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Chapter 16: Pantomime as Resistance: Ajitz as the Heart of the *Baile de la Conquista*

16.1. Introduction

As discussed in earlier chapters, the *Baile de la Conquista* was composed as a proselytizing play celebrating the defeat of K'iche' by Alvarado's invasion forces and the foundation of a new society of Christian subjects of the Spanish empire. The colonial text appears to have remained free of intentional alterations, except for the addition of concluding dedicatory stanzas, until the period of liberal dictatorships that began in 1871. Therefore most of the history of the dance's evolution as narrative drama must have involved pantomimes, some of which became standardized and, in some cases, were supplied with explanatory texts after the 1870s. Both pantomime and textual additions have been directed overwhelmingly towards elaborating K'iche' resistance to the Spanish invasion's goals, primarily through altering and expanding the roles of the two personages who originate modes of resistance out of their own volition, rather than following others' leads. These personages are Tekum, who defends his nation through military resistance, and Ajitz, who uses spiritual means to pursue the same goal.

Such resistance is clearly an important part of the original Franciscan text. In this text, Tekum resists by insisting on war rather than surrender and Ajitz endeavours to aid in this effort through spiritual means. However, the author makes it clear that continuation of either political resistance or maintenance of Maya religion cannot be countenanced: both must give way before the civilization of Christendom. But as the Dance of the Conquest came under exclusively Maya control, probably in the mid-colonial period, these Franciscan goals were rejected in favour of continuous political resistance and retention of as much as feasible of Maya religious beliefs and practices. Thus pantomimes were developed to serve a need that the text could not fulfill. The important point to remember about such pantomimes is that because they are not limited by the recitation of a set text, they can be quickly updated to comment on current circumstances, particularly those involving a continuously evolving history of oppression by outside forces. Thus while the particular content has been changing over the centuries, these pantomimes have retained a function of articulating resistance.

While maintaining a shared story outline, as well as characters, costumes, general aspects of choreography and some of the same texts and pantomimes, conventions of the *Baile de la Conquista* have evolved in different directions among the many *municipios* in which it has enjoyed a long history of performance. Through elaboration of distinct texts and pantomimes, resistance is represented differently. Amplification of Tekum's heroic resistance appears through pantomime that has been supplemented by text in the expanded scripts of the Cantel lineage, including those still in use in San Cristóbal Totonicapán and Santa María Joyabaj. Through the addition of the prologue in some Cantel lineage texts, the Franciscan author's view of Ajitz and Maya religion as deluded by the devil have been

transformed into a vision of Maya knowledge and foresight as well as resistance. The servile and cowardly character that the Franciscan author envisioned for Ajitz has been transformed into a character of unfailing courage. However, this change of Ajitz's character has received little textual supplementation, and is instead portrayed primarily through pantomime. Even before the Spanish *entrada* that opens Part II, Ajitz fulfills his role in policing the dance ground—removing dogs and drunken men, and insisting on donations from audience members taking video or photographs. From the time the Spanish enter, Ajitz almost never stops harassing them and parodying their movements and speech. It may be because Ajitz has become both heroic and a more important, central character, that the personage of Azteca (also called Lacandón and Jicaque) was developed to fill the niche of the buffoon and outsider.¹

The comic aspect of Ajitz's pantomimes represents another shift from the original play. The Franciscan author included humour in the method conventional for speeches by a *gracejo* or *gracioso* in *siglo de oro* Spanish drama. Quirijol's speeches demonstrate the *gracejo's* characteristic gluttony and lust as well as a propensity towards hyperbole, while Ajitz's comedy emerges in the interchange with Tzunun that displays his extreme cowardice. But in performance today, the comedy of these speeches is utterly lost. If delivered at all, they are declaimed with the same inflection as dramatic or heroic speeches. The issue is not, as many have argued, that the speaker cannot be understood through a mask without mouth opening. In fact, the mask does not prevent intelligibility: in Momostenango the humorous banter in K'iche', delivered in normal speaking volume is quite well understood and relished, even despite its improvisational quality, which prevents reliance on former experience to comprehend. Rather, lack of understanding of the early style *gracejo* speeches is due to their complex construction in Spanish, a language until recently unfamiliar to most of the audience, and to their use of historical and biblical references as well as word play, the meanings of which have largely become obscure, which has led to extensive corruption of these comic texts after centuries of recopying. Further, as patron saint fairs grew in size, complexity, and sound, it would be harder to receive as comic any speech that is not accompanied by physical humour. Thus in all *municipios* studied for this project, the humour of this dance-drama has moved completely away from comic speeches of the two *gracejos* to the physical humour of the pantomimes, as well as to the banter in K'iche' specific to Momostenango.

¹ By comparison, Romero Salinas (2005: 48) notes that a new character was inserted in the *pastorela* texts of Mexico in the same late 19th century period.

The current approach to humour in the *Baile de la Conquista* must be understood as very different in character from the original *gracejo* speeches, and not only because it now arises from physical comedy rather than speeches filled with puns and hyperbole. The humour is now also transgressive in that it is focused largely on Ajitz and in particular his program of harassing and humiliating the Spanish Ambassadors. Ajitz may also parody the Spaniards in their style of marching and in their speeches; García Canclini (1995: 157) noted that such parody of the Spaniards is common in conquest dances. At one time when open critique of the politically and economically dominant non-Indigenous society might have been dangerous, such humour could have functioned as a hidden subordinate transcript in that it would be perceived by the dominant group as non-threatening, or at the least would be deniable should members of that group become suspicious (Scott 1990: xiii, 172-73). Although the humiliation of the Spaniards remains transgressive in relation to the dominant society, within the context of the *feria* in a Maya community there is no longer a need to deny the concerns out of which it arises. Indeed, it can attract so much open appreciation among audience members that performers are inspired to expand its use, as in San Cristóbal. And in Momostenango this humour is further developed through Ajitz's spoken and extemporized interaction with the audience in two extended pantomimes that I have not seen elsewhere and that will be discussed further below.



Ajitz makes the *pañuelo* reek. Joyabaj, 2009.

Ajitz's ability to extemporize in K'iche' in Momostenango raises the possibility of two broader comparisons. First, within the context of Guatemalan Maya festival dances, Mace (1970: 27) notes that extemporizing is expected in dances that are in the K'iche' language, but is not permitted in dances for which the text is in Spanish. In comparison, I have noted that in ceremonies associated with the *Conquista* dance team, prayers to Christian entities are recited precisely in Spanish, while prayers to Maya supernaturals are extemporized in K'iche'. Thus within the performance of the *Baile de la Conquista* in Momostenango, it is consistent that Spanish is used for exact recitation (though minimal) of the written text, while K'iche' is extemporized by Ajitz.

A second comparison is international in context. As a *gracejo*, the character of Ajitz in the *Conquista* text is modeled after the *siglo de oro* conventions of the *gracioso* or buffoon, hence Ajitz's cowardice and comic dialogues and his ability to comment on the action of the play, including relating it to the time and situation of the audience. This last element, according to John Towsen's 1976 cross-cultural study of clowns, is prevalent in other European countries as well as Spain. Also true of contemporary performance by Ajitz is an even more widespread function, common in Asian theatre, that the clown becomes an outlet for unscripted political satire pertinent to the time and place of performance. As

noted in India, China, Myanmar, Thailand, and Indonesia, the clown is able to perform this task because he speaks in the vernacular of the audience, rather than in old, classical forms of language in which the more heroic main characters speak (Towsen 1976: 31–38). Thus while Ajitz’s ability to speak, unscripted, in K’iche’, so that he can be widely understood by his audience, has been noted only in Momostenango, it corresponds to a widespread trait in Asia. Diffusion is not the explanation here, but rather the need for a clown’s extemporized and satirical speech to be easily understood by the audience. The pertinent issue then is the particular Momostenango interest in the clown’s ability to move the audience with pointed political satire confronting issues that they share and that they are perhaps already considering as they watch the drama unfold. However, it must be remembered that the Ajitz of the early text is a dual character: both buffoon and priest. An audience may be able to identify most fully with Ajitz not only because he articulates their political concerns but also because activities of the daykeeper, and particularly the divination prominent in Part II, are still familiar aspects of their everyday lives.

As noted, seeds of Ajitz’s altered behaviour are actually found in the early text, suggesting that his aggressive attempts to harass and humiliate the Spaniards as well as protect the ruler and his followers might have been elaborated from them very early in the history of the Conquest Dance. Ajitz’s function as protector expands from the description of Ajitz by Carrillo at their first meeting, when he says that “*Estos son los brujos que a su Rey guardan*” (These are the *brujos* that guard their king). Among other acts, this statement likely gave rise to the practice of Ajitz facing outward to look for danger when *Caciques* kneel to greet Rey K’iche’. Ajitz’s aggression against the Spaniards is indicated at the end of Part I, when Ajitz tells Tekum how he will assist in K’iche’ resistance:

<i>Pues yo me prometo estar</i>	I promise to be
<i>Haciéndole tantos males,</i>	Doing them great damage,
<i>Que en figura de quetzales</i>	As in the form of quetzals
<i>Les tengo de atormentar.</i>	I must torment them.

Indeed Ajitz’s harassment of the Spaniards begins immediately thereafter with the Spanish *entrada* that opens Part II. Ajitz’s humiliation of the Ambassadors is also signaled by his exultant request for the music of the *pito* (cane flute) so that he can dance the helpless Ambassadors to their interview with Tekum. Similarly, the pantomime of divination likely arises from Tekum’s demand and Ajitz’s promise to consult the gods concerning the Spanish threat. And finally, Ajitz’s role in policing the audience, which may explain his military costume,² likely arises from the ability of a *siglo de oro gracejo* to speak directly to the audience in order to relate events of the play to their current reality, as Ajitz does when he sardonically predicts that Indigenous peoples will never be considered more than beasts to the Spaniards.

² In some communities, monkey dancers fulfill a similar policing function and in some of these they wear a similar uniform, but coloured black instead of red.

Though some of Ajitz's pantomimes are performed in all the *municipios* studied for this project, they were most elaborately developed, and thus the focus of greatest attention, in Momostenango (see also Cook 2000: 120). In almost every performance of the *Conquista* I have witnessed in Momostenango, the dancer portraying Tekum has been elderly and physically somewhat feeble, whereas Ajitz is always danced by a strong and energetic man. Throughout Part II of the dance-drama in Momostenango, Tekum is virtually reduced to the function of a straight man to Ajitz's comic pantomimes, as when he shaves Tekum with the Ambassadors' swords or asks for healing from Spanish beatings. In the battle scene at Momostenango, Tekum's textual moment of despair, as he begins to realize his cause is lost, is ignored by the audience, intent on listening to the insults in K'iche' that Ajitz hurls at Alvarado, and that Alvarado sometimes returns with a word or two. With so little text recited at Momostenango, Ajitz has every opportunity to



Ajitz announces his dance to the Ambassadors. Momostenango, 2009.

“steal the show.” Even before the Opening Dance begins, he may engage in comic interaction with the audience, including the longstanding practice of putting his doll-like idol up to the breast of a young female audience member to suggest that she is nursing the god as a child. This action would never be tolerated in everyday life but persists within the carnivalesque liminality of the *feria* and the understanding that Ajitz is a powerful supernatural being whose presence during the *feria* is beneficial to the community.³



Procession, Cunén, 2010.

Among all the *municipios* studied, the magnified importance of Ajitz as a performer of resistance has resulted in several developments that set his character apart from the line of K'iche' *Caciques* that he terminates. This distinction contrasts with Don Quirijol, the *gracejo* of the Spanish line, who is distinguishable from other Spanish officers like Calderón and Moreno only by his longer texts. Ajitz instead wears a vastly different costume,

³ This practice is becoming infrequent, however, and I heard the Mayor tell the dance team it should not be done.

made of only red velvet, and combining the European military jacket and hat associated with Spanish soldiers, with pants in the style of K'iche' personages. Ajitz is also distinguished by his jumping dance and by manipulating a large number of props. He uses a divination table and chairs, and he carries a *morral*, rock crystal, *vara* (bag containing divination seeds), along with axe, chain, and the idol dressed like himself. More dramatically, Ajitz is the only figure to have been doubled, by introducing Ajitz Chiquito, a personage not found in the original style texts. Ajitz Grande and Ajitz Chiquito dance somewhat independently of the other K'iche'. This pair performs the *vuelta* with each other when *they* reach the corner, not when the line leader reaches a corner.⁴ Also, only they are able to move freely through the dance ground. They have their own platform, representing an altar shrine on a volcano. And, unlike the two Princes and two Malinches, Ajitz Grande and Chiquito always enter and leave a line as a pair.

At Momostenango further distinctions apply. When it is their turn to report, the Ajitz pair do not walk directly to Tekum's position as the *Caciques* do, but instead *run* a counter-clockwise circuit of the dance ground and hop before speaking. As discussed further below, Ajitz and Chiquito will also pray at the centre of the dance ground at the beginning of the morning and afternoon sessions. Also in Momostenango, only Ajitz and Chiquito rigorously maintain their masks in place during processions. And in my experience, only Ajitz and Chiquito wear canvas shoes in performance in that *municipio*. These distinctions for Ajitz and his small-sized double, evident in all *municipios* studied but amplified at Momostenango, enhance their responsibility for affairs in the spiritual realm in addition to their participation in war under the leadership of Tekum.



Ajitz jumps before speaking to Tekum. Momostenango, 2009.

As a resistor of oppression, Ajitz takes on several particular roles in the Conquest Dance, some of which are widespread while others appear limited to Momostenango. Focusing on Momostenango, I intend to show that Ajitz's subversive pantomimes are particularly concerned with two issues: 1) resistance to oppressive political and economic power; and 2) defense of *Costumbre*.

16.2. Courage and Resistance to Oppressive Power

⁴ At San Cristóbal *only* Ajitz and Chiquito perform the *vuelta* at corners, except for when they dance with Tzunun and he joins in.

Baile de la Conquista pantomimes that centre around Ajitz's resistant behaviour result in departures from the text both in general character and specific points. Ajitz's character in contemporary dance performance is not servile or cowardly but courageous and free-willed. The specific point at which the textual characterization of cowardice and the performed character of courage glaringly disagree is in Part III, when Ajitz repeatedly refuses to accompany Tzunun to the court of the Rey K'iche' in Q'umarcaaj as Tekum had ordered him to do. Nowhere in the early style texts does Ajitz give in and agree to go. Even in the greatly modified Cantel and *Dioses* lineage texts he refuses.⁵ The original text for this dialogue is designed to discredit Ajitz and the



Ajitz accompanies Tzunun to Q'umarcaaj. San Cristóbal, 2009.

religion he represents, so the original staging would have been for Ajitz to stay behind, shaking with fear. Having Ajitz go with Tzunun, as always happens in contemporary performance, does exactly the opposite. As discussed earlier, this unscripted action expresses clearly a hidden transcript of resistance that contradicts the dominant and subordinate public transcripts. As is typical for a hidden



Ajitz sharpens the sword. Momostenango, 2009.

transcript, this action could be perceived on the surface as innocuous and unthreatening to colonial authorities, religious or secular, because it does not involve interaction between Ajitz and the Spaniards. In contrast, Ajitz's pantomimed interaction with Spaniards dramatizes the violence and injustice of the conquest while inverting its power relations through his subversive use of comedy at the expense of the Ambassadors.

Comparing those of Ajitz's resistant pantomimes that are widespread with those that are distinctive to Momostenango reveals different approaches. Widespread pantomimes generally involve straightforward examples of Ajitz harassing and humiliating the Spaniards. Ajitz begins harassing the Spaniards at their *entrada*, as he tries to scare off the horses with chili smoke or sets traps to trip the horses, and he parodies both the Spanish march and Alvarado's speech. In response to the Spanish Ambassadors' desecration of his divination table and seed bag, Ajitz humiliates them by making the

⁵ Uniquely among texts of the Cantel lineage, and uniquely among all the texts I have studied, the San Cristóbal text "catches up" with this change in stage action: Ajitz continues to refuse but Chiquito agrees to go, and their journey is further acknowledged by introduced text for Ajitz in the scene with Rey K'iche'.

blindfold cloths reek with body odors from K'iche' personages' armpits, crotches and asses and by showing their swords to be bent and dull. Ajitz's actions with the sword are a parodic reversal of the usual claim that the K'iche', and all Indigenous peoples in the regions now called Latin America, were defeated by the superiority of Spanish weapons. Here Ajitz demonstrates that his knowledge of even Spanish weaponry is superior.⁶

Although the text indicates that the Ambassadors willingly submit to Ajitz in order to fulfill their mission of presenting terms of surrender to Tekum, with the concomitant possibility of discovering the strength of his forces, in performance the Ambassadors put up at least a minor resistance, allowing Ajitz to assert control. This scene reaches its comic height at San Cristóbal, where the Ambassadors cover



Ajitz drags the Ambassadors to their interview with Tekum. San Cristóbal, 2009.

and shake in fear of Ajitz, seeking to hide as Ajitz attempts to blindfold them. After both Ambassadors are blindfolded and bound, they still try desperately to flee, so Ajitz secures the rope around his waist in order to drag them to the palace of Tekum, with the wild man Azteca (also called Lacandón or Jicaque) prodding them from behind. Still resisting, they trip each other as they climb the ladder to Tekum's palace, with one or both falling through the ladder to amuse the audience. In all *municipios*

studied, Ajitz's harassment and humiliation of the Spanish, and their loss of power and control, constitutes a reversal of colonial power relations between Indigenous and Spanish peoples. Through this inversion, colonial power is portrayed as ineffective and resistance thereby appears more plausible.



Ajitz challenges Alvarado. Momostenango. 2010.

This reversal of power relations is also enacted at Momostenango but supplemented by additional, distinctive pantomimes in which conflict between Ajitz and the Spaniards is made more

⁶ In comparison, Harris cites a drama of the Mexican conquest witnessed in Michoacán in 1586, where Spanish control of their most devastating weapon, the horse, was likewise demeaned in favour of Indigenous equestrian prowess (Harris 2000: 158).

immediate and relevant to the present. Essential to this distinction is Ajitz's ability to extemporize outside of the text, in K'iche', with quips directed both at the Spaniards and at the audience, that gives the pantomimes a special flavour. A good example of the approach at Momostenango would be Ajitz's confrontation with the Ambassadors. On the one hand, Ajitz takes frequent opportunities to confront Alvarado (who, according to the text, should not be in the scene nor anywhere near it geographically) and demean him through jokes. Don Ernesto translated some of these from a videotape of his performance. Some were colourful. Riffing on the issue that the Spaniards spoke a language different from Maya-K'iche', Ajitz tells Alvarado: "You don't speak well. Maybe you should try English." He also insults Alvarado by saying "You Spaniards may be tall but you have tiny dicks, not like us." Other quips are just rude, such as "If you're so thirsty, why not drink my piss?" or "I'll stick this sword up your ass." Some of this banter in K'iche' is more serious. As Ajitz, Don Ernesto accuses Alvarado and the Spaniards of abducting K'iche' women and confiscating K'iche' land. Whether clever, crude, accusatory or plaintive, the very idea that Ajitz confronts Alvarado directly with his barbs demonstrates exceptional courage in resistance. These pantomimes and their accompanying banter fulfill the same need to dramatize resistance through one-on-one encounters that in the Cantel lineage texts was fulfilled by added speeches for Tekum and *desafíos* that Tekum can hurl at Alvarado.

In Momostenango the drama of this confrontation is enhanced by the convention that the Ambassadors refuse to passively cooperate, instead violently resisting Ajitz's attempts to control them, as when he seeks to take their swords. One of the ways in which the Ambassadors harass and resist Ajitz is through his divination table. Several times they will move the table away from the precise centre of the dance ground, requiring Ajitz to move it back before he can continue with his actions. They may also carry the table to Alvarado who will use it as a footstool. In many performances, they repeatedly overturn the table and, if they are seeing Ajitz's mounting frustration, will even smash it to bits. Attacking Ajitz through his divination table becomes a graphic example of Alfred Gell's (1998) understanding of distributed personhood. The table is so identified with Ajitz that it becomes part of his personhood, distributed into an object that is physically separate but conceptually linked. This linkage renders Ajitz and his spiritual powers vulnerable to any manipulation or harm done to the table, and it renders the table a convenient target for the Spaniards to enact such harm.



Ajitz moves the table back to the centre. Momostenango, 2011.

Ajitz's interaction with the Ambassadors, at San Cristóbal and especially at Momostenango, serves to test, and thereby demonstrate, Ajitz's spiritual powers. Some sequences involve testing Ajitz's ability

to control the situation, as when Ajitz defends his table from the Ambassadors in Part II, and defends Tekum's coffin in Part IV. When Ajitz turns to the audience for donations to rescue Ajitz Chiquito in Momostenango, they too demonstrate their judgment of his spiritual authority. In Momostenango, the Ambassadors not only resist giving up their swords on the third try but also hide the *vara* or seed bag. Ajitz's search for the *vara* requires quick movements with careful planning and observation as well as an ability to intimidate, respond with humour, and control frustration. Successfully passing these tests increases an Ajitz's aura of courage and spiritual fortitude.



Ajitz searches for the *vara*. Momostenango. 2010.

The Ambassadors' violent resistance at Momostenango also serves to dramatize not only the violence of the initial conflict between Spanish and Maya but also its continuation to the present through centuries of discrimination and exploitation. Ajitz's harassment of the Spaniards is tame and standardized but the Spaniards' harassment of Ajitz is severe and much of it is opportunistic or even resisting the standard (like resisting giving up the sword on the third try). A strong and charismatic Ajitz can usually control the Ambassadors' behavior but one who lacks such character may be mercilessly humiliated by them. During Ajitz's search for the *vara*, I have seen the Ambassadors make sexual jokes at Ajitz's expense, miming with gesture that "If you want it you will have to suck my dick", and one Ambassador gave Ajitz a big mask-to-mask kiss. I have also seen Ajitz knocked to the ground by the Ambassadors. In Joyabaj, the Spanish and Maya dancers are friends, and some may dance both sides in the same day. In San Cristóbal, Ajitz is father or uncle to several Spaniards, including one of the Ambassadors, and they take great joy in their pantomimed antagonism. But In Momostenango, Spaniards and Maya have to make a show of trying to get along. Ajitz has to do all the work to mollify the Spaniard performers, often buying them water.

Some performances at Momostenango were so brutal in the Ambassadors' treatment of Ajitz that I became upset. Once during the succeeding lunch break I mentioned my unease to the dancer performing Ajitz, but he assured me that there was no personal enmity, that they were just playing out the appropriate character.⁷ To further reassure me he had me take his picture with one of the Ambassadors with their arms on each other's shoulders. However I have also seen performances in

⁷ Applying Scott's analysis, one could say that the dancers response to me involved exercising the hidden transcript's technique of deniability to the dominant group with which I, as non-Maya, was identified.



An Ambassador breaks the chair for the divination table. Momostenango. 2011.

which the *autor* asks one of the Ambassadors to tone it down. This emphasis on playing out the historic conflict is enacted outside performance as well. Only in Momostenango do Spaniard and K'iche' dancers dress in separate rooms; they even eat separately when at the Santiago *Cofradía*. Although they are performing as 16th century Spaniard and K'iche', the brutal antagonism they enact makes it clear that this past event of defeat and domination is still sharply relevant to the current lives and identities of Momostecans.

That it is always Ajitz who tries to reduce the tension at Momostenango, and the Spaniards who try to increase it, suggests more possibilities of interpretation. Rather than 'siding' with the Spanish in an aggressive conflict, performers of Spanish personages step into and embody that conflict, enacting its violence. I see this enactment as a carnivalesque opportunity for young men to release their pent-up anger and frustrations that arise from the economic, social and political relations into which Maya are continuously re-inserted. In this way their personal issues in dealing with economy and politics in the position of a disempowered, discriminated, and exploited ethnic majority are recognized as systemic and the origin of the system is clearly understood to be the unequal relation between Spanish and Maya at the conquest. The Ajitz-Ambassador interaction is violent both because the Spanish invasion was violent and because the current economic and political situation in Guatemala has such a violently negative impact on their lives.

A second type of pantomime in Momostenango that dramatizes conflict between Ajitz and the Spaniards and reinforces the relevance of the *Baile de la Conquista* to present concerns consists of two long, unscripted scenes: 1) the *rescate*, a ransom scene following the Ambassadors' interview with Tekum; and 2) the *velorio*, a lamentation over Tekum's corpse. Don Ernesto excelled at these scenes and I saw him in rehearsal passing his knowledge on to another Ajitz dancer (Oscar Caguox) who he helped train. In explaining his actions and speech during these two scenes, Don Ernesto consistently emphasized their relevance to current conditions of Maya and other Indigenous peoples in Guatemala. His explanations demonstrated that his extemporized performance of these scenes is structured according to the parallels that performers choose to draw between exploitation of Maya peoples by outsiders in the past and in the present.

In the *rescate*, the scene in which Ajitz ransoms Chiquito, Alvarado's refusal of products from the market, and his insistence that only money will suffice, on the surface dramatizes the events of the Spanish Conquest. It particularly comments on Alvarado's blindness to the cultural as well as

agricultural richness of Guatemala and his brutal treatment of K'iche' and Kaqchikel rulers in his lust for gold. But also in Don Ernesto's interpretation the scene draws comparisons with later forms of exploitation, including post-war neoliberal incursions into Guatemala. Don Ernesto states that foreigners still come with promises of mutual benefit but Maya peoples always end up in worse conditions than before.⁸ This pantomime has taken on another and more poignant meaning as Guatemalan communities deal with an epidemic of kidnapping for ransom, giving tight-knit Maya communities yet another reason to fear outsiders. I suggest that by focusing attention on this tragic problem with strategic use of humour, Don Ernesto hopes that this ransom scene will motivate the community to organize in self-defense against this rampant crime.



Ajitz offers ransom for Chiquito to Alvarado. Momostenango. 2011.

The second extended scene is a kind of wake or *velorio* for Tekum, distinguished from other pantomimes centering around Ajitz by the fact that he is not interacting with Spaniards, though he refers to them obliquely. The brief text for this section requires Tzunun to take over the command and stop the war and for Ajitz to bid a short farewell to Tekum. But these scripted elements are overshadowed by Ajitz's interchange with both the corpse of Tekum and the crowd of spectators, mixing comedy seamlessly with tragedy.



The wake or *velorio*. Momostenango. 2009.

overcome with grief. Crying out "Tata" (father), Ajitz berates the audience for their lack of sympathy. "You are made of wood," he says in K'iche', "You feel nothing." But he is also angry at Tekum, his father,

⁸ Ernesto Ixcayauh, personal communication, 2010.

and explains his death as punishment for adultery. He repeatedly tells the audience in colourful metaphors that their wives and mothers have all slept with Tekum, and he admonishes the men to watch their women because his father is “active.” Don Ernesto explains this seemingly shameful point as arising from his strong opposition to adultery.

Just as in the *rescate* scene Ajitz was required to turn to the audience for donations to ransom Chiquito, in this *velorio* scene Ajitz turns to the audience and begs money to pay for the wake and burial. Before they give up their donations, audience members wait to hear what insults he will hurl at them for their “stinginess.” Intermittently Ajitz returns to seriousness. Pointing to the body, he tells the crowd that it is black with the blood that Tekum has shed for his people. Bitter and comic at the same time, he intones that “My father is dead. Now there is no one who can defend the people.” Don Ernesto likely hopes that by drawing the audience into the action, he can help spectators imagine themselves in attitudes of shared responsibility and resistance.

Both of these exceptional scenes at Momostenango are characterized not only by the insistent relevance of the past to present oppression, but also by drawing the audience directly into the action through the exchange of banter and physical objects between them and Ajitz. The audience is thereby encouraged to participate in acts of resistance within the safety and alternate reality of a festival performance of a dance–drama, developing an attitude that they can apply to choices they make in everyday life. This approach corresponds to Scott’s (1990: 191) advice “to think of the hidden transcript as a *condition* of practical resistance rather than a *substitute* for it” (emphasis added). Bruce Kapferer (2004) takes this process a step further by arguing that ritual activity has a unique potential for transforming resistance from representation to action. Kapferer explains that when ritual actions express ideas that are outside the parameters of normal behavior, this ritual dynamic allows the possibilities of everyday action to be re–examined and re–imagined “so as to reconstruct, restore, or introduce radical new elements into the dynamic structurings of its possibility” (Kapferer 2004: 49). In this way, “ritual participants are both reoriented to their ordinary realities and embodied with potencies to restore or reconstruct their lived worlds” (Kapferer 2004: 51).

In Momostenango then, a competent and charismatic Ajitz fulfills the purpose of a subordinate hidden transcript by attempting to mobilize community action. In other *municipios* in which Ajitz’s behavior and that of the Spaniards are more subdued, resistance is still expressed through pantomimes that are frequently comic. However, it should be obvious that this transcript of resistance is now far from hidden. Ajitz’s courage in standing up to the Spaniards and getting the best of them, the opposite of the cowardice he expresses to Tzunun through the early style text for Part III, is overt. In terms of resistance to political oppression, the subordinate hidden transcript has become a subordinate public transcript. With certain exceptions, such as traffic–blocking protests, attempting to organize labour unions or rejection of mining projects or hydroelectric dams, it is no longer dangerous to denounce oppression in Guatemala, especially within one’s own community. Accordingly, through pantomimes

and added text for Ajitz and Tekum, the dominant flavour of the *Baile de la Conquista* has become an expression of resistance. Furthermore, Ajitz like Don Ernesto can demonstrate that complacency is dangerous, because circumstances are constantly arising that call for new forms of community-wide resistance.

16.3. Threats to *Costumbre*

In the Franciscan text, Tekum resists political aspects of the Spanish onslaught, choosing military means to preserve his nation's autonomy, while Ajitz uses magico-religious means, empowered by his "amigo Lucifer." In terms of this author's text, both Tekum and Ajitz fail. But the role the author gave to Ajitz as a Maya priest left open another possibility for interpretation and elaboration beyond defense of political autonomy.

In contemporary performance, Ajitz exemplifies not the disappearance of Indigenous Maya belief and practice as the Franciscan author appears to have intended, but their continuation and continuity despite pressures to convert and assimilate. The fact that it has become so important to demonstrate Ajitz's courage and to test his spiritual fortitude at Momostenango alerts us to the possibilities of this other, still hidden subordinate transcript. I argue that many aspects of Ajitz's role may be read in this manner as a continuing defense of *Costumbre* in response to periodically heightened pressures to reject it and join Roman Catholic or Protestant congregations. This hidden transcript is particularly evident in performances of the *Baile de la Conquista* at Momostenango where the loss of text in combination with the expansion of pantomime have resulted in Ajitz becoming the dominant character. However I argue that expression of a hidden transcript of maintaining Maya religious identity likely has been part of K'iche' *Conquista* performances since the mid-colonial period. It will be remembered that the *Conquista* dance-drama was developed in the early colonial period as a "theatre of conversion," and therefore it launched an attack on Maya religion, configuring it as pagan, idolatrous, and devil-worship. Through the dance's subsequent history, the author's direction of a baptism to end the *Baile de la Conquista* came to take on a meaning the opposite of what he had intended. Instead of signaling the demise of Maya religion, it came to signal this religion's rebirth and continuation as *Costumbre*.

Though likely written by a Franciscan friar and performed under his authority, it is equally likely that the first performances of the Conquest Dance were staged largely under more direct supervision of *fiscales*: monastery-educated sons of local K'iche' *caciques* who took over many of the friars' duties when they were absent, including education in the *doctrina* (Early 2006).⁹ *Conquista* dancers in this early colonial phase were likely to have been already baptized though many would have been educated by *fiscales* rather than in the monastery schools and thus may already have begun amalgamating

⁹ In comparison Roland Baumann (1987: 147) notes that fiesta spectacles in Tlaxcala in the 16th century would have been organized by the noble (*cacique*) families.

Christian elements into Maya K'iche' religion to develop *Costumbre*. Though *Costumbre* might be said to have evolved naturally through friars' attempts to explain Christian doctrine by using Indigenous Maya concepts, and often letting Maya *fiscales* take over the task of explaining doctrine, applying Scott's analysis opens up the possibility of a different view of *Costumbre's* origin.

Scott's (1990: 116–17) explanation of the development of a resistant subculture expressed as a hidden subordinate transcript alerts us to the possibility that as *Costumbre* was evolving it was hidden from friars and other authorities as a form of resistance to the exclusivist imposition of Catholicism. In that case, Maya people would have been performing a subordinate public transcript of church-oriented Catholicism while pursuing practices of *Costumbre* that were hidden from Spanish surveillance. Scott (1990: 133–35) notes in particular that a situation of strong segregation between dominant and subordinate communities, in which the subordinate community is able to engage in what he calls dense social interaction, will foster the development of such a distinct subculture. For comparison, Scott (1990: 116–17) cites a Christian subculture developed by slaves in the United States. He notes that their public demonstrations of Christianity adhered to teachings of meekness and obedience, while “offstage” they developed a Christianity that stressed deliverance and redemption. In colonial Guatemala, difference in language between dominant colonial and subordinate Maya groups would have made secrecy more available. Furthermore, Early (2006: 147–77) provides evidence that most Maya communities had little contact with the friars, which suggests that conditions were optimum for the development of *Costumbre* as a subculture. Scott (1990: 135) states that: “Once this occurs...the distinctive subculture itself becomes a powerful force for social unity as all subsequent experiences are mediated by a shared way of looking at the world.” He adds that due to this segregation, the resulting subculture is likely to be opaque to the dominant group (Scott 1990: 132). Thus, though it cannot be demonstrated, applying Scott's analysis to the early colonial period in Guatemala suggests that *Costumbre* began to develop in part as a Maya subculture under authoritarian Spanish domination, with a language and practices of spiritual power that also took on the political function of resistance.

At some point in the evolution of *Costumbre*, it came to be practiced more openly and safely, and *Costumbristas* came to consider themselves not only as Catholics but as the true Catholics and “the only maintainers of pure Christianity” (La Farge 1947, quoted in Early 2006: 260), and thus charged with reproducing the pious devotions of their ancestors.¹⁰ It cannot be said with certainty when this shift may have taken place in Guatemala. This attitude may have come about as *congregación* and conversion were largely complete, and festival dances like the *Baile de la Conquista* were taken over by *Costumbristas* for their own purposes. In this context, *el Baile da Conquista* would have carried a special importance as a representation of the origin of *Costumbre* through the first K'iche' conversions to Christianity. I was alerted to this possibility by Garrett Cook's statement concerning the Conquest

¹⁰ The Indigenous Peruvian Felipe Guaman Poma de Ayala made a similar point in his *Nueva Corónica y Buen Gobierno*, finished in 1615, though his argument was about oppressive colonial politics of discrimination and exploitation.

Dance that participants are: “telling and reenacting the stories that account for the origin of their institutions” (Cook 2000: 118).

Cook’s statement did not concern *Costumbre*, but rather his interpretation that the *Conquista* follows a pattern for performing the story of cosmogenesis. However, in the story that represents the origin of *Costumbre*, narrated in 1976 by Vicente de León Abac of Momostenango and published with commentary by Cook in 2001, personages from the *Baile de la Conquista* figure prominently, and these are the only festival dance characters who do so. In this narration, Tekum, Rey K’iche’, and Tzitzimit (i.e. Ajitz: see below), as supernaturals (*encantos*) are mentioned frequently in connection with the celebration of the annual year-bearer festival for the Mam, accompanied by their appropriate instruments, the *chirimía* and *tambor* (see also Cook 2000). Alvarado is also mentioned at one point but his function is ambiguous. He brings the wheat bread, which Cook (2001: 117, 121) interprets as a reference to the Eucharist. But Alvarado is also called an enemy and is not welcome at the *fiesta*, perhaps because in this historical context of the mid 20th century, Alvarado and the Eucharist were associated with Catholic Action. This *Costumbre* foundation story involving leading figures from the Conquest Dance thus provides strong comparative evidence that in the 1970s the *Baile de la Conquista* was closely connected with the origin and annual renewal of *Costumbre*. The same connection is expressed in the gateways to the *Costumbrista* altar enclosure at the summit of the Paclom shrine in Momostenango, which feature busts representing Tekum.



Bust of Tekum over one of two identical gateways to the ceremonial enclosure on Paclom summit. Momostenango, 2009.

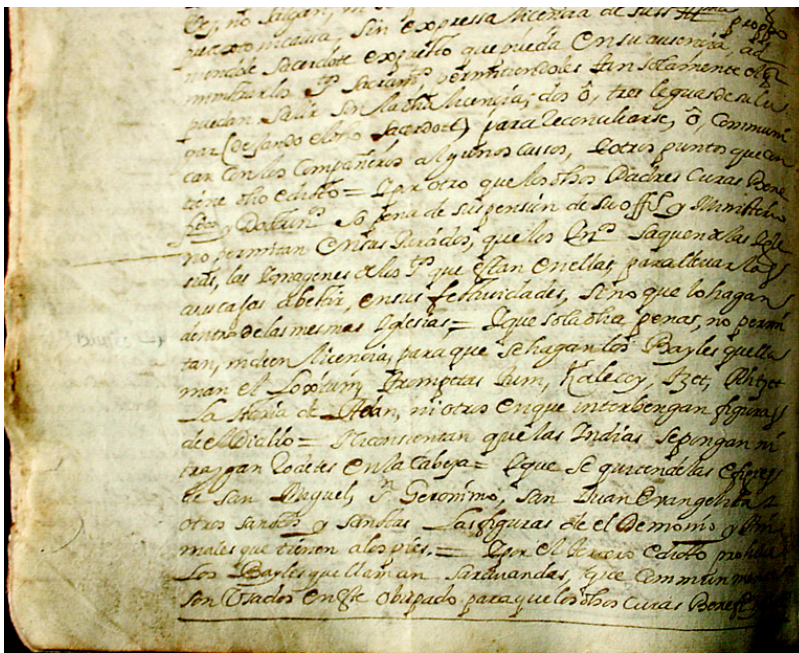
The original author of the *Baile de la Conquista* may have expected performance of the story of the conquest and conversion of the K’iche’ to operate like the performance of a biblical tale in a peninsular celebration of Corpus Christi, as a method of recalling an event in the past that helps explain the present. But Mesoamerican rituals appear to have been designed instead to return a community to primordial time in order to recreate the ancestral event that established and arranged the conditions for the present. Through dancing the *Baile de la Conquista*, Guatemalan *Costumbristas* are, to apply Cook’s argument on dance, reenacting the story that accounts for the origin of *Costumbre*.¹¹ Because

¹¹ Note that by understanding a performance of the *Baile de la Conquista* as a reenactment of an ancient event in which the ancestors accepted Christianity, each performance also becomes an “image” of that event and therefore, using modified terminology from Gell, the “distributed being” of that event. In this way any such ritual re-enactment collapses past and present into ritual time.

all of the festival dances that have been discussed are *Costumbrista* dances, the Conquest Dance retells their origin as well, and that of the *fiesta patronal* itself.

Cook (2001: 118) argues that aspects of the story represent a defense and legitimation of *Costumbre* at a time (the 1970s) when the forces against *Costumbre* in this community were intensifying. Indeed, Barbara Tedlock (1986:137) noted that in the 1970s Vicente de León Abac, author of Cook's narration, was an activist in support of *Costumbre* against the assimilationist pressures of Catholic Action and Protestant sects. I suggest that the origin story recorded by Cook incorporates leading figures from the *Baile de la Conquista* because in the 1970s, and likely for the preceding two decades as well, the dance likewise fulfilled the role of defending *Costumbre* against Catholic and Protestant pressures to convert and assimilate. But I argue further that the Conquest Dance took on this role in the late 18th century in response to forces of assimilation intensified by the secularization of Catholic priests in Maya communities.

As this point about the origin of *Costumbre* is not made openly, it may give us an insight into the hidden subordinate transcript intended not only to celebrate *Costumbre* but also increasingly to maintain this religion against renewed pressures to abandon it that mounted in the late 18th century. Indication of baptism in the final scene of *La Conquista* thus potentially carried two meanings: one would be the subordinate public transcript with compliance likely read by Catholics as submission to Catholicism; and the other would be a subordinate hidden transcript intended by the Maya as celebration and defense of their religion. As typical of such double meanings, the potentially threatening subordinate hidden transcript could be easily denied should it be detected by the politically and economically dominant group. With this double meaning in mind, we can look more closely at the forces of conversion and assimilation arrayed against *Costumbre* in the late 18th century.



Detail of *visita* entry for May 5, 1684 in baptismal record book for San Cristóbal Totonicapán.

Attempts to regulate or even abandon *Costumbre* are evident in the late 17th century but greatly increased in the late 18th century. Earlier examples include the 1684 *visita* record probably by the Archbishop Andrés de las Navas in San Cristóbal Totonicapán demanding that icons be removed from the church if they show animals or demons at the feet of the saint (see also Van Oss 1986: 149–50). Similarly, Archbishop de las Navas lists several dances that should be prohibited, including the History of Adam, because

the Devil appears in them. He prohibits taking of icons to the houses (i.e. *cofradías*) for their ceremonies, insisting that these take place in the church, and forbidding ceremonial events referred to as *zarabandas* in private and *cofradía* houses. These same complaints were renewed more forcefully in the late 18th century. In his record of an extensive *visita* tour in 1768–70, Archbishop Pedro Cortés y Larraz complains about images and other church furnishings being taken for rituals in *cofradía* houses and even into caves (1958: I: 110, 120; II: 16). He seems to find no spiritual value in private, *cofradía*-based *Costumbrista* ceremonies, classifying them as *zarabandas* and an excuse for drunken debauchery that wastes money and incites immorality and idleness (1958: II: 16, 62–63, 251). Thus he insists that *cofradía* ceremonies take place in the church under priestly supervision.

Whereas Warman (1972: 122–23) notes an event in Mexico in 1762 in which a secular priest tried to prohibit all festival dances, the priesthood in Guatemala appears to have been more tolerant to such public dances. Official policy, was to exclude festival dances from the church interior, and Cortés y Larraz (1958: I, 133) noted that one priest had succeeded in banishing them to the cemetery. This distinction between ordering that *cofradía* ceremonies involving icons must take place in the church, while festival dances may not use this same space, demonstrates clearly in what areas of practice the Catholic establishment wished to exert control and in what areas it did not see the necessity to do so. For example, Cortés y Larraz (1958: I: 133) specifically mentions the *Moros y Cristianos* as the kind of dance that must be excluded from the church interior because such dances show lack of respect for the church. It will be remembered that the *Moros y Cristianos* genre shares with the *Baile de la Conquista* the early colonial agenda of conversion to Christianity, ending with the sacrament of baptism. With universal conversion in most parts of Guatemala, this agenda was no longer necessary, and Cortés y Larraz's comments show that this dance and others were no longer officially sponsored by the church. Thus when Cortés y Larraz visited San Miguel Totonicapán on Corpus Christi, he took part in the Catholic ceremony but avoided the masked dances, noting only that he could hear the performers howling (i.e. reciting texts) once he retired to his room (1958: II: 102).¹²

The late 18th century period that encompasses the *visita* of Cortés y Larraz was a watershed moment for Maya communities. Increasingly from the 1750s, the formerly small population of Ladinos in Maya *municipios* ballooned, and they were able to take over control of the *municipio* government, of its resources, and of its long-distance trade. During this social transformation, in 1747, the imperial government shifted to a requirement that tribute be paid in coin rather than in product. McCreery (1984: 35) notes that the combination of this tribute, church charges and fees, as well as the *repartimiento de efectos* extracted most liquid wealth from the Indigenous population.

Most importantly for this argument, this was the period of secularization, with its main thrust beginning in 1754 and continuing through the 1770s. The Spanish crown had initiated attempts to

¹² The text reads: "...no faltó danza de máscaras, pero no advertí aullidos hasta ya concluida la función y retirado a mi cuarto."

secularize the priesthood in Indigenous communities in the late 16th century but were thwarted by the defense of missionaries by Indigenous communities. As Aracil Varón (1999: 555) explains, missionaries not only learned to preach in the local Indigenous language but also tended to defend their flocks against exploitation by the colonial authorities, especially objecting to excessive tribute. They saw such defense as helping to maintain their own position in these communities. For this purpose also, they were concerned to maintain a separation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities, especially the Franciscans whose millenarian goals relied on such a separation. Opposing missionary aims were the goals of secularization of the priesthood and assimilation of the Indigenous population as a means of gaining more control over Indigenous communities by the Catholic Church as well as the Colonial government. This would further the ability of both institutions to extract wealth from the Indigenous population. The church and state were able to realize these goals of secularization and increased wealth extraction in the late 18th century.

Secularization widened the rift between colonial and Indigenous populations, as friars who considered themselves obligated to serve the community were replaced by secular priests who primarily served themselves, striving continuously for greater wealth and higher position. Secular priests often appropriated Maya lands and labour for their plantations, while contracting out their religious obligations (McCreery 1994: 78; Van Oss 1986: 130–50; 172–73). Secular priests looked down on Indigenous populations as backwards and morally corrupt, instead allying themselves with the *Ladino* administration and militia. Their reluctance to learn the local language was supported by the Crown which in 1770 abolished the requirement to do so. Indeed the plan was to eradicate Native languages through the establishment of Spanish schools in each locality, though this plan foundered due to lack of funds and reluctance of Indigenous parents to allow their children to attend (Van Oss 1986: 144). Secular priests also decried *Costumbre* as pagan debauchery and attempted to curtail its practices, but Van Oss (1986: 140–41) argues that the strength of the *cofradías* defeated these efforts. Instead, *Costumbre* provided religious continuity in this transition to secularization, as it would in later periods of liberal government's repression of the Catholic establishment.

Recall Scott's argument that elaboration of a hidden subordinate transcript into a subculture of resistance depends on segregation between dominant and subordinate groups. In general, from the late 18th century the alliance of secular priests with the growing and increasingly powerful *Ladino* population in Maya *municipios*, and their refusal to learn the Indigenous language, would have increased this segregation. But within this growing rift note that surveillance of *Costumbre* across its various manifestations was not homogeneous. Judging from the *visita* record of Cortés y Larraz (1768–70) divination, curing and other activities of Maya priests had receded as a direct target of Catholic priests. Whereas in the late 17th century divination and daykeeping were associated with superstition and idolatry (Ruz 2002–08: I, 49–50), the extensive late 18th century record of the *visita* tour by Archbishop Cortés y Larraz gives the practices much less attention (see Cortés y Larraz 1958: I, 68, 83). The Archbishop does mention a case in which 12 individuals were accused of witchcraft and a pact with

the devil, but he dismisses the claim as maliciousness on the part of *Ladinos* and the (secular) *cura* (Cortés y Larraz 1958: I, 113–15). Perhaps divination's lack of attachment to *cofradías* and lack of icon usage made it less of a threat. *Cofradía* ceremonies, in contrast, drew much attention from secular priests because their ritual treatment of icons was considered idolatrous and because the ceremonies themselves, disparagingly called *zarabandas*, were considered to be nothing more than drunken debauchery. To Van Oss's (1986: 140) argument that the strength of the *cofradía* system defeated secular priests' attempts to eradicate *Costumbre*, we might add that such public persecution might have caused the *cofradías* to make their activities more secretive, away from priestly surveillance and punishment by the largely *Ladino* municipal government. McCreery (1990: 101) also suggests that the gradual appropriation of *cofradía* resources (primarily agricultural lands and livestock), which developed in the secularization phase of the colonial era and intensified in the 19th century, meant that the church was becoming less interested in the *cofradía* institution. This allowed it to develop further and more autonomously in ways that took advantage of the new necessity to operate through individual donations of members, developing the so-called closed corporate community organization and civic-religious hierarchy studied by 19th and 20th century ethnographers. Following Scott, these processes would suggest further entrenchment of *Costumbre* as a resistant subculture.

Festival dances came between these poles. Previously noted comments by Cortés y Larraz suggest that dances were not considered a threat as long as they took place outside of the church, and no argument is made that the masks contribute to idolatry. This would suggest that, remaining outside of repressive surveillance, festival dances had greater freedom to develop in a public rather than secretive fashion and thereby contribute differently to strengthening the resistant subculture of *Costumbre*. Unlike *cofradía* rituals, these dances would maintain the ability to obscure a transcript of resistance, well understood by the Maya population, beneath a façade of willing compliance appreciatively consumed by the dominant non-Indigenous group. Furthermore, as noted previously, all of the traditional dances performed at patron saint festivals are articulations of *Costumbre* and in many communities are closely tied to the *cofradía* system, its best-known aspect. As the foundation story for *Costumbre*, the Dance of the Conquest likely would have taken on a prominent role in its continuation and defense. Mere performance of the dance would have been read by the dominant group as a public transcript of compliance with colonization and conversion and by the subordinate Maya community as a hidden transcript of resistance in defense of *Costumbre*.

As discussed above, the same point can be made concerning the period since the mid 20th century when *Costumbre* again came under direct attack, this time from Catholic Action and more recently Evangelical Protestantism and Mormonism. These renewed pressures have much in common with the policy and agenda to which the Franciscan author of the *Conquista* would have subscribed. Like early colonial friars, these fundamentalist Catholics and Protestants consider *Costumbre* to be a pagan and idolatrous religion. They seek to convert enough adherents that *Costumbre* will disappear through attrition rather than reformation as the secular priests of the 18th century might have wished. For many

in these competing sects, conversion is considered a step towards assimilation. Reflecting on the current relation of the Dance of the Conquest to the defense of *Costumbre*, Cook and Offit (2013: 22) write that the dance “still potentially provides a charter for K'iche' identity and resistance and for the survival of the K'iche' religion.” I would slightly shift the grammar of this phrase to indicate that the category of resistance also applies to the survival of *Costumbre*, because its survival depends on resisting pressures to convert and assimilate.

In the mid to late 20th century so many Maya were converted to Catholicism, especially through the efforts of Catholic action, or to Protestant Evangelism, peaking during the civil war, that the defense of *Costumbre* can no longer be characterized simply as Maya resistance against *Ladino* domination. Nevertheless, because pressures to convert arise from religions associated with and dominated by *Ladino* society, conversion has assimilationist aspects to it, the threat is not just to *Costumbre* but also to Maya identity. Thus Cook and Offit's three terms—identity, resistance, survival—are all bound up in the defense of *Costumbre*. As Diana Taylor (1991: 91) notes, identity represents an important political resource for group action. Until recently, Maya identity in Guatemala was centred around membership in a specific *municipio* like Momostenango or Joyabaj, but today a more generalized Maya identity is often the focus of preservation and transmission. Powerful forces for assimilation have pressed upon the Maya many times, especially during the time of the conquest, in the period of liberal dictatorships, and under present globalization and neoliberalism including its Evangelical religious arm; but these forces have also always met with strong Maya resistance. Maya identity is continually reproduced, but with struggle. And as Krystal (2001: 370) has noted for the Dance of the Conquest, the character of Ajitz “speaks to the importance of preservation of belief and practice in the survival of Mayaness.” In particular, Krystal notes significant connections maintained between pre-Hispanic Maya religion and the character of Ajitz, including the axe, primary attribute of storm deities like the K'iche' Tojil, and the “doll” which may have once represented an idol of Tojil.¹³

Nestor García Canclini (1995: 109) succinctly characterizes the important functions of dramatizing foundational events, writing that “in order for traditions today to serve to legitimize those who constructed or appropriated them, they must be staged.” He notes that the necessary dramatic focus on those considered the heroes and their roles in the founding event legitimates these founders as a source of ultimate authority. Their acts must be reproduced, in dramatic form, to maintain the order that they established. Staging history in this way also reinforces the shared identity of the community that traces its origin to the event being portrayed. The resulting cohesion enables the authority of the founders to be mobilized as a political force (García Canclini 1995: 110–112).

¹³ While general associations with Indigenous belief and practice are maintained, the particular relationship of the doll to Tojil appears to have lapsed. Instead, in Momostenango, where ritual relationships in the Conquest Dance have been reinterpreted as family relationships, the doll represents a child of Ajitz.

García Canclini's concern in this passage is primarily with the dramatization of an authority that is to be resisted. Thus he writes that: "In conservative regimes, whose cultural policy tends to be reduced to administration of the preexisting patrimony and to reiteration of established interpretations, ceremonies are events that ultimately only celebrate redundancy" (García Canclini 1995: 111). However, the history of the Conquest Dance, as tentatively reconstructed here, complicates this interpretation, considering that the dance originated as theatre of conversion written by a Franciscan friar, but was continued by Maya *Costumbristas* for different purposes. Using the model set forth by García Canclini, we might suggest that in the original author's view, the heroes to be commemorated for foundational acts were Alvarado and Rey K'iche' whose combined deeds led to the incorporation of the K'iche' nation into the Spanish Empire and the Catholic church. But when the Maya took control of the Conquest Dance and continued it as part of their ancestral traditions, conservatism and redundancy could take on roles of resistance against outside authority and forces of assimilation. By the secularization period in the late 18th century, achievements of incorporation into the empire and acceptance of Christianity had become split. This shift allowed Tekum to be celebrated for defending his nation against invasion and oppression at the same time that Rey K'iche' could be celebrated for embracing Christianity and thereby founding *Costumbre*. More recently, likely in the 20th century, and particularly in the western K'iche' communities of San Cristóbal Totonicapán and Momostenango, Ajitz has taken on the roles of both determining the syncretic content of *Costumbre* and heroically defending its survival against assimilationist pressures.

Threats to *Costumbre* in Momostenango and elsewhere have been continuous since the 1940s, though they have passed through two phases. In the 1940s, the fall of liberal quasi-dictatorships that had ruled Guatemala since 1871 led to the progressive "Decade of Spring" (1944–54). At this time also the Catholic Action movement developed, a militant and somewhat fundamentalist approach to Catholicism that enlisted priests in launching a direct attack on *Costumbre* and particularly on the membership and activities of *cofradías*. Cook and Offit (2013: 52) report that by the mid-1970s about half the Maya population of Momostenango *municipio* had been converted to Catholic Action. A graphic example of Catholic militancy in this period is the Sololá priest's attack on Rilaj Mam at Santiago Atitlán in 1950. After an unsuccessful attempt to shoot the Mam during Holy Week, he returned six weeks later, decapitated Rilaj Mam with a machete, and confiscated two of his ancient masks (Christenson 2001: 62). In Momostenango, the priest insisted that the Santiago *cofradía* must hand over to the church any donations made to the *Costumbrista* saint (Cook and Offit 2013: 52).

A temporary exception to this anti-*Costumbrista* activity at Santiago Atitlán was Father Stanley Francis Rother, sent there by an Oklahoma diocese to become a resident priest in 1968. Rother tried to make bridges between Catholics and *Costumbristas*, even attending *cofradía* ceremonies. As Christenson (2001) relates, when earthquakes inflicted major damage on the old *retablo* of the church, Father

Rother hired the Chávez brothers¹⁴ to restore and add additional carvings to it, encouraging them to draw parallel relations between *Costumbre* and Catholicism, and suggesting some parallels himself. As part of the attack on *Costumbre*, under the repressive military government of Guatemala Father Rother was assassinated in 1981 and the Chávez brothers tortured for their promotion of Indigenous Maya culture. Christenson's analysis of the re-installed *retablo* demonstrates its visual, religious, and political importance, so it was a distressing to learn, in December 2012, that the current priest planned to remove the Chávez brothers' carvings from the altarpiece. This priest has launched other attacks on *Costumbre*. When I attended Semana Santa in Santiago Atitlán in 2007, the portion of the drama re-enacting the Last Supper with small boys was cancelled. I was told that the cancellation was due to the Priest's refusal to officiate at this ceremony in the role of *Jesucristo*, as was customary.¹⁵

By the late 1970s, the pressure exerted by priests in concert with Catholic Action was being superseded by pressure from a growing community of converts resulting from North American Evangelical, Pentecostal and Mormon church proselytization. Antagonism between *Costumbristas* and Evangelical Protestants was understood as the reason for a crisis that almost saw the cancellation of the Momostenango *feria* in 2009. When the Guatemalan government became concerned over the epidemic of the so-called Swine Flu (the H1N1 virus), it closed schools and ordered that *ferias* be cancelled. Momostenango's mayor and council, largely Evangelicals, quickly passed an act that cancelled the fair. However, the epidemic soon proved much less serious than expected, so schools reopened and *municipios* reinstated their *fiestas patronales*. That is, except for Momostenango. Mayor and council were adamant that the *feria* must not take place, and in meetings with *Costumbrista* representatives of the *cofradías* and dance teams as well as market vendors, a government doctor was called upon to exaggerate the risk in their support. But the widely repeated rumour was that both religion and economics were at issue. The Evangelical community was against the *feria* both for its "pagan" aspects and because its small-vendor economics competed with their larger scale commercial enterprises. I became involved in the dispute because Ernesto Ixcayauh, in that year co-*autor* of the *Conquista* dance team, asked me to serve as an "external observer" for meetings with the governor of Totonicapán department (in which Momostenango is situated) and the mayor of Momostenango as well as the Human Rights office (*Procurador de Derechos Humanos*). As pressure to reinstate the fair steadily grew, Human Rights representatives worked out a face-saving compromise for the mayor and council: the fair was suspended "officially" but the usual activities could therefore take place "unofficially."

16.4. Pantomimes in Defense of *Costumbre*

¹⁴ Diego Chávez Petzey and Nicolás Chávez Sojuel.

¹⁵ Andrew Weeks, personal communication, 2007.

I have considered together the two episodes of direct attacks on *Costumbre* from other religious sects, in the late 18th and late 20th centuries, because there is little evidence to differentiate which pantomimes intended as a defense of *Costumbre* might have developed in response to each of these periods of greatest threat. Despite lack of supporting evidence, we may hypothesize for the sake of discussion that the most widespread pantomimes, like the amusing scene of sharpening and straightening of the Ambassadors' swords, entered the repertoire earlier than more localized scenes like the *rescate* that I have seen only at Momostenango. Therefore in discussing other pantomimes more closely connected with the defense of *Costumbre*, I will first treat widespread examples that perhaps developed in the late 18th century, and then more localized examples that might not have been introduced until the middle of the 20th century.



Divination, San Cristóbal, 2009.

The most widespread and indeed universal element of Ajitz's pantomimes that concern *Costumbre* is the divination scene of Part II, which in some communities (e.g. Nebaj, Sololá) also forms a transition between Parts I and II. Though Ajitz announces in Part I that he will consult the gods, there is nothing in the text that indicates he will be performing divination. This pantomime has been grafted on to his role as a sentry or lookout for Tekum, stationed outside his palace or perhaps even at the entrance to Quetzaltenango. Because secular priests introduced to Maya communities in the late 18th century do not appear to have made divination a target of their religious repression, the

divination pantomime became a useful subject for a hidden transcript. While priests would have viewed it as an innocuous representation of an ancient religion, superseded by Christianity, in line with the original author's intent, Maya performers and audience would have recognized Ajitz's divination pantomime as a defense of *Costumbre's* continuation in defiance of church authority.

That divination remains particularly relevant to current life in Momostenango is amply demonstrated by Barbara Tedlock's (1992) exhaustive study of divination procedures and their rationales. Some of these are reproduced more-or-less faithfully in the divination scene of the Conquest Dance. For example, that the diviner and client should sit on opposite sides of the table is reproduced in the dance by placing Ajitz opposite Chiquito or the Lacandón. Also, Tedlock's (1992: 140) explanation that the diviner orients himself or herself to the four directions so that his body becomes a microcosm would relate to the insistence, at Momostenango, that the divination table be placed in the precise centre of the dance ground. The primary divination procedure of grabbing a handful of the divination seeds and dividing them into piles of four, then using these piles to count out the days, is mimed in Joyabaj but performed more accurately in San Cristóbal Totonicapán where, significantly, the Ajitz (Francisco

Rodolfo Hernández) is also a *chuchkajaw*. In Momostenango, the Ajitz usually limits divination to pouring out the pile of seeds and massaging it in a circular motion with the palm of the hand. This gesture, according to Tedlock (1992: 158) is a preliminary action based on the use at Momostenango of both seeds and rock crystals, which the diviner must mix before grabbing a handful to make the piles for the days.

Following this action of mixing the divination seeds, the Ajitz at Momostenango and Joyabaj usually extends one of his legs and points to it. Tedlock's analysis of divination at Momostenango clarifies this gesture as well (1992: 133-47). As part of the divination procedure or even outside of it, a diviner will feel the blood jumping in some part of his body. This sensation is inspired by sheet lightning which uses the blood to speak to the diviner and reveal some important information to him or her through the location in which the jumping sensation is felt. The diviner interprets the information on the basis of whether the sensation is felt on the left or right side of the body, front or



Ajitz shows where the blood is jumping in his leg. Momostenango, 2009.

back, inside or outside of the limbs, fleshy or bony areas, and other criteria. Thus Ajitz points to his leg to reveal that this is where his blood is jumping. At Momostenango, the meaning is made clear as Ajitz extends the leg on the side of his body closest to the line of Spaniards and after pointing to his leg he then gestures to the Spaniards that they are done for.

By including these realistic touches, Ajitz's pantomime of divination resonates with *Costumbrista* members of the audience and other dancers as an experience in which many of them have been involved, whether as diviners or as their clients. Through this identification with the action of the drama the audience is able not only to relate the past of the drama to their present, but also to celebrate the strength and continuing importance of this ceremonial procedure rather than its imminent demise as the author might have expected. The scene of divination thus exemplifies the process in which added pantomimes shift the meaning of the dance and thereby subvert the author's intentions.

The link that divination forges between a Maya past and present is conjoined with a further link between human and supernatural presence. In Momostenango particularly, Ajitz is identified with a supernatural known as K'oxol. Discussions of K'oxol by Tedlock (1983; 1986; 1992) and many others

might be interpreted to suggest that the term has come to be associated with two different contexts. On the one hand K'oxol can be a *Mam* and therefore an earth deity who is the keeper of the animals. It is in this context that the White K'oxol (*Zaqi K'oxol*) appears in the Popol Vuh, a Red K'oxol (*K'ak'i K'oxol*) figures in an origin story published by Tedlock (1986: 133–35; 1992: 147), and reports are made of priests entering the cave-tunnel at Q'umarcaaj to find K'oxol and his corral of small stone animals (Tedlock 1986: 134).

K'oxol's association with lightning represents a second context, supported by Dennis Tedlock's (1985: 368) interpretation of the name as "spark striker," referring to the method of striking stones together to produce sparks and thereby start a fire.¹⁶ Barbara Tedlock (1985: 134–35) reports that K'oxol gives a diviner the ability to know the future and lost portions of the past by striking the diviner's body with his stone axe. This action awakens the diviner's blood so that the sheet lightning can communicate with him by the jumping of the blood. From K'oxol also the diviner may receive the *vara*, the bag for holding divining equipment. Connections between K'oxol's stone axe and lightning derive from ancient beliefs in the Maya area and greater Mesoamerica, in which the stone axe is the tool storm deities used to cause lightning, and various kinds of hafted blades are thought to have been created by lightning (Staller and Stross 2013: 173–75). Maya peoples differentiate many kinds of lightning, which they distinguish by colour. Of these the Red Lightning is the most powerful, and it was the Red Lightning that finally succeeded in splitting a mountain to release the Maize in the last creation (Staller and Stross 2013: 187). Finally, both Tedlock (1992: 147–48) and Cook (1986) identify K'oxol as a dwarf dressed in red. His small stature is another association with lightning, since as Staller and Stross demonstrate (2013:144), in Mesoamerica lightning and rain are generally considered to be produced by beings who are dwarves or who have dwarf assistants.

Of these two K'oxol variants, only the second, the lightning-maker, may be associated with Ajitz in the *Baile de la Conquista*. Like K'oxol, Ajitz is dressed in red and carries an axe. His red mask may also have axes carved on the forehead. Ajitz's divination is clearly inspired by K'oxol since he demonstrates that he feels the blood jumping in his leg. In this context it is likely that part of the inspiration for the Maya invention of Ajitz Chiquito is that he fulfilled the role of the dwarf assistant to a lightning-storm deity. And it cannot be a coincidence that the western K'iche' region, including *municipios* of Quetzaltenango, San Cristóbal Totonicapán, and Momostenango, where belief in the Red K'oxol is strongest and he is regularly seen at night in isolated places, is precisely the area in which the role of Ajitz in the *Baile de la Conquista* has expanded to the point that he becomes equal to or even superior in emphasis to Tekum.

Connection between the character Ajitz and the supernatural *K'oxol* is most commonly expressed through mutual reference by the term *Tzitzimitl*. *Tzitzimitl* (plural: *Tzitzimime*) is a Nahuatl term that

¹⁶ Thomas Hart (2008: 244) notes that the K'iche' can no longer recover the meaning of K'oxol, which they recognize only as a proper name.

in Aztec times referred to female supernaturals who carry abundant imagery of death. These supernaturals are associated with various death goddesses and at times also with the women who died in childbirth. As Klein (2000: 3–4) demonstrates, the Spanish clergy reinterpreted the *Tzitzimime* in line with Christian concepts. They associated the destructive, death imagery with the devil, in one instance identifying *Tzitzimime* with the Aztec *Mictlantecuhtli* (Lord of the Land of the Death) thus changing the *Tzitzimime*'s gender to male, as well as specifically relating them to Lucifer. In the text of the Conquest Dance, *Ajitz* is shown to be in league with the devil by referring to his "*amigo Lucifer*". It is likely then that the term *Tzitzimitl* came to be applied to *Ajitz* due to his association with the devil, whether the name was applied by friars who had previously proselytized in central Mexico or by Nahuatl speakers in Guatemala who descended from those making up the bulk of the invading Spanish armies. The name *Ajitz* was probably developed through collaboration of the Franciscan author with a *cacique* family in order to position Maya priestly activity as the work of the devil. The name has been translated as "he of sorcery"; Cook (1986: 143) also translates it as "one of evil," indicating that *Ajitz* is a witch. It is also possible that it was under the influence of the Franciscan author that *Ajitz*'s costume came to be red, since this is the colour associated with the Christian Devil. Indeed, in the Guatemalan Dance of the Devils, performers still wear red masks and costumes. However, Catholic priests also wear red robes.



Ajitz dances as the K'oxol. Momostenango. 2009.

I suggest therefore that over the centuries, *Ajitz* as *Tzitzimitl* came to be identified and ultimately conflated with the Red K'oxol, resulting in a very different, autochthonous interpretation of his red costume and axe. The extent of this merger is evident from reports that when the K'oxol is seen in some isolated place at night, he is dressed in red and dancing with an axe—just as *Ajitz* is seen in the *Baile de la Conquista*. At least some *Costumbristas* understand the historical process somewhat differently. Ernesto Ixcayauh understands *Ajitz* to have been the actual priest serving *Tekum*, who became an *encanto* after the events of the conquest narrated in the dance, as also did *Tekum* and *Rey K'iche'*.¹⁷

Though K'oxol in general is regarded with great ambivalence, the particular being who conflates *Ajitz*, *Tzitzimitl*, and the Red K'oxol is seen as much more positive. As Cook (2000: 120) notes, *Ajitz* may still be a witch for the Catholics but he has become a *Costumbrista* culture hero. More than this, the process of conflation has transformed *Ajitz* into an *encanto*, a sacred and powerful supernatural, the

¹⁷ Ernesto Ixcayauh Alvarado, personal communication, 2011.

visible embodiment of the K'oxol activated and made present through dance. Ernesto Ixcayauh is explicit about this relation, explaining that when he dances on the high platform, he is on a volcano, summoning, activating, and embodying the K'oxol.¹⁸ Some onlookers perceive Ajitz to be the *encanto* K'oxol. I have seen older members of the Momostenango community interact with Ajitz on the dance ground in the same way that is considered appropriate to interact with the K'oxol when encountered in an isolated locale that he inhabits. These men¹⁹ seek out Ajitz and give him an offering of money, most likely in the hopes that the K'oxol will reciprocate by bringing them prosperity. Don Ernesto also explained that when he dances Ajitz, the audience perceives him to be the Red K'oxol, and that on occasion women have felt themselves enchanted by the K'oxol and have propositioned him. I questioned how the audience might perceive an inferior Ajitz who, unlike Don Ernesto, allows himself to be completely dominated by the Spaniards. Don Ernesto responded that the audience would see such an occurrence as the dancer's deficiency, not the *encanto's*.²⁰

16.5. Misinterpretation of Ajitz's Role in Religious Resistance

The notion that after the events of the conquest, Ajitz became an *encanto*, living in the forest and hills away from human habitation, has been distorted in some recent literature. Beginning in 1983, Barbara Tedlock has several times published an interpretation that Ajitz went into the forest in order to avoid baptism and thus conserve native Maya religion (Tedlock 1983: 343; 1986: 134; 1992: 149–50). This interpretation has become popular with followers of Maya spirituality, who reject *Costumbre* because of its Christian elements, and with other Maya activists. For Tedlock, who has not separated the two K'oxol complexes as I have, the actions of the White K'oxol in the Popol Vuh provide a precedent for her interpretation, since he fled into the forest when the rising sun turned many gods and animals to stone.

Matthew Krystal (2012: 60, 73) has likewise interpreted the actions of Ajitz as a rejection of Christianity, noting that Ajitz does not appear in the final scene of baptism. However, Ajitz's absence is actually limited to San Cristóbal. In all other locations where I have seen the Conquest Dance, he is present for the baptism and closing dance. One explanation for San Cristóbal as an exception, as noted earlier, is that the final pages of the text are missing, so that performers are unaware of the speeches for Ajitz and Quirijol that end the work in other Cantel lineage texts. As this text is lacking, and as Ajitz does not have a solo dance in this section, nor does he act at this time in any way that affects the plot, he takes the opportunity to retire when he follows Tekum's coffin as it is carried onto the platform, the stage business for his burial.

¹⁸ Ernesto Ixcayauh Alvarado, personal communication, 2010.

¹⁹ I have only seen men perform this act.

²⁰ Ernesto Ixcayauh Alvarado, personal communication, 2011.



Ajitz in the closing dance line at Cunén, Joyabaj, Momostenango and Nebaj.

We can also examine texts and performances of the *Conquista* to investigate this problem of Ajitz's conversion or refusal to do so. In early style texts for the *Baile de la Conquista* as well as those of the Tecpán lineage, Ajitz's choice of religion is not an issue because he does not speak in the final scene in which Rey K'iche' and the *Caciques* opt in unison for baptism. In about half these texts, dedications to the Virgin Mary and local patron saint were added in which each character contributes a quatrain. In these Ajitz and Quirijol both speak with equal Christian fervor.

In the Cantel lineage texts as well as the *Dioses Inmortales* group, both composed at the end of the 19th century and modified as late as the mid-20th century, Ajitz and Quirijol share an epilogue in which they ponder the conclusion to the drama and send off the audience. In these epilogues, Ajitz's rejection or acceptance of Christianity does become an issue and he explains his choice. The basic Cantel lineage epilogue involves Ajitz commenting that all the population was baptized, with Quirijol adding that one of them became a devil, so people should be careful. Here there is a suggestion that Ajitz retired to the forest, though not that he rejected Christianity. Rather the final comment warning of danger suggests that Quirijol is instead referring to the merger of Ajitz with the Red K'oxol *encanto* who, if encountered, can bring good or ill. In contrast, Rey K'iche' and Tekum also became *encantos* but, lacking the K'oxol association, are not dangerous, nor can they provide equivalent benefits. In the Joyabaj text, also from the Cantel lineage, a different speech for Ajitz is substituted, one that also appears in Cunén lineage texts. In this version, Ajitz explicitly rejects his native religion and embraces Christianity. In performance at Joyabaj, Ajitz is reluctant to submit to baptism but, once the act is accomplished, he happily joins the others for the closing dances. The epilogue speeches in the *Dioses* lineage texts are more varied. In the Rabinal version, Ajitz explicitly rejects Christianity, saying that he will retire with his friend Lucifer (“*Yo me voy a retirar con mi amigo Lucifer*”), but in the Momostenango version this line is altered to say that he will throw away his Lucifer (“*Haré tirar mi Lucifer*”).²¹ In performance at Momostenango, the meaning of this line is made explicit by its accompanying gesture, as Ajitz throws down his axe. Considering that Tedlock's fieldwork centered in Momostenango, it is surprising that she ignored or misinterpreted the intent of the dance's ending in that community.



Ajitz throws down his axe. Momostenango. 2010.

²¹ The text from San Andres Xecul is composite: Ajitz speaks the *Dioses* version as in Rabinal, rejecting Christianity, while Ajitz Chiquito speaks the Joyabaj/Cunén version, embracing the new religion.

Considering text and performance together, it is clear that the more recent Cantel and *Dioses* lineage versions acknowledge the complexity involved in Tekum's priest accepting the new religion after he, like Tekum, had rejected it. The contrast of the Rabinal and Momostenango *Dioses* lineage versions, as well as the dissonance between Ajitz's words and actions at Joyabaj, attest to a logical ambivalence. But it should also be noted that only in the Rabinal text is Christianity overtly rejected and only in Joyabaj, among the five *municipios* in which I have viewed the dance, is there any ambivalence in Ajitz's gestures.

Krystal and Tedlock are certainly sincere in their view that Ajitz models resistance to Christianity. For both authors, I considered that their view might have arisen from their primary contacts with activist Maya K'iche' persons. Tedlock's argument that Ajitz retires to the woods to preserve Maya religion is placed within the context of a discussion of a story of the origin of some Momostecan religious institutions that was narrated to her in the late 1970s by Vicente de León Abac (1992:149; 1986:134). As noted earlier, Tedlock described León Abac as an activist, but for Maya traditions including *Costumbre*, hence Ajitz (as Tzitzimitl) figures strongly in the related story of the origin of *Costumbre* narrated to Cook by León Abac. In contrast, Krystal's source of information does make sense of his assertion that Ajitz rejected Christianity. Krystal (2001:156–68) describes the *morería* Nima' K'iche' in Totonicapán where he apprenticed, and the *morero* Chepe (José Yax Talo), as committed to Maya cultural activism, and notes this orientation profoundly affected his informants' often essentialist interpretations. It appears that for such activists, Ajitz has become an emblem of Maya "authenticity" and Indigenous Maya religious elements are preferred, while Christianity becomes the negative instrument of "acculturation." This view resonates with the Maya Spirituality movement which arose out of Maya cultural activism and which seeks to expunge all Christian elements from its rituals.

While I understand and appreciate the activist view of León Abac, Yax Talo and others, it is incorrect to state this view as fundamental to the Conquest Dance or in any way the intention of the original author or current performers. Instead, Ajitz and the *Baile de la Conquista* reenact the foundation story of *Costumbre* and thus an acceptance rather than rejection of Catholicism by *Costumbrista* participants who characterize themselves as Catholics. As Maury Hutcheson (2003:212) writes, "the dialogic reinscription of the *bailes* was not always, or even primarily, an effort to subvert and undermine the tropes of Christian faith, but rather to creatively engage with and come to understand these novel modes of thought." Ajitz's resistance, therefore, lies in his preservation, not his rejection, of the "Catholicized" Maya religion known as *Costumbre*.

As a character designed to represent an Indigenous Maya priesthood, Ajitz embodies both the opportunity and the obligation to model proper priestly behavior. This behavior has shifted from the negative view intended by the early colonial author to a highly positive view in the context of *Costumbre*, its story of origin, and the necessity of its persistence. Though none of the Ajitz performers I have seen in Momostenango is qualified to be a priest (*chuchkajaw*) in his everyday life, he

is called upon to fulfill this function for the *Conquista* dance team apart from his role in the drama. Thus Ajitz and Chiquito do not take off their masks for processions, as other dancers do. Ajitz is also expected to light a candle in the church before every performance of the dance, as part of his responsibility to ensure the safety of the dance team and thereby the successful completion of the dance as an offering to Patrón Santiago. Then, either climbing the high platform or proceeding to the centre of the dance ground, he should pray to the four directions before taking part in the dance drama. These actions parallel the mountaintop *costumbres* performed by the *chuchkajaw* for the dance team before the *feria* begins. Thus wearing the costume and performing in the festival dance during the *feria* bestows upon the Ajitz performer the powers of a priest which he uses directly for the benefit of the team, but indirectly for the benefit of the community, in part through his identification with the K'oxol.



Ajitz prays at the centre of the dance ground before the performance starts. Momostenango, 2009.

At the same time that Ajitz serves as a priest in the present for the benefit of his team, he also relives the events of the Spanish invasion, since as part of his responsibility on the high platform he uses a rock crystal to search the four directions and divine the direction from which the invading army will advance. These gestures not only demonstrate *Costumbre's* maintenance of Indigenous religious practice while embracing Christian elements, but they also conflate historic actions of Ajitz with the present office of a *chuchkajaw*, thereby further demonstrating the continuity of this religion from pre-Hispanic stages to the present. For the period of the *feria* and especially for the duration of the dance, Ajitz is simultaneously the 16th century and 21st century priest. I believe this linkage would occur even were he not identified with the K'oxol, due to the ability of any ritual drama to conflate past and present. But my point here is that through this merged identification of past and

present, of Ajitz and K'oxol, the Ajitz performer becomes an archetypal *Costumbrista* priest, responsible for the religion's origin, development, and perseverance.

As noted in the narrative of the dance at Momostenango, Ajitz's prayers for the dance team involve both introduced Christian gestures such as kneeling with the hands raised and palms joined, and Indigenous Maya gestures such as dancing to embody and activate the *encanto*, with each of these two gestures repeated for the four directions. Ajitz again repeats both gestures of worship to re-sanctify his divination table. I have noted other ways in which elements of Catholic and Indigenous origin are juxtaposed in *Costumbrista* practice, such the Maya divination calendar of 260 days and the Catholic liturgical calendar, or the design in sugar that underlies an offering fire on Mount Kanchavox,

overlooking San Cristóbal Totonicapán, composed of three crosses plus an element representing the day in the Maya calendar on which the offering takes place. I have wondered whether the distinct origins of these religious gestures and other practices are recognized by *Costumbristas* or whether such a distinction is merely an outsider or etic viewpoint. Applying his model of layered history to Jakaltek Maya society, Thompson (2001: 84, 91) argues that such distinct origins are recognized by Maya people as aspects of a history of conflictual relations between Maya insiders and non-Maya outsiders, and therefore that *Costumbre* can not be considered syncretic. One could further apply his model of layered histories and multi-valent symbols to suggest that the dual gestures of Ajitz represent a kind of peaceful coexistence of the two religious traditions, rather than conflict arising from the push-and-pull of dominance and resistance expressed in other symbols and practices as part of the variety of messages the Conquest Dance is capable of conveying. This approach is not in overt conflict with the earlier discussion of *Costumbre* as arising from Indigenous Maya religion embracing Catholic elements, but it is contrary to *Costumbristas'* self-identification as Catholics. Thompson's and my etic views are the result of concern with the historical evolution of Maya society and religion since the Spanish invasions, while for many *Costumbristas* history collapses into an opposition between an improper religion before conversion to Catholicism and followers of the true path thereafter.

16.6. Continuities with Pre-Hispanic Maya Religion

Identification of pre-Hispanic elements in contemporary *Costumbre* is a worthwhile task as a means to counter the Ladino population's view, also accepted by many Maya, that the ancient "Maya" have little to do with current "*Indios*." But this task is fraught with the danger of ahistorical equations between ancient and contemporary Maya, sometimes erasing more than a thousand years of intervening history, a process of denying cultural evolution that Peter Hervik (1999) has called the "continuity trope." Rather than being content with finding similarities between the ancient past and the present, it is necessary to trace historical developments.



Masks of Tekum, Tzunun, and Ajitz. San Cristóbal.

For example, Matthew Krystal (2001) has argued that the Conquest Dance serves as a repository of pre-Hispanic religious knowledge. Among other evidence Krystal summons to support this theory, he cites the use of pre-Hispanic religious imagery in Conquest Dance masks—specifically the quetzal of Tekum, hummingbird of Tzunun, and axe of Ajitz. However, identifying these contemporary design elements as representing a continuity from pre-Hispanic times is problematic when their histories of use in the Conquest Dance cannot be demonstrated. Rather the little historical information we have on the dance and the masks of these three personages may argue against Krystal’s interpretation.

To start, the depiction of a quetzal on Tekum’s mask and in his headdress cannot be documented before 1900. As noted in an earlier discussion, descriptions of Tekum’s duel with Alvarado in the three *títulos* either specify an eagle form or simply a bird for Tekum’s *nawal*. It was Fuentes y Guzmán who, in the late 17th century, introduced the possibility that the *nawal* was a quetzal rather than an eagle, and following chroniclers also remained undecided. Not until 1887–1888 is there any documentation of a connection forged between Tekum and the quetzal.

Other mask images cited by Krystal arise from different histories. Tzunun’s hummingbird corresponds to the meaning of his name in K’iche’. The rays surrounding his mask resonate with pre-Hispanic solar associations of the hummingbird especially from Nahuatl speaking peoples such as the Tlaxcalans who came with the Alvarados, and from whom he likely acquired his other name, Huitzitzil. Eric Thompson (1970) assembled a large number of ethnographically recorded Maya stories of the sun taking the form of a hummingbird to woo the Moon, but this story is not evident from pre-Hispanic visual imagery. In contrast, Ajitz’s axe resonates with many pre-Hispanic representations of deities of lightning and rain storm. Most likely Ajitz acquired the axe when he merged with the Red K’oxol, a lightning-maker. Thus Krystal’s argument that the Conquest Dance serves as a repository of pre-Hispanic knowledge becomes speculative without sufficient historical evidence.

In contrast, considering that Ajitz's role in the Conquest Dance has come to signify Indigenous Maya religion as it continues in the form of *Costumbre*, his introduced pantomimes provide an opportunity for transmission of more profound elements that have maintained their place in Maya religious belief and practice since early pre-Hispanic times. In the discussion of Tekum's developing character, I amplified Cook's argument concerning a hidden transcript of Tekum's cyclic return to resist oppression, structured according to a widespread and deeply rooted paradigm of transformation in which a male character's destruction or death is followed by rebirth or renewal in a more powerful state in which he is able to defeat his adversaries. Cook rightly drew on the saga of the Hero Twins in the *Popol Vuj* to analyze this paradigm and connect it with the adversarial relationship between Tekum and Alvarado, and I argued that the same paradigm structures the *Costumbrista* dramatization for Holy Week in Santiago Atitlán. As noted earlier, the saga of the Hero Twins is likely the transcription of a dance-drama, which brings it closer to the analysis of the *Baile de la Conquista*. Another comparison would be the *B'alam Keej* or Jaguar Deer, a K'iche' language dance-drama performed in Rabinal. Maury Hutcheson's (2003: 475–89) narrative of the action for this dance may be analyzed to reveal a similar paradigmatic structure: hunters who are destroyed by a jaguar's magic are revived by a woman and in their stronger, renewed state are able to overcome the jaguar and successfully hunt a deer.

In his research on the Books of Chilam Balam, written in Yucatán during the colonial period, Timothy Knowlton (2010) has shown that Maya authors were best able to maintain pre-Hispanic religious concepts under colonial domination when they could be understood to parallel newly introduced Catholic religious concepts. The Catholic story of Christ's death, three-day sojourn in the underworld, and subsequent resurrection would have been an obvious comparison to the Indigenous paradigm of solar-maize transformation as illustrated, for example, in the saga of the Hero Twins in the *Popol Vuj*. The drama of Semana Santa at Santiago Atitlán builds on this parallel. Here I argue that a pantomime carried out by Ajitz, which I have only seen in Momostenango, employs this same paradigm for a dramatic purpose directly related to the Spanish conquest and its reverberations throughout subsequent Maya history to the present. It is perhaps not surprising that Ajitz would enact this paradigm in Momostenango, considering that Tekum's role is secondary to that of Ajitz in this *municipio*.

Ajitz's transformation from destruction to renewal is not overt in Momostenango's *Conquista*; rather it is expressed through his divination table, an object that was shown to act as a surrogate or distributed personhood for Ajitz during the second part of the drama. In both Momostenango and San Cristóbal, the Ambassadors combat Ajitz's powers by destroying the sacredness and thus the ritual function of his table and divination equipment. They conclude by stacking the chairs on the table, rendering it unusable. In San Cristóbal, Ajitz's restoration of the table by cleaning the garbage, setting the table upright, and arranging the chairs and the cloth, are all performed with humorous pantomime. But at

Momostenango, the resanctification pantomime is serious and is marked by continuation of the music from the dance by which Ajitz returned from his brief dialogue with Tekum.



Sequence for resanctification of table. Momostenango.

In Momostenango, as he discovers the desecration of his table on returning from his audience with Tekum, Ajitz begins to pantomime remaking the table. He first uses his axe to tap the four corners of the table as if hammering in nails, an act that Cook noted is cosmologically significant in its reference to the four cardinal directions.²² Next, Ajitz dances before the remade table and then jumps over it from east to west. He dances again and jumps over the table again from west to east. Note that in other communities, Ajitz jumps over the table when the Ambassadors first encounter him, since in the text they tell him to stop hopping (like a goat). But in Momostenango, this act of jumping has been postponed and resignified to represent part of the process of resanctification. His jumps, of course, follow the path of the sun, both diurnal and nocturnal. Ajitz also kneels on the resanctified table with hands raised and palms together in the Christian posture of prayer. He then stands and dances on the table with axe upraised, applying Indigenous methods of communication with and activation of the supernatural, and thus also mirroring the combination of Christian and Maya prayer gestures performed on the high platform. As noted earlier, great emphasis is placed on maintaining the table at the exact centre of the dance ground. Therefore, I suggest that when he is standing on the table, Ajitz occupies the position of the world axis between the four cardinal directions. In using his body to create this world axis, Ajitz reorders the cosmos, an act that Cook (2000: 107–08) considers an essential component of what he terms the “sunrise” transformation, and that I have connected with Jesucristo’s visit to the four directional shrines after his defeat of Rilaj Mam at Santiago Atitlan. This reordering completes the resanctification of the table, so that when Ajitz steps down from it, the music stops, and the standard *Conquista* narrative continues.

²² Personal communication, 2009.



Ajitz defends Tekum's coffin. Momostenango. 2009.

Evidence that Ajitz has been transformed through the renewal of his divination table is seen in his changed relationship to the Ambassadors. As noted in the concluding discussion on texts for the *Baile de la Conquista*, adapting the Franciscan play to Maya tastes involved, among other things, depiction of consistent characters that are brought into interactions that both further define their characterizations and advance the narrative. The relationship between

Ajitz and the Ambassadors has been modified in performance to perform these tasks. In his initial meeting with the Ambassadors, Ajitz is attacked, and at Momostenango even complains to Tekum that they have severely beaten him. Ajitz and the Ambassadors thus enact a highly asymmetrical, polarized relation of power in which Spaniards are dominant, providing a taste of what is to happen if the K'iche' are defeated. But following his renewal of the table Ajitz dominates and humiliates the Ambassadors. This change is evident in other localities as well, despite absence of this resanctification pantomime. For example, in some performances at Joyabaj, when the Ambassadors encounter Ajitz they attack him and drag him by his arms, whereas after their interview with Tekum, Ajitz grabs their arms and shoves them away. The widespread humiliation of the Ambassadors with the reeking blindfold cloths tied over their faces also shows that the power relationship is still polarized but now with K'iche' dominant. The general emphasis on bringing contrasting characters into conflict, and the specific emphasis on using Ajitz's interaction with the Spaniards to demonstrate extreme differentials of power, also explains a deviation from the text in the Ambassador scene. Whereas the Ambassadors' lines demonstrate willing compliance with the blindfold demands in order to fulfill their mission, in San Cristóbal they are literally dragged to their interview with Tekum. At Momostenango, the importance of Ajitz's spiritual renewal continues to affect the drama, since the Spaniards continue to test Ajitz's powers, as in the search for the hidden *vara* in Part II and the defense of Tekum's coffin in Part IV.

This scene of sanctification-transformation reveals another shift away from the more standard construction of Tekum as the main defender in the *Baile de la Conquista* in Momostenango. In the colonial text, Tekum's interview with the ambassadors, in which they deliver the terms of submission according to the legal document known as the *Requerimiento*, is the pivot of the action. Tekum's choice to resist rather than submit sets in motion and predetermines the course of the rest of the drama. But 20th century modifications, especially in the Cantel lineage texts and likely in pantomimes even apart from their use, expand the depiction of Tekum's heroism by introducing his firm commitment to resist early in the drama, so that his rejection of these Spanish demands becomes predictable and anticlimactic. In Momostenango, the Ambassadors' interview with Tekum is further

overshadowed by Ajitz's extemporized pantomimes involving the humiliation of the Spaniards, treating Tekum as his straight man, or raising the ransom for Chiquito. Furthermore, in the battle segment at Momostenango, the duel between Tekum and Alvarado, signaled by the *cruzada* format, is eliminated. Instead, Alvarado and Tekum are merely matched in skirmishes because they are at the head of their respective forces. With this diminution of Tekum's role as adversary and resister of Alvarado and other Spaniards, a space is opened up not only to magnify Ajitz's role but also to shift the pivot point of the drama. I argue that the pivot is now Ajitz's symbolic transformation and renewal through re-sanctification of his divination table, and that the central importance of this pantomime is marked by the unique continuation of music throughout the sequence—a combination that does not occur elsewhere in the Momostenango performance and that I have not seen in any other community.²³

In Momostenango the *Baile de la Conquista* is largely Ajitz's show, allowing him abundant opportunities for comedy, satire, and interaction with the audience. Acting as synecdoche for *Costumbre*, representing the religion of which he is but one practitioner, Ajitz's significance is broadened. Thus we may consider that Ajitz does not merely renew and strengthen his own powers through re-sanctifying his divination table; rather, by these means he renews and strengthens *Costumbre*. In taking over Tekum's function of resister and antagonist of Alvarado, Ajitz shifts the role of K'iche' defender from defense of the kingdom to defense of Maya identity and tradition as they are bound up in *Costumbre*. If Ajitz's transformation thus becomes the pivot of the dance-drama, perhaps it also predetermines the remainder of the action. The meaning of this hidden transcript would then be that it is not the fate of the K'iche' but the invaders' fate that has been determined: Maya tradition and the religion of *Costumbre*, as signified by Ajitz, will triumph by surviving while outsiders remain powerless to erase it.

16.7. Conclusions

As discussed in chapter 9, performance of the *Baile de la Conquista* involves the use of two chronotopes or space-time constructs. One chronotope is derived from the text and involves a logic of progression. For its spatial logic, the three main sides of the dance ground represent three different locations, requiring dance circuits for personages to move from one of these locations to another. The temporal logic as constructed by the original text involves a narrative sequence that tells the story of an event in the past (Alvarado's victory over the K'iche' army) that is designed to help achieve a result in the future (universal baptism). This chronotope or progression also affects the development of character, and in the *Baile de la Conquista* the character of important personages evolves as more information is revealed and different groups interact according to an historical sequence of actions.

²³ Music is also played throughout the battle skirmishes, but these are normally choreographed so that they function as dances. In Momostenango, admittedly, the battle choreography is looser than elsewhere.

The second chronotope was likely not intended by the Franciscan author of the play and has instead been formulated over the centuries by Maya contributions in the form of pantomime. This chronotope involves a logic of co-presence, articulated through conflation or flattening of space, time, and character. In terms of space, personages are able to walk freely among the different locations to interact with others who by the textual chronotope would not be visible or reachable without travel through space and time. As noted earlier, this co-present staging allows Ajitz at Momostenango to take the Ambassador's sword at the lookout position, walk over to shave Tekum, then walk again to insult Alvarado with the shavings. Or in the battle scene at Joyabaj it allows Tekum to hide from Alvarado behind Rey K'iche' or with the musicians. In San Cristóbal the difference between the two chronotopes is shown in the relation of Ajitz's temple platform to Tekum's palace platform. In the prologue, in accord with the chronotope of progression, Ajitz must dance from temple to palace. But when Ajitz disputes with Tzunun in part three, in accord with the chronotope of co-presence, they call back and forth between the two platforms.



Ajitz shaves Tekum. Momostenango, 2009.

In addition to pantomime, the chronotope of co-presence has also had a limited affect on the use of dance for travel, since it allows the Spaniards to observe protocol by visiting the royal palace at Q'umarcaaj "on the way to" Tekum's headquarters in Quetzaltenango. A temporal conflation or collapse of time allows the Ajitz performer to become both an ancient and contemporary priest within the space-time of performance. For Don Ernesto, it allows dancers to make the ancestors present, and in Momostenango it allows Ajitz to use this story of the past to draw the audience into a common purpose in the present. The combination of temporal and spatial conflation allows Ajitz to angrily confront the musicians for responding to Alvarado's request for martial instruments to sound.

This temporal collapse also affects the relation of character to drama. As made clearer by modifications to the text after 1870 that involve "catching up" to already conventional pantomimes, temporal collapse results in the availability of all information from the beginning, so that character arcs of the original text are flattened. The narrative unfolds not through character evolution but through a series actions and interactions involving personages who act as foils for one another. This desire to present the outcome of the drama as if present from its beginning may also explain why the light-skinned masks worn throughout the dance by royal court members anticipate their culminating conversion.

Temporal collapse is not merely a formal technique for structuring drama but also an important functional tool that is basic to much ritual behavior and particularly the dramatization of foundational

events from the past. In this type of ritual drama, the ancient transformative event is not being *re-enacted* but actually *enacted*, since performers do not *represent* ancient actors but instead *embody* or become them. To explain why ritual enactments may work through the conflation of past and present time, we may again draw on Alfred Gell's theory of distributed being. The performance of a story, such as the fatal confrontation of Tekum and Alvarado, functions as an "image" or "semblance" of those events, though unfolding through time as well as in space.²⁴ Any image of a thing allows it to function as that thing's distributed being. And through distributed patency, this thing may be affected by the creation and manipulation of its image. By means of this relationship of distributed patency, performing an ancient event becomes that event. But at the same time, it opens that event itself to manipulation, not only of its specific elements but also its meanings. Thus as a performance of the Dance of the Conquest enacts the K'iche' military defeat and conversion, it also enables a variety of meanings to be drawn from these events that allow the dance to remain current in its significance.

Through this manipulation, and through the very process of conflating past and present, multiple levels of meaning become possible. And we have seen these multiple levels in details such as the rattle (*plato*) that also acts as a shield and in addition can become a coin purse for a comic pantomime at Joyabaj, or the flag that becomes a lance and then a sword in battle scenes. But these multi-leveled and expandable meanings work more importantly on a broader level to sort out the potential contradiction of the story that arose from changing historical circumstances. While initially formulated to justify invasion and encourage conversion, the story has come to be understood to narrate the origin and continuation of conditions of oppression that must be resisted, while at the same time narrating the foundation and ongoing need for defense of *Costumbre*, the religion of those who perform the Conquest Dance. This flexibility and multivalence of meaning has enabled Maya communities for centuries to find continuing relevance in the Conquest Dance and thereby to articulate resistance to changing circumstances of threat and oppression.

Such resistance must be built on the bedrock of a shared group identity, which is strengthened and renewed through the retelling of a shared history. The fact that at Momostenango Ajitz, the religious figure, takes over from Tekum the primary role of resisting oppression, shows how important religion can be for constructing a unified Maya identity from which resistance can be launched. This is further demonstrated by Ajitz's opposite, the currently expanding Maya spirituality movement that repudiates all Christian aspects and formed a religious base for Maya activism in the late years of the war and in

²⁴ Applying Gell's terms for the components of the art nexus, the 1524 events would be identified as the prototype and the current performance as the index. These terms rely on making a distinction between prototype and index that Gell's theory of iconism subsequently collapses. However, while I argued in chapter 12 that the performing dancers are icons of the *primeros* or ancestors that laid the foundations of human society, I would not argue that the dance is an icon of the 1524 event. Rather I would point out that the use of semblance as a means to construct distributed being (distributed personhood in Gell's terminology) is the basis not only of iconism but also of other practices, and especially ritual practices.

the post-war period. As noted, some who belong to or express sympathies toward the Maya Spirituality movement have attempted to rehabilitate Ajitz by asserting that, like them, he rejected Christianity. But we have seen that Ajitz articulates Maya resistance to assimilation and adherence to *Costumbre* as a continuity of heritage, belief and practice between pre-Hispanic and present times—a continuity that is often, for equally political reasons, vehemently denied by non-Maya.

Through pantomimes of divination and the re-sanctification of his divining table, Ajitz demonstrates that the Maya religion known as *Costumbre* is Indigenous, proper and continuing. This message is possible because *Costumbre* has also embraced Catholic elements to the point that *Costumbristas* consider themselves Catholic and in some cases the truest Catholics. While the original Spanish text is proselytizing and looks forward to future baptisms, this subsequent Maya adaptation is foundational and looks back to the origins of *Costumbre* through the deeds of the ancestors. Ajitz thus demonstrates that in terms of religion (in addition to other aspects of tradition) Spanish intrusion and imposition of Catholicism entails not rupture but continuity. Maya civilization was not lost before or during the Spanish invasion as is often claimed—though it did change and continues to do so.

Thus, for all three fundamental messages of the *Baile de la Conquista*—acceptance of Christianity in the form of *Costumbre*, rejection of oppression, and shared identity—Ajitz has become the nexus.

While the Franciscan author of the *Baile de la Conquista* based much of his story on the history of the war with the K'iche', as recorded in Alvarado's letter of May, 1524, and in the K'iche' *títulos* of the mid-16th century, he invented the two *gracejos*: Quirijol and Ajitz. He drew Quirijol's character as a straightforward example of the *gracioso* in *siglo de oro* theatre. But he constructed Ajitz as a dual character. On the one hand the character of Ajitz continues the *gracioso* tradition in his portrayal as cowardly and servile. On the other hand, to serve the function of the dance-drama as a "theatre of conversion," the author used Ajitz to represent a pagan religion, in league with the devil, a religion that the author presumed would disappear when the population had converted to Catholicism. The author's condemnation of Maya religion appears in the name chosen for the character—Ajitz is K'iche' for "sorcerer" —as well as in the characterization of Ajitz as goat-like, one of the devil's minions. The author and other contemporaneous missionaries likely assumed that such evangelizing dances would also disappear as the population converted and proselytizing ceased to be necessary. But Maya communities have taken on the Conquest Dance as a tradition that must be upheld to maintain practices laid down by their ancestors and thereby sanctified.

As Maya, and particularly K'iche', communities have performed the Conquest dance over four centuries, they have guided its evolution towards resistance rather than compliance, even if this resistance has for long been a covert, hidden transcript. In the centuries prior to the Liberal revolution of 1871, Maya *maestros* and performers have adapted this Spanish play to Maya purposes primarily through development and expansion of Ajitz's pantomimed actions. Ajitz's pantomimed narrative has added

several new layers of meaning to the now antique story. Ajitz has thus been accorded the task of communicating a variety of messages, some overt and some hidden, that ensure relevance to the Maya in their evolving position within Guatemalan society. This amplification of Ajitz's importance to the dance-drama varies depending on locality, and in my admittedly limited experience his extreme prominence at Momostenango represents the exception.

Earlier it was noted that the *Baile de la Conquista* involves simultaneous performance of comedy and tragedy, seamlessly interwoven. It should be clear now that the tragic component arises from the text and its chronotope of spatial, temporal and character progressions, while the comic component arises from pantomime and its chronotope of spatial, temporal and character co-presence. While the tragic component focuses on Tekum and the script provided for him by the Franciscan author, the comic component focuses on Ajitz and arises from a centuries-long evolution of pantomime. This contrast occurs in all the *municipios* studied, so difference lies in where the locally evolved emphasis has been placed. For example, in performances at Joyabaj, Tekum's heroic resistance carries the most weight, while in Momostenango Ajitz's comic aggression is the focus.

Concerning the original intention that Ajitz represent a doomed pagan religion, these pantomimes, to locally varying degrees, have inverted his character. Ajitz has been transformed from cowardly to courageous, from servile to noble, and from doomed devil-worshipper to triumphant *Costumbrista*. Through challenging, harassing, humiliating and demeaning the Spaniards, Ajitz is tasked with modeling an aggressive resistance to oppression, whether imposed by Spaniards of the past or the national government and foreign enterprises of the present. In Momostenango, Spanish resistance through pantomime is also ramped up, leading to extended scenes involving Ajitz's violent confrontation with the Ambassadors and the rescue of Chiquito from Alvarado. Ajitz's message of resistance is still couched in considerable comedy, as typical of hidden subordinate transcripts, but since the signing of the peace accords in 1996, conditions in Maya communities have altered to the point that such resistance can be presented more openly, even violently, though still with some degree of deniability.

The initial formulation of the character of Ajitz by the unknown Franciscan author carried within it the seeds for this subsequent transformation. Though filling the dramatic niche of the *gracejo* or buffoon, the author made Ajitz a Maya priest in order to let him represent the evils and supposedly inevitable doom of a pagan religion. Despite being a second-tier character in terms of the number of lines and his influence on the action of the drama, this combination of priest and buffoon gave Ajitz a complexity and three-dimensionality that was equal to the character of the first-tier personages (Tekum, Rey K'iche', Alvarado) and that could be further developed through pantomime. In addition, while both *gracejos*, Ajitz and Quirijol, were also given the role of sentry in the original text, Ajitz fulfilled that function at the high point of the drama, and in a crucial interaction between K'iche' and Spaniard that allowed for a reversal of power, so that despite the short text for this scene it is extended

to a full hour in performances at Momostenango. This reversal also provided the foundation for transforming Ajitz from a cowardly buffoon to a courageous defender of his society and its religion. Ajitz's ability to interact with the audience has also allowed him to expand into the role of policing the audience.

Ajitz's courage and performance of the religious obligation of divination is not everywhere equally prominent. From my experience viewing the *Baile de la Conquista* in five *municipios*, Ajitz's role as a religious practitioner is least emphasized in the Joyabaj, Cunén, and Nebaj where instead Tekum's heroism is foregrounded through the doubled combat sequence. In contrast Ajitz's role as the embodiment of *Costumbre* is more detailed and focal in San Cristóbal Totonicapán and Momostenango where he also takes on a more heroic role in dominating the Spanish Ambassadors in a scene that is both expanded and exaggerated for comic effect. The complexity of Ajitz's character is further expanded at Momostenango where Ajitz is not only the priestly character of the 16th century but also acts as the priest for the current dance team, praying for their safety and success in the church, in the dance ground, and on his high platform.

Over time, and especially in the western K'iche' area that includes Momostenango and San Cristóbal Totonicapán, Ajitz's importance has increased through his identification with the powerful *encanto* known as the Red K'oxol, a being that many envision precisely as Ajitz in the Conquest Dance. For Momostecans, when Ajitz dances, waving his axe, on the high platform representing his temple on the mountain, he is simultaneously and fully both Ajitz and K'oxol, another of the many confluences that multiply the dance's messages. Expansion of Ajitz's role in these two *municipios* may be due to the greater importance in the western K'iche' region of the *K'oxol* with whom Ajitz is identified; but it may also be due to *Costumbre* being under greater threat of diminution, as revealed by the reduced number, importance, and contribution of the *cofradías* to the *feria*, in contrast to the much more prominent *feria* contributions of multiple *cofradías* in those *municipios* where Ajitz's is less prominent. If indeed Ajitz's role has been magnified in the western *municipios* in response to greater threats to *Costumbre*, it would support my interpretation that the hidden subordinate transcript of Ajitz's contribution to performances of *la Conquista* is intended to express a strong defense of *Costumbre* against practitioners of those other religions that are ideologically committed to its disappearance.

In 2009, Ernesto Ixcayauh remarked to me that “*El corazón de la fiesta es la Conquista; y el corazón de la Conquista es el Ajitz...*” (the



Ernesto Ixcayauh embodying Ajitz-K'oxol. Momostenango, 2009.

Conquest Dance is the heart of the *feria*, and Ajitz is the heart of the Conquest Dance). While recognizing that Don Ernesto speaks from the viewpoint of a Momostecan who dances Ajitz, I believe his point has greater relevance for two reasons. On the one hand, the Conquest Dance is the heart of the *feria*, the annual *Costumbrista* celebration, because it narrates, or indeed *enacts*, the origin of *Costumbre*. And Ajitz is the heart of the Conquest Dance because he exemplifies *Costumbre*, not only in its origin and in its continuing relevance and importance but also in the need to aggressively defend it against external threats. Whether or not the reason for the attempted cancellation of the Momostenango *feria* in 2009 was due to Evangelical loyalties of the mayor and council, *Costumbristas* perceived it to be so, thus articulating their awareness of the danger to *Costumbre* traditions that proselytizing religions represent. On the other hand, and in broader terms, Ajitz is central to the *Baile de la Conquista* because he is the focus of pantomime, and pantomime is what has Indigenized it, allowing it to express Maya values, beliefs, and resistance, and enabling it to remain current and meaningful. At Momostenango in particular, but elsewhere to a lesser degree, Ajitz is the heart of resistance. This is likely why adherents to the equally resistant Maya Spirituality movement have sought to appropriate and reconfigure Ajitz as the antagonist of Christianity.