

*"Estrella del oriente
que nos da su santa luz
Es hora que sigamos
el camino de la cruz"*

AZTEC *CONCHERO* DANCE TRADITION:

HISTORIC, RELIGIOUS AND CULTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

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Introduction

The tradition of the current Aztec *conchero* dancers seen in Mexico and more recently in the U.S. originated shortly after the Spanish invaded Mexico in 1521. As a form of accomodation the Native Americans that survived the invasion of the Spanish were allowed, under Spanish ecclesiastical supervision, to conduct their dances in the courtyards of churches in honor of the saints or virgins represented there. The dance troupes imitated a military type of hierarchy, the head being the captain (*capitán*), two women captains who tend the altar and who supervise other women, two sergeants (*sargentos*) who tend the altar and supervise trips (*marchas*), and two standard bearers (*alfareces*). The men are referred to as warriors, the women as *malinches*. Malinche here refers not to the concept of traitor, originating from the lover and interpretor of Cortés, but rather a positive image of the historic *Malintzin*, a person that assists the soldiers. These Aztec dancers use a plumed headdress, a cape, and a stringed instrument made with the armor of an armadillo; moreover, rattles from shell-like seeds known as *chalchahuites* or *ayayotes* provide a pre-Columbian native quality of sound that

accompanies the intricate steps of the dancer. Also accompanying the dance is the rhythm of a tall wooden drum known as the *huehuetl* (from Aztec Nahuatl *wewetl*). It is estimated that there may be as many as 50,000 *conchero* Aztec dancers in Mexico; in the United States, there are *conchero* dance groups represented in every state where there is a sizeable population of Mestizos, i.e., those that are part Native American and Spanish. Most recently, the performance based troupes (as opposed to traditional, sacred and ritualistic) have been seen participating in North-American Native pow-wows.

The origin of the *conchero* tradition as it is known today is the result of an accommodation between Spanish/Christian authorities and Native Americans of Mexico circa 1537.¹ 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.² Among the problems in searching for a deeper meaning of the tradition is the number of groups that became part of the folklore of *danza* vis-a-vis Catholic saint ceremonies and celebrations. Moreover, there is little research in this area; what little remains as Native American documents are post-conquest, written under the hand and censorship of the Inquisition.³ Martha Stone, in her book, *At the Sign of Midnight*, attempts to portray a collaborative view between herself and the *conchero* groups that have accepted her as a *Malinche*, a *capitana de mesa* (a captain of a troupe), and a *capitana de comunidades en la capitanía* (a captain of troupes within communities).⁴ While her work does provide an interesting and descriptive portrait of *concheros*, it does not explain the most important elements of the *conchero danza*, i.e., the sacred/spiritual foundation. While it could 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 on folklore and Christian accommodation. Perhaps it is the very nature of its sacred essence that makes it more difficult for the *jefes* to divulge its spiritual base.⁵

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