, the public sidewalk or street. *Cama de piedra* sleepers are characteristically men and are a socially acceptable routine feature of *féria*, and daily life. A man passing out in the streets does not catch the eye of locals, nor raise the eyebrows of passersby who must step over them on their way going about their business.

A woman sleeping on the *cama de piedra*, however, is rare (Fig. 5.12). One afternoon during *féria*, I was walking through town with my friend Conchi and we saw a female sleeping on the corner who had clearly been there through the night and morning. Although the woman was sleeping and harmless, Conchi insisted we cross the street to walk on the other side. She kept saying what a disgrace it was to see that poor woman, although we had already, quite frequently, seen a number of men in the same predicament throughout the course of the week. What struck me was the double standard; Conchi was quite embarrassed for me to see a female drunk in her town, as this was clearly not the norm. The presence of the *charamilera* was a source of ignominy.

Likewise, one of the other consequences of the characteristic indulgence in alcohol as part of the ritual revelry of *féria* is the formation of spontaneous drunken dancing throughout the day. This typically occurs in an area in the plaza in front of the main church where bands perform and involves men of all ages (Fig. 5.13). The interactions of these dancers reminded me a great deal of a mosh pit minus the stage diving and crowd surfing. It did feature spinning, bouncing, bobbing, slamming and, of course, the unintended tumbling, all to the general ignoring of the actual beat of the live music. The same men were involved all through the day and night and then again the

next day. This drunken dance pit is an example of the fleeting freedom from social constraints that characterize carnival (Bakhtin 1984, 104).



**Figure 5.13 Festival drunks, including women, dance in front of a live band, Momostenango, 2008**

Women's participation in this dance of temporary liberation is not common, but does occur and only by elderly females. Similar to what Christine Eber (1995, 93-94) explains for highland Chiapas, among females, public ritual drinking is limited to older women, those under the age of fifty completely abstain or strictly control their drinking. Older women are sometimes free from the social constraints of the proscribed rules of gender. This explains why in many of the *charamilera* costumes, the woman's costume highlights her advanced years.

Like the Xena dancers, the female *charamilera* outfits are also very popular. The *disfraces* costume shop proprietor and costume designer Juan Carlos Zacarias (pers. com. February 1, 2008), divulged to me that they are one of the most frequently requested outfits. Moreover, the *charamilera* costumes feature *vestido*, clothes worn by *Ladinos* and *gringos* (Hendrickson 1995, 26-27), as opposed to *traje*, the fabric of indigenous women. The performances, therefore, regard more than just a satire on disobedient and unruly Maya women, they are a comment on ethnicity. The *charamilera*'s meaning is multi-dimensional, involving more than men teaching indigenous women to avoid immoral behavior, they represent a slippage between gender and ethnicity. Using a Ladina-type costume to represent gendered wrongdoing, they reinforce social transgression, as well. They produce distinctions regarding what *K'iche'* women in particular should not do, creating a fault line based on ethnicity. This idea supports Carol Smith's (1995) argument, that indigenous women's behavior is a social commodity that they willingly trade for their community's support. Rigoberta Menchú Tum (1983, 59) says something similar, when she commented that Maya women have their village's backing "as long as they don't break our laws."<sup>13</sup> The *charamilera* dancers deploy the signs of gender in equal measure to the symbols of racialized affiliation. While the Xena represents strength and beauty, the *charamilera* is her moral and cultural antithesis.

*La Reina de Disfraces*, "The Queen of the Disfraces Dances"

Field Notes: July 30, 2008, Momostenango

Today there was an all-day party for the dancers sponsored by the *Sociedad Amigos Momostecos*, "Momostenango Friends Society" formed by members of the dancer's families. It was in Abelino's house, and there was a lot of food and beverage as well as a home altar of flowers and incense for blessing people in the Society (Fig. 5.14). The floor of the

whole house was covered in pine needles and the rooms were all full of incense smoke. They had a band playing in the house as part of the festivities, with balloons and streamers dangling from the walls. There must have been about 60 people there, including the TV channel Momosvision that was covering the events of the *féria*. This evening they voted the first ever “*Reina de Disfraz*,” who they also called the “*novia*.” A room off to the side, away from where the band was playing was full of women and several judges. There were 3 contestants and 2 winners, a Queen of the *Disfraz* and a Queen of the Society of Friends. Alfredo was there explaining how the election would work (Fig. 5.15). Each contestant was assigned a color, and every person voting received 3 slips of paper one in each color to represent each contestant. The colored paper was used because not all of the women who were participating in the election could read and write and this was the best alternative for a private vote. Alfredo explained that everyone should put the color of the female they wanted to vote for in a hat that was passed around in order to determine the winner. This was done twice, first for the *Disfraz* Queen and again for the Society Queen. There are not a lot of responsibilities, except arriving at the church at 5 a.m. to sing and pray, and getting the best seats in the plaza during the dance. Afterwards the big party continued, as the new *Reinas* were introduced to the whole crowd.



**Figure 5.14** The Revolución 2008 customary altar, Momostenango, 2008





**Figure 5.15 Alfredo Torres explains the election process for “Queen of the *Disfraces*,” Momostenango, 2008**

Telma Aracely Ajanel was, almost unanimously, elected the first “*Reina de Disfraz*” in the history of Momostenango (Fig. 5.4). There was an enormous amount of leeway from which to place a vote, as the judging was completely subjective and left up to the individual preference of each woman who cast a colored ballot slip. Throughout the introductory speeches of the young women seeking the office, much murmuring transpired, indicating that there was some corroboration on the part of different candidate’s backers, presumably their closest family and friends (Fig. 5.16).



**Figure 5.16** Telma Aracely Ajanel makes her candidate's statement at the election for the *Reina de Disfraz*, Momostenango 2009

I was included as a voting member in the election, and was provided with hints and suggestions from various women sitting next to me on whom they thought I should vote for. There was no historically informed image the voters had in mind, as there were no past competitions to base the structure on. In addition, there were no formal talents displayed to consider—the voting was all guided by individual preference and some mild persuasion among the audience members. That only women partook of the vote suggests that the winner captured some dimension of femaleness agreeable to all.

*Reina de Disfraz* as a statement of Maya female identity

Much like the beauty contests throughout Guatemala that elect the *Reina Indígena*, the “Indigenous Queen,” selection of the *Reina de Disfraz* centers on notions of

Maya femininity and pride in cultural heritage. In this way women are, once again, the signifiers of ethnic worth. Unlike beauty contests, the *Reina de Disfraz* competition does not concern an attempt to capture genuine “indigenouslyness” based on a performance of an authentic, idealized version of the self (McAllister 1994). The indigenous beauty pageants are what Mark Rogers (2003, 344) refers to as “a process in which a social group fixes a part of itself in a timeless manner as an anchor for its own distinctiveness.” In Momostenango, as elsewhere in Guatemala, this anchoring resides in the body of women. K’iche’ beauty queens are the locus of “anti-modern” forms of indigenous identity construction (Smith 1995), meaning they link gender with an essentialist ideology regarding race and class. Contestants are selected on their ability to represent an authentic version of race, class, dress, and language, or as Carlotta McAllister (1994, 7) discovered, the “really real.” They are situated in opposition to *Ladina* beauty queens who represent “modern” female society engaged in contemporary things in the world around them (Fig. 5.17). Edward Fischer (2001, 198-199) notes, that despite this opposition, Maya pageants are, nonetheless, still modeled on the Ladino version much in the same way Maya *disfraces* are replicas of the Ladino *convites*.



Figure 5.17 Cover of Momostenango local magazine, *Revista*, featuring Ladina and indigenous beauty queens.

*Reina de Disfraz*, an international queen

Similar to the *disfraces* dances, the election of the *Reina de Disfraz* is also a statement about Maya society's ability to connect with the contemporary culture and present-day means of production. For example, whereas the *Reina Indígena* is judged by her ability to wear traditional *traje*, the *Reina de Disfraz* sports new types of female garments that also center on concepts related to "indigenoussness." Carol Hendrickson (1995, 193) states that for many Maya "there is an ideological and emotional identification with *traje* such that dress is inextricably associated with the person's very being." On the contrary, for beauty pageants that showcase the older styles of *traje* that have fallen out of fashion with the young women, they project themselves into the past

and create a fossilized version of identity, as these are not the types of garments many indigenous women wear on a daily basis. As Hendrickson (1995, 35) also notes, the single most distinctive piece of indigenous women's clothing and a symbol of Maya female identity is above all, the *po't* or as they are more commonly known, *huipiles*, specifically Mayan blouses. *Huipiles* are handwoven on a backstrap or treadle loom and are decorated with designs unique to the woman's natal community. Women are always changing and sometimes even reviving the styles of *huipiles* (Hendrickson 1995, 59).

#### Machine-made *blusas* and Maya female identity

In recent years, highland women have been choosing to wear new types of machine-made *blusas* for work and for special occasions. The new style of machine-made *blusa*, that Temla Aracely sports (see Figs. 5.4 and 5.16), is replacing the *huipil* as a more recent gendered statement of Maya identity (Maury Hutcheson pers. com. July 25, 2009). As Maury Hutcheson (pers. com. July 25, 2009) notes, *huipiles* require enormous amount of labor and are falling to the wayside as women are making the shift to a cash economy and employment in the public sphere. In addition, young women are reluctant to spend their time at the loom, preferring instead alternate activities, such as attending to their schooling. Wearing the new style machine-made *blusa*, then, culturally symbolizes an indigenous woman who is educated and readily employable in wage labor outside of the home. Moreover, *blusas* are cheaper and readily available in a number of styles in shops throughout the highland communities, yet are still worn strictly by indigenous women, as opposed to their *Ladina* counterparts. In this respect, the candidate's blouses worn at the two different activities metonymically refer to their level of progressiveness. Whereas the *Reina Indígena* speaks to "authenticity," and the traditional role of women,

the *Reina de Disfraz* articulates the social reality and actual consumer practices related to contemporary indigenous women's self-presentation.

As an authority figure, the *Reina de Disfraz* has few tangible responsibilities. Telma Aracely is mainly in charge of the dancer's spiritual well being through song and prayer in front of the church. Many of the dancers referred to her not only as a queen, but also as the *madrina*, or "godmother" of the *disfraces*. Similar to Ecuadorian (Rogers 2001, 347) and Nicaraguan (Borland 2006, 136) indigenous festivals and dances that also have *madrinas*, Telma Aracely's role is primarily nominal.<sup>14</sup> As women are bereft of any true political power, the *Reina de Disfraces*' job is to embody a permutation of an idealized image of femaleness. By eschewing the notions of folklorization that the *Reina Indígena* contests feature as a means of constituting the legitimacy of the female candidates, the *Reina de Disfraz* contest challenges the associated notions that beauty and femininity must be from an idealized past, one not in concert with contemporary society while still maintaining indigenosity.

## Conclusions

K'iche' Maya women are reconstituting their gender roles. They are positioning themselves as active participants in community dance rituals while providing a public, collective space from which to speak regarding the dancers' social and cultural clout. Through the use of the Xena Warrior Princess costumes, Maya women evoke a positive, strong female character as an alter ego to the K'iche' woman of today, one in control of her sexuality and willing to flaunt it, albeit under the guise of a religious ceremony (Fig.

5.18). *Charamilera* performers, on the other hand, push back on women's independence by creating an ethnic gap that demarcates the difference between what a proper K'iche' woman may do. By satirizing inappropriate behavior of Ladinás, Maya men are exhibiting their anxiety that women may break too many norms. And finally, the *Reina de Disfraz* demonstrates how K'iche' women may combine indigenosity with present-day activities, such as speaking Spanish, their educational pursuits, and working outside the home.



**Figure 5.18** *Convites Femeninas* dancers salute the Four Directions

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<sup>1</sup> In discussing the modern nationalist ideologies, Partha Chatterjee (1989, 631-632) suggests women represent the spirit of the nation as the essential homebodied Other. This characterization seems apt to use as a metaphor among some discussions of Latin American discourses, as well.

<sup>2</sup> Ruth Bunzel (1952:165) notes, in Chichicastenango the K'iche' word for *cofradía*, *chaq patán*, means "work-service" while Robert Carmack (1995, 320) similarly translates the Momostenango term, *aj patanib*, to mean "those who serve." Both versions lay emphasis on service to the patron saint, and throughout the highlands membership is limited but expected. Positions are graded in rank and are public places of duty only filled by appointment. As many scholars have noted, to hold one of these posts was once a virtually inescapable obligation of traditional society (Cook 2000, 35-41; Tedlock 1982, 36; Carmack 1995, 320-321).

<sup>3</sup> In Momostenango women's titles are *chuchaxel*, "chief lady," or *alaxel*, "female assistant" (Carmack 1995, 320).

<sup>4</sup> Although as Zur (1998, 52) observes, the growth of the Catholic Action movement and the continued work of evangelism are causing women to lose some of their influence in the *cofradía* system.

<sup>5</sup> According to Townsend (1980, 3), an Ixil priest, called an *'iqon be*, "carrier of the road" functions as the marriage go-between.

<sup>6</sup> A woman still unmarried in her mid-twenties runs the risk of being categorized as a witch, as Judith Zur (1998, 54) suggests, "Marriage is one of the most potent symbols in K'iche' culture."

<sup>7</sup> Smith (1995, 738) identifies the main markers of ethnic identity as community specific forms of language and dress.

<sup>8</sup> Founded in 1905 and growing in strength and influence through the 1930's, Catholic Action is a reform religious movement aimed to rid Catholicism of all "pagan" activities, most specifically ritual inebriation. The 1950's era Arbenz government recruited Catholic Action to work in Guatemala to cleanse the highland region of communist activities. For a comprehensive discussion of the history of Catholic Action in Guatemala see Nelson 2009.

<sup>9</sup> As Diane M. Nelson points out (1999, 97), every male who participated in the Civil Defense Patrols had a loved one who was victim.

<sup>10</sup> In addition, the peace process created openings for excluded groups to be involved in institutional processes for planning postwar national policy by including an accord on the Identity and Rights of Indigenous People (Dunn 2000, 109).

<sup>11</sup> Menjívar (2006, 92) also notes paid employment and more opportunity in a host community is not, however, an indication of empowerment.

<sup>12</sup> Carlota Pierce McAllister (1994, 59-60) argues that for ladinos, wearing *traje* desexualizes Maya women and that by wearing indigenous clothes, their sexuality is cast away by the dominant culture. Although this festival is directed at the local village population and not to ladinos, this is an interesting problem to consider, and one that merits further study. That is, to what degree the dancer's casting away of *traje* was an internalization of ladino gendered racism, and whether or not it formed part of their motivation in using foreign costumes as a trope for sexuality.

<sup>13</sup> Menchú's community did end up censuring her for violating these rules as part of her international campaign for human rights [source?]

<sup>14</sup> *Madrinas* in other festival contexts are responsible for ensuring the financial security of the events, as well as procuring refreshments. The *Reina de Disfraz*, however, has not yet assumed these tasks, but may at some point in the future as the event becomes more formalized.



## CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSIONS – DANCING IN THE *ALTIPLANO*

“A Beauty that Hurts,” “A Finger in the Wound,” “Gift of the Devil,” “The Blood of Guatemala,” “Harvest of Violence,” and “Of Centaurs and Doves.” These are some of the recent book titles written by ethnographers and historians, who specialize in research that concerns highland Guatemala. A perusal of the varying headings captures the dichotomy that is Guatemala, its magnificence and at times desperation, its splendor and anguish, its ability to draw absolute wonder and every so often repugnance -- in which we are also complicit. It is difficult to bring to life on paper the many contradictions that one can experience during time spent in the western highlands, no matter how brief (Fig. 6.1).



**Figure 6.1** Some of Guatemala’s many contradictions are accidentally superimposed on a billboard that features a ballerina on top of three mountains of garbage. Photographed near *Cuatro Caminos*, Four Roads, the major intersection of the western highlands, 2004

The endearing and colorful local characters; the incessant droning of evangelical missionary melodies; the overwhelming and unavoidable air pollution emanating from every vehicle on the road; the packs of feral dogs sifting through piles of street refuse; the fear of traveling certain roads fraught with military stops or bandits; the dignity of working the earth with your offspring; and the unreserved love of good *chisme*, gossip, and *chistes*, jokes. It is a total sensory experience, in your face, something you never forget. This is the place where I sometimes fear going and I always hate to leave, a magical, terrifying place where the locals frequently say: *en Guatemala, todo es posible*, “in Guatemala, anything can happen,” with all it infers, both good and bad.

One finds almost all of these experiences compressed and concentrated, to its fullest strength in the *féria*, the festival for the patron saint. It is an overload of all the senses, a harmony emanating through the crowds, blasting tunes from competing sources, stepping over drunks sleeping off the previous night in the road, willowing over salesmen hawking their wares over loudspeakers under your hotel window, all of it interesting, tangible, and immediate (Fig. 6.2). The North American practice of shutting off while tuning in to something else, being able to be in two places at once using an iPod or other MP3 player is not the norm in Momostenango, or other villages and towns in Guatemala where buses blast music and cars and vans broadcast their advertisements from enormous speakers mounted on their roofs. Even dogs, both homeless and pets, participate in the endless medley of call and response barks throughout the day and night. Sounds are shared experiences, never cut off or in private. Often competing, overlapping, and always constant, sound is part of the

social fabric that makes Momos a community. Sound is rarely a personal choice, but rather a cacophony of noises from many technologies and opposing genres at once.



**Figure 6.2** A festival drunk sleeps off his revelry in the middle of the *féria*, Momostenango, 2008

This is the setting for the dances. One would expect the performances to take center stage, and in some respects, they do, but there is also so much constant competition diverting ones attention, the dances are just one spectacle in the panoply of splendid pageantry, the soundscape that is festival. There is no substitute for experiencing these festivities first hand, but my hope is these previous chapters verbally imparted the lived events as shared encounters. At the outset of this project I began by questioning how foreign images produce local meanings during the *féria* and which meanings are shared within society. What I discovered is that the significance of the costumes the dancers wear may take a variety of meanings,

depending on their shifting context and changing audience. They are as varied as the sounds that surround them, always in motion, part of the flux of festival. They are religious when the dancers address spirits in the morning before the dance. They are ribald, rife with humor and horseplay when the performers are resting backstage drinking shots and teasing one another outside of the framework of the intended formed pairs. They are also biting social commentary when they appear before a live group of spectators, creating combinations and pairings not possible in the genuine world of daily life, seeing George Bush hug Saddam Hussein, or Rigoberta Menchú dance with Efraín Ríos Montt. They represent the *imaginaire* of the K'iche', where *todo es posible*.

The costume designs also represent a number of different meanings depending on the intention and ethnicity of the designers. Through the use of a variety of cues, they may represent Ladino middle-class values, such as access to the latest technology. Or, they may suggest a connection to a fundamental Maya worldview, one that harkens back to a way of life of the ancestors, with a concern to represent hunters and warriors. In either case, meaning is secured through the format of public dance, the designers and performers capitalize on the pre-existing pattern of ritual dance drama to distinguish their place in society. Both of these opposing festive enactments are firmly based on the foundation of traditional, ritual dance. It would be simple and easy to assume that the distinct groups, the Ladinos and the K'iche' Maya, are internally homogenous and straightforward in their various understandings and interpretations of the significance of the dances in which they participate. Such is not the case, as I have found that even performers of the same group may have slightly--

or very--different reasons as to why they partake, or even what the value of these dances is within Guatemalan society at large.

In his book *The Festive State*, David Guss (2000) discusses the pluralistic nature of festivals and suggests rather than reading public performances as simply uniform expressions of collective consciousness or solidarity building events, festivals are a site for redefining such important issues within communities, states and nations as race, ethnicity, gender, and even history. In explaining his work Guss (2000, 23) states, "In each instance, the festive forms are viewed not as static 'authoritative texts' but as unique performances responding to contemporary historical and social realities." Guss (2000) cogently demonstrates that local devotees hold different views of the meaning of the folk performances. In this study, I have taken Guss' lead and read the various forms of public festival and drama as rooted deeply in recent history and current events specific to highland Guatemala in the postwar era. In the contemporary highlands, opposing groups articulate their race, economic, and gender differences through the praxis of *féria*. These events are not motionless in meaning with content that is bound.

An additional concern of my research has been with the way class and gender relations, national politics, and Guatemalan identity are played out during the *féria*. For Ladinos, *convites* represent a way to connect to mass media and North American popular culture by representing figures that derive directly from film and TV. Additionally, in my research I have been concerned with what we can learn about the ways that figures of popular culture and modern historical personages are understood and used by people living in relative geographic isolation. The Ladino *convites*

provide strategy for distinguishing their consumption practices through the appropriation of such recognizable characters as Shrek, Santa Claus, and Bart Simpson. These characters invariably retain as much of their original incorporated meanings under a completely novel context—the medium of public performance. In addition, they function as a marker for Ladino identity, for those who wish to associate themselves with North American Latino culture. They are status symbols, as the costumed performers receive compensation for circumambulating through town and dancing in front of specific businesses and homes. At the end of the dances, Ladino performers reveal their identities suggesting they are concerned with not only group acclaim, but also individual recognition for their participation.

For K'iche' *disfraces* dancers are a mode of embodied penitence, a celebration of devotion and faith proven through the arduous task of dancing through the exhaustion and inebriation from morning till night. As in the case of the Ladinos, the K'iche' dancers also seek public affirmation for their personal commitment by revealing their identities. For K'iche' performers, devotion is evinced through the steep economic cost undertaken to participate. This cost, rather than simply reflecting participation in middle class consumerism--which it does--is also a social measuring stick of one's dedication and religious fervor. While some costumes may only be a hundred dollars to rent, others may reach several hundred, exorbitant prices that equal two months pay. The more expensive the costume the greater sacrifice and pleasure it brings both the performers and Santiago Apóstol. Moreover, the money that arrives in Guatemala through remittances from the United States connects the dancers to North America, not only thematically, but financially, as well.

The significance of the costume's individuality is sometimes lost on the K'iche' dancers. Many participants and audience members may recognize the personalities from movies and television, but I have also had dancers ask me to explain to them who their costume represents and their significance. For example, on August 6<sup>th</sup>, 2008, as I was interviewing a small group of performers after the *féria* was over, I showed them the photos I had taken. Rather than conducting my interview of them, they turned the tables and were questioning me. They wanted to know the names of their own costumes, such as one pair who danced as Harry Potter and Hermione. But the situation reversed once again when it came to identifying costumes from cartoons from Mexican TV.

For indigenous females, the *convites femeninas* provide women dancers an opportunity to assert themselves and their sexuality in an arena once considered strictly male, public masked performance. Like the male participants, the women dancers also reveal their individual identities seeking public affirmation (Fig. 6.3). Women of all ages perform, young girls, teenagers still in high school, and married women. They form a variety of pairs, even one mother daughter couple performed all three years since the dance began. While it is not uncommon to see people from all over the highlands in Momos during *féria*, the women's *convites* attract the most diverse crowd. Silvia Elinda Perez Akabal (pers. com August 4, 2009), one of the initiators and organizers of the *convites femeninas* proudly listed the variety of places people came from in Guatemala just to see the women dance. They came from Chichicastenango, Totonicapan, and Santa Catarina Palopo, near Lake Atitlan, five or

six hours away by bus and are identifiable by the variety of *traje*, indigenous women’s traditional clothes visible in the audience.



**Figure 6.3 Female dancers during the “reveal,” Momostenango 2009**

The *convites femeninas* are the most popular dances in Momostenango. As Sabina Vicente (pers. com. August 4, 2009), the founder and main benefactor of the women’s dance only half jokingly describes it, they are more popular than the other *disfraces* because *Los hombres les gustan de ver las piernas de las mujeres*, “The



men like to see the women's legs." Short skirts, revealed midriffs and lots of cleavage of the Xena costumes are not typical of women's daily dress that tends to include several layers of cloth. Doña Sabina's openness about the sexual appeal of the costumes parallels the costume makers' reaction when I asked why they were so sexy. Although Francisco, Juan Carlos, and Manuel Zacarias, who claim to be the originators of the Xena costume, explain that less material allows the women to move easier, they also acknowledged the suits are quite risqué when they blushed and giggled at my question. But the Zacarias brothers were very forthright in explaining that all of the women's costumes do ultimately derive from Xena, Warrior Princess, regardless of the specific manifestation, such as "Warrior of the Millennium" or "Warrior of the Aztecas," that the individual designs may take. Xena functions as a reflection of and a symbol for what women may become in K'iche' society, tough, independent, and caring.

The distinctions between these three different types of dances, such that they appear on completely separate days, or even festivals, with distinct groups of participants, beg the question if they are truly competitive, and the answer is yes. The dances do not, however, act as a social mechanism that reduces friction between Ladinos and Mayas, nor do they function as a means for its increase. They do reflect those racialized tensions that already exist in society and provide an additional avenue for articulating ethnic difference.

In numerous conversations with Ladino dancers, or even costume designers, there is a perceptible attitude of condescension that is very shallowly below the surface during discussions of their counterpart K'iche' *disfraces*. In interviews,

Ladinos state very clearly that Maya dances are a different class of activity, not to be confused with their *convites*. These discussions often sidestep the obvious issue that both ethnic groups wear many of the exact same outfits that feature characters from North American pop culture. While the Ladino dance costumes have a strong tendency to emphasize cartoons that predominately appeal to children, they also include characters that derive from other forms of mass media. These same suits are also included in K'iche' Maya festival performances, often without any modification whatsoever. That Ladino participants consider these same costumes so entirely different strongly suggests it is not the outfit that is at stake in these comparisons. Rather, it is who participates underneath the costume that makes all the difference between these two dances, rendering the Ladino dances superior.

Not all Guatemalans admire the dances and their costumes, nor do they all appreciate their expressive function within society. There is a perception among some people of the western highlands that the *convites* are a truly unique Guatemalan invention representing some of the finest examples of creativity and exceptional cultural practices the country has to offer. To others, they symbolize just the latest in a series of foreign cultural practices meant to highlight the superiority of North American technology, wealth, and media culture. In a the thread titled *Navidad en Toto*: “*Convite Navideño* from the blog website [Guate 360](#), a frank discussion of the meaning of the *convites* elicited an interesting and insightful series of responses, of which I include some excerpts here.

Bretero:

Advertising in Guatemala has nothing to do with Guatemala. A while ago I entered the site of the Miraflores Museum, and the first thing you

see is a mannequin of a blonde lady with a white family. Even many of us involved in this blog, have the U.S. as a model of perfection. What they have in the U.S. we must have here. (President) Berger went to Yankee Stadium with a Yankees baseball cap, saying that baseball's what he liked most in life. That is why I say that nationalism is dead.

Melrebi:

I agree with Bretero. On Friday they published something about the restaurant "Hooters" and this is a concept that arrived from the United States. I think our society is changing and updating and even in a traditional dance, there is no longer a desire for an indigenous concept.

Claudia:

You are absolutely right Bretero and Melrebi ... We find it insulting to use the word *indio/a* because we want to assimilate and pretend we are something that we are NOT and that is so sad, because we fled from what really is our identity. We want to pretend that we are not *indios/as* and that we are bourgeoisie, but to what merit? To trample our roots and be ashamed of them, we clone and adapt to a culture that is not ours but that of Uncle Sam. These traditions are what make us unique and distinct.

Marcela:

Bueno, I am from Totonicapan ... I want to tell you that we all have different points of view. I want to explain that this activity of the Christmas *convite* is very much ours, although we use "imported" personalities, we also have our own characters. This year we had costumes not necessarily from television. But the most important thing is that we manufacture them in the departments of Toto, Mazate, and Quiche (<http://www.guate360.com/blog/2005/12/26/semana-santa-en-toto-convite-navideno/>). [Translation by author]

This discussion succinctly summarizes some of the opposing opinions I have heard regarding the *convites* over the years. How foreign symbolism is not a positive source for identity production, but rather an attempt to assimilate to the dominance of the United States. The opinions regarding the *convites* are as varied as the numerous costumes that appear, always in flux and always colorful.

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