

# MATACHINES!

## Essays for the 2008 Gathering

Edited by Claude Stephenson

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The following thank-you's are in no particular order but each is no less important than those who had the luck to be listed above first.

This event could not have been possible without all of the Matachines dance groups who not only agreed to come and perform at this event, but who have been keeping this important dance tradition alive in their communities for countless generations. Many were uncomfortable at first with the idea of bringing their groups away from their communities, as this dance is considered sacred by most who practice it, and so we thank them from our hearts for honoring us with their participation.

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I'd personally like to thank the authors and scholars who contributed to this event and to this booklet as well as our copy editor Celestia Loeffler and graphic designer Jaye Oliver. Also, kudos to the staff at the Vagabond Executive Inn in Albuquerque for cheerfully accommodating the hordes of Matachines dancers who descended upon them.

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## Introduction

At mid-day on Christmas Eve in Picuris Pueblo, the brisk winter air heavily scented with piñon and cedar smoke and simmering posole with chile, two strangely masked characters begin their appointed rounds. Going from house-to-house and knocking on doors and windows, they cry out in a high descending falsetto “hoo-hoo” calling the dancers to assemble on the plaza. Men carrying ribbon-covered costumes and colored wands emerge from the warmth of their homes and begin to congregate beside the old adobe church where children are playing beside small, neatly stacked pallets of freshly split cedar. To the accompanying strains of a violin being tuned, the dancers disappear into a small room to dress while the people of the Pueblo begin arriving and greeting each other, milling about the plaza and lightly stamping their feet to drive away the cold. “Hoo-hoo” call the masqueraders again and again as they circle and weave through the gathering throng. The violinist, accompanied by a guitarist, begins to play an oddly haunting melody and the dancers, now dressed in fabulous costumes with their faces obscured by scarves, walk out in two files into the center of the plaza and begin to dance the ancient Southwestern ritual drama known as Matachines. For an hour they weave and swirl, they squat in place, then rise again waving their fan-like wands and shaking gourd-shaped rattles to the tempo of the music. A young girl in a white dress dances in and out among them, chaperoned by the two mysterious masked characters, who continue calling out in their high falsetto voices. A man dressed as a bull joins them as the girl watches from a chair on the sidelines. Then, just as suddenly as they began, the dancers stop and file back inside and the crowd begins to disperse.

After dark, with the small neatly stacked piles of wood now ablaze, the musicians and dancers return and promenade in the eerie light surrounding the plaza, wending their way through the luminarias to the church for a final dance performance in front of the altar. Then it is all over. The Matachines will not appear again for another year. “What is this dance?” a visiting tourist asks me. “I don’t know,” I reply, “it’s a mystery. I’ve been studying it for years and I still don’t really know.”

*continued*

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nine fellow  
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I wrote the preceding piece nearly ten years ago and upon reflection, I realize that I'm no closer to an explanation for the Matachines dance now than I was then. I'm somewhat resigned to the fact that we will likely never know the real truth behind the mystery. It is what it is. I've simply come to love the dance in situ, enjoying what each of the communities who continue to practice it make of it in their own personal fashion. To that end I've invited some of them to come and share their interpretation of the dance with each other and with all of you who attend this unprecedented event. I hope that you will enjoy their performances and take with you a better understanding of its simple and elegant beauty as well as its importance to the communities who have chosen to keep it alive. I would also hope that you gain a quiet respect for the personal commitment of each individual dancer that is necessary and implicit to performing this timeless ritual.

I've also invited nine fellow scholars of the Matachines dance to offer their insights and opinions about the dance for this booklet. I asked them to write about the dance's significance, meanings, history, origins, music, steps, and practice in New Mexico and surrounding states. I was flattered and honored that all of them enthusiastically accepted my offer to participate in this project. I am therefore quite pleased to now present to you their interpretations of the Matachines dance and I hope you find their essays as compelling and interesting as I have.

Claude Stephenson  
New Mexico State Folklorist





Alcalde Danzante and Abuelo

# The Upper Rio Grande Matachines Dance

Sylvia Rodríguez



The power of the dance lies in how its basic plot gets played out with such astonishing variation

The Matachines is the only ritual drama that both Pueblo Indian and Hispano communities perform in the Upper Río Grande Valley. Some perform the dance in midwinter, others in summer. Style and detail vary widely from place to place, but common elements define a distinctive regional complex that stretches between Taos in the north and Tortugas in the south. There, a symbolic battle of transformation is enacted in several musical and choreographic sets by a king and a young girl, a bull or *toro*, usually two clowns or *abuelos* (lit. “grandfathers”), and two lines of eight or ten *danzantes*, thought by some to represent soldiers. The festive air of the dance carries a subtle undertone of violence that culminates in the death and/or castration of the bull. Many locals will tell you the dance portrays the triumph of good over evil, the holy virgin’s conversion of the pagan king. Others allude to a spiritual marriage. Another reading finds a hidden transcript of native regeneration and resistance against foreign invaders. The complex intricacy of every dance set and ritual gesture suggests a clear message that nonetheless remains elusive. The power of the dance lies in how its basic plot gets played out with such astonishing variation, each locality imparting its own distinctive stamp.

Some scholars trace the Matachines to the *morisca*, a dance said to have originated in Medieval Spain in the twelfth century or earlier as a pantomime of Moorish-Christian combat. Catholic missionaries to the New World saw their encounter with Indians through the eight-hundred-year-old glass of *Moro-Cristiano* conflict. Fresh from Spain’s *Reconquista* and fortified with the power of Inquisition, they deployed the dance and similar forms as a vehicle for Christianizing Indian converts. No one knows precisely when or how the Río Grande Pueblos incorporated the dance into their ritual calendar, but we assume this signaled their conversion to Christianity. The Matachines dance commemorates this bittersweet change in all its ambivalent, poignant beauty.

Some Pueblos attribute the dance not to church fathers like their Hispano neighbors, but to a Mexican-Indian king, identified in the dance as the figure of Monarca or Montezuma. He is dressed and masked like the *danzantes*, with a *palma* or trident in his left

hand and a *guaje* or rattle in the right, but he wears a crown instead of a *cupil* or miter. Monarca is paired with the little girl, known as Malinche, who wears a first Holy Communion dress. She is the only female character and the only dancer with no mask, an embodiment of purity and innocence who stands in puzzling contrast with the historic personage (Hernán Cortés' translator and mistress) known in Mexico by the same name. The Abuelos escort her in her meanderings between the two lines of *danzantes* and oversee her intricate exchange with Monarca of his *palma* and *guaje*. One clown carries a whip or *chicote* and sometimes the other is an edgy transvestite called *la Perejundia*. They call out the dance steps and wrestle the bull to the ground to castrate him, and then offer up his mock testicles to the audience. The musicians, usually a guitarist and violinist, play the tunes for each set as well as for the procession that opens and closes every hour-long performance.



Tortugas Monarca & Malinche

Encounter, struggle, and transformation between light and dark forces is a story for all times and places, whether Medieval Spain, sixteenth century Mexico, or New Mexico today. In 2008, one wonders if the old theme of Christian-Moorish struggle will resonate anew in the aftermath of 9/11. The Matachines remains a vibrant tradition in New Mexico because it resonates on so many levels at once: personal, somatic, spiritual, aesthetic, interethnic, communal, historic, geopolitical. One can watch or dance it five hundred times and never arrive at a fixed, authoritative account of what it means. Familiar though it is, something new happens every time people dance the Matachines.



Picuris Matachines



Tortugas dancers

## Understanding Los Matachines

Larry Torres

Bernalillo Toro



The dance-drama of *los Matachines* is an ancient tradition in the Hispanic Southwest. It is one of the very few dances shared by both Hispanic and Native peoples. Its roots can trace their influences back to the Middle Ages in Europe and at the same time, find New World influences included within their scope. Just as the sites where the dance-drama is produced are different, the 44 catalogued versions in the Americas also span places as far-flung as Pueblo in the State of Colorado and the deep rainforests of Belize.

Taking a look at the Old World influences, many have remarked that the costumes worn by the dance participants are tremendously influenced by the Moorish culture. It must be remembered that the Moors occupied the Iberian Peninsula between the years 711-1492 A.D. Each dancer is appropriately masked with scarves hiding the lower part of their faces with fringe, called *fleco*, masking their foreheads and eyes.

The heads of the Matachines are surmounted by tall headdresses made of costly fabrics such as velvet and silk. These *cupiles* are decorated with silk ruffle borders and jeweled trinkets and symbols. From the back of the headdresses hang long silk ribbons arranged in patterns pleasing to the eye.

The masking of the hand is continued with many scarves that bedeck the dancers. Held within the right hand is a three-pronged wand called a *palma*. It represents the Trinitarian belief that God is one and three at the same time. In the Old World, St. Patrick explained it by holding the triple-leafed shamrock out to the Druids. In the New World it is reflected as the triune god Quetzalcoatl of Mexico who is lord of the air, lord of the land, and lord of the water at the same time.

In the Old World *los Matachines* found themselves reflected in the Italian *commedia dell'arte* as *mattachinos*. The people of England would certainly recognize their own beribboned "Morris Dancers" as "Moorish Dancers."

As *los Matachines* became an increasingly popular dance, much symbolism was attributed to them. They were made figures to be seen

only during feast days or during mid-winter mumming rituals. New Mexico scholars such as the late Fray Angélico Chávez however, ask us to consider the possibility that los Matachines was originally merely a form of social dance.

Be the case as it may, it is known that the oldest unbroken tradition of dancing los Matachines can be traced to the town of Bernalillo, New Mexico, where they have been performed for 315 years straight. According to many references, the citizens of Bernalillo made a promise when they returned to their homes after The Pueblo Rebellion of 1680, that if their patron saint San Lorenzo were to keep them safe, they would dance in his honor every year.

Other scholars who have studied the dance have suggested that los Matachines is a homoerotic dance, that is, a dance done by men, for men, since female figures were not originally part of the dance. Just as female societies guarded their secrets, even so did men's secret societies guard their own. The only female figure in the dance, an ogress called *la Perejundia*, was always played by a man dressed as a woman. In this way the figure was assured of having both the strength of the man and the power of the woman.

As the history of the dance unfolded among the indigenous tribes of the New World, more symbolism was added to it. The ancient ogres called *Abuelos*, were brought in to keep order in the dance as well as to call out the movements to the dancers. They played the role of dance monitors called *bastoneros*. Part of their duties also included keeping the dancers' ribbons nicely arranged and keeping the spectators out of the arena. As the *Abuelos* took on the traits of trickster figures, they also teased the sacrificial bull of the dance.

The bull is called *el Toro* while he is dancing and *el Capeo* whenever he is ritually castrated. He must bow low before the chief dancer called "*Monarca*" among the Spanish and "*Monanca*" among the Tiwa Natives. *Monarca* is easily recognized as he is the only dancer who wears solid white. It is only after the bull is felled that the ogress *Perejundia* will fall on the floor at his side and give birth to a newborn *abuelito* who will then become the spirit of the dance the following year. Whenever this happens, los Matachines can be interpreted as a fertility rite.



Picuris Abuelo

The ancient ogres called *Abuelos*, were brought in to keep order in the dance

The newest addition to the dance-drama is the little girl figure called La Malinche

In looking at Native influences on the Dance of los Matachines, it must first be noted that the participants, whose numbers vary according to their interpretations, carry masked rattles in their left hands. The rattles are highly decorated gourds. To this may be added the notion that they also gird their waists with loincloths called *tapa-rabos*. The loincloths are decorated with ritual symbols known only to the dancers. About their lower shins, they wear fancy leggings.

The newest addition to the dance-drama is the little girl figure called *la Malinche*. Her name stems from the ancient records that say that she was the paramour of the conquistador Hernán Cortés. In fact, in Belize los Matachines is known as “The Dance of Cortés” according to full-blooded Maya Native, Victor Choc.



Tijeras Malinche

Again, the symbolism attached to *la Malinche* depends on her interpretation. In Belize there are four Malinches who dance. In Bernalillo there are three. In Jemez there are two. In Arroyo Seco, there is only one. Depending on how she is seen, she can represent the waxing, full, and waning moon or the dawn, full day, and the dusk. In the village of Tortugas she is the spirit of purity and she often wears attributes belonging to the Virgin of Guadalupe.

The music of los Matachines may vary in tenor and speed. It is usually done with guitar and violin among the Spanish villages and with ritual drum and rattle in Native villages. But what people watching the dance will remark upon the most is that it is a fine example of how the differences among people can serve more as a means of unifying everyone than of dividing us.

# Moctezuma and the Elders, the Virgin and the Bull: the Matachines Dance of Greater Mexico

Enrique R. Lamadrid

The dynamics of devotion, remembrance, resistance, and accommodation are deeply embedded in the ritual of the Matachines dance. Its cast of characters recapitulates colonial histories as they dance across spiritual, ethnic, national, cultural, and even gender boundaries. No other tradition expresses the complexity and depth of cultural relations in Greater Mexico more eloquently than the Matachines. A sumptuous feast of signification is offered up through choreography, costume, gesture, and music which resonate between the sacred and the burlesque.



A sumptuous  
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choreography,  
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and music

A text wrought of interacting symbols always suggests more than it can mean. Historical documentation is tantalizingly scant. Etymologies abound, Arabic, Italian, Spanish, even Nahuatl sources are cited by scholars. Origins are ultimately untraceable. Eurocentric explanations of the dance drama stress the apparently Moorish elements of fringed face masks and opulent costumes, and the theme of Christian conversion. Americanists assert that the Matachines is an Aztec dance that portrays the spiritual conquest of Mexico. No one has yet explained the presence and popularity of the dance in Colombia. Whether the bearers and teachers of this tradition in the far northern reaches of the upper Río Grande were Franciscan missionaries or Mexican Indians is only speculation.

The legends are many. One of many Pueblo stories tells that long ago king *Moctezuma* himself flew north in the form of a bird with bad news and good advice. He warned that bearded foreigners were on their way north, but if the people mastered this dance, the strangers would learn to respect them, would join the dance and come to be just like them. One of many Hispano stories tells that an alliance based on the sharing of the Matachines dance with Pueblos in the Bernalillo area saved the Spanish Mexican settlers from destruction in 1680. On the eve of the great Pueblo Revolt, Tiwa and Queres people warned their neighbors of the dangers at hand. San Lorenzo is credited with this miracle and the collective vow to honor him is celebrated yearly with the dance.

What is clear is that for centuries, Native, Hispano, and Mestizo peoples have danced the Matachines. From Taos to Sonora, from



Alcalde Torito and Tularosa  
Malinche and dancer

...a new character is added as the totem bull of Spain appears and runs wild through the lines of dancers

Zacatecas to Laredo and San Antonio, they step in unison to the insistent, bittersweet music of drums and rattles, guitars, and violins. The fluttering ribbons that hang from their crowns and shoulders are the colors of the rainbow. In proud formation they do battle against chaos and reenact the terms of their own capitulation.

Christian souls or Aztec spirits?—they dance in graceful reconciliation, now in lines, now in crosses. In their midst a great king receives the counsel of a little girl. She is *Malinche*. In the south her name is synonymous with betrayal, but she is no traitor here. Her purity and ceremonial conversion of *Monarca*, the King, to Christianity identify her with the Virgin herself. She takes up his rattle and animates the rest of the dancers. When they kneel with bowed heads, seemingly dead or in another dimension, she brings them back to life. At the edges of this fray, a grotesque band of mostly masked Elders guards the dancers, pop their whips, make fun of the people, and ridicule the New World Order.

There are two regional styles of Matachines, both of which come together in only one community—Tortugas, a village near Las Cruces, New Mexico. In the southern style, also called *Chichimeca* or *Apache*, dancers are dressed in bright red and yellow aprons thickly hung with horizontal reeds. In many communities they wear plains style war bonnets and the dance captains are called *Comanches*. With stylized bow and arrow clackers in hand these Matachines corner and shoot the *Viejos*, the old men of the dance, and sometimes pretend to drink their blood when they die.

In the northern style, analogous to the *Danza de la Pluma* or Dance of the Feather in northern Mexico, dancers wear *cupiles* or

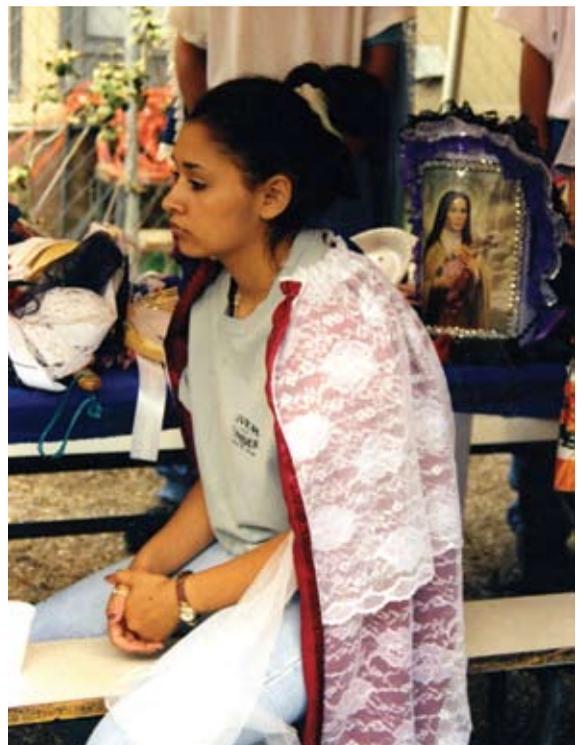
Aztec crowns, thought by some to resemble the bishop's miter. With *palmas* or three-pronged lightning swords, they invoke the Trinity and carve the wind in symmetrical arabesques. In New Mexico, a new character appears, *el Toro*, the totem bull of imperial Spain. With horns and canes for front legs, he runs wild, taunting the Malinche and weaving through the lines of dancers, as though lost in a labyrinth. The Malinche flees, then confronts the Toro and engages him in a miniature bull fight with the Virgin's *pañño* or scarf. The *Abuelos* or grandfathers of the dance taunt and overpower the Toro, killing and castrating him, and casting his seed to the joyful crowd. Have they vanquished evil, as the people say, or has the savage bull of European empire met its consummation? *Gracias a Dios*, it is still a mystery.

The key elements of the Matachines dance drama are performed across cultures on key winter and summer feast days such as Christmas, New Year's Day, San Antonio, San Lorenzo, San José, and the Virgin of Guadalupe. Its allegorical characters reenact the spiritual drama of the conquest in a complex blend of Indigenous and European traditions. Some features are related to the reconquest themes of *Moros y Cristianos*. Other elements derive from combat dances of the Aztecs, which were Christianized and used for evangelization during colonial times. The significance and details of los Matachines can vary widely between regions and cultures. In Hispano communities, it has a strong sacred character and is performed in devotion to Guadalupe and the saints. In Native communities it is often a more secular celebration. Strong burlesque components can appear in both, with the Elders engaging in hilarious fights and sometimes even romance and mock marriage.

As a multiplicity of localized sub-themes play out, it becomes clear that besides the basic plot, innovation and change are the only constants of the Matachines tradition. The most compelling symbol of this protean versatility is the mirror itself, which in tiny pieces is incorporated into costumes, crowns, and objects like the palma held in the hands of dancers. Ultimately, communities perceive themselves in the dance.

Every year the dance evolves and speaks to the people of changing times. Unsatisfied with the single female role of the Malinche, women everywhere are participating as never

Every year  
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Bernalillo dancer

...Malinche  
skipping  
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lines of  
dancers on  
the plaza.  
She is hope.  
She is  
adoration.  
She is the  
future.

before. In northern New Mexico and the Mexican state of Durango, all-female groups have emerged. Near Albuquerque, one fiesta recently featured a little blond Malinche, the daughter of Anglo-American *mayordomos* or fiesta sponsors, whose role bespeaks the respect they earned in a multi-cultural community. Those who criticized her ethnicity were ridiculed the next year by the *Perejundia*, the female *Abuela* clown in a long blond wig. In a central New Mexico community, openly gay dancers have “come out” on the plaza with the precise rainbow sequence of ribbon colors, even as they maintain their anonymous devotion in the dance. Although the *Matachines* belongs to the larger category of folk Catholic celebrations, communities divided along religious lines have realized that the dance transcends sectarianism as it reaffirms their culture. In one recent village revival in northern New Mexico, Protestants and Catholics have reorganized the dance. Catholic dancers have saints images on their scarves, while Protestants dress in their imageless iconoclast style, with patterns and solid colors! True to its

mission, the *Matachines* continues crossing boundaries in its conversation with cultural otherness.

A multitude of questions remain. Is the *Matachines* more truly the “beautiful dance of subjugation” or the “beautiful dance of persistence and survival?” What is the symbolic post-colonial significance of castrating the Toro after its death? Why does the presumably Trinitarian Palma sword of the Monarca have four instead of three points in some communities? And most importantly, what are the “hidden transcripts” for the many Indigenous communities who have encountered and appropriated the dance? With such a multiplicity of significance, if there is a unifying theme in the dance, it is reconciliation and transcendence. The truest consensus of the *Matachines* is that of eyes and hearts following the Malinche skipping between the lines of dancers on the plaza. She is hope. She is adoration. She is the future.



Tortugas Malinche

# One Name, Many Dances: Differentiating the Danzas de los Matachines

Max Harris

**H**istorically, the *danzas de los matachines* were not one, but many. The matachines that I saw in Bernalillo, New Mexico, in August 1993 were different from, but visibly related to, those I saw in Picuris, San Juan, and Santa Clara pueblos in December 1994. The length of performance, the details of the dress, the style of the music, and the antics of the *abuelos* and the *toro* varied from one community to another. Most notably, the Santa Clara matachines danced to native drums, rather than to guitar and fiddle, and their malinche wore native dress rather than a European first communion dress. Nevertheless, the matachines of northern New Mexico all belong to a single dance tradition. If I am not mistaken, the Rarámuri matachines of Chihuahua, Mexico, belong to the same tradition.

Where the  
two traditions  
meet, hybrid  
forms are  
developing

The *danzas de los matachines* that I saw in Zacatecas, Mexico, in August 1996, belonged to a different dance tradition altogether. There was no *monarca*, no malinche, no story line. The choreography was simpler, the footwork more intricate. The music of the dance was entirely rhythmic, marked by a drummer, by each dancer's gourd rattle and percussive bow and arrow, and by the stamping of the dancers' feet. The *viejos* who kept the dancers in order were sometimes skilled comics; but, unlike the *abuelos* of northern New Mexico, they had no narrative role. The matachines from Aguascalientes that I saw dance outside the Basilica de Guadalupe in Mexico City, in December 1998, also belonged to this tradition. So do most Texan matachines. Patterns of migration have taken this dance at least as far north as Kansas and as far south as Tlaxcala.

Where the two traditions meet, hybrid forms are developing. The matachines of Mesquite, a suburb of Dallas, dance as if they were in Zacatecas but dress as if they were in northern New Mexico. So do the matachines from Santa Clara and Durango, who combine the single drummer of one tradition with the fiddle of the other. Another form of hybridization in the border regions is the application of the name matachines to the increasingly popular, but unrelated, *danzas aztecas*.

The *danza de los matachines* of Huajuapán de León, Oaxaca,



The dancers  
individually  
cavort, whirl,  
and bow to  
the lively  
music

bears no resemblance to any of these traditions. The Huajuapán matachines are lightweight, less dignified versions of Catalan *gegants* (giants). Their costumed wooden frames, topped with papier-mâché heads, double the height of the dancer, who peers out through a grille in the giant's chest. The dancers individually cavort, whirl, and bow to the lively music of a large wind ensemble. Other communities in Oaxaca perform the same dance, but Huajuapán claims—in this context at least—to be the “*cuna* [cradle] de los matachines.”

Why do such different dances share a single name? The answer lies in the history of the name itself. From the moment that it first appeared in the written record, in sixteenth-century Italy, *mattaccini* was used as a generic European term for a wide variety of foreign, acrobatic, or otherwise strange dances.

The word's first verifiable use is in Piero da Volterra's *Canzona de' Mattaccini*, an Italian carnival song written between 1530 and 1550, which portrays the *mattaccini* as lively fools, whose dance involves exaggerated (and sometimes obscene) postures, pratfalls, body blows, and dubious claims of agility and sexual prowess. A decade or so later, a late Italian saint's play, the *Rappresentazione di Santa Uliva*, included an interlude of “four men dressed as *mattaccini*, with bells on their feet and drawn swords in their hands.”

The word passed from Italian into French. In 1549, François Rabelais used the word *matachins* twice in an account of mock battles staged in Rome the previous year. First, he described “some matachins unfamiliar with the sea, who thought they could show off and fool around on water just as they do very well on land.” Later,

Picuris Pueblo



he mentioned “a company of new matachins,” who, “to the sound of cornets, oboes, [and] sackbuts,” “greatly delighted the entire audience” with their comic antics. But the most complete sixteenth-century description of matachins, complete with music, dance steps, and gestures, is given in Thoinot Arbeau’s *Orchesography* (1589). Arbeau’s matachins are not fools, but elegant sword dancers, “dressed in small corslets, with fringe epaulets and fringe hanging from beneath their belts over a silken ground. Their helmets are made of gilded cardboard, their arms are bare, and they wear bells upon their legs and carry a sword in the right hand and a shield in the left.”

A similar range of performers is designated by the Spanish word *matachines*. In 1559, Francisco de Alcocer called on all “good judges and governors” to “banish” the “matachines,” along with “similar inventions, childish dances, and *comediettas* that foreigners bring with them to make money off the common people.” At the other end of the social scale, a triumphal float that greeted the new queen, Anna of Austria, as she entered Burgos in October 1570, carried twelve matachines who performed “acrobatic feats of strength.” Subsequent Spanish descriptions of matachines include dances with wooden swords, equestrian ballet, tricks with fireworks, tightrope walkers, and dancers dressed as devils, wearing half-masks with long papier-mâché noses or waving inflated animal bladders on sticks.

The fact that there is no record of the word *mattaccin* or any of its cognates in Europe before at least 1530 raises the possibility that it may have originated in an Italian mispronunciation of a Nahuatl word. Over the previous four decades, several groups of Native Americans had traveled to Europe. In Sevilla, in 1522, two Mexica danced for an audience that included several Italian dignitaries. One of the Italian visitors left a detailed account of the dances, which were evidently small-scale versions of the kind of Mexica dances that Bernardino de Sahagún and Francisco López de Gómara were soon to document in Mexico itself. We know of one Mexica dance called *matlatzincayotl*. Could this have been one of the dances performed in Sevilla and, if so, could one of the Italians have mispronounced the name when he took it back to Italy? In 1528, a group of about seventy native Mexicans, of whom nearly thirty were entertainers, arrived in Spain with Cortés. Two of the many dancers performed on their backs, tossing and catching a log with their feet



Tortugas dancer

The origin  
of the  
matachines  
of northern  
New Mexico  
is more  
difficult to  
determine

(a dance that is still performed, I am told, near Chilapa, Guerrero). The two log dancers performed before the pope in Rome in April 1529. One of them was almost certainly called Benito Matatlaqueny. Could his name be the source of the mangled Italian *mattacini*, which so soon afterward was used to describe foreign dances and acrobatic tricks? Both derivations are speculative, of course, but they are no more so than many of the proposed European derivations of the name.

Of course, the word *matachines* may yet be shown to have European semantic roots. But even if that were the case, its use in the Americas to identify particular local dances would not mean that the dances themselves have European roots. The cultural identity of the various American *danzas de los matachines* must be determined on a case-by-case basis, not by their shared generic name. The Huajuapán *matachines* seem to me almost certainly European in origin. The Zacatecas *matachines* seem equally as certain to be native in origin. The origin of the *matachines* of northern New Mexico is more difficult to determine, given the frequent overlay of European dress, music, and narrative. But, if I were to guess, I would say that these, too, are of native American rather than imported European origin.



# Yaqui Matachinis

Jim Griffith

**I** have been working with my Pascua Yaqui neighbors and friends for many years; but I owe much of what I know about their matachinis tradition to anthropologist Muriel Thayer Painter who studied the Yaqui for over thirty years. I consider her book, *With Good Heart: Yaqui Beliefs and Ceremonies in Pascua Village*, to be one of the best sources on Yaqui belief and ceremonialism in Arizona and it is the source for most of the information in this essay.



Tortugas dancer

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While Yaqui matachinis have much in common with dances of the same name in other cultures, there are certain ways in which they stand out. In the first place, there are no masked clowns such as the *viejos* or *aruelos* of other traditions. The dances appear to have no dramatic or narrative content. While the middle line of dancers consists of young boys dressed in skirts and called *malinches*, Yaquis make no connections between these and Doña Marina, Cortés' interpreter. And for Yaquis, matachinis and their musicians are very sacred ritual performers. The matachinis seldom, if ever, dance at purely secular occasions, and ground over which matachinis have danced is blessed for the rest of time.

For Yaquis, matachinis are soldiers owing allegiance to the Virgin Mary. According to some legends, it was she who personally recruited them and had them dressed in accordance with her taste. When they dance, they do so before images of her and of San José, her husband. All parts of the matachini *insinio* (regalia) relate to her in some way. The red gourd rattles, the trident dance wand or *palma* with its tufts of colored feathers, and the crown with its multicolored paper streamers are all considered to be "flowers" in Yaqui thought. Flowers—and roses in particular—have long been associated with the Virgin, of course, but for many Yaquis their meaning goes even deeper. A Yaqui belief relates that, when Christ suffered on the cross, His blood fell to the ground and became flowers. "Flower," then, is a kind of conceptual shorthand for the sacred, for blessings, for the grace of God.



Alcalde musicians

The ceremonial labor of the matachinis is also called “flower.” Some Yaquis have said that at dawn, when the matachinis have fulfilled their all-night obligation to dance at a fiesta, the “flower” of their sacrifice is picked up by angels or by the Virgin, and stored in heaven as testimony on behalf of each participant.

Having been notified by their *kobanao* or manager (usually an older

man whose badge of office is a cane staff adorned with ribbons) that they are requested to dance at a fiesta, a wake, or some such sacred occasion, the matachinis arrive, dressed in their “good” shirts, trousers, and shoes. At the fiesta site, be it a community church or a private home, there will be a ramada sheltering an altar, and a wooden cross stuck in the ground some ways in front of it. The matachin regalia is left by this cross until it is time to put it on. The crown especially is considered sacred, and a dancer always puts a folded silk scarf on his head before putting on his crown, so that it doesn’t actually touch his head.

The men and boys dance in three files, with the head dance leader at the front of the middle file, and secondary leaders at the side files. Behind the leader in the middle file are the malinches— young boys who wear white skirts and embroidered blouses. They are future leaders in training.

The music for the matachinis is provided by violins and guitars. The musicians usually wear dark trousers and “good” shirts. Unlike the dancers, the musicians do not necessarily take vows. Due to the number of school mariachi programs in Tucson, many Yaqui youths are adept at both guitars and violins, and it appears that the music will continue indefinitely into the future. The music until recently has been passed on aurally. Different villages in the United States and in Sonora, Mexico, will have their own tunes or versions of tunes. The violins are often retuned in special ways at different times in the all-night ceremony, especially at midnight.

At the beginning of the fiesta, the musicians start playing, the dancers line up, and after giving his rattle a long shake to alert the other dancers, the dance leader starts to mark the time. He will

The music for the matachinis is provided by violins and guitars

then move into the first dance. There are over twenty different dances, each with its own music. As the all night fiesta progresses, the matachinis dance, often for an hour at a stretch, resting between dances. At some big fiestas such as Palm Sunday or Holy Saturday or the patronal village fiestas, the Maypole is wound and then unwound. The winding takes place at sundown or early in the evening, to a series of special tunes (*sonim*). The wrapped pole is allowed to stand all night, and then unwound next morning at dawn. This series of dances is very popular among Yaquis and other spectators. The fiesta ends by a sermon given by the head dance leader or by a *maehto* (lay prayer leader).

Matachinis dance at village and house fiestas, and at wakes—in fact whenever they are requested to dance, with one major exception: they do not dance during the forty days of Lent, except on the eve of Palm Sunday, and on Holy Saturday, when they also assist the church groups in their combat against evil. (Yaqui fiestas are celebrated on the vespers of the day in question, and typically last all night.) Once one has taken one's vows and joined the matachinis, one is expected to serve by dancing when asked, often at short notice. Ideally, the vows are for life.



Tortugas Maypole



## For Her: The Tortugas Danza and the Virgin of Guadalupe

Deidre Sklar

**T**ortugas Village  
Las Cruces, New Mexico

At dusk on December 10, inside the *casa de descanso*, or “resting house,” the *danzantes* finished the last minute details of adjusting their clothing. The dancers were about to accompany the *virgen’s* procession from the *capilla*, the little chapel, to the *casa del pueblo*, the community house. There, an all-night *velorio* would start the three days of fiesta in honor of the Virgin of Guadalupe. Through the night, the *danza*, a version of the *matachines*, would alternate with spoken prayers. The next day, many of the *danzantes* would climb Tortugas Mountain in pilgrimage. On the final day, alternating with the *indio*, or Pueblo, dance group, they would dance morning and afternoon before the church. When I asked the *monarca*, the dance leader, what the opening moments of the fiesta felt like, he looked surprised. “It can’t be described,” he said. “You have to do it. It’s the moment you’ve been waiting for all year.” Some experiences, he seemed to be saying, were unavailable to language.

Framed by  
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jewels and  
pearls, dots  
of glittering  
stone, little  
mirrors...

Perhaps it was their *cupiles*, the high headpieces shaped like bishops’ miters, or the fact that their faces were hidden, that made them appear to be large presences rather than men. Under these coverings, the father who managed a Wellborn paint store, the young man who worked behind the counter at Grandee’s Chicken, the lawyer who commuted from Albuquerque, the two brothers, one about to join the border patrol, the other about to be married and start a plumbing business, were unrecognizable, their individualities hidden beneath the signs of their purpose. A silky dark fringe attached to the front edge of their *cupiles* covered the men’s eyes. A bandanna across nose and mouth concealed the rest of their faces. Colored ribbons, ironed smooth, were attached at the back of each headpiece and fanned down the men’s backs to their knees. Softening the anonymity of their aspects, a portrait of the virgin, the size of a prayer card, was displayed on the front surface of each *cupile*. It was customized by the dancer, or his wife, or his mother. Framed by scallops of jewels and pearls, dots of glittering stone, little mirrors,

and curlicues of ricrac, the virgin's portrait at the center spoke in silence for the man: "I do this for her. This is who leads me."

In that year's wet weather, the men wore plastic coverings over their cupiles, and as they walked, drops of rain caught the light from the roof of the capilla so that watery sparks danced over the dancers' masked forms. Once inside the casa del pueblo, the *mayordomos* placed the virgin's palanquin on an altar table. The *danzantes* filed in and took their places in two lines facing her. Through the night, they would dance in alternation with the spoken prayers. The nearly one hundred people who would spend the night in prayer settled with coats and blankets on the three rows of wooden benches along the long side walls. During the forty-five minutes of opening prayers, the eighteen *danzantes* remained kneeling on the concrete floor. Several were over sixty years old, and forty-five minutes on their knees did not come easily. But each of the men was fulfilling a promise, one man's inherited from his father, another's taken on in memory of his grandmother. Some men made the vow to dance for life, others for a year, or five years.

Each of the ten *sones*, or dances, in their repertory creates a different *figura*, a design in space. In *la ese*, the "S," the men trade places across their two lines. In *la mudansa*, the "exchange," they trade places diagonally opposite. In *los arcos*, "bridges," one couple at a time join hands across the lines to make arches under which the rest of the men file. In *los paños*, "handkerchiefs," two men link with handkerchiefs, and then turn under the handkerchiefs and step over them in procession. *El son de la Malinche*, "the malinche's song," is all processions, in different floor patterns, both lines filing outward, both lines filing in, each line passing around the other. In *la entretahira*, "weaving," the men form into phalanxes of three that braid together from the corners of the hall. And in *la trensa*, "the braid," they wind and unwind ribbons on a maypole, changing places. Two dances introduce the rest, like ceremonial offerings: *la entrada*, "entrance," and *la batalla*, "battle." One dance, *la procesion*, "procession," frames the beginning and end of each dance set.

Three-steps-in-place, stamp, and kick. A lightly bouncing triplet of steps in place, slow and heavy for the stamp, catching the momentum off the rebound to propel the kick forward, and a quick recovery to begin again. Three-steps-in-place, stamp, and kick. The *figuras* unfold and refold in symmetrical scrolls, the dancers etching out its loops and filigrees like the designs in a Moorish painting. The metaphor is appropriate: the Christian fathers came



Tortugas dancer



Tortugas dancer

to the New World on the heels of military victory over the Moors. The Yaquis, who do a similar dance, still call their dancers “good soldiers” of the virgin. The Franciscan fathers superimposed European violins and the story of the Moors’ conversion onto Aztec dances to teach the people in Mexico City the new religion. But the Tortugas danza was not about the conversion of Montezuma through Malintzin, though it had a *monarca* and *malinches*. Rather, the dance embodied the story of the Virgin of Guadalupe’s apparition before Juan Diego. As the *monarca* said, “All the dances, somewhere along the line, have a meaning to that apparition.”

At rehearsals, the dancers faced a portrait of the virgin that hung on the rear wall of the *casa del pueblo*. During the *velorio*, her altar was before them. In the church courtyard, they faced her altar within. “I always tell them, I guess I shall until I die,” the *monarca* said, “that if they want me to dance—somewhere, in the church, in any church, for the Catholic religion—that we must have the Virgin Mary in front of us all the time, the Lady of Guadalupe.” In his understanding, there is no one-to-one correspondence between dance moves and narrative. Rather, the dance as a whole referred to the story as a whole, so that the same dance element might refer to more than one aspect of the apparition story. This global strategy permitted a meditation in which the experience of dancing evoked images from the story, and together dance and story invoked the virgin’s presence.

When the *monarca* danced, he felt himself to be within that story, entering the virgin’s presence. He used the first person pronoun ambiguously, referring to himself as both dancer and narrative character. Dancing and story merged in the person of the dancer. “When I’m dancing as the *monarca*, I don’t see [anything] of the people that are standing around. All I see is the dances and the vision to the holy Mary. That’s all I see.” The virgin’s story made it clear that she called on each person, individually and personally, to serve her. In exchange for that devotion, each would receive her blessing. Perhaps the most significant part of that blessing was the feeling of her presence, the bliss of giving oneself over, like Juan Diego, to her solicitude. The image of the virgin that the men faced was the image they also carried within.

The author thanks all the members past and present of *los danzantes* and the *Corporación Indígena de Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe*.

# Matachines: Enduring the Centuries

Jack Loeffler



Peter of Ghent

**I**n 1523, a stuttering Flemish friar, Peter of Ghent arrived in Mexico and established the first school of European style in the New World where, according to the research of Rev. Camillus W. Vahl, "...as many as a thousand students attended this school...of primary letters, [and] also of the industrial and liberal arts so that as a result students were produced who could speak Latin, who were singers, musicians, embroiderers, painters, sculptors, tailors, shoemakers and infirmarians."

Fray Peter soon recognized the significance of music and dance to the Aztecs and was determined to lure the Indians away from performing ceremonials to appease their home-grown deities, and rather perform music and dance rituals in practice of the Christian religion. Vahl writes, "Indian songs were translated and put into meter to which the Indians were accustomed." The students were also taught how to construct and perform on musical instruments of European provenance.

...the Spanish  
Conquest  
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force of arms

As newly composed dance-dramas supplanted the old, and as young Indian boys grew to adulthood composing sacred music that rivaled compositions in Europe, it can truly be said that the Spanish Conquest owed at least as much to music as to the use of force of arms. For example, certain Christian feast days were celebrated in pagan form, "...but in a way that they became the re-telling of religious maxims through the medium of plays and vivid representations accompanied with religious songs and dance," (Vahl).

Fray Peter of Ghent was so successful in luring Indians of all ages to masses and ceremonies that involved music and dance-drama, that great open-air churches were constructed to accommodate up to ten thousand indigenous people at a time.

Two of the instruments whose construction was taught to the Indians during the sixteenth century were the violin and *vibuela*. Both instruments perfectly suited the Indians to provide music for dance-dramas. Dance dramas in the form of mummeries and later, masques had been performed in Europe since at least the thirteenth century. Indeed, masked dancers had been dancing to music in Europe and Meso-America for hundreds of years.

a wonderfully  
hand-crafted  
violin ... of  
Tarahumara  
provenance

And so we come to the Matachines whose origin remains enshrouded in mystery. However, clues and fields of inquiry are to be found within the tenure of Fray Peter of Ghent, the stuttering friar from Flanders who was closely related to and had the ear of Charles V, and who, incidentally, ceased to stutter when he spoke in Nahuatl, the language of the Aztecs.



I first recorded Matachines music in 1969 in the Rarámuri or Tarahumara village of Samachique, located in the Barranca del Cobre in the Sierra Madre Occidental of the present day state of Chihuahua, Mexico. I arrived after the ceremony had already begun, and was immediately surrounded by a large array of Tarahumara men who were several sheets to the wind as a result of imbibing *tesguino*, a fermented corn drink for which one must develop an appreciative palate. The Tarahumaras were neither friendly, nor as yet, hostile. I proffered packs of Faro cigarettes and they reciprocated by insisting that I drink *tesguino* from the never empty circulating bottle. After actively participating in several passes from the favored, weirdly-flavored Tarahumara substance of choice, a somewhat wasted would-be ethnomusicologist figured out how to set microphones, and turn on the enormous battery powered tape recorder that I lugged about in my backpack. And thus I recorded the final minutes of the Tarahumara Matachines *procesión* that wended up the side of a hill beside the church in Samachique.

Others have since made far better and more complete recordings of Tarahumara Matachines music, however, I am fortunate to have in my possession a wonderfully hand-crafted violin as well as a less well-crafted guitar, both of Tarahumara provenance whose practice of construction must hearken back to the days of Peter of Ghent.

Earlier in my 1969 adventure, I spent several weeks in the Huichol village of San Andrés de Coamiata located farther south in the Sierra Madre Occidental. While the Huicholes are not known to presently perform the Matachines, they do perform music on diminutive violins and guitars of their own fashion, and wear beautifully embroidered clothing, especially during the annual peyote fiestas of autumn. The Huicholes are linguistically related to the Tarahumara (Uto-Aztecan). Photographer Karl Kernberger and I documented the construction of both violin and guitar by Huichol craftsman, Martín de la Cruz Carrillo. He carved the bodies and necks of both instruments from local seasoned pine using only his

machete, and glued the parts together with a substance exuded from the bulbous root of a species of wild orchid. While the Huicholes are among the few Mexican Indians to have eluded the reach of the Spanish Conquest, the violin and guitar have long been included in their array of musical instruments.

Throughout the years, I have recorded complete Matachines musical repertoires in Arroyo Seco north of Taos, and Bernalillo, New Mexico, and in Pascua Yaqui west of Tucson, Arizona. I have recorded snippets in Alcalde, Las Cruces, and elsewhere. While I do not purport to be an authority on Matachines music, I have a deepening interest in its possible genesis, and in the similarities and differences in its melodies.

Almost every Matachines melody I have ever recorded employs the use of violin and guitar except in the case of the Pascua Yaqui, where musicians perform on violin and harp. What is also of great interest is that the Matachines ritual is performed in both Indian and Hispano communities. Indeed, as ethnohistorian Fran Levine so aptly states, “Matachines music is the music of *mestizaje*.”

The Matachines ritual is presented as a set of dances, each with its own melody, and each dance addressing a specific element of the drama. As scholar Larry Torres of Arroyo Seco points out in a recorded interview I conducted in 1986, each community applies its own unique interpretation to the Matachines ritual. That same year, I recorded the entire musical repertoire of the Arroyo Seco Matachines that hadn’t been performed there for many years. José Damian Archuleta was the *violinista*, and Ernesto Montoya was the *guitarrista*. Their Matachines ritual occurred in eleven movements: *la Marcha, la Malinche, el Monarca, la Corona Part I, la Corona Part II, la Mudada Part I, la Mudada Part II, la Tejida* (maypole dance), *el Toro, Abuelito de la Sierra*, and *la Entriega de los Matachines*. For an interpretation and musical notation of the Arroyo Seco Matachines presentation, refer to *La Musica de los Viejitos*, Loeffler, Lamadrid, & Loeffler, UNM Press, 1999: 196–207; and Claude Stephenson’s 2001 dissertation: 238–40.

In August, 2000, I recorded the entirety of the Bernalillo Matachines drama under the musical direction of Charles Aguilar. For a rendering of the transcribed musical notation, refer to Stephenson, pgs. 241–244. The Bernalillo pageant is presented in ten movements: *la Entrada, la Cruz, la Mudanza, Paseada de la Malinche, la Batalla del Monarca, Juvilo, el Toro, la Tendita, Promesas Dance*, and *la Carrera* (Procession).



Picuris violinist

Musically, both Arroyo Seco and Bernalillo musicians share a common key signature, D Major. Listening to the melodic lines for both rituals, anyone with a musical ear would readily identify the music as Matachines music. However, in comparing specific melodies, there are great differences. For example, the Arroyo Seco version of *la Marcha*, which is the equivalent of *la Entrada* in Bernalillo, one finds the time signature to be in 6/8 time with six eighth notes to the measure wherein is couched a more complex melody line. *La Entrada* of Bernalillo is in 4/4 time with a more stately melody line.



### Arroyo Seco la Marcha



### Bernalillo la Entrada

The Arroyo Seco version of *la Malinche* is in 4/4 time with a sixteen-measure melody line that repeats again and again until the end of the dance. The root melody for the Arroyo Seco Malinche is the same as the eight-measure Batalla melody played in Bernalillo. However, the Arroyo Seco version is more highly embellished.



### Arroyo Seco la Malinche



### Bernalillo Batalla

Another similarity between Bernalillo and Arroyo Seco occurs between the *Júvilo* movement in Bernalillo and *el Monarca* in Arroyo Seco. Both are in 3/4 time and have nearly identical melody lines.



### Bernalillo Júvilo



Arroyo Seco la Monarcha

And so on. In other words, the music of the Matachines has undergone transformations over the decades and centuries of specific community performance, yet the music retains its Matachines flavor wherever it is performed, at least in New Mexico.

In Cochiti Pueblo, the music of the Matchines is more markedly different than between Arroyo Seco and Bernalillo. First, the prevailing key is A Major. However, there are occasional accidentals that give Song One in particular something of a modal flavor.



Cochiti  
Song One

Also, the time signatures may well change within the melody. For example, Song Four begins with three measures of 3/4 time, then goes to one measure of 4/4, then back to 3/4 for six measures, returning to 4/4 for one measure, thence to five measures of 3/4 ending in one measure of 5/4!



Cochiti  
Song Four

This is in keeping with more traditional dance music of Cochiti Pueblo that is usually provided by a combination of chanting and rhythm instruments wherein the time signature may abruptly shift as the dancers move in rhythmic accord.

The Matachines melodies at Cochiti differ from those performed among other Indians including the Tarahumaras of the Barranca del Cobre. In an unnamed Tarahumara song transcribed by Stephenson, one can note a shift from the key signature of A Major as the G# goes to G natural while the violinista has a modal moment as he plays on his hand-crafted violin.



Tarahumara Sin Nombre

...music of this enduring ritual has remained relatively stable since antiquity

No matter where it is performed, the Matachines ritual provides a ceremonial continuum wherein the mythic process of each individual community is cyclically re-enacted, inevitably culturally tweaked over spans of time, wherein cultural intuitions are ever interpretively re-aligned. While a particular violin may pass through the hands of family members from generation to generation, the music is transmitted aurally through the generations, each musician providing elements of individual interpretation and style. Hence, the fiddling fingers of the great-grandson may well convey a subtle but real difference in expression from that of the forebear. Music expresses cultural change. The miracle is that the music of this enduring ritual has remained relatively stable since antiquity.



Tijeras musicians

# The Role of Gender in Matachines Enactments

Brenda M. Romero

I speak here on the role of gender in Matachines enactments based on fieldwork in New Mexico, Mexico, and Colombia, and familiarity with the performative aspects, having played the violin for the Pueblo of Jemez, New Mexico for nine years. It was the first time a woman had performed the repertoire for their dance, and as a woman my motivation was that the tradition should continue if possible, as it brings its own special magic, and the music is part of that. There are many reasons that men have dominated Matachines enactments in



the tunic that Matachines wear, visually feminizes the danza

the past and in many places that is still true. In Western Europe there has always been an emphasis on the performance of masculinity in dance; in this case Matachines danzantes represent converted soldiers or warriors. The tunic look that Matachines assume through the use of Pendleton scarves in Jemez and a feature of most of the Mexican Matachines dress traditions, visually feminizes the dancers, by Western standards at least. A white tunic that male dancers still wear in some parts of Western and Eastern Europe, and also in one Matachines troupe I observed in Juárez, Mexico, and of course the long robes of friars and monks recall, however, that tunics were not associated with women in Medieval Europe.

Two central female characters emerge among a broad variety of Matachines types: one sacred and one profane, one who is innocent and one who is worldly and even bawdy, typically making people laugh. Some regional Matachines troupes in Mexico, as in Zacatecas, do not include a female character. Here the tradition has developed a showy, virtuosic side to the dance choreographies, and the younger troupes include both male and female danzantes. The



Alcalde Rainbow danzante

choreographies for a full Matachines celebration in some places in Mexico used to take four or five days to enact, which may have favored males for the roles if parents were hesitant to send their daughters away to dance. Mexican troupes today travel to dance at a variety of events and typically the younger, mixed gender troupes have often emerged in conditions where adult men are in the north working for the family and adult women are left to continue the tradition.

Although there is an early history of sacred dance in Europe, by the time of the Conquest dance was typically secular, if still contextualized in religious feast days. Perhaps because of the strength of indigenous beliefs, a re-emergence of sacred dance traditions among mestizos has occurred over time. Among the Pueblo peoples of New Mexico, communal dance events typically include everyone (women, children, homosexuals) and are considered sacred. This may have provided an important direction for mestizo groups, specifically through contact with Tortugas Pueblo, New Mexico, fifty miles from the

U.S.-Mexico border, as communal mestizo versions, with an equal presence of women and children, are common in north Mexico and along the U.S.-Mexico border area, and resemble Pueblo corn dances in the way described.

Various female characters dominated theatricals in Spain of old, among them the damsel in distress, whom King George saved from the “dragon.” Elsewhere I have written about the censoring of women from Western European theatres and theatricals. Men assumed female roles in theatricals. Among the Yaquis at the Mexican border, a man traditionally dresses in white communion dress to enact la Malinche. In Colombia, a Matachines danza troupe I documented included a female character called “Matachina” (the same name, Matachina, that the New Mexico Pueblos assign to their danza versions) with some of the princess quality of the St. George story (the holy female). Both female archetypes are visible in Colombia, however. A young man with commedia dell’arte half-mask and wig enacted the character I documented in Río Sucio, wearing female dress and padding to appear exaggeratedly voluptuous. *Commedia dell’arte* was a form of Italian comedy during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, that used stock characters and

familiar plots and became popular in Spain in the eighteenth century. Early Matachines were often featured as interludes in the Spanish *comedia del arte*, and my fieldwork in Mexico and Colombia suggests that such interludes probably featured poetic contests, or at other times, perhaps, spoken narratives and pantomimed gestures to music, a Matachines characteristic of old. The spoken narrative is retained in Colombia in the version I recently documented. The theatrical survives in completely secular fashion and the female character shares the limelight with the central male character, the devil.

The New Mexican Malinche is different from a Malinche character in Mexico who wears a mask and features in musical-theatrical events with distinct narratives from the Matachines. Indigenous representations of Malinche are yet again different; I have been told “Malinche” was a term of honor. In fact she was a slave given to Hernán Cortés. Presumably the New Mexican character is an old Spanish version, celebrating Malinche’s role in spreading Spanish Catholicism. The holy Malinche represents good and chastity. Going on at the same time and interwoven into the serious danza space are intercepting dramatic enactments. Among the Hispanos of Alcalde, New Mexico, a man dresses like a woman and stages bawdy behaviors with clowns or *vaqueros* to entertain the spectators, and he is sometimes drunk. He collects money from the spectators and shares it with the danza group. The bawdy *Perejundia* of Hispanos in New Mexico is a wild card, and as such can function as a means of social commentary, as when “she” performs a nun pregnant by the priest. Perhaps because old women, elders in general, are honored in Pueblo traditions, this character is missing in the Pueblo Matachina (although not from the repertoire of humorous skits the people put on for entertainment in home contexts on special days).



Alcalde Malinche

Some places now include female Matachines *danzantes*, most notably Bernalillo, New Mexico, and Juárez, Mexico, while many others are still exclusively male, except for one or more female *danzantes* enacting the Malinche role. An all-female troupe in Alcalde, New Mexico, and others are beginning to emerge on both sides of the border, as Enrique Lamadrid notes. The Pueblo women I spoke with did not think it appropriate for women to dance Matachina. The Pueblo women do, however, enact very humorous Matachina parodies on New Year’s Day alongside the Matachina proper, which honors the Infant Jesus by dancing at the “Infant’s House.” This is the home of the family hosting a two-week open



Alcalde Rainbow danzante

house, from Christmas Eve to January 6, where mostly women serve food from 5:00 a.m. to 2:00 a.m. of the following day. As fiddler, I hung out with the ceremonial participants. Later, when Kathleen Gauchupin started playing the “Slow Monarca,” she was the only other female in the rehearsals. The men were always respectful and kind, as were all of the people I worked with at Jemez, and similarly when I worked in Ohway Oweenge (formerly San Juan Pueblo). At Jemez, I typically roomed with the nuns at the Mission, of whom only Sister Karen now remains as caretaker. She deserves mention in a discussion on the role of gender, as the sisters for a long time directed many of the church activities that provided the context for the Matachina dance in Jemez, at least for the December 12 celebration.

The communal type of Matachines includes both male and female danzantes, and is often identified as Chichimeca when the dancers wear red tunics decorated with cane fringe. Around Tortugas, New Mexico and Juárez, Mexico it is common to see these and similar troupes with multiple numbers of Malinches, three being common. Typically little girls, this resonates with ritual concepts of renewal on both sides of the border. This practice is beginning to be adopted in Bernalillo, where it is desirable to allow as many young girls as possible to dance. In Mexico and among many communal Matachines troupes in the U.S., the Malinches wear the colors of their troupes, while in New Mexico, where only one Malinche is typically selected for each troupe, she typically dresses in a white communion dress. Like the Jemez danzantes, who change their clothes between sets, Malinches sometimes change their dresses and wear a color other than white on different days, as Sylvia Rodríguez notes. Increasingly, troupes take ownership by selecting their own color(s) and character enactments. In the Pueblo of Jemez Pumpkin Kiva Matachina, the Malinche dresses traditionally and is more of a young woman than a young girl, symbolizing and affirming latent fertility and potential life. The Jemez song for this sequence describes what she must wear as Malinche, in Keres (the language of nearby Cochiti and Santo Domingo, where the Jemez Pumpkin Kiva Matachina comes from). It is customary to borrow the same items from cherished individuals. In Ohkay Oweenge the Malinche is held in great esteem for the spiritual power associated with her dance; it is held among some that it tends to snow when she is a member of the winter moiety.

In summary, both sacred and profane female characters are typically portrayed in Matachines enactments on both sides of the

border. Sometimes both archetypes appear in the same Matachines danza, as in Alcalde, New Mexico. This is distinct from the contemporary choreography-centered Matachines in Mexico, where more attention is placed on the dance and virtuosity than on the drama, and there is no central female character. Female danzantes increasingly participate, however. Women participate fully in the large communal Mexican versions. It is unlikely that some groups will suddenly start letting women dance in their traditional Matachines, but a new Matachina in the Pueblo of Jemez (originally from San Felipe) reportedly features girls dancing in dressing gowns opposite their Matachines partners, a unique version for which Stanley Waquie is the composer of the Spanish language songs at the Pueblo of Jemez, New Mexico. Here the gender dynamics capture popular conceptions of female beauty and weave them into a new Matachina tradition.

Women  
participate  
fully in  
the large  
communal  
Mexican  
versions



Bernalillo danzantes

## Visioning La Malinche

Miguel Gandert



Alcade Abuelo

The dance and rhythm of the *Matachines* has enchanted my camera, as well my imagination, for over twenty-five years. As I explore the communities along the Río Grande and now continue my journey south along the *Camino Real de Tierra Adentro*, I see historic conflict everywhere. The Matachines are a negotiation, a symbolic battle fought between two worlds, a living contradiction and a tension, which continues to affect the soul of Nuevo Mexicanos, Mexicanos, and their native *vecinos*.

Thinking of the words of the late Mexican anthropologist Guillermo Bonfil Batalla's book *Mexico Profundo*, I try to make sense of the tension I see with my camera. I want to read the text found within the dance and want to understand the story. Batalla describes this conflict as one between the imaginary linear time of Europe and the profound circular time of pre-colonial America. According to Batalla, this clash is reflected in the heart of the mestizo, who is a descendent of both worlds but who also has never been fully accepted by the dominant society. In this world, the idea of *Indio* is still considered lower class and an insult. It is hard to find fidelity with the imaginary when the face in the mirror reflects the profound.

The dance ignores both national and cultural borders

The dance of the Matachines is a metaphor for the profound. It is the confluence where Europe and the native peoples were able to mediate the conflict and this dance has evolved into a symbolic ritual of the cultural hybridity of the region. This *mestizaje* is negotiated in the Matachines as an expression of our Indo-Hispano culture.

Because the fiesta is shared between Native-American and Hispano communities in Nuevo Mexico and along the Camino Real, it is a binational as well as bicultural celebration. The dance ignores both national and cultural borders.

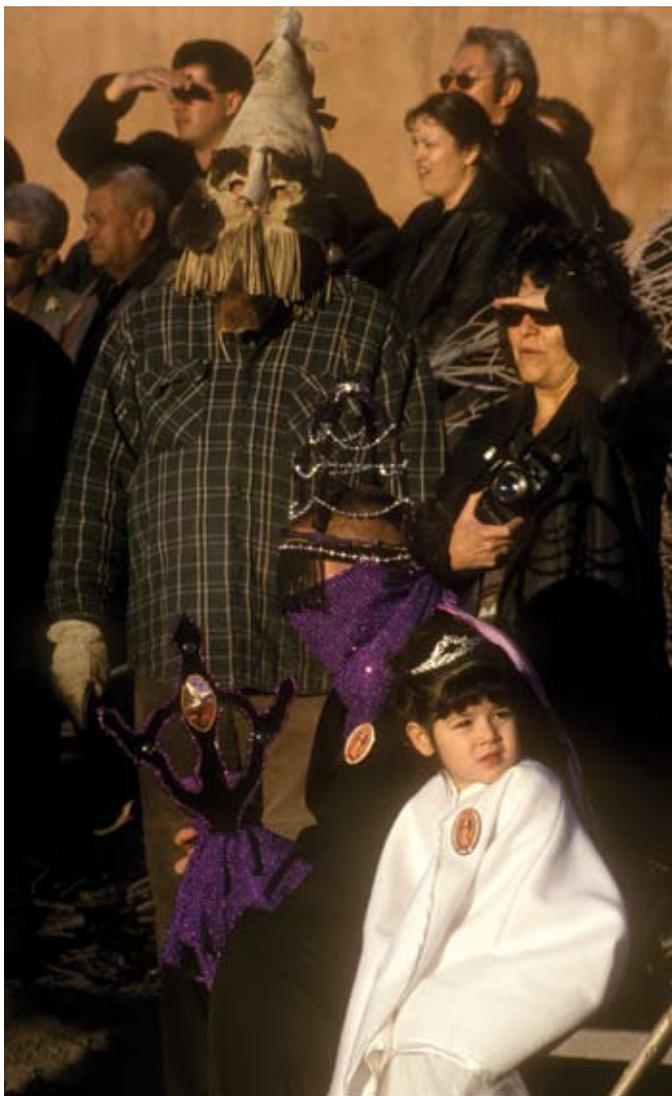
As I have followed the Río Grande and continue south along the Camino Real with my camera, Matachines appear like spirits. Although the dancers and the ritual vary from community to community, there are numerous characters that remain constant within all the different presentations. In New Mexico, the Matachines pageant is considered primarily a Hispano tradition,

although numerous pueblos including Taos, Picuris, San Juan, Jemez, and others all perform the dance. In some of the native communities I have been a witness with my camera, in others I have been given the privilege to witness with my eyes. Sometimes I am able to share the ritual with images, at others I am allowed to share in the intangible poetics of the dance. In Mexico I have photographed the Matachine spirits as far south as Zacatecas as well as Tarahumaras living in exile to the north in Juárez, far from their Copper Canyon homeland.

The dance of the Matachines does not have a specific day on which it is performed, but rather is used to celebrate numerous feasts of importance depending on the community it is danced in and the requirements of their religious calendar. The ritual performance varies but the story remains similar as each community molds the symbols, rhythms, and story to their own spiritual needs.

Finally, the spirit of the Matchines has become a marker of the changing demographics of my adopted home city, Albuquerque. In a number of Catholic parishes, the feast days and ritual dances were traditionally represented by Nuevo Mexicano Matachines. At many local fiestas, native New Mexican dance groups now share space with our brothers from the south. In the Barrio San José south of Albuquerque, the *Fiesta de Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe* celebration is shared by Matachines dance groups from both sides of the border as well as groups performing the *danza azteca*, a recent addition from the south that is reflective of New Mexico's newest immigrant population.

As my journey with the camera continues, the spirits of Moctezuma, Malinche, Abuelos, and the Soldados de la Cruz follow me. As I photograph them I try to read the symbols, gestures, and movements that will teach me the deeper hidden meanings of mestizaje and the richness of cultural hybridity; or what the great Mexican educator/philosopher José Vasconcelos has described as "*la Raza Cósmica*," the dance of the Cosmic Race.



Alcade Abuelo, Monarca, and Malinche



Tortugas cupiles

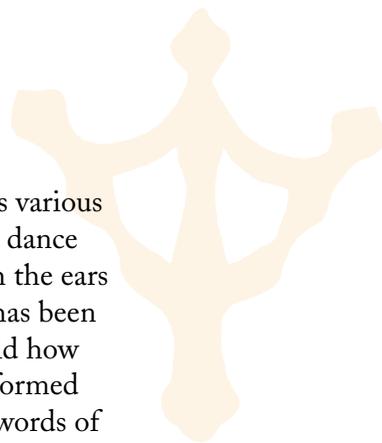
## Entriega

Following three days of dancing Matachines in August in Bernalillo, there is a concluding ceremony called an *entriega*. At the *entriega*, all of the many community participants who contribute toward making the dance happen are thanked in song amidst cheers and hugs. The *danzantes* and *musicos*, (or dancers and musicians in English), who have been rehearsing for over a month in advance of the performance, are “given” back to their families. It is in that spirit that I would like to thank the authors who contributed to this program booklet as well as the many dance groups who made this May, 2008 Matachines gathering at the National Hispanic Cultural Center such a special and memorable event.

The preceding essays have offered us similar and contrasting views and opinions of the Matachines dance, its history, significance, and performance in the cultural world that surrounds us in New Mexico and the greater southwest. Is it Spanish? Moorish? Aztec? Were Catholic missionaries responsible for the dispersion of the dance across the southwest or was it Montezuma himself? Does it represent good versus evil? Does it commemorate resistance? Christian conversion? We likely will never know any of these answers for certain, and that is all right. Some things may best be left unknown, the better to intensify the mystery of life itself.

However, thanks to the performers who came to this gathering, we do know that the Matachines is a profoundly beautiful dance and that it has deep, significant, and even sacred meaning to those who perform it year after year. We know that the accompanying music is haunting and unique, if repetitious, and that it requires deceptively difficult technique and stamina to perform. For this knowledge, the performers from Bernalillo, Alcalde, Tijeras, Tortugas, Tucson, Chihuahua, Cochiti, and elsewhere deserve our deepest honor, respect, and gratitude; and they have mine.

The authors who contributed essays for this booklet have described to us many aspects from which to consider the dance, from academic to personal, from sociological and ethnographic to devotional and artistic appreciation. We have historical accounts of these dances in our communities during recent times if not ancient



ones. The etymology of the word Matachines itself and its various usages through time has been analyzed. We have seen the dance through the eyes of the photographer and heard it through the ears of the ethnomusicologist. The performance of the dance has been described to us by participant observers. We have been told how the dance has evolved and continues to change as it is performed anew year after year. We have read and heard the quoted words of those who have danced and those who have studied the Matachines dance for years, and so we are wiser even as the mystery of the dance remains unsolved. For expanding the intellectual prosperity of mankind in this small but insightful way I thank Sylvia, Larry, Enrique, Max, Deidre, Miguel, Jack, Jim, and Brenda.

And I thank all of you who were blessed with the opportunity of attending this gathering and who came, and to all of you who could not attend but read this booklet in order to learn about the Matachines dance. This dance has now ended and I joyfully return all of you to the families and communities from whence you came.



Bernalillo Matachines

## Glossary

- Abuela: Grandmother. Dance character, usually a male dressed as an old woman, who accompanies the Abuelo and provides comic relief. Sometimes called “Perejundia” in various locations.
- Abuelo: Grandfather. Dance character who provides order and sometimes comedy in Matachines groups.
- Capitanes: Captains. The two danzantes who stand at the head of the files during the Matachines dance.
- Corona: Crown. The more elaborate headdress worn by the Monarca to distinguish him from the danzantes.
- Cupil: Decorated headdress worn by the danzantes, often said to resemble a bishop’s miter or an Aztec emperor’s crown.
- Danzante: Dancer. Sometimes called soldiers. One of the line dancers in the Matachines dance.
- Filas: Files. The two parallel lines of Matachines danzantes.
- Guaje: A hollow gourd filled with seeds or stones fastened to a stick that is carried in the left hand of the danzantes and used as a percussive musical instrument to mark time during the dance. It is similar to a maraca.
- Malinche: The name of the young female (sometimes cross-dressed boy) character in the Matachines dance. Thought to be a Hispanization of the Nahuatl name Malinal or Malinali given to a woman who was born on the twelfth day of the month in the Aztec calendar. Adding the respectful Nahuatl suffix “tzin” the name results in Malintzin (pronounced in Spanish as Malinche) which was also the given Nahuatl name of Cortes’ companion and translator Doña Marina.
- Monarca: Monarch. The leader of the Matachines danzantes who is commonly thought to represent Montezuma.
- Palma: Palm leaf. A highly decorated flat fan-like wand with three to seven points carried by the danzantes in their right hands and waved in time to the music during the dance.
- Perejundia: (See Abuela)
- Toro: Literally, “bull.” A mischievous character in the Matachines dance dressed as a bull. He is thought by some to represent evil.

