Performing the community: representation, ritual and reciprocity in the Totonac Highlands of Mexico

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ANNEX 6

DANCES IN NANACATLÁN

The dances in Nanacatlán are considered to be religious and are performed during Catholic celebrations. Their sacred character is emphasized by a prohibition to commercialize them. Each dance has a teacher (master), a captain, dancers, and musicians. The master is usually the previous captain, and the new one is his son. Girls dance only in the Migueles (three angels) and Negritos (Malinche). The men and boys are Catholic Totonacs and come from different social backgrounds. Though the dancers operate as a group (Kasburg 1992:197), people remember the names of the best dancers, especially the comic and evil figures. The music is often rather monotonous but the outfits of the dancers and their wooden attributes (like the horse, wings, masks) are colourful and impressive. The dance troupes take part in the processions and have their main performances in the afternoon in front of the church.

In the 1990s the previously existing dances (Santiagueros, Migueles, Huhues, Judíos and in Mexico City by migrants the Negritos,) were augmented with five new ones, though not all by villagers (Voladores, Quetzales, Españoles, Tejoneros and a second Migueles troupe). Decades ago all these dances were performed in the village and almost every male used to join them for a while, but they had gradually disappeared and only the eldest villagers remember this. The Voladores, Quetzales, Huhues and Tejoneros are generally seen as reinterpretations of Pre-Hispanic dances, and the Santiagueros, Migueles, Negritos and Españoles as Spanish or colonial war dances. Ichon (1973:406) for instance considers the Voladores and Santiagueros as opposite dances: a pagan dance with hardly any new influence against a purely Spanish and Catholic one. Nowadays such distinctions are unimportant in Nanacatlán because all the dances are part of the local customary repertoire, performed to honour the Saints and God. The meaning, recitations or dance passes are not what counts, but rather their spectacle and drama as an expression of local customs that need to be preserved and continued. Even the master of a dance is unable to offer an explanation, even about its local history and interpretation.

Santiagueros

Because Santiago is village patron this has been the principal dance of Nanacatlán as long as the elderly can remember. There are 10 dancers (among them the sons of Magdalena and Lorenzo) and eight similar dance scenes, apart from the principal part: the war between the king Pilatos and Santiago on his horse (of wood, around his waist). Large crowds gather to watch during the first days of the feast. The war
starts with a recitation in Nahua (sic!) that even the master is unable to translate. The master don Pedro plays a flute and another person a large drum. The master's son Sebastian (husband of Tomasa) is the captain. The dancers each wear about 100 bells around their ankles. Each night the horse returns to his altar in the house of the master, who offers maize, grass, water, and salt and burns a candle and incense. The horse is on the altar from the beginning of July (when the dancers start practising) until after the feast of San Miguel (beginning of October).

The *Santiagueros* is a variation of the *Moros y Christianos* dance, spread by the missionaries to christianise the indigenous war dances. Its principal diffusion is in the Sierra Norte de Puebla (Ichon: 1973:407, 392); Mompadré and Gutiérrez 1976: 127-128).

*Migueles*

The eight Migueles with their wings, the three Marías, and the devil with his black masks dance eight different parts in four scenes, apart from the principal part of the war between Miguel and the devil, who tries to steal the angels. The last day another devil and the *Huehues* (see below) appear to stage a major war, but with the help of the *Huehues* the devils are chased all over the village. The two violinists (sometimes only one) and a guitar player are from Tuxtla, Ixtepec, and Huitzilan. The devil has a comical role, though he is feared by the children, and makes the grown ups laugh by saying they are his children. This dance is also an old one in the village, mainly organised by the family of don Felix. His son Fermin, the captain, was therefore not amused when in 1994 a second dance troupe organised by a migrant appeared on the scene. The new one had to stop performing.

*Voladores*

This famous and spectacular Totonac dance reappeared in the village in 1989 performed by a troupe of Hueytlatlan. The master taught it to a group of Nanacatecos who started performing themselves afterwards. It centres around a huge pole (between 20-35 metres) with a rotating platform on top to which a square frame of four poles is attached. The principal performance is the descent, when five dancers climb the large pole and four of them fly down in a circle around the pole, attracting large excited crowds. The remaining dancers circle around the pole and one of them beats a small drum. The captain dances on the top of the pole, playing his flute, while the four dancers start sitting on one side of the frame each and attach a rope to their waist. They drop backwards at the same time to descend, circling wider and wider as the rope unwinds. Just before their pointed hats hit the ground they turn straight up to land on their feet. It is a spectacular sight. One of the dancers (Bernadino) learned during a course of Liberation Theology that the square on top of the pole represents the four cardinal points and the pole the centre of the world, while the dance symbolizes the veneration of the sun.
Though the dance is considered of pre-Hispanic origin, there are no definite proofs, on époque or on indigenous groups (Aztec, Otomi, or Totonac). Nowadays it can be found among Totonacs, Otomí, and Huastecos in Puebla, Veracruz, Hidalgo, and San Luis Potosí (Leal 1977:129-142). It has been commercialised in Cuetzalan, Papantla, the site of El Tajín, and outside the Anthropology museum in Mexico City.

**Quetzales**

The young people who revived this dance, several grandsons of don Felix (including the captain) among them, were keen to learn it “so that the costumbres do not get lost”. The dance is spectacular like the Voladores, and centres around a large vertically rotating wheel with wings (resembling a wind mill with the wings in frame). On their head the dancers wear a large multi-coloured circle of bright foil with plumes, which has a diameter of over a metre. The principal part consists of four of the dancers sitting on the wheel that turns because each time a dancer is below he pushes the ground with his feet. They are accompanied by the sound of a flute and drum. The wheel starts turning faster and faster until the head decorations turn into one large multi-coloured circle that sparkles brightly when hit by the sun.

The dance is originally associated with agricultural rituals, has solar and cosmological connotations, and is also seen as the symbol of movement. It is performed among the Totonacs and Nahuas of the Sierra Norte de Puebla, among the Totonacs of coastal Veracruz and the coastal Huastecas (Mompadré & Gutiérrez 1976:74).

**Huehues**

The Hueheus in Nanacatlán appear on Easter Saturday to dance happily around in an exaggerated manner, because Jesus is resurrected, and also take part in the Migueles (see above). They are oddly dressed, with masks of animals or the devil, old jackets, shirts, and battered hats, while some use jerrycans as tambourines; several are dressed as women with dresses and wigs, or in traditional blouses and skirts. They behave oddly with jumps, shouts, dance passes and people laugh a lot, especially when they see those dressed as women. During Semana Santa they are the opposite of the aggressive Judíos, just like they oppose the devils during the Migueles.

Among some Totonacs the Huehues dance during Carnival and among Huastecas and Tepehuas during Todos Santos. Huehues, meaning 'Elderly' in Nahua, are the dead. Originally the Huehues were the soldiers of Herodes, disguised to enter the houses looking for Jesus (Ichon 1973:431-435).


**Judíos**

The Judíos only perform during Semana Santa, when their principal presence is on Good Friday to carry the coffin of Jesus during the procession to his little house at the back of the church, representing the killing of Jesus and his burial. The 16 dancers are dressed like old people with masks; mestizos with shoes, trousers and shirts; women with dresses and wigs or in traditional clothes, and look a lot like the Huehues except that they carry a rifle and behave very differently. The Judíos dance very aggressively and wild, waving their arms as if ready to attack. They are considered to be evil because they killed Jesus, though their appearance nevertheless makes people laugh at first. During the solemn and long procession when the Judíos carry Jesus Entierro (Jesus in a glass coffin) – symbolising the killing of Jesus and his burial – such amusement is completely absent.

The role of the Judíos is comparable to the origin of the Huehues who Ichon describes as the disguised soldiers of Herodes who try to find and kill Jesus. In Nanacatlán Judíos and Huehues are each other’s opposites as the ones killing Jesus against the ones celebrating his resurrection. That the categories of good and evil are not mutually exclusive is exemplified by the similarity of the two troupes.

**Españoles**

Performed in the Totonac area, this dance appeared in Nanacatlán in the early 1990s only to disappear again a few years later. According to the dancers the Spaniards fight against Cuauhtémoc, Moctezuma, the Moors, or the Indians. It represents the Spanish flag against the Mexican flag.

The dance is also called Moros y Aztecos or Tocotines and represents the visit of Cortés to Moctezuma, with a war. At the end a dance reunites the two parties (Mompadré and Guriérrez 1976: 149-150).

**Negritos (from Zongozotla)**

This dance is situated on a sugarcane or maize plantation, where a group of peones work under supervision of a foreman (the captain of the dance), together with his wife Malinche (translator and companion of Cortés). The peones complain that they have found a snake who has bitten them, but each time the foreman starts checking out he finds only a harmless object such as a branch or liana. Finally the peones find the snake and the foreman kills it, though he has been bitten. He is only cured after he has written his testament with bequests for his workers. In the Sierra Norte de Puebla where no haciendas exist, emphasis is on the danger of the snake. Don Felix is also master of this dance, now performed by his sons in Mexico City who also come to the village (though less and less). A troupe from Zongozotla started performing it at the fiesta in Nanacatlán.

In general, the snake plays an important role in the Totonac worldview and
represents lightning, rain, and maize. The dance seems to have originated in the part of Veracruz where black slaves worked on sugarcane plantations, which explains the African influences (Ichon 1973:415-419). Very different versions of the dance exist between the Totonac of Veracruz, the Totonac and Nahuas of the Sierra Norte de Puebla, the Purépechas of Michoacan, and the Huastecas of Veracruz and the Sierra in Oaxaca (Mompadré and Gutiérrez 1976:206).

Tejoneros (from Zitlala)

About 12 dancers (dressed like the Huehues) dance around a large pole (15 meters) to the music of a violin and guitar. The pole is covered by Papatla leaves with a woodpecker on top and a stuffed badger a quarter of the way up. Around the foot of the pole is a screen of cloth (2 metres high) to hide the person who pulls the ropes to move the bird and the badger. The principal scene starts with a man outside the crowd shooting the badger, who then moves in a death struggle (by pulling the ropes). This looks very realistic and makes people laugh. After that the woodpecker starts moving down, picking at the leaves and thus uncovering the pole and this again looks realistic. Don Felix explained that the dance shows the discovery of maize (see chapter 5 and Ellison 2004:205). First the badger that eats the maize growing on the milpa and therefore is the enemy of men, is killed. The woodpecker uncovers the maize by picking at a rock, but he gets hit by a piece and therefore has a red head. When during the dance the bird takes the leaves from the pole, he uncovers the maize.

This dance is performed in the Sierra of Puebla and Veracruz, and is also known under the name Huehues among Totonacs. It is interpreted as a dance related to nahualism, the ability of sorcerers to convert into an animal (Mompadré and Gutiérrez 1976:108) or as one of the animalist dances that frequently occur in Mexico and Guatemala (Ichon 1973:421). The interpretation in Nanacatlán suggests it is an agricultural dance, venerating the (origin of) maize.