

The Dance of the Conquest of Guatemala
In Four K'iche' Municipios

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Dedication

To the Cojtí family,
particularly Don Demetrio, Doña Clara and Avex.

Notices

This work is available for free download. I choose not to publish it because then it would bring income to the publishing house and not the participants in the Conquest Dance who most deserve it. Also, though I have invested nearly \$50,000 of my own salary in this project, I ask for no monetary compensation, as this too would be injurious to participants.

Except where otherwise noted, all photographs are by the author and included with written permission from the dance team *autores*.

Acknowledgments

This project would not have been possible without assistance from a host of people and institutions. To organize my thanks, I will proceed according to temporal and geographic relations rather than positing any kind of priority.

The seeds for this project were planted in my community of Vancouver and the Lower Mainland of British Columbia. In 1998, in preparation for an exhibit on Maya history and society, I became involved with the community refugees who fled the Guatemalan civil war in the early 1980s. This interaction led me to question the politics of the archaeological and art historical study of pre-Hispanic Maya imagery with which I had been involved since my undergraduate days in the late 1960s. For exposure to Maya points of view on this discipline I thank Maximo Morales, Francisca Sales, Lix Lopez, Alejandro Ruiz and Zoila Ramirez. Also among this community at the time was Leoncio Ventura with whom I had hoped to collaborate and who did provide invaluable assistance in the early stages of my research in Guatemala, particularly in his home *municipio* of Olintepeque from which he obtained for me a text for the dance. Leoncio's brother Mynor also took me to the locations of battles between Spaniards and K'iche' (Palajujnoj, El Pinal, and Río Xequikel) that are central to the Dance of the Conquest. Also through the Vancouver community I met Avexnim Cojtí Ren, who had come to Vancouver to study.

Disillusioned with the study of Pre-Hispanic imagery, and nearing the end of my career, I did not plan to take on a new research project. So I initially planned to look into the *Baile de la Conquista* only for teaching purposes. I was greatly intrigued by this topic from reading the dissertation by Matthew Krystal, who told me in correspondence that I could surely see the dance at least in San Cristóbal Totonicapán. Matthew connected me with Carlos Molina, who arranged a homestay in San Miguel Totonicapán. At the same time and fortuitously, Luisa Meyerman, a former student who had returned to Guatemala, contacted me and on hearing my plans offered to help me get started in researching in Guatemala. Luisa was indeed was an enormous help when I arrived in July, 2008, and I thank her heartily for that.

The logistics of my first trip were also facilitated by Avexnim Cojtí, who arranged for me to stay with her parents, her father being the extraordinary scholar and activist, Demetrio Cojtí Cuxil and her mother the generous and wise Clara Ren, both of whom I had met in connection with the earlier (2002) exhibit project that involved collaboration with Lix Lopex, Avexnim Cojtí, and Wendy Porter. This new project on the Conquest dance has ultimately involved eleven trips to Guatemala, ranging from a few weeks to more than three months, and the Cojtís generously hosted me in Guatemala City and helped facilitate transportation and research for each of those times, including letting me stay whenever I wanted in their home in Chichicastenango. A huge thanks to the Cojtí family to whom this work is dedicated.

The homestay that Carlos Molina arranged for me in Totonicapán was with Miguel Abraham Hernández Tax, member of a multi-generational extended family of weavers. Miguel and his wife Raquel made me feel so much at home, including arranging office space for me, guiding me to unfamiliar cities, and making delicious and varied vegan meals, that I returned to their home each trip, making Totonicapán my centre of operations. Our long after-dinner discussions was an enormous help in raising my level of Spanish conversation. Huge thanks to the Hernández family.

I met Matthew Krystal in Totonicapán and he guided me on my first visit to Momostenango, where I saw my first *Baile de la Conquista*. Matthew also introduced me to Garrett Cook, whose anthropological study of *Costumbre* institutions in Momostenango is unsurpassed. I chatted with Garrett a bit during the dance, giving him my impressions, and he cleverly combined complements on my “insights” with encouragement to pursue the *Conquista* as a research project. This bait worked, and Garrett gave me the advice that helped me become involved with the *Conquista* team in Momostenango, encouraging me to look for Santiago Itzep who became a close contact, and who in early 2009 introduced me to the venerable *autor* Juan Eulogio Vicente. Garrett also found me a homestay with the family of Marvin Xiloj. There I found a second Guatemalan home with more delicious special vegan cooking. Garrett and I thought about collaborating at one point, and through this he included me in an important interview with Francisco García Peruch, who had danced Alvarado decades earlier. Through Garrett I was also able to correspond fruitfully with Robert Carmack. So huge thanks to Garrett and also Matthew.

I returned to Momostenango in the summer of 2009 to attend some rehearsals, and there met Ernesto Ixcayauh Alvarado, who had impressed me with his gripping performance as Ajitz the previous year, and who became my main contact. Don Ernesto is talented and knowledgeable and absolutely generous in sharing his knowledge with me. I owe a great deal of my understanding of the meaning of the dance in contemporary Guatemala to Don Ernesto.

In the same week that I first came to Momostenango, Carlos Molina arranged for his daughter to guide me for the performance of the *Conquista* in San Cristóbal Totonicapán. She introduced me to the *autor*, Francisco Rodolfo Hernández (Don Pancho), who gave me permission to videotape the performance in return for a donation to the group. When I returned in 2009, Don Pancho made me welcome to participate in the ceremonial events and to photograph and videotape in any way I liked. He let me study his text, a very limited privilege, and even put me up after the *velada de los trajes* because of the late hour at which it ends. I spent many hours in Don Pancho’s house watching dancers dress and watching daily life take place among his wonderful wife, children and grandchildren. Don Pancho has also been a tremendous influence on my understanding of the importance of the *Baile de la Conquista* to Maya identity, beginning at our first meeting when he took me out to his back yard and pointed out to me the places where the events narrated in the *Baile de la Conquista* took place. Also particularly welcoming, friendly and helpful were Don Pancho’s son Juan Oswaldo Hernández Chanax, who dances Alvarado, and José Gregorio Elías Chay, who dances Tekum.

The next week in my initial, 2008 trip I stayed in Chichicastenango, where Avexnim Cojtí had arranged for her friend, Natalia Mejía to help me in my research there. From Natalia I learned about the important tradition of dancing *La Conquista* in Joyabaj. When I went to Joyabaj, my initial guide there was Timoteo Alonso who toured me around on his motorcycle and suggested a stay in hotel Los Panchos, to which I have returned many years. In 2009 I was able to see the *Baile de la Conquista* in Joyabaj. There were actually two teams performing simultaneously, though I didn't know this when, during their rehearsals, I attached my self to the team whose *autor* was Domingo Gutiérrez. Don Domingo was courteous to me but it was José Manuel Gutiérrez who really made me feel welcome, and it was the outstanding interplay of Manuel as Alvarado and Francisco Ordoñez Alonso (Don Chico) as Tekum that made me stick with this team. I also met the *maestro* Benito Ajanel. The next year, Domingo Gutiérrez did not sponsor a team, so I spent time briefly with Domingo Castro's team, which Manuel and Don Chico had joined. Manuel and Chico remained good friends to me. The height was 2012 when Don Chico was the *autor* with his cousin. Manuel and Chico suggested that they and I could be co-autores in 2013, which I accepted, but unfortunately Chico became gravely ill during that *feria* and these plans had to be called off, as his recovery has been very slow. Warmest friendship and thanks to Chico and Manuel.

After correspondence with Carlos Galindo I came to Guatemala again in January, 2009, to see the Rabinal Achí. Carlos met me in Rabinal and took me around, letting me take advantage of his close relationship with that dance team. Several times in Guatemala City as well, Carlos spent enormous amounts of time and energy to facilitate my research along with, to a lesser extent, Carlos René García Escobar and David Pineda. Carlos also obtained a copy for me of the Joyabaj text for the *Baile de la Conquista*. Huge thanks to Carlos Galindo for his limitless friendship and generosity.

Before heading to Rabinal I had stayed in Chichicastenango, where I encountered members of the Cunén *Conquista* team and arranged to come to Cunén after seeing the Rabinal Achí. My brief exposure to their dance in January 2009 led me to return in 2010 for the entire festival. There my research was facilitated by the warm and generous Jaime Gamarro. Through Don Jaime I was introduced to José Camajá (Don Chepe) whose house was the *posada* for the *Conquista* dance team, so I appreciate Don Chepe welcoming me into his home to spend long hours waiting for dancers to arrive and dress. The brothers Juan and Ambrosio Chilisná were both leaders of the dance team and both offered friendship, inviting me to their homes, for which I am grateful. I also greatly enjoyed my conversations with the musicians (Manuel Camajá and Diego Martín Canto) and Don Chepe's son, Manuel Camajá. Documentarian Andrew Weeks offered companionship during part of this *feria* in Cunén, as he also did in Joyabaj.

I also want to show my appreciation to those who have assisted me in research outside the present performance. Thanks to Rachel McCleary who sent me a copy of the Lemoa text held in the Peabody

Museum, Harvard University. My thanks also to Jim Pieper who made his two scripts available for study and to Tsao Hsingyuan for photographing them for me when she was in southern California. The largest body of *Conquista* scripts are in the Latin American Library of Tulane University, many collected by Barbara Bode whose field notebooks are also in that collection, and I want to thank David Dressing for facilitating my research there. While in this library, I met Guatemala dance researcher Carroll Mace, who provided me with important information. Thelma Porres and Anaïs García Salazar generously helped my research in the archives of CIRMA in Antigua.

Back in Vancouver, many, many other people have contributed to this project. Raúl Álvarez-Moreno gave me valuable insights into the relation of the *Conquista* script to *siglo de oro* Spanish theatre. For enormous help in coding video, mounting a website, and other necessities in this research, another huge thanks to former (Negin Miriahi, Tim Wang) and present (Angela Lam, Jennie Wong, Ricardo Serrano, Taher Hashemi) members of the Arts IT team at the University of British Columbia. The interlibrary loan department of the UBC library has been invaluable, with a special thanks to Dave. Rhodri Windsor-Liscombe, when he was chair of the Department of Art History and Visual Arts, arranged for a \$1000 grant to support my research: the only funds for this project that I did not provide from my own salary. Jasmina Karabeg edited two preliminary papers that were ultimately incorporated into this study. Felice Wyndham and Esteban Izquierda helped me with some small-project translations. Mónica Daniela Pérez Montelongo has worked for a year and a half to translate more than half of the text into Spanish. A giant thanks to Daniela for her astuteness, often pointing out mistakes I had made. My son, Coby Cohodas, and eventually also his wife, Syahidah Ismail, took care of home and pets during my eleven trips to Guatemala, and I hugely appreciate this important help.

Many dancers, musicians, *maestros*, and *autores* that I have not named also made this project possible through their participation, and this includes not only those presently active but also their ancestors who have developed and nourished this dance tradition over the last four centuries. Of course, any mistakes in this work are my own fault, not those of these many facilitators. And I want to apologize in advance for any areas in which my interpretations may have exceeded the information and might therefore be distasteful to the dance participants.