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Chapter 12. Saints and Danced *Primeros*

Intertwined ritual actions of *cofradías* and dance teams in the Cunén feria constitute a dramatic performance of large scale and long duration. Collaboratively, they both renew and honour the spiritual powers that dominate their lives, in the hopes that these elaborate offerings, expensive both in time and money, will be reciprocated by the patron saint with benefits of health and prosperity. In Cunén both *cofradías* and dance teams are necessary to enact this transformation as they fulfill complementary roles. But in this discussion I am concerned not with these institutions but with the entities that *cofradías* and dance teams serve or embody—saints and danced *primeros*. Both saints' icons and danced *primeros* combine sacred powers with material, anthropomorphic forms to enact ritual functions, and thus both share the characteristics of iconism as defined and analyzed by Alfred Gell in chapter seven of his posthumously published text, *Art and Agency* (1998). For Gell, the category of icons includes both wooden sculptures like the Cunén saints, and biologically living individuals who ritually embody the divine or supernatural through costume and attribute, like the danced *primeros*. Therefore, to better understand their complementary roles in the renewal ritual of the *fiesta patronal*, it is useful to submit both saints' icons and danced *primeros* to the methodology of analysis that Gell supplies. Due to their important contribution to the evening rituals in which dance groups participate, the *toritos de fuego* will also be discussed in a few sections.

12.1. The Living Icon

Gell devotes a considerable portion of his chapter on icons and iconism to the problem of how an icon becomes or is perceived to be alive. He postulates two strategies, which he calls internalist and externalist. However, he subsumes distinct approaches within his internalist strategy, so I prefer to review his argument in terms of five strategies rather than two, and have added some additional interpretations to his arguments concerning those strategies. Each of these five strategies may be explained and related to saints' icons and danced *primeros* to highlight similarities and differences and thereby progress towards an understanding of the nature of their complementarity and collaboration in the annual ritual renewal of a community like Cunén.

Two clarifications are needed before beginning this analysis. First, it is necessary to remember that *Costumbrista* saints are of a different nature than Catholic saints. In Catholicism, the saint is a deceased holy person now residing in heaven. When devotees address prayers to the icon in the church, that icon is able to transmit these prayers to the saint in heaven. This process can be explained by Gell's notion of distributed personhood, in which any likeness of a person, an object made or used by the person, or exuvial matter (hair and nail clippings) from a person remain bound to that person. As a likeness of the saint, the icon remains bound to the saint, which means on the one hand that the saint can express agency through the icon, and on the other hand that living humans can affect the

saint through the icon. The first of these processes Gell calls distributed agency, so the second, which Gell labels volt sorcery, might also be called distributed patency in an agent–patient relationship. In both processes a triadic relation applies to a Catholic saint, with the icon mediating between humans in a church and the supernatural saint in heaven.



The *Conquista* dance team worshipping the *Costumbrista* icon of Santiago in the Momostenango church. 2009.

In contrast, *Costumbrista* saint icons are not the likeness of a saint but the saint, him– or herself. For example, Momostecans know that other communities like Santiago Atitlán and Santiago Chimaltenango have a patron saint named Santiago, but each of these icons is a different being and should have a different name. Thus the *Costumbrista* patron of Momostenango is Santiago de los Caballeros and that of Santiago Atitlán is Santiago Apóstol. The relation of devotees to the supernatural is thus direct and dyadic. Agency in this relation is reciprocal. When devotees make an offering to the saint, they become the agent and the saint becomes the patient. Devotees’ offerings are openly visible, therefore “onstage.” When the saint responds to devotees with some benefit, the saint becomes the agent and devotees are the patients. This response takes place outside of human sight, or “offstage.” In all these characteristics, including relevance to a specific locality, *cofradía* saint icons continue the function and relations of Indigenous, often pre-Hispanic, icons such as the Pascual Abaj icon on a hilltop above Chichicastenango.

Second, it is equally necessary to recognize that danced *primeros* are dual entities. On the one hand, they fully embody the *primero* or personage from the past whose actions they perform. In the early 17th century, Thomas Gage recognized that for Indigenous performers, the play was not a matter of actors representing a long past event. Instead, the performers understood themselves to be embodying the characters and living through the stories. Thus Gage (1928: 270–71) writes that:

The indians that dance this dance most of them are superstitious for what they do, judging as if it were indeed really acted and performed what only is by way of dance represented. When I lived amongst them it was an ordinary thing for him who in the dance was to act St. Peter or John the Baptist to come first to confession, saying they must be holy and pure like that saint, whom they represent, and must prepare themselves to die. So likewise he that acted Herod or Herodias, and some of the soldiers that in the dance were to speak and to accuse the saints, would afterwards come to confess of that sin, and desire absolution as from blood-guiltiness.

On the other hand, while the *primero* is demonstrably present, the dancer who embodies that *primero* has not fully surrendered his own identity in the process of embodiment. Theatre specialist Kirsten Hastrup (1998: 37–41) argues that performers are always conscious of a double identity as both performer and performed. Thus the entity we see dancing at the same time both is and is not a *primero*. Hastrup (1998: 37–41) continues by arguing that theatrical performers operate simultaneously within two spheres of moral behavior: both as performer concerned to fulfill expectations of proper technique, and as embodied character living through a pre-ordained narrative.¹ This contrast between the singularity or unity of the saint icon and the duality of the danced *primero* will be seen to contribute to important differences in the five strategies by means of which they are brought to life and conceived as icons as well as in their complementary functions within ritual contexts.

12.1.1. Externalist strategy

Gell argues that although icons are understood to be alive, they are not alive in the same way as those living humans who interact with them. What is the difference? Gell (1998: 123) explains that an icon's agency is not defined in terms of biological life processes but is instead defined through positions in those networks of social relationships in which they are placed. Thus, he argues, while icons are not biologically alive, they are socially alive. In fact, evidence of their social life comes in part from their

¹ Concerning the moral behavior of the performer, it is widely recognized among *Costumbristas* that proper execution may be jeopardized by too much indulgence in liquor during the *feria*. Concerning the embodied *primero*, certain kinds of morally extraordinary behavior are permitted. In the Conquest dance the Maya priest Ajitz acts as a kind of trickster and may engage in acts that would be grossly inappropriate in everyday circumstance. In Momostenango it was customary until recently for Ajitz to press a doll to the chest of a woman in the audience to suggest that she is nursing it. This action has been a target of disapproval for Momostecan evangelicals who see *Costumbre* itself as immoral.

absence of biological life. Because they have a body that is not biologically alive, icons cannot clothe or feed themselves, and do not move in the presence of biologically living persons. Instead, they require attendants and other devotees to take care of these necessities. In doing so, these devotees nurture the icon, as if it were a child or perhaps an honoured guest or a ruler, thereby inserting the icon into a social relation. In this way, attendants bring the body alive as a social but not biological entity. And because the focus is on caring for the icon's body, Gell calls this insertion into a network of social relations the externalist strategy. In many cases the externalist strategy also involves a distinction between general worshippers who may bring offerings of food or clothing and religious specialists who nurtures the idol with these offerings through special and often complex ritual protocols.



Cofrades dressing the Virgen del Rosario at Cunén, 2010.

This externalist strategy applies fully to *Costumbrista* saints, who must be clothed, fed with incense, candles and liquor, and moved in procession. Those ritual specialists who clothe and transport saints are the *cofradía* officers or *cofrades*. Worshippers bring the candles and may also donate items of clothing, especially scarves, that (for example, at Momostenango) may be carefully maintained and inventoried as the icon's personal property (Cook 2000), another fully social concept. Inserted thereby in social relations but not limited by the restraints of

biological life, saint icons become powerful beings with extraordinary agency expressed offstage in ways not visible to their biologically living and thus more limited worshippers.

Danced *primeros* do not have ritual attendants or worshippers who insert them into a network of social relations with the living. Thus externalist customs are different. An example would be welcoming the costumes and masks into the community with *bombas*, thereby treating them as honoured guests. Then the masks and costumes may be arranged in front of an altar (Cunén, San Cristóbal), following the same spatial arrangement that their characters will occupy on the dance ground and in processions. This action is a clue to the more prominent social relation in which a danced *primero* is inserted, which is their own community. The makeup and form of this community or social network, evident in these altar



Costumes arranged before an altar in the same configuration that dancers will take in performance. San Cristóbal, 2009.

arrangements, processions, and dance performances, arises from the story narrated in their dance, telling of past times when they were biologically alive and acted as a community.

Further strategies for bringing an icon to life all arise from conceptual relations between interior and exterior, so Gell subsumes them into a single category he calls internalist. In this discussion I will divide these strategies into four categories based on differences in process and goal.

10.1.2. Internalist Strategy

Gell's primary internalist strategy involves an understanding that the icon has mental faculties of awareness and ability to communicate, as well as volition and intentions. Gell (1998: 132–33) notes that while a realistic depiction is not necessary for an icon to function, it can facilitate mental communication, since having a body like our bodies suggests having a consciousness with which ours can directly communicate. Gell (1998: 120) is particularly concerned with the eye-to-eye contact that a worshipper would have with the icon. In biologically living humans, Gell notes, the eyes give evidence that within the material body there is an immaterial mind. If this is true of those who are biologically alive it is also true of icons who are socially alive and likewise have eyes. The relationship of exterior to interior is thus one of matter to spirit or mind (Gell 1998: 132–33). Furthermore, as an orifice to the body's interior, the eyes can act as a gateway to the mind, to the others' consciousness. Open eyes thus can signify consciousness while closed eyes signify its lack. Gell explains that when you look into another's eyes, you see them seeing you, and become aware of how you appear to them, thus creating an intersubjective relation. This intersubjective relation is not only possible between two biologically living persons but also between a person and an icon, likewise furnished with eyes. Recognizing the icon's material body as enclosing its mind, and in some cases making eye contact with it, allows worshippers to communicate mentally with the icon, conversing with it, for example in making vows of service and requesting recompense. Thus I would say that whereas the externalist strategy gives the icon a socially living body, the internalist strategy provides it with a conscious mind.

This communication between the consciousness of the saint and that of its devotee is central to *Costumbrista* interaction with the icon. Saints recognize and reward prayers and other honours offered to them, and they require *Costumbristas* to fulfill the terms of the bargains they struck. For example, men will often vow to the patron saint to dance for a period of seven or nine years, in return for benefits of health and prosperity for themselves and their families. Many keep this vow because the saint will punish them with sickness or destitution if they fail to live up to the bargain they have made. However what surprised me after reading Gell's discussion of the importance of eyes for the recognition of the icon's consciousness is the rarity with which I have seen *Costumbristas* make eye contact with the saint. They may recognize other cues to the icon's consciousness, such as the inner-outer dichotomy, or it may be that they reproduce centuries of socialization by oppressive non-Maya

minorities in Guatemala who insisted that Indigenous Guatemalans keep their eyes cast down before such “superiors.”

Though audiences recognize danced *primeros* as having mental capacity that enables them to dance and recite text, no attempt is made to communicate with them as icons, and no favours are asked of them.²

10.1.3. Animation

Gell notes that many icons contain a cavity in which is placed a magical substance in a ritual process that brings the icon to life by giving it a heart or soul (Gell 1998: 133, 147). Gell calls this substance the *homunculus*, since it may also be given human form. While this principle is apparent, the terms “heart” and “soul” as well as the homunculus form are too limiting. A comparison might be made with the pre-Hispanic Mesoamerican practice of bringing buildings to life through lighting a fire in the interior, mimicking the fire that animates the sun, and metaphorically vivifies all living things. While we perhaps lack an appropriate vocabulary to express this process, we can suggest that while the internalist strategy gives the icon a mind, and the externalist strategy gives it a body, the animation strategy gives it what we might call a spirit or vital energy as well as inhabiting the object with a specific identity.



Velada de los trajes, presided over by *chuchkajaw*. Masks are arranged on table out of view to the left. Joyabaj, 2012.



Francisco Hernández performing prayers and blessings that unite dancer with the personage they will embody. San Cristóbal, 2012.

I don't have information on animation for a saint icon in *Costumbrista* context, a process that might have taken place centuries ago considering the age of these sculptures. In contrast, the animation of a danced *primero* is a repeated and current process that forms an important part of welcoming ceremonies or *velada de los trajes* (vigil of the costumes) in Momostenango and Joyabaj. This process may involve placement of a mask or masks on an offering table, with a *chuchkajaw* saying

² The apparent exception of money offered to Ajitz at Momostenango is due to his being more than an ordinary danced *primero*, as he has become identified with the supernatural being known as the K'ak K'oxol (Red Lightning).

prayers them incensing them, while dancers may offer candles, liquor, packaged incense and other materials. Alternately, in San Cristóbal, dancers kneel among the arranged costumes for blessing by the chuchkajaw, as the spirit of the *primero* they will embody is invoked by name to join with them. Evidence that the mask been inhabited or “ensouled” by the *primero* is seen in the procedure I witnessed in 2009, during the welcoming ceremony for Santiago Itzep in Momostenango, performed by his grandfather, in which all guests were asked to come forward and kiss the mask, which I understand was designed to honour it and perhaps receive some benefit for the act of honouring. Once animated, and with support of a costume, the mask and costume can unite with a dancer to become a danced *primero*.³



Ceremony for Santiago Itzep, Momostenango, 2009.

10.1.4. Spatial Framing

Gell (1998: 136) further expands this concept of interiority as signifying spiritual life by arguing that an icon is also made alive by enclosing it in a larger form like a temple, so that the icon would function as the temple’s homunculus. When Gell talks about these interior–exterior relations, he notes that the layers around the icon can multiply, and presents a complicated reasoning for this practice, from which he derives his most inclusive theory of iconism. Gell (1998: 148) writes that:

The animation of the image is not a matter of finding the ‘sacred centre’ at all. What matters is only the reduplication of skins, outwards towards the macrocosm and inwards towards the microcosm, and the fact that all these skins are structurally homologous; there is no definitive surface, there is no definitive inside, but only a ceaseless passage in and out, and that it is here, in this traffic to and fro, that the mystery of animation is solved.

In contrast to Gell, I perceive a significant difference between the internalist strategy and this strategy that I call spatial framing. For the internalist strategy, it was noted that a crucial element is the presence of bodily orifices such as the eyes that allow perception of the icon’s mind and promote the devotee’s mental communication with it. These processes can easily occur without framing. I argue instead that multiple layers of framing work to elevate what is at the centre, constructing its importance and especially its sacred importance. The more layers to the frame, the more sacred and important the idol is constructed and perceived to be. For this strategy to succeed, it is necessary to socialize members of society, to teach children from an early age to read auditory, olfactory, visual and performance cues involving elements that frame the icon as identifying sacred spiritual power. Such

³ I also lack information on whether ritualized gestures also accompany the union of a performer with the *torito de fuego* armature.

socialization, Gell (1998: 96–97) shows, is as powerful as the opposite socialization, prominent in the contemporary west, to not consider statues of divinities to be divinities themselves. So to the production of animate body, mind, and spiritual identity, we may add the strategy of framing to construct sacredness and spiritual power.



Cofradía San Juan Apóstol, Joyabaj, 2009.

Cofradía icons worshipped by Maya *Costumbristas* in any *municipio* are surrounded by multiple dense layers of framing. The frame begins with their clothing, both carved in European style and further dressed in a more local fashion with multiple scarves and capes. In the *cofradía* they are then framed within a glass-fronted case, and further framed by flanking cases of subsidiary saints and standards and by a table in front holding lit candles and flowers, along with plastic table cloths and plastic cut-out strips hanging from the ceiling. When carried, they are framed by the highly decorated *anda* decorated with feathers, both plastic and real flowers, and other materials. The *anda* in procession is further framed by attending musicians and the male and female *cofradía* officers that surround it as well as the dance teams that precede it with their own musicians. In both *cofradía* and processional *anda*, icons are also in a way framed by the ritual gestures that are necessary to accompany them, including incensing with copal resin, spraying with deodorant, lighting candles, playing music, dancing

and praying. All of these framing elements are read as cues to differentiate what is outside the frame from what is inside, the everyday from the extraordinary, the material from the spiritual. Furthermore, the saint's being, sacredness, and spiritual powers are distributed outward through elements of the frame for the benefit of devotees. In Momostenango, for example, worshippers affectionately touch not only Santiago's body but also his clothing, his horse and the anda, all conduits in the outward flow of his potentially beneficial powers.



Anda of Santiago and San Felipe, Momostenango, 2010.

Layers of framing also differentiate danced *primeros* as extraordinary. Their visual appearance is spectacular, with painted wooden mask, multicolour velvet costumes embellished with mirrors and sequins that brilliantly reflect sunlight, and brightly dyed ostrich feathers that tower above the audience and render dancers visible from afar. These resplendent beings only move by dancing to music, the particular instruments involved depending on the time of the dance's origin, and they generally speak

with a quasi-musical intonation. Their language, in the examples with Spanish script, is foreign and often so antiquated as to be semi-unintelligible. They also carry attributes like axe, sword, shield or sceptre that are not used in everyday life. Further, danced *primeros* enact foundational dramas. The Dance of the Conquest, for example, tells how the Maya K'iche' were defeated by the Spanish-led invasion and adopted Christianity. Extraordinary appearance, music with dance, identification with the historic past, and responsibility for founding institutions are all spiritual frames that differentiate danced *primeros* from biologically living humans as well as from lineage ancestors. In comparison, the *torito de fuego* also presents an extraordinary visual appearance in terms of the layered armature, dancing, and the dazzling firework display that each supports.



Alvarado greets Rey K'iche'. Joyabaj, 2012.

10.1.5. Temporal Framing

Also an element of the extraordinary nature of both *cofradía* saints and masked *primeros* is the fact that they are seen in public only on special occasions, when their presence and actions are necessary to the performance of ritual. This restricted appearance also pertains to framing but of a temporal nature, a relation not generally noted because theories of ritual process tend to form a distinct discourse. Gell (1998: 109–14) opens up the issue of temporal framing when he discusses a Tahitian idol normally kept hidden within a bundle but revealed by unwrapping for a ritual receipt of offerings, then bundled up and hidden once again. From this procedure, structurally analogous to rituals centred on bundles in other parts of the world, including the sacred Martín bundle of Santiago Atitlán (Christenson 2001: 24, 157–60), one may abstract a repeated process involving the three sequential actions of unwrapping, activity centred on the revealed spiritual entity, and re-wrapping. Such a process combines the spatial frame of the bundle with a process of temporal framing.

This temporal framing may be compared with the three-stage ritual process defined by Arnold van Gennep (1960) and Victor Turner (1972) and referred to as the “rite of passage.” In their analysis, the first stage separates participants, as well as often spectators and even the cosmos, from everyday structures and activities, hence this stage is called the separation stage. This process brings the human community into the sacred realm by bringing the sacred to it. For the bundle, this is accomplished by unwrapping and revealing its sacred contents. The second or liminal stage employs sacred entities—such as the contents of a sacred bundle—to work the transformation on which the specific ritual is centred. The third or reintegration stage reconstitutes society and the cosmos. Since the transformation has been accomplished, the sacred is sent off again to its spiritual realm allowing participants and society to return to everyday behaviors. For a bundle this is accomplished by re-wrapping. I argue that even when actions of unwrapping and re-wrapping are not implied, this three-stage sequence is inherently a framing strategy. The stages of separation and reintegration, bringing in the sacred and then sending it away, constitute ritual, temporal frames for the central transformational process as they symmetrically enclose the liminal stage of transformation.

A corresponding cycle for a *Costumbrista* saint icon would be the annual renewal, which for the patron saint and often other *cofradía* saints will take place at the patron saint festival. Renewal in preparation for the coming year involves both ritual regeneration of the saint and induction of the new set of officers. Throughout most of the year *cofradía* icons remain conceptually wrapped in the dense layers of framing within the *cofradía* house. Then during the patron saint festival, they are brought in public procession to the church for a number of days. During their liminal period away from the *cofradía* and in the public sphere, they spend part of the time residing in the church, but also emerge for processions around the urban centre, sometimes visiting the set of four *poza* chapels as at Cunén. Then at the end of the festival, the saints are taken into their new *cofradía* headquarters to be conceptually wrapped up for another year. At Cunén this relation is reinforced by the temporal

symmetry of the period from February 1, when the saints emerge from the *cofradías* and are taken in procession to the church, until February 9 when they are carried to their new *cofradía* headquarters, both actions bracketed by the saints' receipt of nighttime dances (January 31 and February 9). Further emphasizing the symmetry of these framing events, their removal from the *cofradías* is ordered from lowest to highest *cofradía* rank, while their transport to new *cofradías* is ordered from highest to lowest *cofradía* rank.

The presence of danced *primeros* (as well as the *toritos de fuego*) as sacred entities throughout the eight- or fifteen-day *feria* is also a significant aspect of the way that the *feria* is marked out as a liminal period. As such, we would expect that this period of transformation is framed by rituals of separation and reintegration, when the sacred is brought into the community to perform its task, and when it is expelled from the community because that task has been completed. For dance, the rite of separation that brings the sacred into the community involves the union of a dancer with the mask and costume that will join and transform them into a danced *primero*. Prior to the *feria*, costumes rest folded on shelves of the costume shop or *morería*, and masks hang from the rafters, both displayed and conceived as merchandise. But when masks and costumes are brought from the *morería* into the community, often involving several hours transportation by bus, they are welcomed as honoured guests with noisemaking *bombas*. This is followed by a welcoming ceremony.

In welcoming ceremonies performed for individual dancers in their homes, as at Momostenango, dancer and mask are consecrated, and the dancer performs his role for his family. The family can also benefit from contact with the supernatural by kissing the mask, now sacred and alive. In welcoming ceremonies performed by the dance team as a group, costumes (or just the masks) are laid out before the altar, sometimes in the spatial arrangement that dancers will occupy on the dance ground, which is also the arrangement they maintain in processions. Both costumes and dancers are consecrated, after which dancers don part of the costume and dance a *cruzada* around a symbolic arrangement of offering fires that mark the four directions and centre.



Last rehearsal as part of the *velada de los trajes*. San Cristóbal, 2011.

The final or reintegration rite for danced *primeros* is known as the *despedida* or sendoff. The *despedida* is usually a group dance following the final performance of the *feria*, in which all the dancers

ritually greet and symbolically thank each other in the course of a highly elaborate choreography. Following the *despedida* and conclusion of the festival, costumes and masks are “wrapped up”: that is they are returned to the *morería* shelves and rafters as the dancer also returns to everyday life, and at the same time that saints are “wrapped up” in their *cofradías*.⁴

10.1.6. Review of strategies

In comparing saints and danced *primeros* according to these five strategies of iconism, it is clear from similar spatial and temporal frames that both iconic forms are considered extraordinary and that their presence and complementary actions in the patron saint festival are necessary for transforming and renewing both patron saint and community. Animation differs. Saints are present in the community year-round, although outside of major religious festivals they are enclosed in *cofradías*, so if a ritual act of animation took place it would have been long ago. In contrast, *toritos de fuego* and danced *primeros* grace the community only during festivals and thus need to be animated through embodiment each time. Finally, the externalist and internalist strategies apply primarily to saints, whose bodies are nurtured and whose minds communicate with devotees, in both aspects involving direct devotional relations between biologically living humans and saint icons. In contrast, danced *primeros* stand apart from such intimate relations with living humans, due in part to their dual existence as both dancer and *primero*. Instead, danced *primeros* form their own community, one that existed in the distant past and that resurrects periodically on festival occasions. In this ritual setting, performance of their dance-drama plunges the living community into a primordial era of transformation in which the *primeros*' foundational acts may be enacted, experienced, witnessed, and reaffirmed. Though more abstractly, the *toritos de fuego* also form a symbolic community

10.2. Complementary Iconic Functions

These contrasts allow us to explore one of the complementary ways in which saints and danced *primeros* function as icons in their relations with the present community, both as individuals and as a group.

Relations between living humans and saints are intimate and reciprocal. Devotees communicate with saints, make bargains, and perform their promised offerings onstage. In such actions living devotees are agents and the saint is the patient. But offstage, saints express agency and fulfill relations of reciprocity by providing the requested benefit to their devotees. Alternately, saints may bring some

⁴ Perhaps relevant to the temporal framing that is inherent in the rite of passage structure is that costumes are brought from the *morería* in the form of bundles which must be unwrapped for the dancer to don them at the ceremony for welcoming the *trajes* and then re-wrapped for return to the *morería* after the final *despedida*.

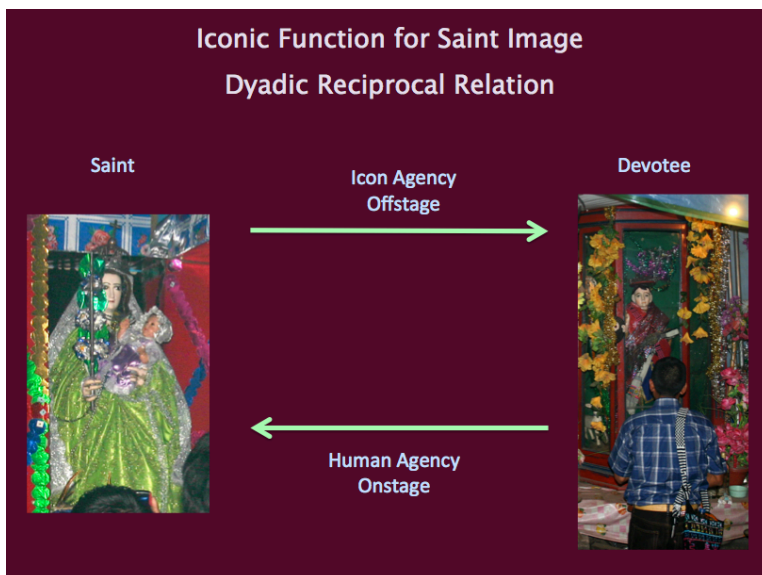
form of punishment if devotees fail to provide the promised offering. This reciprocal activity may take place year-round, since saints are still somewhat available for communication and offerings in the private space of the *cofradía*.

In contrast, relations between living humans and danced *primeros* are more distant. Danced *primeros* do not have devotees. Further, whereas saints have the power to benefit or harm their community, and lineage ancestors have similar possibilities

for affecting their descendants, danced *primeros* do not have the ability to bring benefits or inflict harm on individuals or on the community. This inability is due in part to their lack of an offstage existence, since they are not present in the community outside of particular festivals.⁵

Due to their more distant relationship to the community, reciprocal relations in which danced *primeros* are involved is not with the living community but with its patron saints. This relation also arises from the dual nature of a danced *primero* as both dancer and *primero*. Dancers as individuals are devotees of the patron saint, whether during the period outside of the *feria* when they go about their normal activities as well as rehearse the dance, or during the *feria* when they unite with the *primero* without abandoning their individual identity. As biologically living individuals, dancers interact with saints in the same way that non-dancers do, communicating mentally with the saint to arrange a reciprocal contract, whether connected with a specific issue, in which case the usual offerings are made, or whether involving a vow to dance for a set period of years in return for health and prosperity for themselves and their families, in which case their offering is their contribution the dance.

But embodied as danced *primeros*, these dual entities operate on a group level. As a symbolic community they offer the saint a public dance that honours and brings joy to the saint. They do so without devotional communication with the saint and in the absence of an offstage reciprocation. For example, when the three dance groups combine to perform honouring sequences for the two Virgins in Cunén, the Virgins graciously bow to visibly demonstrate their appreciation and acceptance. In this way danced *primeros* offer their dance not for the benefit of their own individual families but for the benefit of the community as a whole.



⁵ Exceptions to danced *primeros'* absence outside of the *feria* involve major personages in the Conquest Dance—Rey K'iche', Tekum, Ajitz—who have become *encantos*: supernaturals tied to the mountainous terrain they inhabit outside the communities.

Within the space and time of the *feria* which is their sole contemporary existence, the danced *primeros*' relation to the saints is direct and the saints' reciprocation is immediately demonstrated "onstage." The actual flow of benefits from the saints to the community will take place offstage, throughout the year, outside the time of the *feria* and without the presence of danced *primeros*. Thus while dancers as individuals may receive such benefits both as part of the community and as individuals who offered their time, energy, and funds to participate in the dance, as a group of danced *primeros* (as well as the *toritos de fuego*) they offer nothing but their dance and receive nothing more than the gracious bow.⁶ The spectacle of Cunén community members watching as *primeros* offer their dance to their two patron saints and these saints bow graciously to acknowledge appreciative receipt thus suggests that danced *primeros* mediate in a triadic relationship between community members and saints. Even when a dance team is invited to perform in a private residence for the benefit of a particular family, the danced *primeros* are still making a group offering on behalf of a family that will reap the reward offstage when danced *primeros* are no longer around.

I argue specifically that danced *primeros* (and *toritos de fuego*) may be understood as an expression of the community in its act of making an offering to the saint.⁷ In Gell's terminology, danced *primeros* would constitute the distributed personhood of the community, an iconic likeness of the community that can act on its behalf through what Gell would call distributed agency. Further indications that danced *primeros* function as the



community's distributed agency include their identity as ancestors of the community as a whole, rather than of particular lineages, and their formation of a virtual community in themselves. San Cristóbal's *feria* provides a related example of a dance team enacting the distributed agency of the community, when *Conquista* dancers take a turn at carrying the *anda* of Santiago Apostol in the procession from *cofradía* to church, thereby honouring and serving the saint. As in everyday occasions, this reciprocal exchange between saints and community mediated through danced *primeros* is initiated through an onstage offering to the saint, and will be reciprocated, offstage and in the future, with a flow of

⁶ On the second evening offering to the Virgins, the *toritos de fuego* were presented as a contribution of the two Virgins' *cofradías*, representing another form of community offering designed to benefit the *municipio*.

⁷ This function of presenting an offering of performance on behalf of the community is paralleled by groups at Cunén and Momostenango whose offering consists of launching a type of noise-making rocket tied to a bamboo pole.

benefits from the saint. However the saints' reciprocation reverts to a dyadic relation, bypassing the danced *primeros* who are no longer in evidence once the *feria* has ended.

I therefore suggest that the community's offering to its patron saints during the *fiesta patronal* is conveyed by *primeros* to the saints through the medium of dance. This allows the community's agency to be expressed onstage in a festival of community renewal, reverently and on a grand scale. More than this, the convocation and interchange of two kinds of iconic beings, danced *primeros* and patron saints, allows a glimpse into actions of the saint that are normally invisible, offstage. When the saints bow to receive the offering, the community receives instant assurance of the saints' protection and a flow of benefits for the coming year. The saints' bow suggests the promise of a future offstage response in the flow of benefits to the community, at once enacting, renewing, and dramatizing the reciprocal relationship between the community and its patron saint. This benefit to the community stands apart from individual benefits which accrue to each dancer in return for the sacrifices of time and money incumbent on participation in a festival dance.

10.3 Conclusion

While this analysis has focused on the intense, extended, and dramatic interrelation between *cofradía* saints and danced *primeros* in Cunén, particularly in the nighttime dances honouring saints on the church atrium, it raises a question concerning the extent to which the interpretation presented here may be generalized to other Maya community festival dancers in the context of Guatemalan *Costumbre*. My belief that it can be so-generalized arises from similarities with the other three communities studied. In all these communities, danced *primeros* are community ancestors, limited in their supernatural powers and their interaction with the community, with their existence limited to the time and space of the *feria*. In this festival context danced *primeros* form an honour guard for saints in public processions in all communities, and perform their respective dance-dramas (or selections from these) in the church plaza, church atrium, and *cofradías*. Thus whereas in all communities festival dance-dramas are justified as offerings to the saint, I believe this point is meant not just in terms of an individual dancer's great sacrifices incumbent on participation, but also concerning the group as a whole, collaborating as a virtual community on behalf of the living community in order to serve and please a saint.

In these actions the dual existence noted for danced *primeros* may be understood as complex and as extending through time. A dancer remains both a living individual and member of a group of community ancestors while participating as honour guard in a saint's procession and in the performance of the dance drama. By participating, the dancer is making both an individual offering in the hopes of benefits to himself and family, and also a group offering that will bring benefits to the whole community. Further, the dancer is not only honouring and maintaining practices laid down by his

own lineage ancestors who participated in dances long ago, but also as a member of the group that reenacts such foundational events as first performed in the past by the community ancestors when they were alive, designed to keep the world alive, functioning and in balance. This duality would appear to have fostered the role of danced *primeros* as mediators in relations between the living community as a whole and its patron saint.

An historic basis for the necessity of such a role involving community ancestors and their relation to a community's patron saint might be the early colonial process of *reducción* or *congregación*. Through this process, missionary friars joined various small community groups associated with a lineage ancestor into a nucleated community, working to integrate these *parcialidades* by assigning saints as community patron and four *barrio* patrons. Though a parallel duality between lineage ancestors and community patron deities likely existed in pre-Hispanic times, it took on a new character under early colonial *reducción* as a duality between saints and ancestors, and within the latter category a duality between lineage and community ancestors. Over the following century, the institutionalization of this duality in evolving *Costumbre* likely led to the complementarity of *cofradías* and dance teams as expressed through complementary ritual actions of saints and danced *primeros*.