

2013

La Tradición Conchera: Historical Process of Danza and Catholicism

Jennie Luna
New Mexico State University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://via.library.depaul.edu/dialogo>



Part of the [Latin American Languages and Societies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Luna, Jennie (2013) "La Tradición Conchera: Historical Process of Danza and Catholicism," *Diálogo*: Vol. 16 : No. 1 , Article 6.

Available at: <https://via.library.depaul.edu/dialogo/vol16/iss1/6>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Center for Latino Research at Via Sapientiae. It has been accepted for inclusion in Diálogo by an authorized editor of Via Sapientiae. For more information, please contact digitalservices@depaul.edu.

La Tradición Conchera: Historical Process of Danza and Catholicism

JENNIE LUNA

NEW MEXICO STATE UNIVERSITY

Abstract: *La Tradición Conchera* (Conchero tradition), often used synonymously with *Danza Azteca* (Aztec Dance), has profound and complex roots connected to both an indigenous and colonial trajectory. This article presents a concise map of this history and the ties to the Catholic Church, which has been both a process of syncretism and synergy. The syncretism of Indigenous world views with the Catholic Church has had elements of preservation and decimation as demonstrated within the complex history of *Danza*. This article focuses on the Post-Cuauhtémoc origins of *Danza* (dances) and its relationship with the Church, State, and Indigenous communities.

Keywords: Danza Azteca, Conchero Dance, Syncretism, Mexican Cultural Traditions, Mexican Catholicism

Native American scholarship examines the historical relationships between native peoples and dominant cultures as both a process of “upstreaming” and “downstreaming” (Fixico, 1997 & 2003), influences that flow in both directions. Historically, scholarship about Indigenous peoples and cultures has only examined one direction: the influence of mainstream dominant society on Indigenous peoples and ways of life. This piece is grounded in the premise that Catholicism was just as influenced and impacted by Indigenous Mexican ceremonial/spiritual belief systems as Indigenous Mexican ceremonial/spiritual belief systems were influenced and impacted by Catholicism. This essay pursues a complex narrative, constructed by ethnographic research¹, interviews and complete participation observation to present a concise map of the historical trajectory of *la Danza Mexica* (also referred to as traditional Aztec Dance or *Danza Azteca*) and the *Tradición Conchera* (Conchero tradition or *Danza Conchera*), the latter being a product of Catholic influence. Often *Danza Mexica* and *Danza Conchera* are understood as similar and used interchangeably, but this essay will demonstrate that, while they share the

same roots, they are actually distinct schools of thought and practice of *Danza*. The *Tradición Conchera* emerges from the pre-Cuauhtémoc² roots of the sacred dance traditions of central México as a product of history and the cross pollination that occurs with the Catholic belief system. It is both an adaptation to Catholicism and resistance to complete conversion, used as a strategy for survival. While both *Danza Conchera* and *Danza Mexica* share genealogical roots, *Danza Mexica* emerges out of the *Danza Conchera* tradition in more contemporary history, creating a distinct branch of *Danza*. This study pursues a deeper, more complete understanding of *Danza* in all its forms, its complex roots and the diverging branches that both cling to and disengage with competing historical, cultural and religious influences.

Not unlike many Native American ceremonial practices in the United States during the early colonial era, after the arrival of the Spaniards in México, the practice of various Indigenous *Danzas* (dances) and ceremonies was prohibited and severely punished. What is known and/or documented about spiritual and ritual beliefs of *Danza Mexica* was corrupted, written under the hand and censorship of Spanish friars and soldiers who depicted Indigenous complex knowledge systems as savage, pagan and evil. According to Mario Aguilar, the Spaniards’ interest in collecting data was to be able to define the “heresies” (1983: 14) of the Nahuatl people. Within these documents, friars such as Bernardino de Sahagún, Alonso de Molina, and Bartolomé de Las Casas also showed an “awed respect” and, at times, compassion for the Indigenous people. “For this reason, and for fear of reawakening the spirit of the Indian nations, most of these writings were hidden in the vaults and libraries of Madrid and the Vatican” (Aguilar, 1983: 14).

From the beginning of what is labeled *La Conquista* (The Conquest), or, more appropriately, “the Invasion,” an incredible effort took place on the part of the Spanish clergy and soldiers to obliterate any evidence of Nahuatl “religion.” Through the burning of irreplaceable, precious documents or codices, the knowledge base of a whole civilization was deliberately destroyed by conquistadores

such as Juan de Zumárraga (Vento, 1994). Arnaldo Carlos Vento calls this an “intentional cultural and religious genocide” (1994: 60). Not only were people decimated en masse through disease and extermination, but the culture and belief systems of those that survived were also condemned. While the aim of evangelization was incorporation and conversion in order to redeem souls, this came with a cost of the extermination of human life. Mario Aguilar (1983) details the observations of Hernán Cortés in Cholula, Puebla, who witnessed 3,000 dancers in a great circle in honor of *Quetzalcoatl*³: “The Spaniards were awed at such tremendous show of precision, dexterity and endurance. The spectacle they beheld caused great fear in them” (Aguilar, 1983: 12). As Aguilar continues, the Spaniards massacred the unarmed *danzantes* using swords, cannons and guns, all weaponry powerful and unknown to the Nahua peoples of México. From the Nahua worldview, complete and total extermination via war and massacre with unequal levels of weaponry were unfamiliar and cowardly, as well as undefeatable. Vento (1994) argues that the Spaniards attempted to recreate medieval Europe in the Western hemisphere through imperialism, exploitation and rule by the wealthy, the State, and the Church. Violence and expulsion would be executed in the same way on these new “infidels,” as was committed on the Moors in Spain. According to Fray Bartolomé de las Casas in his exposé entitled *Brevísima relación de la destrucción de las Indias*, over 25 million Natives perished due to the Spanish invasion (Vento, 1994: 63). Had Aztec human sacrifice occurred mass-scale,⁴ as argued by the dominant narrative, the claimed numbers could not equate with the brutal human sacrifice committed by the Spaniards (Forbes, 2004).

In 1520, Spanish invader Pedro de Alvarado ordered the slaughter of all *danzantes* during their ceremony of *Toxcatl*, honoring *Huitzilopochtli*, divine hummingbird, symbol of willpower, youthful energy and domination of one’s weaknesses. As Mexican scholar Miguel León-Portilla observes:

In fact, the *Noche Triste*, the “Sad Night” when the Spaniards were routed out of Tenochtitlán, was set off by the violation of a ritual act. Pedro de Alvarado, left in charge while Cortés was on the coast, violently disrupted a ritual honoring *Huitzilopochtli*. The surviving *Mexica*

told Friar Sahagún that ‘when the dance was loveliest, and song was linked to song, the Spaniards were seized with an urge to kill the celebrants.’ (León-Portilla, 1990: 74)

The documentation continues, stating that the conquistadores quickly moved to the center of the ceremony, “forcing their way to the place where the drums were played” (1990: 74). Once there, they cut off the drummers’ arms. The Mexica, outraged by the Spaniards’ violent interruption of their most sacred ceremony, drove them out of the city. The continued cultural genocide and holocaust ultimately led to the military defeat of México-Tenochtitlan in 1521. The last leader, or *Tlatoani*, Cuauhtémoc, declared surrender, offering his mandate to the people⁵ (Vento, 1994: 62). In this mandate, while acknowledging a military defeat, Cuauhtémoc outlines that when the people can no longer resist militarily, they will resist spiritually. This mandate instructs survivors to preserve their ways, to teach their children, and to go into hiding so that they, ultimately, will survive as a people. Cuauhtémoc left a prophecy for future generations that one day a new era will open up the possibility to once again live in the ways of the ancestors.⁶

After Cuauhtémoc’s pronouncement, many keepers of the sacred dance and spiritual ways were forced into hiding to survive culturally. Mario Aguilar calls the result “a network of underground worship” (1983: 18). If found practicing spiritual ways, individuals could be burned alive at the stake. Other upper class members of Nahua society assimilated into Spanish nobility or were brought into the dominant society’s hierarchy, leaving their traditions behind (Aguilar, 1983). Sacred ways were therefore maintained by the agrarian or disenfranchised classes in Nahua society—in home and secular units—leaving long lineages of Danza and ritual practice that some participants, even today, can still link to a particular pre-Cuauhtémoc lineage.

After the Spanish invasion, many Nahua spiritual ways became known as “traditions” or “traditional.” What is today called traditional dance or Danza is linked to colonial origins. It was through that moment of interaction and resistance (as resistance was/is still an interaction with the oppressor or colonial powers) that what was once simply understood as *mitotiliztli* (“sacred dance” or “way of life”) became viewed and identified as “traditional” or “Indian/Indigenous.” It is viewed as “of the other” or in opposition to the dominant. This notion of

“traditional” is often used in contrast with “folkloric” to infer “authenticity.” While “folklore” incorporates aspects of “tradition,” it is recognized as holding elements of invention and imagination (Krystal, 2007). This idea of tradition is important, as post-Cuauhtémoc Danza undergoes a significant transformation and accommodation to become known as *la tradición*.⁷ This understanding of “la tradición,” or tradition, is directly understood to mean the Danza post-colonization, syncretized and/or synergized, and linked with Christian/European/Catholic lines. Today, when one refers to la tradición, it is still understood to mean a very particular tradition; one linked to its post-colonial, Catholic origins.

Danzantes, as a result of colonization, had to find ways to maintain their practices. For some, as with many Indigenous populations, it meant continued resistance and uprising. Danzantes either rebelled, ran away to the south or were killed. The failing project of religious conversion, and occasional killing of friars, allowed for some negotiation. Through syncretism or synergistic methods (either the domination of one belief system influencing another or the equal blending of the two), Indigenous people were able to clandestinely maintain their spiritual belief systems, songs, dances and prayers under the guise of Catholicism (Hernández-Avila, 2005). Fernando Ortiz (1995), rather than use the term “syncretism,” which often refers to religious or theological melding, refers to this process as more of a “transculturation.” Focusing on broader cultural belief systems, transculturation posits that neither culture has to necessarily let go of their principles, but rather merge to create a new phenomenon. Other scholars might interpret Danza instead to be a product of a “failed transculturation,” meaning that as a result of colonialism and subjugation, Danza is manufactured from the struggles of Native peoples to maintain or regain their own sense of identity, rather than create a new identity. According to Yolanda Broyles-González, “Historically, today’s profession of ‘Catholicism’ by Mesoamerican peoples is an appropriation process born from resistance to colonial violence” (Cantú & Nájera-Ramírez, 2002: 126). This process of syncretism, synergism, or transculturation, culturally and ethnically, was still a painful process with lasting effects. The hacienda and *encomienda* systems, and European control of metropolitan centers of México, relegated and segregated Indigenous peoples into isolated enclaves and communities/barrios where they coexisted and shared life spaces together. Since the

Spaniards only cared that they had a steady labor force, Indigenous peoples could continue to conduct their lives as they wished; separate from the dominant powers in control. This allowed Indigenous people to exist, persist and continue their ways in secret, within a community, and inside the home.

As Indigenous peoples were pushed to the margins of society and literally to the margins of the newly constructed Mexico City, some of the same enclaves that are now outlying barrios of the city center, such as Tacuba or Tlaxcala, are where many Indigenous people retained their knowledge of sacred and spiritual ways. Therefore, it is no coincidence that many of the Danza teachers of today have origins in some of these barrios of Mexico City. At the same time, it must be remembered that in the barrios where Indigenous people were marginalized, they were left to survive on their own. These same neighborhoods would remain the most disenfranchised and impoverished communities. While these areas have held generations of spirituality and knowledge, they also became some of the more marginalized areas, bearing the consequences of poverty, lack of education and basic resources. Some of these communities have been designated as “dangerous” spaces lacking security and rampant with crime.

This correlation between poverty and Indigenous communities, formed through a process of colonialism, becomes important when I examine the praxis of contemporary Danza teachers that came from these neighborhoods. Often, while the danzantes from these barrios are very adept dancers and drummers, knowing the steps and meanings of Danzas like no others, they simultaneously deal with issues of alcoholism, domestic violence and abuse. These social ills infiltrate many Danza circles, often perpetuating patriarchy, misogyny and imbalance. Because of the lack of resources or jobs, Danza teachers are often focused on the economic benefits; the selling of culture or profiteering of Danza to make a living. I will discuss this further on, but want to make the point that this exploitation of Danza has deep connections to and reflects on a colonial past and the marginalization of people. While Nahua peoples, during the Spanish colonial era, were relegated to areas on the periphery, pulled in only as a slave labor force, this relative isolation allowed for the continuation of Nahua food sources, practices and social organization, such as the *tequio/mita*.⁸ Some Indigenous practices also influenced Spanish colonial society, which adapted or appropriated several Indigenous concepts/ways.

HISTORY AND CHARACTERISTICS OF LA DANZA CONCHERA

Much of the literature claims that Danza originates in 1521 after the arrival of the Spanish, but, clearly, the dance itself predates Spanish contact, as noted in codices and other documentation. Similarly, much of the literature, rather than give a comprehensive history which displays continuity, only focuses on limited aspects of Danza or certain conduits of Danza, assuming that all are the same. Often, the available literature adheres to a very mainstream or superficial interpretation of Danza, within the confines of a Spanish colonial world view, and avoiding the deeper nuances. According to much of the literature, Danza is a “product” of the invasion, a syncretic blending of both Indigenous and European/Catholic belief systems, but in actuality, it is a product of a much longer trajectory of Indigenous world views and cosmology. The Danza one can observe today is both a recording of the painful history and reality of colonization, and a renewed rejection of that colonization.

Nevertheless, the literature suggests that anything that appeared post-Spanish colonization was an accommodation and is still a direct result of that colonization. That Danza product is often referred to as *Conchero*. Danza Conchera is called such to refer to the *mandolina* (small guitar-like instruments) that were made with the shell (in Spanish: *concha*) of an armadillo (Stone, 1975). These *conchas* or mandolina instruments replaced the drum, which was prohibited by the new Spanish rulers (Aguilar, 1983; Aguilar, 2009; León-Portilla, 1990; Hernández-Avila, 2005). Since the Church did not allow Indigenous people to continue playing flutes or drums (viewed as instruments of the devil), the people used a process of subterfuge. Being talented musicians, they were able to learn to use the new instruments in order to preserve their own songs, rhythms and sacred knowledge (Poveda, 1981). The Spaniards viewed the new stringed instrument (a Spanish adaptation) as acceptable. The mandolina or concha became the instrument with which Nahua peoples were able to remember and preserve the original beats of Danza rhythms. While this European influenced instrument may have replaced the drums, it became the only way that songs and beats were recorded in the memories of danzantes. In effect, danzantes took control of the stringed instrument, making it their own. The shell of the armadillo maintained the integrity of an Indigenous instrument, honoring the animal life, in the

same way that the drum honored the tree life. By use of an instrument acceptable to the Spanish, they were able to preserve the songs and beats that continue in Danza today.

According to Arnoldo Carlos Vento in his article, “Aztec Conchero Dance Tradition: Historic, Religious and Cultural Significance:”

... There are two schools of thought regarding the authenticity of the *conchero* tradition: (1) Those who see it as syncretic, as a process of colonialism, and (2) Those who see it as a spiritual and sacred tradition with hidden meaning, interpretation and symbolism. (1994: 59)

One can find many symbolic similarities that made it possible for Indigenous people to overlap Christian symbolism with their own. For example, *la cruz* (the cross) was also an Indigenous structure and symbol representing the four cardinal directions, making it very convenient to transpose the Catholic cross with the Indigenous cross. Rostas affirms that, “the religiosity of the Concheros is syncretic, like that of most present day Indigenous religions. It consists of a fusing of Catholicism with various autochthonous traditions: possible remnants of the practices of the Mexica” (1991: 5–6). In contrast, some literature argues that today’s Danzas are mere invention and that the authenticity of the Danzas having any relation to “pre-invasion” ties does not exist. González Torres argues that all “original” Danza disappeared, and what people do today is basically all a new invention (1996).

Every danzante I have interviewed in my research on Danza (and I have never met a danzante who would agree completely with González Torres) claims that Danza does have a pre-Cuauhtémoc origin and continuity. Hobsbawm and Ranger (2012) would argue that the ascription of antiquity conforms to their theory of how traditions are invented, but danzantes strongly believe and accept as fact that the Concheros preserved the integrity of the dances. Garner also argues that “Aztec ritual dance was never fully eradicated. Rather, practices and symbols were revitalized and re-circulated via the processes of adaptation, innovation and improvisation” (2009: 418). An early study in the 1940s examined the musicality, beats, dance steps and style of Danza and compared it to other

Native American dance traditions in the U.S. According to this study:

The style is utterly Indian in the forward-tilted bowed torso, and in the special quality of emphasis ... Several steps are highly characteristic of Sioux and Pueblo Indian dances alike—the skip with back pull, the limping slide, the grapevine, the toe touching. In the last—a jump, tap, hop—there is one distinction. The northern Indians touch simultaneously with the hop, in even beat; the Concheros alternate hop and tap in iambic metre. Examples are the Sioux War Dances; the Hoop Dance of Standing Rock, North Dakota, and of Taos, New Mexico; the Horse Tail and Eagle Dances of Tesuque; the Zuñi Harvest Dance. (Kurath, 1946: 397)

Kurath's study attempts to answer the questions of "authenticity," whether the steps are vestiges of ancient ceremonies, a cross-pollination of various Indigenous traditions, or highly influenced by Europeans. This study is able to conclude that, unlike the "mestizo" creations of *el zapateado* or the *jarabe tapatío* of Jalisco *charros* (which demonstrate influences of Spanish dancing); the Concheros demonstrate no traits of such footwork or embellishments. The Conchero dance is still distinctly Indigenous in its footwork and movements, with European accommodations minor, such as the adaption of certain instruments.

Rather than lose their ways of life altogether, Indigenous peoples, as a way of resisting colonization, appropriated European Christian ways and made them their own. Concheros gave the appearance of compliance with the colonizer "while sharing amongst themselves the meanings and symbols that are essential to cultural continuity. In other words, traditional dances are occasionally a place of safe sharing ..." (Krystal, 2007: 73). Krystal (2007) and Scott (1990) refer to the overlapping of Christian and Indigenous ways as a form of "hidden transcripts." Disguising their spiritual ways with Christian icons and beliefs allowed them to maintain their sacred traditions, while making the friars believe that they were in fact being converted or "conquered" by Christ, therefore avoiding

persecution. In essence, Indigenous people responded to clergy by being compliant, accepting what was dictated, not arguing, and behaving as they were told, all while knowing they would continue to interpret the Christian religion in their own ways. They were fighting both for their own survival and to resist complete colonization.

Spiritual traditions helped Indigenous communities reinforce and maintain the concepts of communal living, mutual cooperation, duality, reciprocity and balance with the natural world and creation. Elders were respected and sought for their knowledge. Different communities contributed materials such as flowers, food, feathers, attire and gifts in order to participate in a ceremony or fiesta. In order to compensate for the loss of these life-ways, Nahua peoples reconstituted the same traditions, juxtaposed into the Catholic tradition. *Mesas* or *cofradías* were developed historically as a form of resistance to Spanish domination and in attempt to hold onto the communal and kinship form of organization. *Cofradías* in Europe were fraternal orders dedicated to the protection of the patron saints of a community. Subsequently, during the colonization, the Catholic Church introduced the concept of the fraternity and the cult of the saints to this hemisphere. Native people transformed such a system to work to their advantage as a way to maintain spiritual practice of giving *ofrendas* (offerings) to these sacred guardians, overlapping their own notions of spirits/energy with that of the Spaniards' saints (this was done in a similar manner as occurred for/by African heritage peoples in the Caribbean). The convergence of Catholic powers with Native teachings can be viewed as a form of "liberation theology," where one could "liberate the spirit even in the most adverse circumstances" (Cantú & Nájera-Ramírez, 2002: 129). The fiestas and public ceremonies were a front so that elders and communities could make sure the *animas* (souls) of ancestors were honored, and that the old ceremonial calendar would continue.

As a result, Nahua peoples appropriated the Spanish system of *cofradías/mesas* or social organizations to take the place of the *calpulli* (Nahua social organizational structure and notion of "group," as in a Danza group), and designated a saint as the symbol of the mesa. The saint would replace the original Nahua symbol, which the Spaniards attempted to eradicate by destroying massive temples and cities, only to rebuild them as Catholic Churches. Often, because the Spaniards could not stop the Nahua peoples from returning to sacred ceremonial

sites, they would simply build a Church atop the very site and name it after a saint. These same Churches are still evident in México. Interestingly, it was only after the arrival of the Spaniards that apparitions of the Virgin Mary and saints began to occur in 1530, coincidentally all on sacred sites. One famous apparition occurred on September 14, 1531⁹ during what is known as the “Battle of Calderón Pass,” when the Chichimecas laid down their weapons in a battle against the Spaniards in Querétaro. This event would lead to the Concheros’ mantra of *Conquista, Conformidad y Unión* (Conquest, Conformity and Union). According to Yolotl González Torres:

At sunset there were still no victors or vanquished. Before the sun went down the horizon, darkness fell, and on high, in heaven, a white and shining cross appeared, and at its side the apostle Santiago riding on a white horse. Astonished to see such wonder, the combatants put down their arms and between embraces, they made a peace covenant and to the shout of “*Él es Dios*” (He is God), the Indians recognized the Christian cross as a symbol of their new faith, performing a dance as a proof of their veneration. (1996: 20)

According to the respected *Danza Capitán*, Andrés Segura, now deceased, (Poveda, 1981) this supposed apparition of the bright cross of light occurred in 1537, and was an internal battle within the Chichimecas, not against the Spaniards, and when they saw this cross in the sky, they interpreted it to mean the arrival of a new change. For the Chichimecas, the cross of light was not symbolic of the arrival of Christ, as others have interpreted it, but was rather the Indigenous symbol of the cross of life, or the four directions of the universe. This cross of life contrasts the Christian cross, which represents death as sacrifice for eternal life. Segura believed that the cross, rather than viewed as a syncretism with Christianity, was actually a re-encounter with Indigeneity and the universal symbology that existed already:

La historia de los concheros está escrita en nuestros cantos. Somos la continuidad de la tradición indígena que se

conserva a través de un fenómeno que se puede llamar sincretismo, aunque yo personalmente le llamo reencuentro/ The history of the Concheros is written in our songs. We are the continuity of Indigenous tradition that is conserved through the phenomenon called syncretism, even though I personally call it re-encounter. (Poveda, 1981: 284)

Santo Santiago (also known as St. James, the patron saint of Spain) is a common saint that is venerated in many Indigenous communities. As a result of the Battle of Calderón Pass, Concheros continue to say the words, “*Él es Dios*” in ceremony, to acknowledge someone or to begin *palabra* (prayer) at the end of a ceremony.

Danzantes continue to return yearly to Querétaro to commemorate the Battle of Calderón Pass on the day and in the place where it occurred. Querétaro continues to be considered the place where the root of the Conchero tradition began and where the Danza began to present itself inside the Churches. In addition to Querétaro, five other sacred, obligatory ceremonies form part of the annual pilgrimage ritual that all danzantes make at some point in their lives, if not yearly. The five sites are sacred Nahua sites that circle the Valley of Mexico, marking a sacred geography of the center, and the four surrounding directions. The locations of these sacred sites are also places where “apparitions” occurred and Churches were built, making these places sacred not only to danzantes, but to Catholics as well (Garner, 2009; Aguilar, 1983). According to Gertrude Prokosch Kurath, as participants in a *Danza de Promesa* (Dance of Promise) “the members vow participation for life, to avoid some catastrophe, and often go on arduous pilgrimages in fulfillment of this vow” (1946: 387). These pilgrimages also facilitated the encounter of various danzantes with one another, contributing to the metamorphosis and further development of Danza; both the movement of Danza and the actual steps of Danza, which would allow for more artistic interpretations. Garner (2009) details each of these pilgrimages and sites. Oftentimes the dates coincided with Catholic holidays and/or near Nahua significant days. They include, in order of pilgrimage: 1) Tlaloc/El Señor de Sacromonte (Christ of the Sacred Mountain) located in Amecameca in the East, occurring in February; 2) Tezcatlipoca-Oztochteate/Christ of Chalma located in Chalma in the South, occurring in late

May/early June; 3) Xipe Totec/Tlaltelolco-Plaza of Three Cultures located in the center of Mexico City, occurring July 25–26, Santiago's feast days; 4) Mayahuel/Our Lady of Los Remedios (remedies) located in Naucalpan, in the Southern, occurring September 10th; and 5) Tonantzin/La Virgen de Guadalupe located in Tepeyac, the Northern, occurring December 12th. Sacred images, stories of miracle healings, sites of apparition, and locations of historical events all form a pilgrimage center important to both Mexica and Catholic cosmologies: "[The travels ... of people to their shrines were meant to broadcast sacred energy from its dwelling places as well as to concentrate it there]" (Taylor, 2005: 968). Beyond the ceremonial purpose, often these pilgrimages were places where one could build networks between groups. A group could send a representative to a ceremony to establish kinship with others.

The apparition of saints facilitated the conversion process, renaming *pueblos* from their Nahuatl names to the feast day of their own saints. Nahuatl peoples then chose to adapt and transpose their own meanings to the saints. La Virgen de Guadalupe, whose said 1531 apparition occurred on the mountain of Tepeyac, the same location where female energies and fertility were venerated, became known or understood as Tonantzin Tlalli—Our Mother Earth. El Santo Niño de Atocha,¹⁰ or baby Jesus, became known as *el dueño del cerro*—a mountain guardian. The image of the Santo Niño holds a staff, associated in the Christian faith as a pastoral staff for God's lambs. However, in Nahuatl tradition, a staff is known as the *bastón de mando* (the staff of authority); a symbol of authority and respect¹¹. Holding it gives permission for one to speak without anyone interrupting them, and gives a direct connection to the spirits of that staff, connecting the person holding it to the heavens or to the universe. Nahuatl peoples would return to these sacred sites, even if a church had been built atop them, because people knew that, below the church floors, continued to be the sacred, ceremonial site or mountain with a special, venerable meaning. Even when the Spaniards tried to destroy a site, people continued to return, leaving offerings.

Danza groups, also known as *calpullis*, would carry a *pantli* (banner/pennant) with a Nahuatl symbol representing their community or insignia; the *mesas Concheras* would do away with the *pantli* and instead carry *estandarte* (standard), similar to those carried by Spaniards when they arrived to México. These *estandartes* carried the image of a Virgin Mary or of a saint that was meaningful to them or

connected them to their own Churches or *cofradías* back in Spain. Nahuatl peoples used the *estandarte* in the same way as the *pantli*, but placed on it a patron saint which would mask an ancestral spirit or being. The *estandarte* would be a symbol of a particular group's lineage/Danza genealogy and patron saint.

For example, contemporary Danza group Xitlalli, from San Francisco, California, carries an *estandarte* with El Santo Niño de Atocha. They describe their *estandarte* in the following way:

[The *estandarte*] is complemented by an Aztec child deity, Pilzintecutli, also called Xochipilli, evoking both the solar and wind forces. On the edges of the volcanoes, Popocatepetl and Ixtaccihuatl, the mushroom which is held sacred, is lovingly called "apipiltzin," the little child of the waters...

The figure of the Holy Child of Atocha originated outside of Madrid, Spain, and was once accompanied by La Señora de Atocha, a black Madonna¹². During the 17th century, this figure was used by missionaries to stamp out the image of Pilzintecutli ... El Niño de Atocha, dressed in hat and cloak, with sandals, staff and water gourd represents a pilgrim; like the *danzantes*, he is on the road of life, 'el camino de la luz' [the road of light] ...

This infant is a legacy from our *jefes de Danza* who resisted the imposition of European values by absorbing and reconstituting the image of a powerful magical child. (Xitlalli 1995)

As evident, the symbol of the baby Jesus became devoid of overt Catholic meaning and instead was completely "reconstituted" to evoke Indigenous meaning and representation (Hernández-Avila, 2005). In order to appease the clergy, in México's early colonial period *danzantes* would tell the priests that they were indeed dancing for the saints. Content with this negotiation of conversion, *danzantes* were allowed to continue dancing, but only inside of the Church. Since this was not necessarily the norm everywhere, much of the Danza traditions still remained

in private. The Churches that did not condemn Danza tolerated its practice under certain conditions. The all-night ceremonies for the spirits became *velaciones* or vigils held by candles lit for the saints where *alabanzas* (songs of praise) could be sung. *Velaciones* are solemn events, but were also used as a time for networking, and for sharing resources and information.

The original Mexica regalia, or *trajes*, had to be changed in order to conform to Christian conservative norms, meaning that no flesh could be seen. Long skirts, leggings and high collared shirts for men made up the traje of the Concheros. According to elder Señora Cobb, “even if the Concheros were *pobre* [poor], they had new *trajes* every year, made with expensive velvet. Their *trajes* were still complex, decorative and used much more material. Their *huaraches* [sandals], *hecho de madera* [made of wood], with metal taps. They were forced to wear the taps to keep track of them. *Nos enseñaron respeto hacia los trajes* [They taught us the respect we should give our regalia]” (personal interview).

From 1521 to 1810, prior to Mexican independence from Spain, the state/military regime and the Catholic Church were one and the same. The Catholic Church held complete power over politics and the defense of self-proclaimed sovereignty. The Church needed the military to enforce its power over Indigenous subjects. Therefore, the lines between religion and military structure were blurred. The same militaristic structure that the Catholic Spanish military used became the same organizational structure that would eventually govern la Danza Conchera. For the most part, that structure remains in place.

La Danza Conchera also became known as *La Danza de la Conquista* and came to be viewed as a metaphor for *guerra* (war). This war was a spiritual war, and the instruments (*conchas*/*mandolinas*) were the arms instruments of battle. Each *danzante* was a “soldier of the light” (Garner, 2009: 423). The idea of “conquest” is not meant to correlate with the Spanish *conquista* or subjugation of Indigenous people/*danzantes*. Rather, it is viewed as a counter-conquest or spiritual conquest; to “conquer” new people into the Danza tradición:

Where American Indians in the United States associate conquest with European and Euro-American dominance, conquest has a more nuanced and complex meaning for Aztec dance participants.

In La Danza, conquest is a metaphor for valued qualities, in particular reciprocity and submission; it is conquest of a different sort. (Garner, 2009: 416)

The discourse of “conquest” can be conflicting and contentious to other Native communities, but for Nahua people, it was an attempt to survive. They believed that conforming to European terminology would be sufficient for their own survival. Ultimately, below the surface of those terms, it would be impossible to erase their own deeply-held world views and spiritual beliefs. Therefore, it did not matter what terms or names were used, the core beliefs and values would remain the same.

The idea or concept of “conquista” comes from the Spanish *Requerimiento* document which gives justification for Spanish invasion upon Indigenous people:

As the *requerimiento* articulated it, the physical, political, and economic subjugation of the Indigenous people of the area was not enough for the Spanish; their conquest must also be one of religion as well. This declaration of the Catholic Church drew its charge and legitimacy from a sacred genealogy. The king and queen of Spain and the pope were designated as the final human authorities because they were the chosen descendants of the one true God, Creator of Heaven and Earth. Declaring the land to be under divine dominion, the conquerors expected all its inhabitants to surrender without resistance to this supremacy. (Garner, 2009: 417)

This conquest was viewed not only as one of people or lands, but also of spirit. For *danzantes*, using the term *conquista* was to merely subterfuge the idea; to turn it around and use it for their own benefit. Even though la Danza de la Conquista defines itself as opposed to the colonial structure, it still uses the same idea of conquering hearts, but instead of for Catholicism, it is for Danza.

In addition to holding firmly to the term “conquista,” la tradición also uses military terminology to define its structure. The leadership within the Danza group are labeled *alférez* (the person who holds the *estandarte*—a

term originating in Spain to a high ranking magistrate to the king), *capitanes* (captains), *sargentos* (sergeants), and *generales* (generals). There is also a smoke carrier, often referred to as “La Malinche.” La Malinche, in México, is often referred to as a traitor and has long held a negative reputation, sometimes referred to as a whore. La Malinche, or Malintzin/Malinalli, was the translator for Hernán Cortés and later bore him children, who are referred to as the first *mestizos*. Contemporary Xicana feminist scholars have reconfigured La Malinche’s historical rendering and have reclaimed her image to be one of survival, not betrayal (Gaspar de Alba, 2003; Pratt, 1993). This same reaffirmation has taken place in Danza, where women hold the place in the center as the smoke carriers. While I choose to hold onto the positive reinterpretation of La Malinche’s memory, it should be noted that her role of “servitude” to the soldiers falls in line with the military construction of the Danza Conchera hierarchy of positions. The Malinche role in Danza most likely did not embrace the positive Xicana adaptation of La Malinche, but actually existed to concede to the idea that they (the *danzantes*) would also be in servitude to, and in accordance with the Spaniards. In a sense, they were honoring La Malinche because she assisted the Spaniards, sustaining their power. It both reinforced their subjugate role as Indigenous people and their goal for cultural survival.

Today, while many Danza groups continue to hold on to the hierarchical military terminology, some Danza groups have renamed the hierarchical positions with Nahuatl terminology or will simply say that one has “palabra,” meaning they have given their “word” to carry on a duty within the group or within a ceremony. Some Danza groups have done away with the entire idea of hierarchy; rather than have a *Capitana* of a group, the leader is simply referred to as *la maestra* (teacher) or *cabeza* (head) of a group. Some groups strive to keep an organizational structure, while letting go of the rigid military subtext that is associated with war, violence and conquest—all painful parts of the history of colonization for Indigenous peoples. La Malinche is usually called Malintzin or *sahumadora* (woman smoke carrier) and has been reinterpreted to represent women as the center of the circle, like the sun, giver of life. She is a reminder of the matriarchal and matrilineal origins of Nahua peoples and reclaims her space and her role that was subjugated upon the Spanish arrival.

Along with the imposition and absorption of a Spanish military hierarchal structure in Danza, *danzantes* also adopted the Catholic notion of *disciplina* (discipline), sacrifice and punishment for sins. The idea of conquest was also used to mean conquering “the lower self” or personal vices, weaknesses and sins. Through adopting and incorporating Christian views of punishment for sins, the idea of conquest became part of the practice of Danza and ceremony for Concheros. Still today, many Mexican Catholics will crawl on their knees for miles to a church to offer up their own sacrifice to the saint or Virgin Mary. Dancing barefoot until their feet blister and bleed was viewed as part of that sacrifice or offering. Mimicking the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, having been whipped and brutally hung on a cross, Concheros also began to incorporate whipping and long pilgrimages atop mountains. “Suffering” came to be viewed as part of the Danza de la Conquista. Even if hurting or in pain, a *danzante* had to be disciplined and not leave the circle for any reason. The use of corporal punishment continues as part of Danza in some places. This is a direct lineage of both the Spanish military and Catholic belief systems: “It is said that 50 years ago the dance was much more disciplined. No one was given permission to leave even to relieve themselves and those who broke the discipline were castigated, often with the sergeant’s whip” (Rostas, 1991: 10). According to *danzante* scholar, Mario Aguilar, at one point in time:

...Whippings and public humiliation were accepted punishment for persons who did not respect the sacredness of the danza. Today, LA LEY DEL HIELO, (the Rule of Ice) is a more appropriate form of discipline. This rule means that the person became invisible to the danza circle. They become a “man without country,” receiving no spiritual support from the others. In the eyes of the dance circle, they have ceased to exist. (Aguilar, 1983: XIII)

Today, while “discipline” is still viewed as important in Danza, different tactics are used. Some groups might “reprimand” someone for arriving late to practice, but through the demanding of squats. While suffering, sacrifice, punishment or redemption for sins was the

origin of disciplina in Danza in the early colonial period, today disciplina is understood as a personal goal to be a strong dancer; to have patience, respect, willpower and compassion.

DANZA POST-MEXICAN INDEPENDENCE AND REVOLUTION

It has been established that during the early colonial period of México, Danza ceremony and spiritual practice was either kept inside the home or practiced in the Church under the Catholic/Spanish military guise. This came to a halt as new reforms were being made after Mexican independence from Spain in 1810. Reforms to create a separation of Church and State did not come to fruition until the presidency of Benito Juárez in 1858. The struggle between the liberal reformists and conservative elites, closely tied to the wealthy Catholic Church, led to a second pursuit of Danza (Atlahxiuhtik, personal interview). This time, Danza was not being penalized by the Catholic Church as had been the case in 1519. Rather, Danza was forced to once again go into hiding because it was associated with, or as *part* of the Catholic Church that was now under fire as anti-clerical sentiments ruled the day. To be a danzante was once again a punishable crime. Liberal reformists sought democracy, expropriation of Church lands, and the creation of an army under civilian control. Anything that was perceived as pro-Catholic Church was then viewed as anti-democracy.

Following nearly 300 years of colonial rule, repression and pseudo-protection under the Church, after several generations, danzantes only knew the syncretic ways of Danza. Many no longer knew how to function or carry la tradición outside of the Church. At the same time, it cannot be denied that Catholicism in México had been Indigenized; Mexican Catholicism today is still very distinct.¹³ The 19th century attack on Danza (and its association with the Catholic Church) was simply a matter of being caught in political crossfire. In addition, danzantes, coming from the poorest and most disenfranchised communities, suffered more of the effects of wars, political instability, American imperialism and economic repressions, all part of the ongoing history of México. Ultimately in the 19th century, secularism triumphed, leaving Danza in a state of limbo.

Fearing punishment and persecution, danzantes were forced to return into hiding and would not reemerge into the public eye until the regime of Porfirio Díaz,

beginning in 1876, which neither assaulted nor protected the Church. Ironically, Díaz (who concealed his Mixteco origins by using face powder, and was known for his desire to incorporate European culture in Mexican society) encouraged the emergence of Danza from a place of hiding, and it was no longer associated with criminal activity (Atlahxiuhtik, personal interview). Others continued to practice Danza ways in secret, passing on the tradition only within the family. The constant need to protect Danza and to keep it only “within,” stems from the historical trauma of being persecuted for practicing Danza. This sense of secrecy would continue to direct the ways that Danza, even in contemporary times, may be very closed off to outsiders.

The Mexican Revolution of 1910 brought simultaneous hope and devastation, seeking a re-Mexicanization of the nation. The struggle for Indigenous land rights and agrarian reform meant a reawakening to take up various types of weapons: both guns and paintbrushes. The cultural renaissance following the revolution pulsated with new appreciation and recognition for Indigenous resistance and critiques of modernity. The devastation of war, loss of life, and mass migration of *mexicanos* northward also created new dilemmas for Mexican society as the country attempted to rebuild and maintain the revolutionary fervor. A new tide of Marxist-socialist beliefs began to condemn and even reject the Catholic Church. From the dictatorship of Díaz to the Cristero War of 1926, danzantes would still be condemned as associates of the Catholic Church. The ritual practice of Danza would continue to retreat back into the safety of the private sector: the home. The only Danza that would be glorified was the “authentic” Danza tied to a pre-Cuauhtémoc/“Azteca” past, the same imagery promoted in the works of Diego Rivera.

THE CÁRDENAS ADMINISTRATION AND NEW REVISIONISM OF DANZA

Although Danza was no longer a punishable crime, as Indigenous people, danzantes were still deemed inferior and their dance was referred to as mere folklore, rather than as an actual complex spiritual practice and history directly connected to México’s Indigenous identity. Danza would not be viewed as part of popular culture or discourse until the era of Mexican President Lázaro Cárdenas (1934–1940). During his regime, significant political and ideological transformations began to take place in regard to Indigenous peoples. Cárdenas was

regarded as compassionate to the rights and history of Indigenous people and *campesinos* (peasants), opening initiatives to give them land and semi-autonomous rights and sovereignty. Native Americans from the U.S. southwest noted this, and several Native individuals and communities moved to México during this era, asking Cárdenas to accept them as Mexican citizens because they felt that Indigenous people were treated with more respect in México than in the United States (Crum, 2001–2002). The infrastructural development of roads into mountain communities created mutual contact between Indigenous communities and mainstream society. Through government sponsored programming, Cárdenas facilitated an invitation to Indigenous communities in the mountains of México to bring their language, culture and dances to the cities in an effort to honor México's history and present. The honoring of Indigenous México no longer had to be only something of the past: Indigenous people, despite having been one of the most ignored sectors of Mexican society, were alive and thriving.

Danza teacher and respected elder Angelbertha Cobb from Sacramento, California, is a product of Cárdenas' efforts to bridge México to its Indigenous identity. She was a child from the mountainous and isolated region north of Cuetzalan, Puebla, and she has helped bring traditional regional dances to the city. In our interview, she laughingly retold a saying that is often stated in a stereotypical, pejorative context: "Cuando dicen que bajaron los indios a tamborazos del cerro, es cierto/When they say that the Indians came down the mountains to the sound of a drum, it's actually true" (personal interview). Cobb, a Nahua woman, came down from her isolated community to dance to the drumbeat of her traditional Danzas.

The 1930–40s saw a renewed effort to build a national Mexican identity, one that glorified the Aztec and Mayan past while acknowledging it as an integral part of the present. Many Danza groups were subsidized by the government (Poveda, 1981) which changed the discourse of Danza and reconstruction of Aztec identity. Film projects and documentaries, such as *¡Qué Viva México!*, (Eisenstein/Alexandrov, 1930) focused on nationalistic themes to honor the Indigenous past, and connecting it to the people of the present. Foreign (American and European) as well as Mexican scholars found new interest in ancient Indigenous texts, inciting new interest in secular society as well. These scholars, anthropologists

and archaeologists shed light on historical Indigenous artifacts and documents, propelling Mexican youth, including danzantes, to study the findings and relate them to their contemporary Indigenous revivalist movements, and to unveil new understanding and interpretations of ceremonial practices. The Cárdenas administration began to invest in the arts through the commissioning of films and public mural projects, and also in education, reaching out to the marginal communities.

Florencio Yescas, a danzante from the barrio of Tacuba¹⁴ in Mexico City, and the first danzante noted to bring Danza Mexica to the United States, was part of an outreach project to Indigenous traditional dancers in the rural parts of México. Although a "traditional" danzante, he used his skills as a dancer to make a living through the new national dance company, Ballet Folklórico. He was a dance partner to renowned choreographer Amalia Hernández, who helped spread recognition of Mexican folkloric ballet, rooted in México's Indigenous and artistic traditions, throughout México and internationally. Yescas worked closely with Hernández, also arranging theatrical dance scenes representing Indigenous themes, stories and creation ethos. One such creation story, titled "Los Cuatro Soles" (The Four Suns), incorporates many of the messages and beliefs represented in Danza Mexica. With Hernández, Yescas contributed to the formation of "La Academia de la Danza" (Dance Academy) of Mexico City (which later evolved into the Ballet Nacional Folklórico), where, as instructors, they recruited other dancers, such as Senora Cobb, from rural Indigenous communities such as Cuetzalan, Puebla.

DANZA MEXICA

Florencio Yescas came from la tradición, meaning that he was a direct descendant of danzantes that were traditional keepers of the practice through the Conchero tradition. Danzantes in Mexico City at this time were still only allowed to dance inside the Catholic churches; they had to follow strict rules of conservative dress, slower dance movements with bowed heads, and their dances were dedicated only to saints and within the bounds of Catholicism. Yescas, who eventually broke away from la tradición (and was criticized and delegitimized by other Concheros for doing so), created a different Danza path that focused exclusively on recreating and authenticating Danza to a way he envisioned as more cultural and closely replicating pre-colonial Mexica ways of dance.

This later became referred to as “La Danza Azteca,” “Esplendor Azteca,” “La Danza Mexica,” or “Mexicayotl Mexicanidad”¹⁵ (sometimes used interchangeably). On the other hand, choosing the Conchero path meant support of Catholic events and syncretism. According to danzante Guillermo Rosete, many people remained or chose Conchero tradition because they saw themselves and the Conchero way as a Mestizo construct (Maestas, n.d.). The inability or perhaps shame of embracing a sole “Indigenous” identity or lived experience as culturally mestizo, may have influenced many danzantes to remain and/or claim Conchero tradición.

In contrast to Concheros, which were very closed to new membership, the Azteca/Mexica danzantes (a new emerging identity or branch within the spectrum of Danza) were very open to anyone who wanted to learn Danza. Danzantes Mexicas viewed Catholicism as the “conqueror” and wanted to do away with the notion of being “conquered.” Those that supported a Mexicayotl path supported cultural events, without religious affiliation. This meant studying the codices and creating regalia more closely designed to original forms, which were ornate and unashamed to show the body. Modern innovations, such as using plastic beading and sequence in the Danza attire, became part of the Mexica repertoire: “If our ancestors had seen these shiny materials, they would have wanted them too” (Maestas, n.d.: 93). These dances were faster, and to the beat of loud pounding drums rather than only stringed instruments. Eliminating *la religión*, and Catholicism (and the freedom to dance outside of the Church), meant that danzantes no longer had to dance for the saints, but could return to the ceremonial centers and sacred sites of the Mexicas. Peeling away the vestiges of colonialism meant moving toward an entire opposite spectrum and embracing (often romanticizing) an Indigenous Mexican identity that had existed prior to the arrival of the Spaniards.

A new era of Danza was on the horizon, coinciding with the 1950s economic development, rise in the tourism industry, and wider interest in the “archaeological” sites of México. According to Aguilar (1983), this led to economic opportunities for danzantes to perform for entertainment at various tourist attractions. For the first time, Danza was not a social barrier but an economic advantage. This phenomenon occurred not only for Danza Mexica, but for other traditional dances throughout México, such as the Voladores de Papantla

of Veracruz. This new economic opportunity, rather than viewed as positive, was seen as exploitative by some danzantes. Danzantes became divided and some saw it as the selling out of sacred traditions, meant only for ceremony. Others thought it was an opportunity to turn around the still “savage image” imposed upon Indigenous people. Many believed that, through reclaiming Mexica regalia and performance, the docile, weak Indian etched in the minds of mainstream society would transform into an intelligent, strong, beautiful Mexica image (Axayacatl, personal interview). The regalia, feathers and ornate accessories were meant to invoke spiritual power, and not only provide the underpinnings of dramatic effect. Society would no longer ignore, nor mistakenly perceive, Indigenous people as of the past or “extinct,” but instead would view them as alive, part of the present and part of the identity and history of all *Mexicanos*.

A new generation of danzantes was open to breaking away from *la tradición conchera*, but it was a difficult undertaking for those who only knew *la tradición* and felt there was neither contradiction nor need to abandon what they had been practicing for hundreds of years. They had become closely linked to the Church, and exiting the Church was like abandoning a sacred site. Many believed that the Concheros, in terms of Danza and tradition, were much closer to the “pre-conquest” era than any of the new “folklore imaginings” that were emerging. The new Danza Mexica/Azteca groups viewed themselves as more “cultural,” negating the religious aspect associated with the Church. In fact, today, danzantes will distinguish themselves as either “*tradición*” or “*cultural*.” Tradición inferred Catholic/Conchero ties while cultural inferred a closer rendering to pre-contact societies. Concheros began to look at the *culturales* as reclaiming, but still incorporating invention, therefore they were not as “traditional.”

Today, there are three large Danza congregations, associations or *mesas*, each composed of individual *mesas* and groups that have their autonomy and their own calendar of celebrations and ceremonies, as well as several obligatory ceremonies that the whole *mesa* is required to attend and dance. In 1980, Andrés Segura estimated that in all these *mesas*/regional areas there could possibly be up to a million or a million and a half danzantes (Poveda, 1981). These three large *mesas* are known as the congregation of Tlaxcala (which also includes the area of Puebla), the congregation of Altos y Bajíos (which

includes the areas of Querétaro, Guanajuato, Jalisco, parts of Michoacán, San Luis Potosí, Durango and Zacatecas), and the congregation of La Gran Tenochtitlan (which includes the areas of the state of Hidalgo, state and city of México, Morelos and Guerrero). All of these large mesas come from the same *tradición de Danza*, yet with different leadership and variations of how they carry out the Danza. Some Danza circles may be from small pueblos or only within families. All of them have capitanes that meet in a council to discuss issues.

LA MEXICANIDAD/MEXICAYOTL

Following the Lázaro Cárdenas administration and the 1950s boom in the Mexican tourism industry, by the 1960s a clear split occurred between those steadfast Conchero tradición dancers and another new *camino* (path) of Danza, identified as *cultural*, *Mexicayotl* or *la Mexicanidad* (translated to mean “Mexicanist,” or, more clearly, resistance to colonial imperialism through the embracing of a Nahuatl/Indigenous México). In the early stages, this trajectory was called Danza Azteca, which was meant to be distinguished from Conchero. To say, “I am a danzante azteca” inferred that one was not a Conchero. The label “Danza Azteca” was viewed as the more radical approach to identify the new path in Danza. It identified the regalia, fast-paced Danza and form emerging. With time, new terms and understandings were developed, such as cultural or Mexicayotl, to describe this trajectory. Mario Aguilar describes this new expression of Danza as a form of the Ghost Dance, “in which we call the spirits of our ancestors to guide us and give us strength in the struggle of life today” (Maestas, n.d.: 64). For a new generation who saw this deviation from la tradición as one with liberatory potential, the older generation saw it as a threat to “tradition.” Eventually, both paths of Danza have had mutual benefit, as all have witnessed the growth of Danza and the attraction towards it. The Mexicanidad sector of Danza created an ideological shift in Danza which called for a movement to decolonize and *mexicanizar a México mismo*—“Mexicanize” México. This shift is parallel to Guillermo Bonfil Batalla’s concept of *México Profundo* (1996), the idea that México’s Indigenous people have been systematically ignored and denied by an “imaginary México” concept created by those in power. He says a more accurate depiction of an Indigenous México would be “México Profundo” (profound Mexico), because, although majority sectors of Mexican society do not

recognize themselves as being Indian, they still organize their cultural life on the basis of Indigenous origin and philosophy. The mexicanidad shift in Danza was a call to recognize, self-determine and self-identify as Indigenous, albeit dominantly a Mexicana identity.

Part of the transformations that occurred within Danza had to do with urban influence. Danzantes moved from rural to urban society, coinciding with the mass urban migration of many Indigenous peoples moving to the cities for work and opportunities. Modernity and social mobility revealed itself in the new, educated classes of danzantes that began to take leadership. Rostas (1991) believes that most of the Danza groups today are not rural/community/pueblo based, but rather city based, which leads to a larger participation of “middle-class mestizos.” Rostas describes these middle class members as people that are involved in the mainstream arts: *teatro*, painting or professional dancing. An example of this would be Andrés Segura, who was professionally trained in modern dance. Rostas believes that these mestizos are “people of mixed blood who, by means of the dance, are seeking to create for themselves an indigenous identity” (1991: 12). While many danzantes might fit the mainstream, imposed definition of mestizo, in its colonial caste context, many of them do not identify as mestizo. In her article, Rostas calls the participants of Danza “mestizos,” despite the fact that, in this same article, she states that the people call themselves “Indigenous.” Accepting the idea that identity is/should be self-ascribed (rather than state defined and imposed), Rostas still negates peoples’ own claims to their indigeneity, and imposes her own frame of reference (coinciding with the state) as to what constitutes authentic Indigenousness. In doing this, both Rostas and the state deny people a right to their self-determination, even as Indigenous Mexicans are taking a critical look at the state cultural nationalism project which promoted *mestizaje* identity. This mestizaje project essentially did away with individual claims to indigeneity; even if a parent or grandparent was “Indigenous” (meaning they spoke their language or self-identified as part of a pueblo), the state (since the Mexican Revolution) imposed a mestizo identity. To be Mexican was to be mestizo; Indigeneity was over, it was a finished part of history. The new, modern México was a nation of mixed race people, a cosmic race comprised of some of the best civilizations of the world, Aztec and European. While perhaps urban realities and imposed cultural nationalist notions were

the dominant experiences of participants of Danza, to assume a lack of “Indigenouslyness” or to deny one the opportunity to self-identify and claim his/her roots, is inherently problematic.

While both Concheros and Mexicayotl claim Indigenous ancestry and/or identity, there remain clear distinctions between the Conchero and Mexicayotl paths of Danza. Mexicas did away with the mandolina, using primarily percussion to guide the dances with a much faster rhythm, while Concheros may choose to use only the mandolina and dance much slower. Some Mexicayotl dance barefoot, wear elaborate feather headdresses called *copillis* and:

Each dancer dresses up in what he or she or the group considers to be appropriate. In some groups, all the costumes [regalia] are identical, while in others, for example ... each dancer is free to use the designs, colours and materials that he or she pleases, within certain overriding parameters. (Rostas, 1991: 10)

The Concheros continue to wear long regalia that reveal very little flesh and often use humble materials such as *manta*, a very plain, basic cloth in contrast to the often ostentatious fabric used by the Mexicayotl. But the Conchero style of dress is changing. Today, self-identified Conchero groups have started to adopt more Mexicayotl aesthetics of *trajes*, while the Mexicayotl have developed even more elaborate and new styles that they are incorporating in Danza. The Mexicayotl *trajes* are typified to be *guerrero* (warrior-like) while the Conchero *trajes* strive to maintain their humility. There have been many internal disagreements about regalia that continue within many groups in California. Vento (1994) notes comparisons of *danzantes* from México and those from the U.S. The *danzantes* from the U.S. have added paint on their faces and additional steps. According to Andrés Segura:

... Los concheros de Austin, no podemos introducir cambios en la tradición ... Las pequeñas variantes entre unos y otros serán nada más de estilo, porque, aunque todos hacemos los mismos pasos, cada quien tiene su propio estilo/... The concheros of Austin, we cannot

introduce changes to the tradition ... The small variants within one or the other should be nothing more than a style type, because even though we all do the same steps, each one has their own style. (Poveda, 1981: 291)

Similarly, while the movements do not ever change, over time, the dress has. Even within the Mexicayotl, there are conflicts that deem some *trajes* as bordering inappropriateness with the amount of skin being shown. There is a struggle between creating a new artistic rendering with *trajes* and disrespecting the Danza through over-sexualized versions of *trajes* that only serve to reinforce the hyper-sexualized colonial imagery still popularized in México, especially regarding Indigenous people (Gaspar de Alba, 2003). Señora Cobb reveals that in her observation and experience, it has often been sexist men (and women who have internalized this sexism) that allowed and even encourage inappropriate *trajes*. She believes “it is an excuse to prostitute women’s bodies. They are saying that God made women only for them to be looked at” (personal interview).

According to Arnaldo Carlos Vento, Andrés Segura objected to “the idea of ‘making tradition’” (1994: 61). Rostas (1991) asserts on the contrary that “the dance of the Concheros as a religious tradition [is] linked to popular culture that has constantly undergone invention” (3) and is being used today by *mexicanos* to form both social and ethnic identity. According to Señora Cobb:

It is not wrong to make changes if you are trying to make improvements that are positive. If our ancestors had access to some of the materials we have, they may have used them, too. Just don’t change things out of ignorance, keep the meanings, and know why you are changing it, and do it consciously. (personal interview)

This would become the root of disagreement between the *tradicición* and Mexicayotl; whether or not “making new tradition” goes against tradition. There is a fine line between “inventing” and/or simply “living tradition,” which means that tradition is alive and has transforming potential.

The Conchero groups with older membership, or originating in smaller towns or rural communities, tend to be much more Catholic. For example, according to Rostas:

[While] many Concheros are practicing Catholics ... those who are not happy to continue in the loose relationship that they have with the Church; they have no interest in rejecting it. The Church acts as a useful foil to their religious activities, a re-ligio, a rejoining, that is linked to the land in which they live. (Rostas, 1991: 15)

The Mexican Catholic Church, in many ways, is still a binding factor that allows for the continued legitimization of Concheros and unity with the larger Mexican mainstream society. Some Concheros, both historical and contemporary, do not view the Church as an oppressive force working to undermine their belief systems, but actually see Catholicism as simply another belief system that could only double their own spiritual power (Poveda, 1981).

For the outside researcher, the distinctions between these two factions may not be apparent. Much of the literature will refer to both of these groups as Conchero or confuse both Danza branches as merely folklore. Part of this confusion is that outsiders may have difficulty deciphering the concealed juxtapositions within Danza:

While it can be argued that *Conchero jefes* (or heads) do not like to share with outsiders any religious aspects of their Danza, nonetheless, without any understanding of the purpose for its existence, it is reduced to performance-based activities that rest of folklore and Christian accommodation. (Vento 1994: 59)

Relegating Danza to folklore posits it as merely a result of modernity and transnationalism, ignoring its deeply rooted resistance to colonialism as a living Indigenous theory (Krystal, 2007: 61). As Andrés Segura affirms, “La danza no es pegar de brincos, sino por lo que se brinca. La danza es una ceremonia/Danza is not just about jumping around, but rather about something for which one jumps. Danza is ceremony” (Poveda, 1981:

287). In other words, one should not view Danza as a series of arbitrary movements or jumps, but rather as a practice that is built around a divine feeling of joy; of being in harmony with the universe to the extent that one must jump in dance. Rostas’ article (and others including Gonzalez Torres, 1996) depict the contemporary Mexicayotl danzantes as ignorant and almost buffoon-like, as they are supposedly searching for a utopia and reinvention of Aztec traditions. This may be true for some, as new-ageism does not discriminate against traditions/belief systems, but it is uninformed to generalize and assume that this applies to all. It does, however, present a real danger of false perception by outsiders as well as misappropriation by insiders. While many danzantes are serious in their attempt to investigate, research and promote their Indigenous roots, there are individuals, as in any group or culture, that could perhaps (mis) represent varied extremes or have self-serving agendas. Rostas describes the Mexicayotl danzantes as “misfits in mainstream society. It is among this group of dancers that the most unemployed people are probably to be found ... Although some do have jobs, many scrape together a living selling their *artesanías*, particularly headdresses and leg rattles to other Concheros” (1991: 14).

I would argue that what Rostas perceives as misfits, are actually *contracorriente* or literally “counter-current,” meaning that they are actually in process of creating an oppositional culture that resists mainstream culture. Based on my interviews, many danzantes that are selling artesanía in the central plazas view this work as part of the informal economy that supports the goal of self-determination. It is difficult work that requires dedication and discipline. For some, it allows them to promote their artistry while providing needed materials for danzantes. They are able to do what they love and deem as important, while promoting culture and providing a service to the growing subculture of Danza. They are conscious of their marginality and cognizant of their urban Indian identity and reality. Rostas simplifies and limits danzantes’ perceptions of themselves and participation in Danza: “The dance of the Mexica is more clearly a conscious search for a social identity grounded in a largely invented Mexica past, which they attempt to live in the present” (Rostas, 1991: 15).

In a nation that has invented its own mestizo racial project and tried to erase its Indian past/present and identity (one that is considered backward, dirty and

shameful by mainstream society), *danzantes* want to embrace a contemporary Indian identity as part of a relevant cultural resistance. Within and/or outside the Catholic Church, *danzantes* continue to seek preservation and a historical process of their identity. *Danzantes* want to live in the present, fully aware of, and embracing their roots. They do not claim to equal the lives and realities of rural Indigenous communities, irrespective of religious/spiritual ties; instead, they are redefining their own urban Indigenous realities, still in dialogue with those other realities.

ENDNOTES

- 1 This article is part of a larger ethnograph study, which includes a series of multiple interviews with sixteen key leaders and teachers of *Danza* in Mexico City and the U.S.
- 2 Pre/Post-Cuauhtémoc is used in opposition to pre/post-colonial, which places European colonization as the center of time. Cuauhtémoc was the last ruler, *tlatoani*, of Mexico/Tenochtitlan, before the Mexica surrendered to the Spaniards. Rather than center time with European invasion/conquest, I center it in Mexica/Indigenous historical time frames.
- 3 Most Nahuatl words used in this piece will intentionally not adhere to Spanish language conventions of accent usage. In contemporary written Nahuatl, there is a linguistic trend to not write the accents because in Nahuatl, the accents are always on the second to the last syllable, therefore assumed and not written.
- 4 There is much evidence that argues the contrary. See, for example, Peter Hassler's work. (1992)
- 5 The *Mandato de Cuauhtémoc* has been translated in different forms and in different documents, but all with the same message. It is recognized as a prophesy kept through oral tradition by elders.
- 6 In discussing Cuauhtémoc's mandate, it is impossible for me to not insert my own positionality as a *danzante* and as one who believes, as many other *danzantes*, that Cuauhtémoc's living prophesy has come to be. As a *danzante*, I help fulfill the dream of Cuauhtémoc that one day the people would return, no longer in hiding or being persecuted, and openly practice our ways. For many *danzantes*, this prophesy is a sacred bond to the wishes and desires of the ancestors. It serves as a reminder that we are living in the era that Cuauhtémoc once foresaw.
- 7 Throughout this piece, I use the word tradition/traditional, as it is understood to mean "spiritual life-ways," still conscious of the fact that it can be a problematic concept. When I use the term, "la tradición," I am referring specifically to the Conchero dance tradition.
- 8 The *tequio* and *mita* systems, which are still in place today in many Indigenous communities, specifically the Mixteco communities in Oaxaca, are tribute systems. When a project that benefits the community is being constructed, everyone must contribute. To not contribute your labor or monetary contribution would be considered socially shameful. Today, if someone in the community needs to build a home, everyone in the community is obligated to contribute in the labor or with food. The Spaniards appropriated this tribute system and corrupted it to only benefit themselves.
- 9 I have found conflicts of the actual date and story. In Poveda (1981), he cites the date of this battle as July 25, 1531, and holds a slightly different version of this battle even from the *maestro* he interviews.
- 10 See Hernández-Avila (2005) for a comprehensive description of the Santo Niño de Atocha, its iconographic origins and philosophy.
- 11 This was also a Spanish colonial tradition, which provides another example of the ability to overlap Indigenous and colonial traditions.
- 12 It can be contested whether or not this Virgen is actually black. The Virgen mother of El Santo Niño de Atocha, depicted in Plateros, Zacatecas, is not black, but revered as a Mexican devotion.
- 13 In Mexican Catholicism, La Virgen de Guadalupe (or the divine feminine) is often placed as the central figure. Jesus or the Holy Trinity is not the main focus.
- 14 Tacuba was one of the three cities that fought alongside Tenochtitlan against the Spanish in 1520. It is now a *barrio* with a deeply rooted history of Indigenous resistance.
- 15 According to Señora Cobb (personal communication), the term *Mexicayotl*, later translated into Spanish as *La Mexicanidad*, was coined by Dr. Ignacio Romero Vargas Yturbide in the 1960s. He was one of the original founders of *el Grupo de Zemanauak Tlamachtilyan* in Mexico City. He was

the first to write about and popularize this term and concept. María del Carmen Nieva López (1969) was also an original founder of *Zemanauak* and extended the use of the term/idea through her book entitled *Mexicayotl: Filosofía Nahuatl*.

WORKS CITED

- Aguilar, Mario. *The Rituals of Kindness: The Influence of the Danza Azteca Tradition of Central Mexico on Chicano-Mexcoehuani Identity and Sacred Space*. Claremont and San Diego, CA: Doctoral Dissertation, 2009.
- Aguilar, Mario. *La Danza Azteca*. San Diego, CA: Unpublished Master's Thesis, 1983.
- Axayacatl. *Personal Interviews*. Tampa, Florida: September, 2009.
- Batalla, Guillermo Bonfil. *México Profundo: Reclaiming a Civilization*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1996.
- Cantú, Norma and Olga Nájera-Ramírez (eds). *Chicana Traditions: Continuity and Change*. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2002.
- Cobb, Angelbertha. *Personal Interviews*. Sacramento, CA: 2009-2010.
- Crum, Steven. "America: Love It or Leave It': Some Native American Initiatives to Move to México, 1890-1940." *The Chronicles of Oklahoma*, Vol. 79, No. 4, Winter 2001-2002 (pp. 408-429).
- Fixico, Donald. *The American Indian Mind in a Linear World: American Indian Studies and Traditional Knowledge*. New York, NY: Routledge Press, 2003.
- Fixico, Donald (ed). *Rethinking American Indian History*. Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1997.
- Forbes, Jack. *Columbus and Other Cannibals: The Wétiko Disease of Exploitation, Imperialism and Terrorism*. Davis, CA: DQ University Press, revised edition, 2004.
- Garner, Sandra. "Aztec Dance, Transnational Movements: Conquest of a Different Sort." *Journal of American Folklore*, Vol. 122, No. 486, Fall, 2009 (pp. 414-437).
- Gaspar de Alba, Alicia (ed). *Velvet Barrios: Popular Culture and Chicana/o Sexualities*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.
- González Torres, Yolotl. "The Revival of Mexican Religions: The Impact of Nativism." *Numen* 43(1), 1996 (pp. 1-31).
- Hassler, Peter. *Sacrificios Humanos entre los Mexicanos y Otros Pueblos Indios: ¿Realidad o Fantasía?* Zurich, Switzerland: Verlag Peter Lang, 1992.
- Hernández-Avila, Inés. "La Mesa del Santo Niño de Atocha and the Conchero Dance Tradition of México-Tenochtitlán: Religious Healing in Urban México and the United States." *Religion and Healing in America*, Linda L. Barnes and Susan S. Sered (ed). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005 (pp. 359-74).
- Herrera Bautista, Francisco Javier (Atlauhxiuhtik). *Personal Interview*, México, D.F.: June-July 2010.
- Hobsbawm, Eric and Terence Ranger. *The Invention of Tradition*. Cambridge, MA: Cambridge Press, 2012.
- Krystal, Matthew. "When Tradition Becomes Folklore." *The Journal of Latino-Latin American Studies*, Vol. 2, No. 3: Spring, 2007 (pp. 59-81).
- Kurath, Gertrude Prokosch. "Los Concheros." *The Journal of American Folklore*, Vol. 59, No. 234: University of Illinois Press, October-December, 1946 (pp. 387-399).
- León-Portilla, Miguel. *The Broken Spears: The Aztec Account of the Conquest of Mexico*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1990.
- Ortiz, Fernando. *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995.
- Poveda, Pablo. "Danza de Concheros en Austin, Texas: Entrevista con Andrés Segura Granados." *Latin American Music Review/Revista de Música Latinoamericana*, Vol. 2, No. 2: University of Texas Press, Autumn-Winter, 1981 (pp. 280-299).
- Pratt, Mary Louise. "'Yo Soy La Malinche': Chicana Writers and the Poetics of Ethnonationalism." *John Hopkins University Press* 16.4, 1993: pp. 859-873.
- Rostas, Susanna. "The Concheros of Mexico: A Search for Ethnic Identity." *Dance Research: The Journal of the Society for Dance Research*, Vol. 9, No. 2, Edinburgh University Press, Autumn, 1991 (pp. 3-17).
- Scott, James. *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*. Cumberland, RI: Yale University Press, 1990.
- Stone, Martha. *At the Sign of Midnight: The Concheros Dance Cult of Mexico*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1975.
- Taylor, William B. "Two Shrines of the Cristo Renovado: Religion and Peasant Politics in Late Colonial Mexico." *The American Heritage Review* 110 (4), 2005 (pp. 945-74).

- Vento, Arnoldo Carlos. "Aztec Conchero Dance Tradition: Historic, Religious and Cultural Significance." *Wicazo Sa Review*, Vol. 10, No. 1: University of Minnesota Press, Spring, 1994 (pp. 59–64).
- Xitlalli, Grupo de Danza Azteca. *El Estandarte—Panquetzalli—The Banner*. Flyer handed out at ceremony, November 1, 1995, San Francisco, CA.