

ARTICLE

BETWEEN AZTECA ESSENTIALISM AND CONCHERO TRANSCULTURATION: DANCE AND ENACTMENT OF INDIGENEITY AMONG A GROUP OF AZTEC DANCERS

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Abstract: This article discusses the shifting nature of boundaries between Aztec and Concheros dancers' ideologies. Whereas Aztec dance emerged as a way of rejecting transculturation practices of Concheros, Aztec dancers transgress strictly defined boundaries of Azteca essentialism in their performances. The author considers politics of recognition as an important factor contributing to this. The article also analyzes dancers' justifications as to why they allow for Catholic elements to pervade their dance, linking these to the wider questions of Mexicanness and mestizaje. The methods used for this study are participant observation, in-depth and oral history interviews.

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Introduction

Bright rays of sunlight fall on the *zocalo* of Alpuyecá, whilst a group of people is performing their dance. The tangy scent of incense is rising in the air; the rhythmic beats of drum and sounds of *ayoyotes* induce a sort of hypnotic trance, while dancers' body-painting and colorful attire have an eye-catching effect. Everyone in the town knows that it is Aztec dance being performed. Aztec dance is deeply

ingrained in the fabric of everyday life of the town; it is performed on a day to day basis but also conspicuously present during the town's local feasts.

Aztec Dance is known all across Mexico and its origins date back to the Pre-Columbian era (Sten 1990: 162). It had spiritual and religious aspects and was performed both at ceremonial and secular events. Dance was practiced by all the sectors of society. Following the conquest of the country Spaniards, indigenous dances were assimilated to the stream of Christian dances as part of an evangelization strategy. For a long time, the

most popular form of Aztec dance was commonly known as Conchero, and it was tied to Catholic religious rites while retaining traces of pre-Columbian dance.

In the twentieth century some dance circles moved towards a version of dance that aimed to 'shed colonial vestiges and return to a native indigenous form' (Colin 2014: 12). This has led to aztequization of the genre and emergence of *danza azteca* genre. Azteca dancers reject the elements of Catholic religion and try to maintain the purity of the original dance. However, what may appear to be fixed and rigid boundaries in the first instance become malleable and fluid when it comes to the actual discourses and practices of the dancers. In relation to this, this paper will analyze shifting boundaries between azteca and concheros ideologies. I will draw on the findings of my fieldwork in Alpuyecá, Morelos that took place between August 2013 and December 2013.

History of the dance in a nutshell

Aztec dance has originated from Conchero dance, which can be traced to 1537, when a group of 'warriors' dressed up as dancers were asked to assist the church with conversion process (Cintli Rodríguez 2014: 146). Also, oral sources suggest that the danza was formed 'to hide the culture and traditions of the Nauha-Chichemeca peoples, transmitting and communicating them, in a hidden form, via

dance, song, and oral traditions' (2014: 146). 'The Danza Conchera is called such to refer to the mandolina/small guitar-like instruments that were made with the shell (in Spanish: concha) of an armadillo' (Luna 2012: 115). Conchero dancers adapted Christian symbolism, worshiping a synthesis of indigenous and Catholic practices. For example they honour the Holy Cross and invoke Guadalupe and different Saints in their incantations, at the same time staging four cosmic cycles of the Nahuatl Olli and burning traditional nahua *copal* in their rituals. They perform on Catholic saints' days and those associated with Aztec deities. Their most important performance takes place on the 12th of December (Fiesta de Guadalupe).

Danza de los Concheros was revitalized and diffused as expression of people's indigenous pasts from the 19th century onwards. This coincided with a period of Mexican War of Independence (1810-21), when Aztec symbols were then recycled by nationalist projects in attempts to build an independent nation (De la Torre Castellanos 2008). Later, during the period of the Mexican Revolution (1910-20), there were attempts to construct national identity around the concept of *la raza cósmica*. Characteristic of this Mexican nationalism were the revitalization of an indigenous past, pride in the new mixed race (the mestizo), and a glorification of the culture's spiritual and theological roots (Morris 1999: 371). These processes were parallel to

the aztequization of the dance and the emergence of danza azteca genre by the 1930s-40s in Mexico City.

In the 1950s the Confederated Movement to Restore Anahuac Culture emerged with its aim to restore Mexican society by rescuing the Pre-Hispanic culture (De la Torre Castellanos 2009: 29). The movement elevated the Aztec past and imposed it as a symbol of 'national ethnicity'. It was not until then when the Aztec style proper really took off in Mexico City (Rostas 2009: 114).

González Torres argues that whereas initially the movement prospered among lower class people especially immigrants from rural communities who sought a form of identity and defense through a link with past, in the 1970s and 1960s middle-age intellectuals and artists started to join these dance groups (1996:22). They were looking for esoteric experiences and for them the dance constituted a search often linked to other spiritual paths. De la Peña (2009) seems to think along similar lines. He argues that whereas at the beginning the Conchero dance was performed by indigenous people, with time it has integrated broad sectors of the mestizo population, initially peasants and marginalized urban population and more recently middle and upper classes.

In the state of Morelos la *danza conchera* has been evolving in synchronicity with these changes. It has been continuously reinvented along with the actual livelihoods and lifestyles of dancers, who in the vast

majority of cases emigrated from villages to cities, encountering other indigenous and non-indigenous peoples and reinventing the dance (Arizpe 2015: 15). According to Martha Oliveros, Captain General of the Aztec dance in the state of Morelos,

there was first the time of 'Concherismo' (the Conchero Dance) but very closely related to the Catholic question; then came the 'Aztequization' (the Aztec Dance) with the rebel chiefs of the Dance but far from settling on whether you are Conchero and I am Aztec, it has to be understood as a historical-cultural process which we have been taking in, precisely to take into our own hands all the knowledge and greatness of our culture (quoted in Arizpe 2015: 9).

This quote points to shifting boundaries between *danzantes aztecas* and *concheras*, to which I will return in the following sections. I will now discuss how different scholars have analyzed practices related to the Concheros/Aztec dance, also focusing on the elements of innovation and creativity as a response to people's changing concepts of Mexicanness.

The Aztec and Conchero dance: Literature review

There is a large body of academic literature that examines the changes within Conchero dance over centuries, focusing on dynamic character of the dance as people's response to changing concepts of Mexicanness and spread of other cultural influences. For example Yolotl González Torres (2005) in her

study of Conchero dances observes that certain rules and hierarchies have loosened within the dance. Furthermore some dancers renounced Catholicism, starting Mexicayotl movement within danza. Many dancers in Mexico marked this shift by referring to the dance ceremonies as *chitontequiza*, which means coming out of darkness or coming out into the light. On the other hand, other some dances became syncretized, such as Citlalamina dance, which is a mix of Tibetan and Conchero dance (2005: 200). This paper specifically deals with danza conchera and azteca. The main difference between these two is that whereas both aim at revitalization of indigenous dance, the extent to which the performers permit elements of cultural hybridization or *mestizaje* varies. More specifically, whereas Concheros dancers allow for some degree of transculturation¹, Azteca dancers on the surface level seem to reject the elements of transculturation and try to maintain the purity of the original dance. Yolotl González Torres refers to Aztec dance as a 'restoration movement' that is intended 'to revive an idealized form of Mexica culture' a sort of 'neotribalism' (1996: 11).

Rostas argues that 'The dance of the Mexica is more clearly a conscious search for a social identity grounded in a largely invented Mexica past, which they attempt to live in the present' (1991: 15). Rostas describes the Mexicayotl danzantes as 'misfits in mainstream society' (1991: 14). She notes that Aztec dancers are often unemployed, and many of

them live from selling their artesanías, in particular head-dresses and coyoleras to other dancers. She suggests that Aztec dancers are associated with those who are reclaiming pre-conquest cultural practices (such as the *reglia* and use of the drum) which had been suppressed by the Spanish.

According to Luna (2011) the rhythm of Aztec dancers is much faster, and some of them dance barefoot and wear elaborate feather head dresses, *copillis*. Regarding dancers' attire, Rostas (1991) maintains that costumes may vary within and between groups. She says that '... each dancer is free to use the designs, colours and materials that he or she pleases, within certain over-riding parameters' (Rostas 1991: 10). This goes in lines with Garner's (2009) argument that innovation, adaptation and improvisation are important elements of azteca dance.

Luna (2011) notices that the Danza Mexica/Azteca groups point to their closer rendering with pre-contact societies while resisting the Catholic aspect of the dance. Similarly, De la Peña (2009) upholds that aztequization of the dance resulted in an open confrontation which leads these groups to deny any value of the classic conchero traditions. Azteca dancers accuse their conchero counterparts of trying to reconcile the irreconcilable: the Christian vision of the West with indigenous cosmology. He also asserts that the cult and the dance lose their relation with Catholic religion when they take place in

prehispanic temples, caves or other sacred spaces. De la Peña further argues that instead of exclaiming 'El es Dios' ('He is God'), azteca dancers say 'Ometeotl'; instead of singing songs to the Saints, they devote them to Quetalcoatl, Huitzilopochtli, and Tezcatlipoca.

De la Torre Castellanos (2008) notes that azteca dancers identify themselves as pure indigenous Mexicans, taking up a discourse of Aztec civilization supremacy and of nahuatl race. She suggests that the majority of the Aztec dancer groups belong to urban popular classes that do not belong to particular ethnic groups, but have physical indigenous features. Rostas (2009) maintains that in comparison to Conchero dance, Mexica dance is more 'external and political and almost a subculture' (2009: 213). She says:

It consists of building an individualized identity instigated by overall ideology of Mexicanidad, an identity that can be exhibited to others by means of dance, but most importantly as rhetoric in the hope of politicizing their views and convincing or converting observers to their cause (2009: 2013).

Whereas many of the existing debates focus on the Conchero/Azteca distinction, relating this to people's ideologies of nationhood, there is very little about the actual practices of the people themselves. It is with these concerns in mind that this article will examine the dialectic tensions between Azteca essentialism and Concheros transculturalism.

Methods

An interesting aspect of my research is that whereas most of the dance groups are urban based, the group of Azteca dancers in Alpuyecá came from rural locations in Morelos. Alpuyecá is a rural community whose members usually live from peanut and sugar cane cultivation. I first met Aztec dancers at the nearby pyramids of Xochicalco, Morelos. I approached the leader of the group, Gabriel and asked if it would be possible to study the group. He kindly agreed and this way I gained access to the field. The dancers would meet several times a week (mostly Tuesdays, Thursdays and Sundays) to rehearse at the *zocalo*, the main square in Alpuyecá. They would also meet at the house of Gabriel on a day-to-day basis, in order to work on their attire, headdresses, and *coyoleras*². They were also invited to different local festivities by other towns, mainly on weekends. Furthermore they danced at other events, such as weddings, or *temazcal* consecration ceremonies. I would accompany them in all these activities.

I chose participant observation as my primary research method in order to familiarize myself with the group and get insight into the meanings attached to Aztec dance. Whilst at the beginning I expected that I would restrain myself to observation only, I soon realized that only through participation in the circle would I be able to grasp more of what was going on.

Having gained the trust of the group, I started conducting in-depth interviews with its

members. I carried out 12 interviews with those who most often participated in all the events. The age of the interviewees reflected the group age patterns; the group was evenly spread across the following age ranges: below 10 years of age, teenagers (11- 18), 18-30, 30-40, 40-50, and 50-60. Interviews let me explore more in more depth themes that came up during the participant observation. In order to protect the confidentiality of my informants, I have used pseudonyms. The main goal of the interviews was to recollect lived experiences of people, to capture their voices, emotions and actions through their narratives.

**Shifting boundaries of Azteca essentialism:
Azteca dancers from Alpuyecá**

The group of Aztec dancers in Alpuyecá is called Kapulli³ Quetzalcoatl. The group leader has had a long history of engagement with Mexican traditional dances, starting with danza folklórica in the early 1980s. In 1985 he joined the Concheros Association but soon became attracted by Aztec dance, which rejected elements of transculturation. In 1986 he started teaching Aztec dance and in 1993 he established Kapulli Quetzalcoatl. Since then Kapulli Quetzalcoatl and Concheros often perform together on important occasions, such as the feasts of Guadalupe (12 December), the Virgin of Mercy (24 September) and the Virgin of Conception (8 December). Conchero dancers were also invited to the twentieth anniversary of the

group in September 2013. It is also worthwhile noting that this Aztec dance group is far from being homogenous. During my fieldwork alone, as a result of internal divisions the group split into two parts and the dancers would not perform together on a day-to-day basis. Exceptions to this were the above mentioned local feasts.

On the level of municipality, Aztec dancers are often invited to perform during the local feasts in other towns together with other Aztec dancer groups but also other Concheros groups. Examples of these are Atlocholoaya (San Bartolomé Apóstol's Feast on the 24th of August), Xoxocotla (La Fiesta de San Felipe on the 1st of May), Galeana (Fiesta patronal de San Nicolás Obispo, 6th of December). Furthermore, the groups performed together during a protest against open shaft mines in Mexico, DF.

It appears that whenever there is some form of ethnic mobilization required on the part of the dancers, the boundaries between azteca essentialism and Conchero transculturation become fluid and porous. This is in line with what Abner Cohen (1974) refers to as the situational character of ethnic solidarity, where ethnic identifications are dynamic and become part of a wider strategy for collective action to achieve specific economic or political goals. In the case of Concheros and Azteca dancers this can be related to their willingness to re-enact their indigeneity in front of the mestizo Catholic majority group. By performing

together they both draw on their symbolic resources, recreating a tradition which had been wiped out during the conquest of Mexico. At the same time, such a mobilization serves to come together and carve out cultural spaces of (hybridized) *indigeneity* within areas in which there may be a certain opposition to such practices. For example it was often the case that the Aztec dancers expressed their disgruntlement with the local authorities that banned them from performing in certain areas. At the same time, all the town feasts are devoted to the local saints and the square in front of a church is usually the central location of all the festivities that are going on. Azteca and Conchero groups stand better chances to be able to dance in front of the church, when they are large in numbers, as it is difficult to disperse them.

At the protests against open shaft mines Concheros and Azteca dancers came together to demonstrate their resistance to a Canadian company that was granted mining concessions which enabled them to extract gold and silver in the state of Morelos. They expressed their concern with negative long term environmental and health effects as a result of this. In his speech one of the dancers exclaimed 'We are people native to the state of Morelos. We dedicate ourselves to agriculture and we are respectful of earth, water and air of our region'. At the same time dancers highlighted that silver and gold extraction may cause damage to the

natural environment surrounding archeological zone of Xochicalco. The main reason why they gathered together on that occasion was to protect their cultural/ native legacy. This shows Azteca and Conchero dancers build solidarity in attempts to defend indigenous heritage and resist to economic globalization.

One can see in this respect that the boundaries between Azteca and Concheros dancers shift, depending on the social context. Whenever they want to highlight their tradition rooted in the indigenous past or mobilize social and political resources, these groups perform together. Through performance they engage in politics of recognition. On other, less significant occasions, when performing ethnicity in front of other members of Mexican mestizo society is not no their main objective, they perform separately. In this way these articulations of 'we-consciousness' can be seen as an 'inventive' cultural process specific to a particular space and time – fluid and never static.

Aztec dance and Catholic religion: re-defining the boundaries

During the local feasts the dancers do not only perform in front of the church but also inside it. They also often perform in front of the statues of the Virgin of Guadalupe on Marian feast days. This on the surface seems to be incongruent with the ideology of Aztec dancers, whose very *raison d'être* was/is to sever the links that the Concheros held with the

Catholic religion. In the interviews that I carried out with the Aztec dancers they often tried to justify their decisions by referring to the fact that the churches had been erected on the site of pre-Colombian pyramids (*teocali*). For example, Anabel explained to me:

When the Spaniards came to Mexico, they started destroying all the pyramids. And a way of making their God more important than ours was to place churches on the top of the teocalis where the Mexican Aztecs admired their deities. Below the structure [of the church] as you can see there is a pyramid. In reality these were ceremonial Aztec centers.

It is worthwhile mentioning in this respect that the base of the church of the Immaculate Conception in Alpuyecá was founded upon former pyramids in 1531. In 2004, INAH (the National Institute of Anthropology and History) carried out excavations and discovered a perimeter fence and 22 graves, which were then handed over to the Museum of Anthropology and History. In these ruins there were tunnels connecting Alpuyecá with Xochitepec⁴, Atlacholoaya⁵, Xochicalco⁶ and Tezoyuca⁷.

In a similar way, Gabriel asserted that when he was dancing in the church, he felt as if he was dancing on the top of pyramid and rather than honoring God, the dancers were really venerating Omēteotl. In this way, he found an explanation for performing at a church, at the same time dismissing any connections to Catholic religion. Gabriel classified the physical space as a former *teocali*, thus

transforming the place where the church was located into a space of self-realization through the recovery of cultural memories. The church as a space is fluid, nuanced and contested. This aspect is of crucial importance when it comes to explaining the reasons why dancers decide to perform in a church. José, 27 year-old, pointed to the importance of the church as an energy centre. He said: 'Wherever you go to a church, it will never be in the corner or at the edge of some place because it always over a *teocali*. The base of the church is energy centre. Below it there is a much older essence. We believe in what is below the church, los *teocalis*'.

Whereas this type of justification as to why the dancers perform at Catholic churches refers to the spatial dimension of these locations, another kind of explanation draws on people's ideas about transculturation and mestizaje. For example, Yunali, a 16 year-old girl when asked how one can consolidate Aztec dance with Catholic religion, noted 'Tonantzin is the Virgin of Guadalupe and perhaps Omēteotl is god. One or the other remains the same thing because when the Spaniards arrived they changed the name'. This statement points to shifting nature of boundaries of azteca essentialism, which allows for a more hybridized version of the dance. This was visible during the Feast of Guadalupe. Dancers were dancing in front of the shrines put up on this occasion by residents of Alpuyecá at their homes. When I asked José why he is

performing in front of a Guadalupe shrine, he said that it is as if he were dancing in front of Tontantzin's shrine. In a way, one can consider this as a symbolic re-assertion of Aztec indigenous beliefs. It is particularly important as our Lady of Guadalupe is a significant religious, cultural and national symbol, whose characteristics reflect the mestizo character of Mexicanness*. Guadalupe anchors Mexican national identity and Eric Wolf referred to the holy image and the ideology surrounding it as the Mexican master symbol. He identified it as a cultural form or idiom of behavior operating on the symbolic level, and not restricted to one set of social ties, but referring to a wide range of social relationships. It is impossible to turn away from a symbol that pervades people's everyday lives. However, highlighting the fact that Guadalupe is a Catholic equivalent of Tontantzin seems to help Aztec dancers to deal with this uneasy aspect of their performances.

This dialectic tension between Catholicism and Aztec dance has been well expressed by Dali, a 20 years-old boy. When I asked him about the red band that he wrapped around his waist, he said that

symbolically they remind the dancers that they belong to the red race, they are red-blooded warriors. This is what they symbolize. Aztecas, Mexicas, Mexicanos, we belong to the warrior race, we have our tradition and millenary culture. (...) well, look, when I dance, I dance from the heart, I feel it. I am excited because I imagine myself in these times when the dance was pure, unpolluted; these were times of peace, harmony, of the power of nature. (...) this is

what I feel at the moment of dancing. I remember my ancestors, my grandparents (...) I consider myself azteca. Natural Mexican. A warrior, a dancer, a mexica.

In his statement Dali has emphasized his indigenous origins. However, when I asked him about how he reconciles Catholic religion with the Aztec dance, he also attempted to single out common features of both indigenous religious beliefs and Catholicism. Whereas he recognized that Catholic religion had been imposed upon Mexican people, he also tried to draw parallels between these two belief systems

*(...)When the conquest happened, there came Christianity and no Quetzalcoatl, **Huitzilopochtli**, they believed that we venerate many Gods, that we were polytheistic. We are not polytheists. We believe that there is one life giver. (...) There is only one god above us, only one god who gives and takes away our lives. And the other ones are guardians. I think that there is only one God and I only change his name.*

Dancers also referred to common features of Catholic/ Aztec religion when accounting for the reasons why they perform in front of figures of Catholic saints. For example, Doña Inno, aged 50, told me:

For me Catholic religion and Aztec dance are the same. Because before our ancestors had their god of water, god of wind, god of sun, whatever image that they have now, it still the same thing. The only thing is that now there is one god and only one mother and many saints. Each person believes in a saint and before they had faith in one god. For me it is the same.

Also such a universalized attitude to religious practices allows for a greater flexibility with regard to dancers' performances. In a paradoxical way it is more about crossing and transgressing initially set clear-cut boundaries between danza azteca and conchero than about re-enacting Aztec dance in its essentialised form. Such a tendency towards universalism also confirms point made by other authors with regards to the connection of Aztec/ Concheros dance to New Age religious practices (cf. Rostas 2009).

Conclusion:

One can consider Aztec dance as a mode of cultural rediscovery, a quest for the lost past and an attempt to reclaim indigenous heritage. Azteca dancers aim at moving away from Concheros' tradition of transculturation, and they reject any Catholic elements of the dance embracing Aztec belief system instead. Nevertheless the boundaries between azteca essentialism and Concheros transculturation are not rigid and fixed and the dancers often transgress them. Transgressing these boundaries can be seen as a strategic action through which dancers they come together to engage in a politics of recognition. Performing as a larger group also enables them to carve out spaces where they can freely reclaim their indigenous roots, spirituality and community activism.

At the same time one cannot deny the fact that dancers' lived realities are permeated with Catholic symbols. In relation to this they often perform in front of St Mary's statues and at the local churches, which goes against their ideology of pure Mexicanness. Dancers justify this transgression by pointing to the ongoing process of performative transculturation, which creates space for a renegotiation of cultural meanings. Some of the dancers also point at the universal nature of religious beliefs, which brings them close to the New Agers' philosophy of religion (see De la Torre 2008, Rostas 2009).

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¹ I use the term transculturation throughout this article as an emic concept. The dancers used this concept to refer to the processes of mixing elements from two different cultural/religious systems into one whole. I use this term interchangeably with the term ‘mestizaje’.

² A leather legband stitched with ayoyote seeds, which produces sound during the dance

³ Kapulli is a dance group, which has a hierarchical structure

⁴ A locality in the state of Morelos established between the XV and XVI century by the Aztec, Chinameca and Tlahuica civilizations

⁵ An indigenous community in the state of Morelos. It is known for its annual San Bartolome feast. 1.05% of population in Atlocholoaya speaks indigenous language (INEGI 2010).

⁶ A locality in the state of Morelos which has an archeological site which comprises a pre-Hispanic fortified city, that came into existence during the transitional Epiclassic Period (ca. 700-900 AD).

⁷ A town and municipality in the state of Morelos with 35,199 inhabitants (INEGI 2010)