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Chapter 2: Costumbre: The Religious Context of Maya Festival Dancing

This chapter concerns the context in which the Conquest dance is performed in Maya municipios of Guatemala, and particularly the four K'iche' municipios in which research for this study took place. Topics to be considered include the Maya religion called Costumbre, and its three components as laid out by Cook: divination, cofradías, and dance teams. Divination will be considered only briefly as this institution is not as directly related to festival dance as are the other two. Cofradías are the long-standing religious confraternities charged with the care, honouring, propitiation and renewal of a particular saint. Dance teams are often temporary affiliations for the purpose of performance at the patron saint festival or other Catholic liturgical (e.g. Holy Week, Corpus Christi) ritual in a particular year. The fiesta patronal or patron saint festival, often referred to as the feria, will be considered as the temporally specific ritual context in which the Conquista is now normally performed. Those contextual aspects that relate festival dances generally, rather than being specific to the Baile de la Conquista will constitute a particular focus. Those aspects that relate to the Conquista in general, rather than to its iterations in different municipios, will occupy the first chapter of part II of this volume.

2.1. Costumbre

The religion practiced by a large number of Maya peoples in Guatemala, and before the late 19th century by most of them, has been called by various names. Dancers with whom I have spoken and who are practitioners of this religion call themselves Catholic. Anthropologists have often referred to the religion as folk Catholicism. A term particularly relevant to the beliefs and practices of this religion is “Costumbre.” This term translates into English as “custom” but it has a more particular and profound significance than simple translation would suggest. For practitioners, the term refers to offerings made to supernatural entities including saints and ancestors. By extension the term indicates the obligations that the living have to perform such offerings and other practices that maintain the rituals and institutions laid down by their ancestors and through such practices to continually renew the world and society. As among many Indigenous Americans, ancestors, though their biological life has ceased, remain socially alive and part of the family of their descendants, closely involved in their activities and able to affect their health and welfare both directly and as intermediaries to supernatural entities of broader significance (Rojas Lima 1986).

2.1.1. Origins of Costumbre

John Early (2006) provides a detailed, cogent and enlightening—if at times problematic—account of the origin and nature of Costumbre in relation to pre-Hispanic Maya religion, disputing application of the model of syncretism as the union of two religions to produce a blended third. As a basis for his
argument, Early (2006: 61–70) analyzes the general tenets that characterized pre–Hispanic religion in the Maya regions and that may be understood by comparison of information from archaeological (pre–Hispanic), ethnohistorical (conquest period) and ethnographic (19th–21st centuries) sources. Early (2006: 255) identifies Indigenous Maya religion as pantheistic—neither mono- nor poly-theistic—due to a belief in a creative cosmic force from which emanate distinct personalities designed to do different kinds of work in the world. These plural entities, like humans, celestial bodies, animals, plants, and the physical universe, are all bound by a cycle of birth, death, and regeneration. This universal cycle is explained by Carlsen and Prechtel (1991: 26) using the terms of the Maya Tzutujil of Santiago Atitlán, as an alternation of material growth (jal) and spiritual replacement (k’ex). For example, in human life a person is born, matures, ages and dies as part of a material growth system, but after death spiritual forces are required to ensure that the deceased is replaced by his or her own grandchild, thus allowing the same human entity to begin again, and turning what in western religions is often considered a one-directional linear progress into a cycle of renewal. Similarly a maize plant grows and the ear of maize ripens and dries out, followed by planting of the dried kernels. But in the ground that bone-like seed, through supernatural intervention is replaced by a new sprout to renew the cycle. Whether a human is renewed in the womb or the maize underground, the spiritual phase of replacement is not materially visible. It takes place in a realm that to the waking eye is invisible, often associated with night and dreams but able to be enacted through ritual.

This unseen world is populated by those emanations referred to as deities, as well as by ancestors, animals, and other forces. This is an animist ontology in which all things in nature or the environment are alive because they are animated by a form of life that is distinctly anthropomorphic in its potential for communication, volition, and fulfillment of intention. The seen and unseen worlds must remain in balance through the continuity of the cycle of jal and k’ex and this perpetuation is made possible by reciprocity between the two realms. Biologically living humans make offerings to nourish those entities of the unseen world who work the k’ex transformation, and in return those entities provide food, health, and other aspects of prosperity to living humans. These offerings, called costumbres, include candles, incense, and often some combination of tobacco, liquor, and flowers. These offerings are made at places considered sacred because they are understood as points of interface between the seen and unseen realms, such as springs, mountain tops, and especially caves. The offerings are burned in a fire that is often laid out on a drawing in sugar. The fire transforms the offerings into a form that can nourish the sacred beings to whom the offering is dedicated, and it carries to those beings the request for reciprocation whether for individual or community welfare. When the biologically-alive are remiss in their reciprocal obligations, entities of the unseen world respond negatively, as with drought or sickness, evidence of the resulting imbalance.

A final underlying tenet of Costumbre in Early’s analysis is the history that links biologically living persons to their ancestors from the recent dead all the way back to the first ancestors, the first humans created in the most recent cosmos. These first ancestors, such as the four K’iche’ ancestors, whose
fashioning from ground maize and water is narrated in the *Popol Vuj*, learned about their obligations directly from the divine emanations that were responsible for their creation. Before these first ancestors disappeared back into the unseen world by means of sacred locations in the landscape, they transmitted this knowledge to their descendants. This knowledge has continued to be transmitted in an unbroken stream to the present. Thus biologically living *Costumbristas* preserve the balance and thus the existence of the cosmos by maintaining the ritual practices learned from their immediate forebears and originally laid down by their most remote ancestors. As the ancestors participate in the same unseen realm and with related powers to the divine beings, they too must be propitiated and honoured with offerings. So *Costumbristas* doubly honour their ancestors, both by maintaining the practices they taught and by providing the spiritual nourishment of *costumbres*, the burnt offerings.

Early also attempts to understand *Costumbre* through an historical investigation, particularly of the conditions under which it developed as early as the mid–16th century. He (Early 2006: 197) argues that Maya people’s first experience of Catholicism would have been visual: banners carried by invading armies, commonly displaying the cross of Santiago or the Virgin Mary. Maya who viewed these images would not understand the stories behind them, but when the Spanish were victorious they would likely surmise that these supernaturals had aided the invaders and indeed had defeated the Maya supernatural protectors, thus demonstrating their superior spiritual power. Some Maya, and particularly the leaders, would then be open to adopting such powerful supernatural patrons for their own protection and success.

Those missionary friars (regular orders) who accompanied invasions or followed soon after were first anxious to baptize as many of the inhabitants as possible in part because this act was understood as a demonstration of obedience to the crown and church. Friars learned quickly that they should aim their tactics at the leaders—those who came to be called *caciques*—because those who accepted the authority of these persons would submit to baptism as well (Early 2006: 173). But by the mid–16th century friars became intent on teaching the tenets of Christianity to elicit what they hoped was full and informed conversion. However their primary instigation for teaching often involved young Indigenous Guatemalans learning what they needed in order to pass the friar’s examination and thus be permitted to marry (Early 2006: 142).

Early (2006: 124–30) explains that the friars taught Christianity through the condensed format known as the *Doctrina*, established in a few published manuals each consisting of a series of usually 6 prayers, the 14 articles of faith, and other matters. Early (123–24) explains that the *doctrina* did not treat of saints other than the Virgin because the missionary orders were involved in a reform movement associated with Erasmus and designed to purify Catholicism of the folk cult of saints that had become dominant in the Iberian peninsula. However, Early (2006: 129–30) notes that the friars did not wholly subscribe to this reform. For example, they read from a book of the lives of saints, and some, especially the Dominicans in the Verapaz region, wrote dances to dramatize these stories. These
dramatizations must have proven especially useful, since Early (2006: 217) notes that the teachings of the *doctrina* tended to involve *rote memorization* rather than understanding of the faith.

The institutional setting by which the friars could inculcate the *doctrina*, as well as collect tributes for church and empire and generally exert control over the Indigenous population, was through a nucleated, planned town made up of Indigenous communities and therefore called *pueblos de Indios*. Creation of *pueblos de Indios* involved a process variously known as *congregación* or *reducción*, a process that was instituted by the Junta Eclesiastica in 1546 and then officially ordered through a royal *cedula* in 1551 (Aracil Varón 1999: 66–67). Through this process, several small communities were required to leave their ancestral lands and join together to become *parcialidades* of a larger pueblo, at the heart of which would be a church and monastery fronting a central plaza from which radiated a grid plan of streets. Political leaders among the Indigenous groups would form a town council or *cabildo* that met in another building facing the plaza. In many communities the separate identity of the component communities or *parcialidades* were preserved wards or barrios of the new pueblo. Often there were four of these barrios. This *pueblo de Indios* was also a place from which the friars could visit surrounding villages to perform the mass and sacraments, especially of baptism, marriage, and extreme unction. Such pueblos then came to be called *cabeceras de doctrina*. The *cabecera* and surrounding dependent villages and hamlets served by a monastery therefore became called a *doctrina* (Early 2006: 135–38). This organization was developing in the Caribbean and then New Spain in the early 16th century but it became formalized as an objective and regularized as a policy by mid-century, especially through orders issued by Carlos V in the 1540s (Móbil 2012: 98–100).

Each *doctrina* was assigned a patron saint by the congregating friar, according to which the church and pueblo were named. The four barrios surrounding the central plaza would each have an additional patron saint for which they would be named, and each would have a chapel, called a *poza* chapel, for venerating that saint, located in the relevant barrio but close to the central church. The four *poza* chapels could then define a rectangular ritual circuit. Many of these *poza* chapels have disappeared but all four are still in use and still visited for ritual processions in Cunén, for example.

As sources of power, saints were readily adopted by members of the *Cacique* class who commissioned images for their home altars. The friar-priests were initially reticent about filling the church with images of saints but to retain control they insisted that these family-owned icons be brought to the church, at the same time realizing that their presence in the church, along with lavish ornamentation, would draw larger congregations to the services. Dominant Indigenous families took advantage of such opportunities for public viewing, competing with each other through lavish donations to the church (Early 2006: 200–01). On the other hand, Early (2006: 200–04) reasons that Maya appreciation of saints through their embodiment as icons in the church was framed by their previous understanding of caves as an interface between the seen and unseen worlds and as a place for rituals involving idols. For
them the church interior had become a new cave—a relationship enhanced by the frequency with which churches were built over pre–Hispanic temples—and the saints became the new idols.

Early (2006: 16, 204, 258) argues that with some exceptions, stories associated with saints' images, animated by symbols of their particular martyrdom, were not understood by the local population. Instead, saints came to be considered as local supernaturals who had taken up residence in the church from which they would watch over the community as its protector. Thus while the friar-priest understood the saint image as a representation of an entity now residing in heaven, but with the ability to communicate a worshipper's veneration and specific messages to that saint, Maya and other Indigenous Americans would have understood the image to be an embodied supernatural existing only in that community. For example, while the population of Santiago Momostenango would recognize that other communities like Santiago Atitlán had a protector with the same name, the fact that the two communities sheltered different material embodiments would make it clear that the two patrons are not the same entity. Even further, today the main church icon of Santiago positioned in the retablo and the Costumbrista icon of Santiago kept in a glass case at the side of the nave are considered different supernatural entities. Within this framework of belief, a globalizing concept of expanding Christianity could become localized through material forms in which they are embodied, in line with ancient Indigenous traditions of the sacredness of the local environment and the veneration of icons as well as bundled relics. In this process, saints and their powers came to be understood similarly to those of Indigenous supernatural entities: capable of controlling fertility, weather, crops, health and other aspects of life through giving or withholding benefits, depending on whether offerings and veneration were provided to or withheld from them by living humans. Through such analysis one can better understand the sincerity of dancers involved in the Baile de la Conquista and other dances who see their efforts as an offering and veneration to the saint in the expectation of beneficial return.

Early (2006: 199, 212–215), argues that Maya peoples failed to understand many other aspects of the Catholic religion and therefore made their own interpretations within traditional frameworks. For example, he notes that baptism today is conceived by Maya in Chiapas as a ceremony to help fix the soul in the infant's body and thereby to protect the child from sickness. Early also suggests that Maya understanding of the mass was based on their recognition of the importance of a ritual specialist and the use of prayers, sacred implements (chalice, plate for the wafer), along with the familiar practices of offerings (incense, liquor, candles), rather than understanding the particular Catholic significance of the service. They therefore interpreted the ritual as an offering to the local saint for the usual benefits of fostering community welfare.

2.1.2. Models for the integration of Indigenous Maya and Catholic elements in Costumbre

The nature of current Costumbre has been studied by many ethnographers but with a surprising lack of agreement on how it relates to Indigenous Maya beliefs and practices on the one hand, and introduced
Catholicism on the other hand. Explanations for the process by which Costumbre originated are understood to be important for examining how this religion evolved and its current nature. For example, Early applied the argument concerning Costumbre’s origin in misunderstanding of Christianity to dispute a prevalent model of current Costumbrista practice as religious syncretism. Early’s and other explanations may be heuristically grouped into three contrasting models, though their differences not great and there are many overlaps. Two opposed models envision Costumbre as either Indigenous Maya religion with a thin veneer of Catholicism or as Catholicism with some Indigenous underlay. A third model mediates between these, considering Costumbre as a syncretic form arising from the union of Indigenous Maya and European Catholic religions. To a greater or lesser extent, all three models involve an understanding of mistranslation as a significant factor in Costumbre’s origin.

Early’s explanation of Costumbre’s origin is fits at least partially with the model in which Indigenous religion remains primary and Catholicism a veneer. Early argues that Catholic saints were interpreted within an Indigenous framework of reciprocity between human and supernatural realms already established for sacred beings including “gods” and ancestors. Maya religion thus incorporated these Catholic entities into the structure of reciprocity by which offerings to the saints would be reciprocated with benefits for individuals and community. Writing about Mixtec peoples of colonial Oaxaca, Terraciano (2001: 311) takes this analogic process further, noting that idols of saints were treated like idols of founding ancestors, considered as household members and therefore dressed, housed, feasted, cleaned, talked to and given offerings. Early also argues that the Catholic priest or friar-priest was understood within the framework of a Maya daykeeper-priest or chuchkajaw, involving ritual use of celibacy and a table-like altar, and able to exert some control over human souls (2006: 224). Early (2006: 38) notes that Costumbristas in Zinacantan, Chiapas, do not attend mass as a congregation, though they consider it essential that the priest perform the proper ceremony within the church, considered the home of the saints. Early thus agrees with the appraisal of Oliver la Farge, who said of the municipio of Santa Eulalia, Guatemala, that: “they are not merely non-Christians, but non-Christians who believe themselves to be the only maintainers of pure Christianity (1947: 81, quoted in Early 2006: 260). To explain how the friars would tolerate significant departures from orthodox Catholicism, Early (2006: 260) argues for the relevance of James Lockhart’s model of “double mistaken identity”, in which each side of the cultural exchange interprets elements of the other through its own framework rather than assimilating the other’s interpretation. Thus while Maya peoples interpreted Catholic saints as similar entities to their own “gods” (divine emanations) and ancestors, friars interpreted Maya submission to baptism and attendance at mass and doctrina teaching as demonstrating informed conversion to Catholicism.

Louise Burkhart’s conclusion on the effects of mistranslation in her analysis of the origin of Nahua-Catholicism also tends toward the veneer model. Burkhart (1989: 188) argues that for Nahua peoples “the premises of Christianity were not understood and therefore only superficial aspects of Christian
rites could be incorporated into one’s own religion....The result was ‘syncretic’ in the sense that it combined elements of both cultures, but not in the sense of simple sum of parts, nor of attaining a true synthesis.” A decade later, Burkhart furthered her analysis by rejecting the notion of “a unified and systematized body of dogma and practice.” She writes further that “Nahuas understood Christian teachings in their own terms and adapted them for their own ends, which varied through time and from place to place” Also echoing Lockhart, Burkhart notes that Nahua chose to represent themselves as Christians, and the friars judged their sincerity according to these representations by constructing “their own representations of what native behaviour meant” (Burkhart 1998: 362). Burkhart (1998: 362–63, 367) also foregrounds Nahua agency in shaping their form of Christianity, including manipulating friars into teaching doctrine through the drama and pageantry of narrative performance rather than dry sermons, and forcing friars to accept modes of public celebration that Nahua groups developed for this religion, some of which continued from pre–Hispanic practices.

An example that would seem to further support such a “veneer” model for Maya Costumbre, since it involves renaming pre–Hispanic deities with Christian epithets, concerns the performance of Semana Santa rituals in the Maya–Tzutujil community of Santiago Atitlán. Renewal of the maize and earthly fertility just before time for planting is dramatically enacted by the symbolic mating of entities that for pre–Hispanic Maya may be referred to as the Sun–Maize deity (male) and the Moon–Earth deity (female) and the rebirth of the former through defeat of an old Earth Lord. But here the Moon–Earth Goddess is named María Andolor while Sun–Maize deity is named Jesucristo, and his rebirth as the new maize is accomplished by raising him on a cross. Alan Christenson (2001) explores such practices and beliefs more fully to arrive at a refined model that is based on the cyclic conception of time. Drawing on his own ethnographic investigations in Santiago Atitlán, Christenson explains Maya cyclic understandings of time and the repetition of events carried with it. Christenson’s cyclic model is not circular but spiral—think of a spring—so that while events repeat at similar points in each cycle, they do so with differences that accommodate historical changes. Holy beings derived from the Christian religion can thus be understood as homologous manifestations of supernaturals known from other cycles under other names and characteristics. Thus Jesucristo is not the Maize–Sun deity under another name but the Maize–Sun deity in another rebirth, in another cycle. Cook (2000: 23) provides another example drawn from ethnographic investigation at the Maya–K’iche’ community of Momostenango. He notes that as a place from which legitimation of religious and political authority must emanate, Spain has become the new Tollan.

In the same category we may consider the important point made by Carmack et al (1996: 165) that one of the ways Maya and other Indigenous Mesoamericans adapted elements of Christianity to their own pre–existing religious contexts was to practice it not in terms of individual salvation but as a collective enterprise directed toward community benefit. This adaptation still prevails among Guatemalan Costumbristas. One sees it in their sincere adoration for the community patron saint as well as in the
importance of festival dances as a communal offering to that saint, in return for which the saint will bring another year of benefits for the whole community.

Several authors have commented on the friars’ difficulties in expounding Catholic doctrine in a non-European language. For some, this problem of mistranslation and misunderstanding supports the veneer model, with penetration of Catholic concepts hampered by the language barrier. For others this difficulty in translation supports the opposing model of adaptation resulting in indigenization of Catholicism. Friars would need to rely on established Indigenous concepts, narratives and experiences to explain Catholic beliefs and sacred narratives. Based on evidence from Tlaxcala, Hugo Nutini (1976: 304) argues that friars consciously incorporated such Indigenous religious elements in order both “to convert the Indians rapidly; and to soften the impact of forced conversion and make the new religion more permanently palatable to the masses of the Indian population.” However, as Early (2006: 140–79) and others point out, there were too few friars for too large a territory, so that some communities were exposed infrequently to preaching by a friar and others hardly at all. Those who contributed most to fulfilling the function of explaining doctrine through preaching in the local language were largely the monastery-educated male youths of high status Indigenous families who then took on the role of fiscal (called maestro in Yucatán). Some fiscales may have fulfilled their duty by insisting on rote memorization without the necessity of understanding the content, as Early argues. But others went farther in their attempts to translate concepts into a format that would be better understood. According to Mark Christensen (2010), these efforts by fiscales or maestros resulted in alteration of the doctrine that they intended to transmit. Christensen explains that if such translations and elaborations were intended for publication they would be closely supervised by priests and examined by censors, whereas those designed only for local use in the absence of priests could involve a great deal of freedom of interpretation.

Early also reviews models of Costumbre as a syncretic union of Indigenous Maya and introduced Catholic religions, in particular quoting characterizations by Charles Wagley and Barbara Tedlock (Early 2006: 7–8, 214). Charles Wagley (1949:50) overtly rejects both of the more contrasting models in favour of fusion:

Their entire culture is a fusion of Maya and European cultures and this fusion is perhaps most striking in their religion. In prayers, for example, Christ, a Catholic saint, an aboriginal day deity, and a Guardian of the Mountain may be appealed to in that order. Their concept of any one of these deities, whether it be of Catholic or aboriginal origin, is a blend of European and Maya beliefs. One cannot say that the Chimalteco concept of Christ is Catholic, nor that the Guardian of the Mountain is a Mayan deity, for the fusion of aboriginal and foreign elements is complete in each detail. The result is not an Indigenous American religion with a veneer of Catholicism, nor is it Catholicism with many aboriginal appendages. Chimalteco religion is a
new form—a new religion—arising out of a historical merging of two religions. Their religion is different from each original ingredient and particular to Chimaltenango.

Tedlock (1992: 37) subsequently argued for a model of fusion or syncretism:

The customs (*costumbres*) ... consist of a large complex of community wide rituals performed in accordance with the pre–Hispanic Quiché calendars, together with other rituals that follow the Gregorian calendar. These two types of ritual, however, do not constitute a simple dualistic opposition between Pre–Conquest and Post–Conquest ritual, or between paganism and Christianity. Rather, there are always ‘Catholic’ elements in pagan ritual and ‘pagan’ elements in Catholic ritual.

Cook and Offit (2008: 49) characterize *Costumbre* similarly, stating that “the constitutive rituals of this syncretized/hybridized world blend K’iche’ and Spanish, Indigenous, and Catholic cosmologies into unified whole.”

As is widely recognized, *Costumbristas* honour and petition sacred beings drawn both from Indigenous Maya and Catholic religious beliefs. Syncretism is also evident in the combination of ritual practices that take place in the church and *calvario* (cemetery chapel) as well as altars at sacred features in the landscape such as hills or mountains representing the four cardinal directions. As the quote from Tedlock suggests, such a mixture of elements of diverse Maya and Catholic origin is reproduced unselfconsciously. For example, a photograph of a K’iche’ man in the costume of Tekum taken by Tomás Zanotti in the early twentieth century shows a headdress decorated with a cross and chalice design as well as a winged angel (Akkeren 2007: fig. 33). The unselfconscious syncretism of this headdress is underlined by the fact that Tekum is the only K’iche’ personage in the Dance of the Conquest who is never baptized.

I have several times observed a ceremony for *Conquista* dancers that takes place on the sacred Mount Kanchavox, a shrine of *encantos* (supernatural beings associated with particular locations in the environment) overlooking San Cristóbal Totonicapán. The altar at the top is where, according to Francisco Rodolfo Hernández, offerings are made to Santiago Apostol, considered to be an *encanto*.

Francisco Rodolfo Hernández performing the ceremony to welcome the *trajes* on Mount Kanchavox. 2010.
as well as a saint. The altar consists of a Christian cross over three indentations or cavities, symbolic caves designed for placing offerings to the *encanto* and to sacred beings of the earth. In front of this configuration an offering fire is built for the ceremony, with candles and incense laid over a drawing in sugar combining a three crosses with a design indicating the day on which the ceremony falls in the Indigenous 260 divinatory calendar. Long extemporized addresses and entreaties in K'iche' address the beings of the Maya Sacred or Holy World (*Santo Mundo*) while set prayers and songs in Spanish address Christ, the Virgin Mary, and saints. The final part of the ceremony takes place at a shrine part way down the mountain. This shrine contains three crosses, the central one of which contains a large cavity for candle offerings. For the purposes of the ceremony at least, this shrine was where one made offerings to Tekum, the K'iche' leader who died in the Spanish invasion and has become an *encanto* in part because his memory has been kept alive in the Conquest Dance. Syncretism is further expressed in the context of this ceremony: though performed on a hilltop inhabited by *encantos*, it is part of the preparation for a dance that will honour a saint.

Timothy Knowlton’s (2010) study of the Yucatec Maya manuscript known as the Chilam Balam of Chumayel explicates a significant process by which such syncretism is produced, concerning the process of alteration through translation also studied by Mark Christensen. Knowlton investigates the dialogue between Catholic and Yucatec Maya religious traditions carried on by Maya authors (*maestros*) who often built their discourse on areas of overlap or similarity between these two traditions. These authors were thereby able to develop a highly inventive fusion meaningful to Maya peoples in the colonial situation of religious, political and economic inequalities. By focusing on such areas of overlap, elaborated in word and deed, Knowlton is prepared to characterize these particular results as hybrid or syncretic.

Syncretism also involves imperfect translation. Significantly, Charles Stewart notes that the term syncretism was specifically applied in the 17th century to the results of missionary activities in the colonies. Stewart (1999: 46) writes that “syncretism became a term of abuse often applied to castigate colonial local churches that had burst out of the sphere of mission control and begun to ‘illegitimately’ indigenize Christianity instead of properly reproducing the European form of Christianity they had originally been offered.” Early’s (2006: 100–01, 204, 258) discussion of the highland Maya adoption of a cult of saints might also be understood as an example of syncretism in the way Knowlton describes the process, as a dialogic response to overlapping practices. Early writes that in Spanish folk Catholicism, similar to the reciprocal structure of Indigenous Maya religion, vows were made to saints in return for protection or magical gifts and power, with failure to fulfill the vow resulting in dire consequences. This parallel allowed *Costumbre* to absorb the veneration of saints and add it to the pre-existing veneration of Indigenous divine beings and ancestors. A quadripartite cosmography common to both the Old World and New World would have provided another area of overlap that could be safely reinforced and further developed. The same could be said of concepts of a creative cosmic force that produces emanations for particular work (e.g. Christ or the Maize–Sun deity) as well as an
historical consciousness centred around the transmission of sacred rules and practices from these
divine beings to the first ancestors then down through the generations to the present.

While it seems undeniable that mistranslation and misinterpretation contributed to the origin of
*Costumbre*, my worry is that this understanding can lead to a characterization of Indigenous mis-
translators as betraying ignorance and a kind of passivity. I prefer to see these interlocutors as creative
adapters of new ideas and at times as active appropriators who perceive a benefit in the addition of
foreign supernaturals to their arsenal of weapons against the unpredictable threats that arise in the
world around them. Another result of this brief comparison is the recognition that while all three
models are supported by evidence of *Costumbrista* belief and practices, no single model is sufficient to
explain the nature and evolution of this religion. As Charles Stewart (1999: 58) writes “religions and
cultures are far too complex and fundamentally subjective phenomena to be tamed by objective
analytical vocabularies.” Yet all the evidence, and all three models, may be contained within the
theoretical framework of transculturation.

2.1.3. A Transculturation Framework for *Costumbre*

The term transculturation was proposed by Cuban sociologist Fernando Ortiz in the 1940s as an
alternative to the degrading anthropological model of acculturation, a nostalgic discourse of loss.
Transculturation instead looks at various types of change, both loss and gain. Transculturation also
situates these processes on both sides, refusing to rigidly distinguish donor and receiver societies but
instead recognizing that transculturative adaptation is bidirectional, since colonizing groups also adapt
elements from colonized groups. However, as Diana Taylor (1991: 93) argues, the power imbalance of
colonial relationships means that the colonizing or dominant group has greater power to define proper
behavior. While the scope of the term transculturation has expanded considerably, it remains
associated with circumstances of pronounced power asymmetry in which the subordinated or colonized
group is pressured to adapt to the rules and values of the dominant or colonizing group.

Groundwork for a broader application of the transculturation model to historical studies of colonial
Latin America was laid by Mary Louise Pratt in *Imperial Eyes* of 1981. For the colonial context, Pratt
(1992: 6) argued that “subordinated or marginal groups select and invent from materials transmitted
to them by a dominant or metropolitan culture. While subjugated peoples cannot readily control what
emanates from the dominant culture, they do determine to varying extents what they absorb into their
own, and what they use it for.” Cook and Offit (2008: 48) pursue this view of transculturation as an
expression of agency by arguing that among the Maya it is “sometimes an effective strategy to accept
profound change in some aspects of a culture in order to preserve some other institutional
arrangements,” In the broadest terms, one might argue that in the formulation of *Costumbre* as a
syncretic Maya–Catholic religion, adoption of foreign Catholic elements like the sacraments, saints and
cofradías was at least partly a strategy to retain Indigenous Maya elements such as divination and ancestral relations.

Pratt investigated the site of transculturation as a “contact zone,” defining it as “the space of colonial encounters, the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality, and intractable conflict” (Pratt 1992: 6). She argues further that a “contact perspective” treats the relations among colonizers and colonized... not in terms of separateness or apartheid, but in terms of copresence, interaction, interlocking understandings and practices, often within radically asymmetrical relations of power” (Pratt 1992:7). Gilbert Joseph sees the contact zone as a place of “encounter” wherein “foreign people, ideas, commodities and institutions have been received, contested, and appropriated...”(quoted in Sundberg 2006: 239). Silvia Spitta (1995: 24–25) also characterizes this zone of encounter as a place of potential misunderstanding and miscommunication. “To see the colony as a space that has given rise to an extreme ambiguity of signs and symbols. It is thus a semiotic space imbued with different, often contradictory—in any case, polyphonic—and incommensurable meanings that carry into the dynamics of contemporary Latin America. For as well as allowing for very divergent readings of the same signs and symbols, the colonial...also gives rise to subjectivities and subjects—and hence narrators—that are living in a borderland, defining themselves according to and being defined by two or more different cultural systems.”

We have seen that these characteristics of ambiguity, polysemy, and misunderstandings are all implicated in models for the development of Costumbre in the context of power asymmetries within a colonial contact zone.

The semiotic clash, along with other kinds of conflicts that arise in such encounters and require new solutions to problems arising, is one aspect of the contact zone that makes it particularly fertile ground for creativity. European invasion and colonization brought the combined horrors of war, pandemics, enslavement and the inquisition, but many survivors of this apocalypse were able to make meaning in radically new ways, and thereby negotiate a better position for themselves and members of their factions. This process of creative colonial meaning–making highlights the importance of interlocutors who have access to both societies and can help facilitate the flow of meaning between the two. Such interlocutors in Guatemala would include both the friars and the cacique families, particularly those cacique youths trained in monasteries and taking up the position of fiscal.

Transcultural cross–appropriation between societies is universal and without beginning or end. Hybridity is an ongoing construction through interaction between societies that are always–already hybrid. For this reason scholars of transculturation (e.g. Stewart 1999: 41; Rogers 2006) argue that culture is itself created through ongoing cultural–appropriation. Rogers (2006: 495) writes that:
Transculturation... calls not only for an updating of the understanding of contemporary cultural dynamics but also for a radical reconceptualization of culture itself: as conjunctural, relational, or dialogic; as constituted by, not merely engaged in, appropriative relations; and as an ongoing process of absorption and transformation rather than static configurations of practices.

This continual fabrication of culture may be conceived as a structuration process (Giddens 1984) in which each action of cultural appropriation from another society arises from a cultural matrix or “structure” and modifies that matrix. In this way what Rogers calls culture is incrementally transformed rather than existing in complete flux. Thus even as its conventions change through transculturative processes, a cultural identity may be maintained and reproduced. Self identification with a community, whether expressed as a culture, society, nation or ethnic group, arises from differentiation between the in–group to which one belongs, and the out–group that is consequently constructed as contrasting with it. Such self-identification with a culture relies on contemporaneous practices, values, beliefs, etc., irrespective of origin. As such, even though Costumbre is markedly syncretic in its integration of Catholic and Indigenous elements, it is not associated with mestizaje but rather with indigeneity.

Several authors advocate careful dissection of transculturative events and processes. According to Spitta (1995: 24–25), transculturation involves many intersecting and sometimes conflicting processes, such as assimilation, adaptation, rejection, parody, resistance, and transformation. To these I would add interlocution, negotiation, collaboration (in both its senses), syncretism and re-signification. Through all these processes an important mechanism of exchange might be understood as bricolage, not in the precise sense in which Levi Strauss defined the term (1962:11–12) but in the looser sense of making do with what is at hand to accomplish a specific purpose. An important addition must be made, however. In the processes of transculturation through which Costumbre emerged, the mechanism of bricolage was employed by members of both donor and receiver cultures. Both friars and fiscales adapted Christian teachings by incorporating elements at hand from pre-existing Maya beliefs and religious practices. With such collaborative effort, we can recognize the validity of Diana Taylor’s (1991: 91, 93) point that transculturative interchange modifies the collective identity of both communities involved.

Considering that transcultural “interaction is neither equal in power or degree nor, strictly speaking, reciprocal (Taylor 1991: 93), we need to recognize that transculturative processes of interchange take place in politically charged situations in which different groups collaborate and compete with each other strategically to improve their position. Sundberg (2006: 242) argues for charting historical specificities of such transculturation processes and events in terms not only of geographical spaces in which encounters take place but also in questioning who were the actors involved, what were their social positions, and what were their agendas and strategies for improving such positions. Likewise Richard Rogers (2006) argues that the micropolitics of these transculturative events need to be
assessed, unpacking the nuances of relevant interactions rather than assuming a simplistic model of dominance and subordination. To further this project, Rogers constructs a classification of potential micro political relationships and investigates some of their varied possibilities. In doing so, he warns against reducing any of these categories to a static dichotomy of exchange between bounded entities, recognizing instead their already-hybrid and ongoing transculturative nature.

Rogers first identifies transculturation as cultural appropriation, which he defines as “the use of one culture's symbols, artifacts, genres, rituals, or technologies by members of another culture—regardless of intent, ethics, function, or outcome” (Rogers 2006: 476). Rogers then introduces four categories of such cultural appropriation based on relationships of power between donor and receiver groups. His first category and baseline for comparison involves cultural exchange, a reciprocal relation between groups who come together in relative equality, noting that in such circumstances exchange is generally voluntary and with freedom of choice. Rogers recognizes that such relative equality is misleading, since power relations may involve economic, political, or social capital, so that while some of these may be equal in an exchange situation the others may not be. Thus he warns that even if there is a relationship of general parity between two cultures, a particular act of appropriation might involve an unequal relation of power (Rogers 2006: 477–79).

Rogers' second category is cultural dominance, involving impositions by a dominant culture on a subordinated culture, often through requirement to assimilate particular educational, religious or other institutions, replacing those of the subordinated group. Naturally such attempts at dominance provoke resistance, which Rogers differentiates into five tactics: 1) assimilation, involving overt acceptance of the imposed institution(s), internalizing them and replacing previous institutions, thereby requiring reformation of identity, values and ideologies; 2) integration, involving internalization of much of the imposed culture but without complete displacement of existing culture and identity, resulting in indigenization of the institutions as well as fusion or syncretism; 3) intransigence, involving overt refusal to appropriate the imposed cultural elements; 4) mimicry, involving a misleading display of acceptance and internalization to convince the dominant group that assimilation has been achieved while in fact the native culture has been maintained; and 5) resistance, involving adoption of aspects of the imposed culture that aid in preservation of the native culture and resistance against domination (Rogers 2006: 480–83). Concerning the last tactic, Rogers cites Judith Butler (1997) to note that “the very discourses that perpetuate the marginalization of subordinate groups can provide a basis for agency and resistance via appropriation and resignification” (Rogers 2006: 485). Rogers adds that “insofar as it articulates multiple discourses and lines of power, an act of appropriation can enact resistance and function hegemonically at the same time” (Rogers 2006: 486).

Rogers' third category is cultural exploitation, in which the dominant culture appropriates and often commodifies aspects of the subordinated culture to serve its own interests, in extreme cases without permission or compensation. Rogers notes that while such appropriation appears to demonstrate that
the subordinated culture is valued, control of appropriated elements reinforces dominance. As cultural elements are repurposed to serve the interests of the dominant group, they will inevitably be distorted, often fetishized, neutralizing any resistant function, and at times submitting the subordinated group to further degradation. When commodified, they can serve the dominant group monetarily, thus depriving the subordinated group of similar material advantage. Subordinated groups often sell the rights to cultural elements in times of need, an action which the dominant group will claim was freely chosen, but was in fact constrained by unequal economic and political relations between the two groups. The same constraints will often lead subordinated groups to commodify and distort their own cultural elements in order to market to tourists and others with similar interests in exoticism (Rogers 2006: 486–90). In a later chapter we will see a current example of cultural exploitation in the folklorization of some Guatemalan festival dances.

Rogers’ categorization usefully provides a series of questions to ask of the material in order to accomplish a more nuanced historical reconstruction. For example, the origin and nature of Costumbre are best situated within the category of cultural dominance, with friars intending to substitute a new religion also involving a new educational system, but being met with various tactics of resistance and compliance from Maya populations. Syncretic aspects of Costumbre correspond to the category of integration but note that cultural resistance might be almost invariably an aspect of the tactic of integration, as Cook and Offit (2008) found in their analysis of religious movements in contemporary Momostenango. An earlier example would be participation in festivals governed by the Catholic liturgical calendar in order to fulfill Indigenous ritual obligations, such as the adaptation of the Holy Week ritual to renew agricultural fertility around the time of planting.

I would suggest that mimicry, syncretic integration and cultural resistance in circumstances of particular micro political relations provide fruitful directions for further research on the topic of Costumbre’s origin and evolution as well as to help explain the usefulness of the various models presented above. First, some aspects of syncretism of Indigenous and Catholic religions arose from less asymmetric conditions of collaboration between Spanish friars and Indigenous fiscales both drawing on areas of overlap between the two traditions. Second, elements that suggest adaptation of Catholicism with merely an Indigenous underlay would involve strong cultural domination concerning elements that Indigenous populations were forced to adopt in order to survive as even unequal citizens of the Spanish empire, such as was the case with the sacraments and the economic value of fees imposed for their completion. Third, and in contrast, those elements that suggest largely Indigenous religion with a Catholic veneer might have arisen from situations of insufficient supervision of the ongoing results of conversion policies, as was the case for Santiago Atitlán, long without a resident priest and therefore performing a Holy Week drama that we will see closely parallels the Hero Twins saga of the Popol Vuj.
These two more asymmetric relations resulting on the one hand in a thin Indigenous substratum and on the other hand in a thin Catholic veneer would together exemplify Cook and Offit’s (2008: 48) model in which external elements are accommodated in some institutions in order to maintain Indigenous traditions in others. As strategic transculturative appropriation continues through time, elements available and micropolitics both change. An example would be the fairly recent adoption of spray deodorant and plastic flowers used to enliven sacred images. Also, apparently in response to the priest sprinkling holy water on worshippers in the church, now an evergreen branch is commonly used to sprinkle bottled cologne on participants in an outdoor ritual. These elements appear to have been appropriated without any pressure from the dominant Ladino society, but serve to maintain and update Costumbre traditions,

The argument that cultures are always–already hybrid also encourages us to look for earlier examples of transcultural appropriation for comparison with colonial and later experiences. Maya religion had long been appropriating foreign elements. In the classic period, lowland Maya of various polities adopted deity images, and perhaps rituals, from the politically and economically dominant culture of Teotihuacan. These included a possible war deity with rings around his human eyes and a related serpent image named Waxaklahun Ubaj Chan. In the postclassic period, many Maya groups adopted the central Mexican deity Quetzalcoatl (Feathered Serpent), known as Kukulcan in the books of Chilam Balam and other colonial period Yucatec sources, and as Gukumatz in the K’iche’ Popol Vuh. Thus the colonial process was not unique, but instead represented some of the stages in a long development of Maya religion that has evolved for millennia in part by absorbing foreign religious elements, and still continues to evolve in this way. As it pertains to the history of the Baile de la Conquista, later chapters will feature discussions of Costumbre’s adaptation to secularization in the late 18th century, to liberal onslaughts on religious institutions in the 19th century, and to assimilationist pressures from fundamentalist Catholics and Evangelical Protestants in the 20th century. Costumbre’s response to these changes have been regulated by its inherent conservatism, due to its admonition to maintain practices laid down by the ancestors as the world, and especially the social world, was formed (Rojas Lima 1986; Cook and Offit 2008: 48–49).

2.2. Costumbre Institutions

2.2.1. Divination

Of the three institutional components of Costumbre identified by Cook (2000), the institution with the most concentrated Indigenous pre–Hispanic elements is divination. As studied in depth by Barbara Tedlock (1992), this institution involves a hierarchy of priest–diviners, known in Maya–K’iche’ as
chuchkajaw (mother–fathers), who regularly visit Costumbrista shrines on hills and mountains, at springs, and in town centres, to burn offerings to the sacred beings. Their rituals, whether designed for the benefit of the community, a group, or an individual, are timed in relation to the Maya 260–day sacred almanac, a divinatory calendar of ancient origin and continuous use. This almanac, often referred to by archaeologists as the tzolkin, involves permutations of thirteen numbers and 20 named days. Each day carries a series of significations that can be used for prognostications of good or ill as well as for discovering more detailed information concerning reasons for imbalance in an individual, community or nature, in order to diagnose and remove illness or misfortune or, conversely, to assure health and prosperity. Through divination the chuchkajaw can identify the entity who has been displeased by failure to venerate and prescribe the offerings needed to make to specific ancestors or other sacred beings. Calendar–based divination is performed with the red seeds of the tz’ite tree or a substitute such as red beans, taking a handful, dividing these into proper piles for the days of the calendar, and interpreting the remainder. The seeds are kept in a bag, called a vara, that is itself sacred, and that may also contain a rock crystal. Maya priest–diviners also interpret movements they can feel in their blood and muscles inspired by lightning.

2.2.2. Cofradías

In contrast to the institution of divination, cofradías and dance teams represent Spanish introductions that have been adapted to suit Costumbrista religious and social needs. Both involve the hierarchy of chuchkajaw or priest–diviners in Costumbre offerings but both also operate in much closer relation to the church, the saints and the Catholic liturgical calendar.

The cofradía is an evolving institution with socio–political and economic as well as religious functions (Rojas Lima 1986) in association with a patron, who may be a saint, one of many aspects of the Virgin Mary, or an aspect of the Catholic trinity such as the Holy Ghost, Sacred Heart, or Cross. Each municipio normally has several cofradías, including one for the patron saint of that community. Religious functions of the contemporary cofradía are summarized by Cook and Offit:

The cofradía is a group of men arranged in a hierarchy with differentiated responsibilities, often affiliated with a similar though smaller group of women, that produces festivals, vigils, and opportunities for visits and processions with a wachibal or imagen, a physical representation, manifestation, and localization for a spirit being (nawal) that walked the earth with Jesucristo in a liminal period before the founding of the human community. The image that is the center of

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1 Rojas Lima (1986: 263) interprets Chuchkajaw as meaning “Grandmother–Grandfather,” which makes some contextual sense, since many Maya use the term “grandparents” to mean “ancestors” in general, and also because in the Popol Vuh the primordial entities referred to as grandmother and grandfather (Xmucané and Xpiacoc) perform divination.
the cult and the ceremonies and offerings associated with the cult have been inherited from the *primeros* or founding ancestors (2013: 5).

A *cofradía’s* religious functions are carried out by its officers, called *cofrades*. Cook and Offit (2013: 28–29) also explain the *cofrades’* functions of serving, honouring, feeding, dancing and otherwise entertaining the saint as well as *primeros*, the living essence of deceased *cofradía* officers. The highest office, referred to variously as the *alcalde*, *principal*, or *presidente*, involves the greatest responsibility and the greatest financial and time burden, referred to as his *cargo*. The second rank may be a second *alcalde*, but in Momostenango it is the *diputado*, who is a *chuchkajaw* carrying the major responsibility for enacting the *costumbre* offerings (Cook and Offit 2013). Lower ranks are the *mayordomos* or *martomas* who run errands and assist the *alcaldes* in various ways. When officers change, ideally each year at the saint’s festival or another Catholic ritual, the knowledge of how to perform ceremonies, and thereby please and enlist the aid of the saint, is passed on to the new group (Cook 2000: 194).

The saint for which a *cofradía* cares is embodied in an image. Most are the standard baroque style polychrome wood sculptures that abound in Latin American churches. The sculpture includes carved representations of its European style clothing, but this global aspect is again localized through the addition of locally-obtained clothing items, both those purchased in the market like industrially-manufactured scarves, and those made in the distinctive style of the *municipio*. The image is “fed” through ritual offerings (i.e. *costumbres*) of candles, incense, and liquor, and it is entertained through offerings of dance and other spectacles especially at festivals.

During *fiestas* the saint is carried in processions between church, *cofradía* and *calvario* (cemetery chapel) during which they also visit and bless community members, interspersed with all–night vigils at the *cofradía*. These ceremonies are frequently accompanied by the sacred instruments, the *chirimía* (shawm flute) and *tambor* (parade drum), as well as the popular marimba and more recently brass bands. Such *cofradía* practices ensure the saint’s protection of the community, the succession of seasons, and the renewal of the world and society.
The location of the *cofradía* is a room, usually in the residence of the *alcalde*, that normally houses a family altar but has been transformed through increased elaboration of its contents and decorations to become a stage setting for various public ritual procedures. For festival occasions, usually the image of the patron saint of the *cofradía* is installed at the centre of a wall away from the doorway. The saint may be in the open on a table altar or in a glass case, either elevated on a bench or set on the floor. Usually other subsidiary saint images flank the *cofradía* patron symmetrically. These saints are interspersed with plastic and real flowers and are set against a background of bright plastic hangings manufactured as kitchen tablecloths. Often a railing separates icons from the main room space. Outside of this railing and in front of these icons will often be a table for lit candles. Such candles, usually set in drinking glasses and designed to last for many hours, often cover the table and floor beneath, radiating light and heat throughout the room. The rest of the floor will be covered with pine needles for times of visitation. And hanging overhead are decoratively cut paper banners in many different colours. Though it is mostly humble materials that frame the icons, the overall visual effect of the altar room can be spectacular. And the same visual spectacle applies to the *anda* or litter in which *cofrades* carry the saint in procession, which will be brightly painted or papered, layered with textiles, covered with both plastic and real flowers, perfumed with spray deodorant. Dance costumes are similarly splendid, with richly coloured velvet, reflective sequins and mirrors, and brightly dyed ostrich feathers.
Considering together the cofradía altar, anda and dance costumes as a form of popular visual expression, we might note that as elsewhere in Latin America, popular worship involves a visual aesthetic quite different from the formal solemnity of a Catholic church interior or the intellectual approach of contemporary conceptual imagery. Thus despite or perhaps because of my training as an art historian, I did not immediately embrace the aesthetic of Guatemalan Costumbrista displays and mentally labeled it as kitsch, as many of my students do when I show photographs of these works to them in class lectures.

In some respects, the kitsch label not far wrong. Wikipedia defines kitsch as: “a low-brow style of mass-produced art or design using popular or cultural icons. Kitsch generally includes unsubstantial or gaudy works or decoration, or works that are calculated to have popular appeal.” A dictionary definition notes derivation from the German word kitschen which suggests throwing together a work of art. The term kitsch is then partially appropriate, as Costumbrista visual arrangements constitute an assemblage or bricolage, displaying a riot of bright colours, using inexpensive and popular items like plastic table cloths, plastic flowers, hanging plastic cutouts and often Christmas lights, all designed for popular appeal. This appeal was not lost on me for long; I soon came to appreciate the visual complexity and eagerly anticipated seeing each cofradía display or processional anda.

However, as the Wikipedia definition immediately notes, kitsch also carries the connotation of “low brow.” One is supposed to look down on kitsch from a lofty position of high art or high culture. This position was clearly articulated by Clement Greenberg in a 1939 essay on “Avant-Garde and Kitsch.” Greenberg understood kitsch as debasing elements of high culture for mass production to be consumed by an industrialized urban lower class, though also overtaking the peasant countryside or folk culture as he calls it. For Greenberg and for many modernists, “high art” is characterized by intellectual struggle, both to produce it and to comprehend it. Such imagery then requires the viewer to translate visual experience into words in order to understand or decipher it. But in my view, popular imagery that can be both composed and appreciated non-linguistically is not inferior. It is an alternate and perhaps more basic approach to the visual. The brightness, reflectivity, and complexity of Costumbrista compositions communicates directly a sense of sacredness and well-being that neither requires nor would be improved by

Cunén Church, 2010.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kitsch
http://www.sharecom.ca/greenberg/kitsch.html
These bright and varied decorations, along with the light of the myriad candles and the fragrance of burning incense, create a warm and welcoming atmosphere in the cofradía that is more joyous and intimate than the vast and solemn spaces of the church. Whereas in the church, the patron saint resides out of reach, installed in the retablo high above the congregation, the position of the saint icon is more approachable in the cofradía house—one can even slip a few bills between the saint’s figures to ask for some special boon. As a more human-scaled place of worship, the cofradía is also more conducive to ancestor veneration. Those who pay homage to ancestors in the cofradía know they too will one day become ancestors and will receive the same homage. Francisco Ordoñez, autor and dancer in Joyabaj, told me that he is very conscious of following the ways of his ancestors and himself becoming one.4

With the exception of a diputado acting as chuchkajaw, cofradía officers should be changed each year. For the cofradía responsible for a municipio’s patron saint, the exchange takes place at the annual patron saint festival, and for other cofradías it may take place on the particular saint’s day, during the feria for the patron saint, or indeed on New Years Day. The exchange requires the cofradía’s icon to be available for a vigil in the cofradía headquarters, or in a separate chapel sometimes called the ermita, and as at Momostenango will require the saint’s clothing to be renewed (Cook and Offit 2013: 36). The image is then taken to the church where the transfer of duties from outgoing to incoming officers is solemnized with a mass, after which the new officers can take the image to the new cofradía headquarters, the home of the new alcalde or a location rented by him. As this annual changeover functions as a rite of passage to renew the saint for another year, the festival–time residence in the cave–like church functions as the liminal space and time in which the transformation and renewal takes place. The resonance of this stay in the church might be increased insofar as it is also considered to parallel Christ’s equally liminal three–day sojourn in the tomb.

The nature and activities of the cofradía institution among Guatemalan Costumbristas are far more complex and varied than presented here, in part because I have only observed those rituals that pertain to activities of dance teams during the feria. Garrett Cook’s (2000) ethnographic study of Costumbre at Momostenango will provide the reader with further information and analysis.

The cofradía institution was introduced in Guatemala and elsewhere by the missionary friars, beginning around the middle of the 16th century. According to Brisset Martín (2001), the ancestors of the Guatemalan cofradía were confraternities associated with militias designed to protect the Iberian Peninsula against Morisco (converted Moor) uprisings. Their concomitant ceremonial activities led to control by the Catholic church and cofradí as were thereby spread by the missionary friars to Spain’s

4 Personal communication, 2012.
American colonies. The church used *cofradías* to help regulate religious practices of Indigenous peoples as well as to appropriate their surplus product. According to Rojas Lima (1986), missionary friars depended on the *cofradías* for their financial support, and Van Oss (1986: 90–91) clarifies that the mechanism involved stipends paid for masses, sermons, and sacraments.

In each congregated community *Cofradías* were formed for the patron and other saints, in order to relegate responsibilities for care of the saint’s icon, its vestments, and the arrangements, practices and expenses attendant upon the saint’s name–day celebration as well as the saint’s participation in the annual festival for the community’s patron saint. These *cofradías* were granted agricultural and/or grazing land and sheep herds to provide income that would offset their considerable ritual expenses as well as sustain the local monastery. Each *cofradia* was required to maintain accurate records of their finances and these were regularly examined by visiting priests, who transferred some of the information to the book recording baptisms, marriages, and interments.

While missionary friars instituted *cofradías* to provide the goods and services needed for the saints’ masses, Early (2006: 214), basing his argument on Zinacantan *municipio* in Chiapas, speculates that Maya *cofrades* might have reinterpreted their *cofradía* offices in traditional terms. His suggestion is that the saints, like Maya gods, carried the burden of their historical cycle of time, so the *cofradía* officers would be understood to be helping to carry the burden by offering their prayers and service and paying for those of the priest and his necessary ritual goods.

Social arrangements involving management of these resources and the religious functions of the *cofradía* are debated. Cook and Offit (2013: 2–3, 9) explain the colonial *cofradía* as controlled by the Church but managed by the ancient landed elite or *cacique* families who determine the use of the profits from these resources to sponsor cult activities. Wealthy families also had the opportunity to form a *guachibal*, a privately owned cult of a saint’s image that was not under church control or supported by communal labour (Hill 1992: 93–95; Cook and Offit 2013: 132). Both institutions evolved: the *guachibal* institution faded while the communally–managed and church–dominated *cofradía* increasingly crossed *parcialidad* boundaries.

The secularization process of the third quarter of the 18th century replaced friars with priests antagonistic to *Costumbre*, an antagonism led by Archbishop Cortés y Larraz. The archbishop’s inspection tour of 1769–70 convinced him that *cofradía* celebrations involved drunken debauchery, and that their treatment of saints’ images amounted to idolatry, so he forbade taking these images from the church to the *cofradía* during festivals (Early 2006: 160). However, the strength of the *cofradía* institution allowed it to survive even under such pressure from the Catholic orthodoxy.

Further dramatic change was in store for the *cofradía* in the 19th century under the liberal government of Central America instituted after independence from the Spanish empire, and more forcefully under
the liberal revolution of 1870. Liberal policies of privatizing land and of debilitating the Catholic Church led to appropriation of church and cofradía lands for sale to a growing ladino population. Land appropriation also contributed to the decline in social and economic power of the cacique families. Lacking a secure economic base, each cofradía had to rely on donations from its officers and from local Costumbristas in general in order to maintain their ritual obligations and thus maintain their responsibilities toward the ancestors (Chance and Taylor 1985; Cook 2000). McCreery (1990: 101) suggests that this 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, shows that the church was becoming less interested in the cofradía institution. This allowed it to develop further 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 richly detailed by ethnographers.

In this system of funding by donation, cofradía office is considered a cargo (burden) because such office requires an investment of considerable time and money for the performance of rituals, gatherings with other principales, and hosting of feasts. This cargo system has been called a redistribution or big-man economy. Its 19th century phase, before the liberal revolution, when Maya municipios had more freedom to pursue their own traditions, has been considered a method of internal leveling of wealth, encouraging those who have more resources to contribute these to the community. A more contemporary way to look at the system is to recognize that achievement within the cofradía came to be based not on status or social capital, but on the ability to invest economic capital, thereby reaping the reward of considerable prestige.5

Another result of these 18th–19th century changes is that the cofradía came to be closely linked with the cabildo, the Indigenous town council. Positions in this council were also ranked and together cofradía and council thus formed what has been called the civic–religious hierarchy of the closed corporate community. The idealized model sees a man climbing the prestige latter by alternating between positions in cofradía and cabildo, moving up a step each time. Each cofradía has less positions available than the cabildo, but the cofradías in a community are themselves ranked, so an ambitious man moves up through the ranks of cofradías as well. After successfully reaching the top position, the alcalde of the highest ranking cofradía, the man becomes a principal or elder of the community, a member of a group that once had considerable political power for municipio governance. However, the increasing power of ladinos in Maya communities has led them to dominate the cabildo, relegating the Indigenous council to the status of auxiliatura.

2.2.3. The Fiesta Patronal or Feria

5 As Bourdieu (1984) clarifies, economic capital (wealth) can be exchanged for social capital (status, prestige) through the seemingly disinterested medium of cultural capital (here a religious office).
The *feria* or *fiesta patronal*, celebrated by Catholics and Costumbristas, is an annual festival of community renewal devoted to the patron saint of a *municipio*. In some *municipios* it is also the time for the changeover in *cofradía* officers other than that of the *municipio* patron as well, so that all the saints are in some way ritually renewed. Maintaining practices introduced in the colonial period, Costumbristas celebrate the *fiesta patronal* for one or two *octavos* (eight or fifteen days), that include the patron saint’s name day. Prominent public events include processions of saints between the church, cemetery and *cofradias*, usually accompanied by noise-making explosives: the aerial-launched *bombas* and strips of *cohetes* (firecrackers).

The function of renewal fulfilled by the *fiesta patronal* may be considered to have been perpetuated and emphasized in part due to an overlap or parallel between Catholic and Maya practice. These elements of renewal are perhaps more subdued in Christianity, despite early associations of Christmas with the winter solstice and associations of Easter, the ultimate in Christian renewal encompassing the death and resurrection of Christ, with the vernal equinox. In the context of Indigenous Maya religion, renewal as an annual death and rebirth, whether of the deity, nature, or the community, is more overt. The contrast of ordinary time and the liminal time of the *feria* thus corresponds to the contrast of *jal* (material growth and maturation) and *k’ex* (spiritual renewal through ritual transformation involving supernatural intervention). Similarly, Diego de Landa describes the annual renewal that took place in pre–Hispanic Yucatán during the five Wayeb days that intervene between the end of one 360–day year and the beginning of the next. The contemporary *fiesta patronal* replaces the Wayeb as the sacred time in which a supernatural (now a patron saint) is renewed and, through this transformation, the community as a whole is also renewed for the coming year.

The *fiesta patronal* was introduced to Maya communities early in the colonial period. Two 17th–century sources describe the patron saint festival. The late 17th Guatemalan chronicler Francisco Antonio de Fuentes y Guzmán (1969–72: I, 216–17) focused on the dance and music that accompanies the festival. Earlier, in the 1630s, Dominican friar Thomas Gage also described the dances as well as rehearsals leading up to them, but added much more detail. A few excerpts will communicate the flavour of his account:

> The chief feast of Chimaltenango is upon the day 26 of July… and then is the richest fair that ever my eyes beheld in those parts of all sorts of merchants and merchandise. It is further set forth with bull–baiting, horse–racing, stage–plays, masks, dances, music, and all this gallantly performed by the Indians of the town (Gage 1928: 183).

In a later section concerning Pokomam communities, but with a more general cast to the description, Gage (1928: 266) again describes the nature of the *fiesta patronal* and the contribution of dance to the public rituals.
Yet under this yoke and burden they are cheerful, and much given to feasting, sporting, and dancing, as they particularly shew in the chief feasts of their towns, which are kept upon that saint’s day to whom their town is dedicated.

Gage (1928: 266) continues:

There is no town in the Indies great or small (though it be but of twenty families) which is not dedicated thus unto Our Lady or unto some saint, and the remembrance of that saint is continued in the minds not only of them that live in the town, but of all that live far and near by commering, trading, sporting and dancing, offering unto the saint, and bowing, kneeling, and praying before him.

In the contemporary feria there can be no such thing as too many bands, too many dances, too much noise or too many attractions. More is better. And local residents will constantly say or prod outsiders to say that the feria is “muy alegre” (very joyful). This comment has been misinterpreted as evidence that contemporary Maya have lost an understanding of religious significance (Christie 2005), but the term actually has many and profound shades of meaning. Obviously an annual fair brings the community together, often from far-away places, and this is a joyful and highly anticipated event. Beyond this, joy itself is an appropriate offering for the patron saint, to whom it brings further joy, and who will reciprocate in kind with benefits to the community for the coming year.

The feria thus involves traditions that appear on the surface to be more for entertainment but are yet considered a religious obligation and offering to the patron saint. In some municipios, and continuing Spanish practice, sparklers and other luminous kinds of fireworks are set off on a three story metal framework called a castillo and on toritos de fuego (fire bulls), which are portable frameworks carried by dancers and featuring a carved bull head on the front. Large bands called marimba orchestras are also hired to play much of the day and for dancing in the evening. They set up what Cook and Offit (2013) call “refrigerator-sized” speakers in banks up to four meters high with sound waves that hit the body like shock waves.
The feria has long involved the economic aspect of a large market and now incorporates a diversity of attractions brought by itinerant entrepreneurs who move from fair to fair as different saints’ days approach. Some of these current attractions include souvenir stalls, amusement rides like the Ferris wheel, and skill-testing game booths. Ferias also now include a desfile (parade) of school children, organized by grade and many forming bands, with accompaniment of town and cofradía officials and masked dancers.

Cook and Offit (2013: 17–23) analyze recent changes in the feria in Momostenango not only in terms of dance, music, marketing and entertainments but more importantly in conceptual terms. They note the prominence of Momostecans working in Guatemala City, Antigua, or the United States, for whom the feria provides an opportunity and desire to return, whether to visit or stay. In their often transnational and post-peasant lifestyle, the home community and particularly its feria represent and help construct identity through a sense of tradition. Though the feria is now filled with products from many industrialized nations, and the band music is international though Latin American, the feria
provides another opportunity to adapt the global to the local. A prime example of this adaptation is the Disfraces dance: though costumes may be ultimately derived from the television show “Xena: Warrior Princess” or from games like “World of Warcraft,” they have taken on forms and meaning that are important to Maya communities but would be unrecognizable to North Americans.

2.2.4. Festival Dances and Dance teams

Although traditional festival dances also occur, depending on the municipio, during Semana Santa, Corpus Christi, and other holidays, they are now especially prominent during the patron saint festivals. Indeed I have not seen the Dance of the Conquest outside the feria venue. In many municipios, several traditional festival dances are performed simultaneously and in adjacent spaces. Most prominent traditional dances in the feria are those introduced during the colonial and national periods.

The historical development of dance teams remains virtually undocumented. Hill (1998: 89) speculates that dance teams would have been drawn from cofradías and the private guachibales, both devoted to specific saints, due to the performance of dances in honour of saints on their festival day. Archbishop Cortés y Larraz (1958: II, 251) connects cofradías with the dancing of zarabandas, which were more social dances that did not require rehearsals by a dance team or costume rental and may have been used instead to raise money for cofradía expenses. Furthermore, Cortés y Larraz clearly distinguishes the zarabandas taking place all night in cofradías from a masked dance with recitations that was performed for Corpus Christi in San Miguel Totonicapán at the time of his visit in 1769 (II, 102). Gage refers to the dance team and the maestro but does not connect the team to either a cofradía or guachibal. In recent times, connections between cofradías and dance teams have varied. Based on research undertaken in 1976, Cook (2000) shows that dance teams are organizationally separate from cofradías, whereas some of Brisset Martín’s (1991) older informants remembered dance teams organized by cofradías. The only place in which I have seen men participate simultaneously in a dance team and a cofradía, their contribution to the dance was often made impossible by their responsibilities to the cofradía. Considering that in recent times, a dance team has required both a maestro to teach and a prominent man as sponsor (autor), it would be more likely that in the early colonial period the prominent family that possesses a guachibal would also be in a position to sponsor a dance team, though the participants in the two organizations might still have been distinct. And, indeed, a prominent family may have chosen to sponsor a dance team rather than a guachibal. In summary, while it cannot be ascertained whether early dance teams were associated with a guachibal or not, it seems less likely that they were organized by a cofradía.

As noted above, festival dances are considered an offering to the patron saint. Dancers in municipios where Costumbre is particularly strong will make a vow to the patron saint to dance for seven or nine years as a means of reaping benefits for their families. To renege on this vow could result in dangerous reprisals from the displeased patron saint. As Hutcheson (2003) noted, the primary audience for the
dance–drama is the saint, not the spectators who surround the dance ground. Ernesto Ixcayauh Alvarado, who dances Ajitz in Momostenango, put it succinctly, saying that the dance “is a penitence that we do” and adding that “the dance is not so important; what is most important is the devotion.”

Thus the dance is performed daily throughout the duration of the feria. As performance of the dance is then understood primarily as completion of an obligation rather than as a means to tell a story, the team is quite willing to suspend the dance if it should rain.

Traditional dance teams are composed of men and boys: a notable exception is the young girls in the Conquest Dance. Women are instead relegated to the supporting roles of cooking for gatherings and helping to adjust costumes. Membership in a dance team tends to run in families. An adult male dancer often participates in a particular dance because his male ancestors did so, and his young son may take one of the child’s roles that will inspire him to continue dancing as an adult. There is also a tendency for a dance team to draw its participants from a particular barrio or village due to the need for continual communication and attendance at rehearsals. When possible, a dance team consists of twice the number of roles in the dance: the two dancers for each role can thus split the cost of costume rental and relax on alternate days of the feria.

Each team has a sponsor, like a film producer, known commonly as autor. The autor is responsible for the greatest expenditures, but also stands to reap the greatest reward in prestige. These expenditures include: buying materials for ritual offerings or Costumbres; hiring a Maya priest or chuchkajaw if he is not himself trained in these religious practices; hosting the rehearsals involving a luncheon for each; paying the musicians for both the rehearsal days and all the days of the feria; and renting a ‘posada’ or place to change into and out of costumes, if his own house is not within the cabecera, the head town of the municipio. The autor, often with an assistant, must enlist participation of sufficient dancers, visiting their houses with a gift of liquor to make the request.

The autor also hires a maestro (teacher) who owns a copy of the text and can instruct the dancers in both the recitations and dance movements, as Gage noted. If the dancers are literate, the maestro may distribute separate documents with each dancer’s part. If not, in rehearsal the maestro will read the lines to the dancers who then repeat them in the hopes of retaining some in their memory. However, this practice of repeating the lines has become a formality in those municipios in which texts barely appear in performance.

Although peaking during the fiesta patronal, activities of a dance team cover a large portion of the year. The decision to dance in an upcoming feria is made many months in advance, and is often announced publicly and ceremonially, incorporating a vow to the patron saint and a petition to that saint to provide for the safe and successful completion of that vow. Dancers must then, individually or

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6 “…es una penitencia que nosotros hacemos…. No es tanto es el baile; la devoción es lo más importante,” (personal communication, 2009).
as a group, order their costumes, masks, and feathers from the traditional costume shop, called the *morería*. Cook and Offit (2013: 134) estimate that the cost of costume rental represents 20–40% of their annual income. A series of rehearsals will then be scheduled—more if the dance involves a long text to learn. There is often an attempt to schedule these rehearsals on appropriate and beneficial days in the 260-day sacred almanac, but this has become more difficult with the prevalence of migration for labour to Guatemala City or to the plantations on the Guatemalan south coast or the US. Another visit or trip to the *morería* is made shortly before the *feria* opens, in order to collect the costume and masks.

During the period of rehearsals it is likely that *costumbres* will be offered at the summit of mountains sacred to the municipio, particularly those associated with the four cardinal directions. If there is no qualified member of the dance team, a *Costumbrista* priest or *Chuchkajaw* will be hired for the service. Only two of the dance teams studied for this project have this mountain *Costumbre* performed. In both, the *autor* is also a *chuchkajaw* and performs the *costumbre*. Otherwise these two vary considerably. At Momostenango, the four sacred mountains that surround the municipio at some distance, as well as the sacred hill of Paclom at the centre of the *cabecera*, are visited by only the team leaders. In contrast in San Cristóbal Totonicapán, the entire team and supporting family members together climb the single hill (Kanchavox) that overlooks the community, and this is done just before the *feria* begins as part of the widespread ceremony for welcoming the costumes and masks into the team and community.

This welcoming ceremony may be held individually in a dancer’s home or collectively in the home of the *autor*. Welcoming the masks and costumes presents an important ceremonial transformation. In the *morería*, costume and masks are merchandise stacked on shelves or hung in rows from the rafters. Before the ceremony, the dancers are just people. The welcoming ceremony then accomplishes a sanctified union of dancer and costume, allowing dancers and costume together to embody and thus become a sacred personage. The welcome often begins as dancers return from the *morería* with their costumes. *Bombas*, the noise-making explosives launched from a metal tube or mortar, are set off both to alert the community to the arrival of sacred beings and to honour those beings.

In addition to dancing in the church plazas and *cofradías*, dance teams in full costume also participate in saints’ processions and the school parade or *desfile*. Their presence adds a further level of sanctity since a costumed performer fully embodies a sacred quasi-ancestral being. Performers dance to the accompaniment of their musicians in public processions as well as the daily processions from their dressing place to the place of performance and back.

Public performances of the dance begin as soon as the *Fiesta Patronal* opens and continue to its end. Depending on the municipio, there may be more emphasis on performing in the church plaza or more emphasis on performing at the *cofradía* houses. Where the former obtains, as in San Cristóbal and
Momostenango, only short performances of individual dance pieces are given in the *cofradía* courtyards. Where the latter prevails, as in Cunén and Joyabaj, the complete or largely complete dance is performed at the *cofradía*. In all *municipios* investigated for this project, a curtailed dance is also necessary for those days in which the dancers participate in saints’ processions and in the school parade or *desfile*.

The first and last dances of a *feria* are often marked by special ceremonial activities that focus the *feria* as a sacred time, a liminal period in which sacred personages are continually present for community renewal. Most commonly these include a group visit to the *municipio* church before the start of the first dance, and performing the first dance in the church plaza rather than a *cofradía*. After the last dance of the *feria* there is often another group visit to the church. But before this, the dance will likely finish with an elaborately choreographed *despedida* or some other means not only to send off the sacred personages but also to honour those dancers who embodied them and will be returning to their everyday lives.

2.2.5. Morerías and Dance Costumes

![Morería San Cristóbal. Courtesy of Bartolomé Arangó. 2008.](image-url)
The *morería* is the shop from which individual dancers and dance teams rent their costumes and masks for festival dances. *Morerías* have operated in Guatemala at least since the end of the 16th century (Hill 1998) though it is not known when the term was first attached to this costume rental facility. The term *morería* is thought to derive from the *Moros y Cristianos* (Moors and Christians) dance, which was brought to the Americas from Spain in the early years of the conquest and thus was the first dance widely promoted as a proselytizing aid.

The interior of the *morería* is a visual feast: wooden shelving lining the walls is stacked high with costumes turned inside–out and neatly folded. From the ceiling beams hang row upon row of painted masks. On the floor are piles of materials and scraps. And sitting at each of the sewing machines are the *morería* workers, concentrating on machine–stitching the fabric or hand–sewing on shiny ornaments. Others repaint masks when necessary, due to wear or use in a different dance. In their service to festival dances, *morerías* represent an integral part of Costumbrista tradition, though they are not necessarily operated by Costumbristas or even by Maya.

*Morerías* are better studied than dance teams. Barbara Bode (1961: 234–35) included a survey of *morerías* that she contacted in 1957, including information on their lineage and names of the owners or *moreros*. Guatemalan folklorist Carlos René García Escobar (1987) produced the most complete study, assembling historic references to dance costume rentals, describing the costume, and listing the *morerías* active at the time of his writing. García Escobar considers issues related to *morerías* through two frameworks. Using a framework of mestizaje, he (1987: 32) argues that the development of the festival dance tradition has involved interchange between Maya and non–Maya Guatemalans since the Spanish invasion. Using a Marxist framework, García Escobar (1987: 96–98) argues that because dance teams travel to *morerías* from distant municipios, the *morería* institution fosters solidarity even among different Maya ethno–linguistic groups (e.g. K’iche’, Kaqchikel, Tzutujil, Mam and Ixil), but that the growth of mass communication and the promotion of capitalist accumulation threaten such solidarity with an ethos of individualism. More recently anthropologist Matthew Krystal apprenticed in the state–supported Nima K’iche’ *morería* in the Casa de Cultura of San Miguel Totonicapán, providing much further documentation on relations with dance teams and the fabrication of costumes and masks (2001).
In separate volumes, both García Escobar (1987) and Luján Muñoz (1987) have worked to assemble information on the history of morerías in Guatemala, including tantalizing details on the antiquity of morerías and changes in costume fashion for the dance. Not surprisingly, some of the fullest information on costume rental prior to the late 19th century comes from Thomas Gage and his contemporaries. Gage (1928: 225) was particularly impressed by the feathers worn by dancers and recorded their popularity and rental costs:

These indians get much money by letting out great tufts of feathers, which the indians use in their dances upon the feasts of the dedication of their towns. For some of the great tufts may have at least threescore long feathers of divers colours; for every feather hiring they have half a real, besides what price they set to every feather if any should chance to be lost.

Robert M. Hill II published a 1608 inventory from Chimaltenango concerning the estate of Baltasar Uuch that provides an earlier glimpse into the morería institution. Among Uuch’s possessions at the time of his death were dance costume elements that give evidence for the operation of a costume rental facility, though it is not titled a morería in the document. As Hill (1998: 88–89) noted, some of the inventory is appropriate to the dance of prominent men, a pre-Hispanic Maya dance that continued into the colonial period and that Gage referred to by the Nahuatl word Tocontin. The 128 bunches of quetzal plumes, 150 bells or rattles, four painted wood staffs and six gilt andas would be used for this dance. The Uuch “morería” also supplied masked dances, as evident from the inventory of 35 masks with beards. This would include the Moros y Cristianos dance, for which the 15 pleated pants and 15 doublets as well as the four swords listed in the inventory would be appropriate.

As assembled by García Escobar and Luján Muñoz, further specific documentation on morerías dates to the late 19th century and is particularly rich for the area of San Miguel and San Cristóbal Totonicapán. At present an inactive morería is lodged in the Casa de Cultura in San Miguel Totonicapán, while two operate in San Cristóbal Totonicapán. One is the San Cristóbal (formerly Chaclán) morería, descendant of the Chuc morería that had operated in both cities around 1900. The largest morería in San Cristóbal is the parent Tistoj establishment, run by Antonieta Tistoj Mazariegos, who is also the “autora” of the most important cofradía in San Cristóbal—that of Santiago. Her morería supplies masks and trajes to the Conquista dance teams of Momostenango and San Cristóbal, offered without charge to the latter as a civic contribution. In Chichicastenango the Ignacio morería is the older establishment, while its offshoot, operated by Miguel Buchan, provides Conquista costumes and paraphernalia for Cunén and Nebaj. The Conquista teams of Joyabaj are served by a local morería established by Pascual Pérez around 1960. He was also a mascarero so he could fabricate both masks and costumes. The Joyabaj morería is presently operated by Mercedes Malecio Aguilar who with her previous husband bought the business after the death of its founder.

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7 The name appears to describe a specific drum beat that would have been appropriate to a Nahua version of a nobles’ dance.
Costumes are fabricated on order in the morería, having been commissioned by individual dancers or dance teams several months previous. Older costumes can also be rented (or sold to outsiders) as well as recycled to fill new orders. Both García Escobar (1987) and Krystal (2001) enumerate the common components of dance costume: mask, clothing, wig, feathers, crown or helmet, and hand-held attributes. To their explanations I add a few of my own observations.

Masks are purchased by the morero (costume maker) from a specialist carver or mascarero. In the most detailed description of mask carving, Krystal (2001) notes that the preferred material is white pine. According to Krystal, when the carving is finished, and any imperfections in the wood are filled or covered, the mascarero primes the surface with a dilution of beef tallow, then paints the mask, preferably with two coats. When masks are to be reused, they must be repainted whether due to weathering or to the need to represent another character, since many of these are interchangeable in shape (particularly the “young man” mask). The mask is not returned to the mascarero for repainting: rather the morero accomplishes this task. Finally the morero sets the eyes into the mask and holds them in place with wax. According to García Escobar (1987: 79), eyes used to be of glass but now are painted acorns. The style of carving and painting is fairly naturalistic in the mode of the European Renaissance and Baroque eras during which this masking tradition was introduced to the Spanish colonies.⁸

Clothing manufacture involves many kinds of materials. Items such as pants, shirt, hat and cape are made of several colours of velvet material with a sturdy lining, using darts and layers to give a more three dimensional affect. For helmets and crowns, velvet with a stiff backing is attached to openwork tin constructions made by metalworking specialists. When stitching is complete, a large variety of decorative ornaments are sewn onto each piece. In comparison with the 17th century descriptions of dance costume by Fuentes y Guzmán (1969–72: 216–17) it may be seen that while small mirrors are still employed, jade beads and Spanish coins are no longer available. These have been replaced by a European-derived assortment of passemonterie materials, of which those most widely used are sequins of various hues as well as gold and silver braid, galloon trims, fringes and tassels. The gold and silver colours and the reflective surfaces of mirrors and sequins construct an ensemble that stands apart from everyday reality so that it is appropriate to sacred personages and thus indicates their spiritual nature. In addition, there appears to be a widespread notion in the Americas that bright colours and reflective surfaces signify well-being, which would be appropriate as the intended outcome of the dance is an offering to the patron saint who is capable of reciprocating with health and prosperity for the community.

⁸ A different tradition of making costumes and masks and different styles for both obtain in the Achí municipio of Rabinal.
Other costume elements may be introduced more briefly. The older style wig is made of a skull cap to which have been sewn dyed and curled strands of maguey fiber. According to Krystal the curls are made by winding the fiber around sticks and then applying gelatin. A newer style wig is made of tightly braided yarn. The skull cap is worn over two or three coloured handkerchiefs or panuelos used to bind the head and covering all but the eyes and nose. For example, at Joyabaj, the first cloth is folded into a triangle and placed over the head, with the point hanging in back and the ends tied under the chin. The second cloth is folded into a narrow strip and tied as a headband. The third cloth is again folded into a triangle and is tied over the mouth with the point hanging down below the chin.

Feathers are mainly dyed ostrich feathers, along with bunches of dyed chicken feathers attached to a stick. Ostrich feathers in particular enhance the image of sacred beings apart from everyday time and space because they tower over non-costumed onlookers. Hand-held attributes include rattles, weapons, and sceptres. Rattles can be gourd or tin, while weapons and sceptres are normally painted wood and made by the mascarero. Panuelos are also normally tied around any hand-held objects. Dancers may also wear gloves or scarves. The dancers’ own long socks and street shoes are most commonly worn; sandals are an exception.

These costumes are not realistic representations of the characters they are designed to embody. The resplendent costume of the vaquero in Torito-group dances, for example, with the huge panoply of dyed ostrich feathers and the sparkly capes does not look anything like what we expect of a working “cowboy”, nor does a bull or deer look anything like the animal except for the headdress. Similarly the costumes for the Baile de la Conquista look nothing like 16th century military garb for either Spaniard or Maya, especially since the Cacique capes are derived from the European ermine robe. Further, the same pants and shirt may be worn for almost any festival dance. Realistic imagery is not the goal, and from a certain viewpoint may be the opposite of that goal. Rejection of realism for its opposite, in the bright colours and reflective materials, highlights the sacred character of the beings whose presence and transformational powers are manifest through dance in the liminal space and time of ritual.

Vaquero (Cowboy), Torito Dance, Joyabaj. 2012
2.3. Costumbre’s Alternatives and Future

Before the modern era, Costumbre would have simply been the religion of Guatemala’s Maya peoples, with its central cofradía institution both controlled by the church and resisting aspects of its dogma. But in their crusade against the Catholic church, which they considered a conservative and regressive force, the late 19th century liberal government invited Protestant denominations into Guatemala. Protestants did not make major inroads into the Maya highland regions at this time, and with the power of the church diminished, Maya communities were free to follow Costumbrista traditions, strengthening the importance of the cofradía. The Catholic church was not in a position to make a serious challenge to Costumbrista religious autonomy until the 1940s when the fundamentalist Catholic Action movement was initiated, supported by the Christian Democratic Party, its political wing, and promoted by the government as a defense against communism (Adams 2011: 142; Cook and Offit 2013: 12–13). Adherents to Catholic Action, called catechists, hoped to stamp out Costumbre, which they reviled as a pagan religion. Using subtle as well as overt tactics, Catholic Action succeeded in bringing cofradías under stronger control by the priests. Cook and Offit (2013: 52–53, 136–37) report that by the mid 1970s, about half the Indigenous population in Momostenango adhered to Catholic action, with the major subscription being in the aldeas (villages) rather than in the cabecera (head town). Costumbre held on, due importantly to the strength of the cofradía institution, but it was the conflicto armado, the civil war that peaked in the 1980s and early 1990s, that curtailed Catholic Action’s campaign. Rojas Lima (1986: 279) writes that catechists were particularly vulnerable to the government’s counter-insurgency campaign, whereas its conservative nature, and its ability to adapt itself to a position of subordination and exploitation, allowed Costumbre to survive.

The decline of Catholic Action also relates to the rise of Pentecostal and Evangelical Protestant movements that begin to sweep the highlands in the 1970s, with Mormon proselytizing added more recently into the mix. As a religious counterpart to a neo–liberal ideology with its stress on accumulation of capital, the Evangelical movement condemns the lavish ritual expenses associated with Costumbre and its cofradía institutions. The fact that alcohol consumption has long been considered an important part of Costumbrista rituals, leading in some communities to a regular interplay of celebration and inebriation, has furthered Evangelical condemnation. All of these Protestant groups, heavily funded especially from the United States, work tirelessly to condemn and win converts away from both Costumbre and orthodox Catholicism, and have succeeded in converting about half of Guatemala’s Indigenous population. Cook and Offit (2013) note that in Momostenango this Protestant onslaught has led Catholic priests to become more accommodating to Costumbre, in return for which Costumbristas must attend mass, accept the Priest as their spiritual authority, and surrender to the church any donations made to the saints during processions and cofradía visits.

In what Cook and Offit (2008: 56) call “a pluralized market for Indigenous religiosity,” Maya Spirituality has recently provided another alternative. Although originating earlier, the Maya spirituality movement
flowered in the period of the horrific civil war that launched a genocidal counter-insurgency campaign in Guatemala. At its height in the early 1980s but lasting until 1996, this campaign of torture, disappearance, massacre and displacement was seen as a new conquest by an oppressive non-Indigenous society. The goal of Maya spirituality to cleanse Costumbre of any elements derived from the Christian religion thus became more attractive to a larger number of elders and educated Maya activists. Archaeological discourse lauding the K’iche’ Maya Popol Vuh as a “Maya Bible” became a useful and return-transculturative tool for basing a religious movement on purely Maya elements, though some Maya also consider the Popol Vuh to be tainted by Christianity. While repudiating Christian elements, Maya spirituality has absorbed an international ethos of indigeneity, seen in prominent references to an Earth Mother, in contrast to the local concept of Holy Earth. As Cook and Offit (2008: 55; 2013: 158–61) detail, Maya spirituality is particularly attractive to women and youth who are both relegated to secondary status in the system of Costumbre. Whether they turn to Maya Spirituality or not, the disaffection of women and youth toward Costumbre is also tied into the exponentially increasing opportunities of consumption for products of globalized industry. As such consumption is based on an ethos of progress that demands continual change, it seems to offer a freedom of action that conflicts strongly with Costumbre’s conservative adherence to traditions inherited from the past. While some interpret the evidence of these other groups whittling away the adherents to Costumbre as leading to its ultimate disappearance, Cook and Offit (2013: 54) argue that there are signs that Costumbre may be seeking a new equilibrium that will allow it to continue in this pluralized religious environment.