El Es Dios! A Historical Interpretation of Danza Azteca as a Revitalization Movement

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KEYWORDS

danza
Concheros
Azteca
Mexika
Mexikayotl
Mexico
Chicana/o history

ABSTRACT

This article outlines a brief historical sketch of the Danza Azteca-Chichimeca, or *danza* for short, which is becoming ubiquitous in areas of the United States with a significant Mexican American population. It looks at its origins during the early colonial period of Mexico, especially its mythological beginnings, to help elucidate the deep foundation of the dance tradition. This sketch also addresses the evolution of danza after it spread from its place of origin in the Bajío into major urban areas like Mexico City, where, once there, it changed due to ideological and political trends that circulated in the post-revolution period. The article also looks at danza's pseudo-militaristic undertones to suggest that it might have contributed to the growing discontent among peasants and indigenous people, leading to Mexican independence. Some scholars have suggested that it, as a revitalizationist tradition, belongs in the "crisis cult" category. This analysis became evident when danza encountered neo-Aztec philosophies that promoted nationalistic and restorationist ideologies. In sum, the article touches on the popularity of danza in the United States despite the current climate of xenophobia and anti-migration, and nods at its growing international and global appeal.

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Introduction

In recent years, it has become common throughout the southwestern United States to see performances by so-called Aztec dancers at festivals and cultural events. If you reside in or have had the pleasure of visiting a city or town with a significant ethnic Mexican population, you might have witnessed these sorts of dances performed at events celebrating Mexican culture. The most popular of these cultural events are Cinco de Mayo (Battle of Puebla), the Fiestas Patrias (Mexican independence), and the Día de los Muertos (Day of the Dead) celebrations. The first two are culturally significant to Aztec dancers, because they are conducive to displays of ethnic pride and solidarity with the greater Mexican community. The last one, Día de los Muertos, also checks these boxes but has an added element to it—a spiritual one. What we have come to know as the Danza Azteca descends from a larger dance complex that scholars in the field have referred to as “Danzas de Indios,” “Danzas de Concheros,” “Danzas de Matachines,” and the more commonly used, “Danzas de Conquista.”¹ As will be shown, these Aztec dancers form part of a larger religious-cultural complex of indigenous-based dances whose origin dates to the colonial period in Mexico and has continued into the twenty-first century.

These Danzas de Conquista, or “conquest dances,” have several branches that address different aspects of colonial society, especially in relation to religious conversion and Catholic indoctrination. The branch that Aztec dancers belong to is called Danza Conchera, of which there are two offshoots: the Danza Azteca-Chichimeca and the Danza Mexika. They are often just referred to as Danza Azteca, Danza Tradicional, or simply *danza* for short. There are significant differences between the dance types, which will be explained below, but for the sake of simplicity, the shorthand term “danza” will be used to refer to the overall folk-dance complex. The *danzantes* (dancers) refute the notion that what they do is simply folklore, because for them danza is more than just a cultural folk dance; it is a spiritual tradition that syncretizes folk Catholicism with indigenous rituals and beliefs. Thus, it is natural for *danzantes* to participate in folk celebrations with spiritual connotations, such as Día de los Muertos, because the reason for the occasion intersects with a core tenet of danza—that of honoring dead ancestors.

The Día de los Muertos celebration originated in Mexico to commemorate and celebrate the life of deceased relatives and is traditionally held from October 31 through November 2. It should not be equated to nor confused with Halloween. Before the Spanish invasion of what is now Mexico in 1519, the Aztecs, or Mexica, celebrated the “Mikailwitl (feast of the dead) and Wey Mikailwitl (great feast of the dead) ... in early August through mid-September.”² Due to the suppression, demonization, and castigation of indigenous religious practices, the celebration of the dead was syncretized with Catholicism but went underground for generations. The festivity slowly began to gain favor in postrevolutionary Mexico and has now become a celebrated holiday in areas of the United States where ethnic Mexicans reside.

This celebration increased in popularity among Mexican Americans during the Chicano movement of the late sixties and early seventies and has been slowly growing even among non-

1. These labels for the danza have long been used in the field by specialists, such as Arturo Warman. For more on this, see Arturo Warman, *Danzas de la Conquista*, INAH 2, Mexico City: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 1967, LP record; Arturo Warman, *La danza de Moros y Cristianos*, SepSetentas 46 (Mexico City: Secretaría de Educación Pública, 1972); Berta Ares Queija, “Las danzas de los Indios: Un camino para la evangelización del virreinato del Perú,” *Revista de Indias* 44, no. 174 (1984): 445–63; and Gabriel Medrano de Luna, *Danza de Indios de mesillas: Una Danza de Conquista en Tepezalá, Aguascalientes* (La Piedad de Cavadas, Mexico: El Colegio de Michoacán A.C., 2001).

2. Kurly Tlapoyawa, “How Did ‘All Saints Day’ Become ‘Día de Muertos?’” *Mexika.org* (blog), November 1, 2017, <https://mexika.org/2017/11/01/how-did-all-saints-day-become-dia-de-muertos/>.

Mexicans in recent years. Take the city of Dallas, Texas, for instance. Although it has long had a large Mexican American population, the city held its first official Día de los Muertos parade on October 26, 2019 (fig. 1). Cities that have been centers of ethnic Mexican activity historically, such as San Antonio (Texas), Albuquerque (New Mexico), and Los Angeles (California), have held these types of celebrations in years past. The fact that unlikely places like Dallas or Wichita Falls, Texas, are now celebrating this festivity in an official capacity is a testament to the growing acceptance of non-white ethnic celebrations in the US. While a favorable interpretation here suggests an increased acknowledgment of the historical connection that the Greater Southwest has with old Mexico, a less generous one insinuates a willingness on the part of local officials to exploit ethnic celebrations for commercial gain. Thus, even though positive cultural plurality is on the rise in these places, one cannot ignore the fact that economic factors play a role in these public cultural celebrations. Nonetheless, despite the often toxic, xenophobic, and anti-migrant climate in the US, these public celebrations are a reminder of our shared humanity on a global scale. At the local level, they are a notable display recognizing the economic and political influence that immigrant communities increasingly have in these spaces.

Figure 1. "Danzantes Aztecas on a Parade Float," Dallas, Texas, USA, October 26, 2019, photo by the author.

For the past twenty years, the city of Dallas has recognized the importance of celebrating its multiculturalism. Through the Office of Cultural Affairs, various danza groups have been supported since the mid-2000s.³ Thus, it was only natural that danzantes be included in city-sponsored festivities. The Day of the Dead celebration that took place in downtown Dallas in 2019 was a perfect opportunity for the greater metropolitan area to witness the dance performed by Mitotiliztli Yaoyollohtli (Dance of the Heart of the Warrior). The dance group is one of the oldest in Dallas, tracing its origins to the mid-nineties when a brief resurgence of Chicana and Chicano (Chicana/o) activism spread across the Southwest.

3. Information provided by Evelio "Chichilticoatl" Flores, leader of the danza group Mitotiliztli Yaoyollohtli. He informed me that his group has been supported by the city of Dallas (Office of Cultural Affairs' arts program) since 2006. Besides funding Flores's group, the city has also supported other danza groups over the years. In return, the groups are asked to participate in city-sponsored celebrations and at public school cultural events.

4. Armando Navarro, "The Post Mortem Politics of the Chicano Movement: 1975–1996," in *Mexican Americans in the 1990s: Politics, Policies, and Perceptions*, ed. Juan R. García, Perspectives in Mexican American Studies 6 (Tucson: Mexican American Studies & Research Center, University of Arizona, 1997): 52.
5. Rodolfo F. Acuña, *Anything but Mexican: Chicanos in Contemporary Los Angeles*, The Haymarket Series (London: Verso, 1995), 293–94.
6. Literature about Proposition 187 abounds, but for the interested reader I suggest starting with Ruben J. García, "Critical Race Theory and Proposition 187: The Racial Politics of Immigration Law," *Chicano-Latino Law Review* 17 (1995): 118–54; and Kent A. Ono and John M. Sloop, *Shifting Borders: Rhetoric, Immigration, and California's Proposition 187* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2002).
7. Acuña, *Anything but Mexican*, 307.
8. *Ibid.*, 308.
9. Ruben A. Arellano, "Becoming Indian: The Origins of Indigeneity among Chicana/os in Texas" (PhD diss., Southern Methodist University, 2017), 11, https://scholar.smu.edu/hum_sci_history_etds/1.

Here it is useful to briefly explain what is meant by Chicana/o activism. The Chicano movement arose in the mid-1960s, lasted roughly throughout the 1970s, and had all but disappeared by the start of the 1980s. The movement, or *la causa* (the cause) as it was called, had been defined by three main overall objectives: better economic opportunities, more political representation, and adequate educational opportunities for ethnic Mexicans. Chicano scholar Armando Navarro described this generation of Mexican American activism as "relentless and resolute in its pursuit to extricate Mexicanos from the shackles of poverty, marginalization, and powerlessness."⁴

The Chicano movement is significant here because, in the United States, the Danza Azteca firmly established itself alongside *ballet folklórico* as a significant outward cultural representation of *mexicanidad* (Mexicanness). It is my estimation that danza's current popularity is partly due to its resurgence during the brief second wave of Chicana/o activism that occurred in the 1990s. This activism was a reaction to the many anti-immigrant and English-only laws that were being passed across the country at the time.⁵ Due to several interlocking factors, various states and local governments in the American Southwest began passing draconian and xenophobic legislation specifically targeting immigrants (read: brown people regardless of citizenship) from Mexico and Central America. One such law that made national headlines was California's Proposition 187—a proposal that aimed to deny the legal benefits for which undocumented immigrants were eligible, such as emergency medical treatment, the Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) nutrition program, and a basic public education.⁶ Taking cues from their Chicana/o forbears, a new generation of activists emerged to resist the perceived attacks on their communities.

During this period of neo-Chicano activism, danza groups also took part in the growing protests and supported various causes, including those involving colleges and universities. In one such event in 1993, members of the danza group Grupo Cuauhtemoc, who were also students at the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA), organized a hunger strike. They were protesting the administration's, and especially Chancellor Charles E. Young's, decision to not create a Chicana/o studies program after many years of lobbying by Chicana/o faculty and students. Instructors, students, and dancers fasted for two weeks while engaging in indigenous ceremonies as part of the protest. In his discussion of this episode, the renowned Chicano scholar Rodolfo F. Acuña notes that "the hunger strike was one of the most dramatic episodes of the Chicano student movement in recent history. For outsiders, one of its most controversial aspects was its *indigenismo* or *indigeness*."⁷

In his analysis of this growing trend of what he called "indigenismo," Acuña states that a big reason that indigenous identity was strong among Chicana/o youth was due to the rampant and intense racism they experienced. Whereas some young Mexican Americans turned to gang life, others sought an alternative that filled the void they felt and the alienation they experienced by American society at large.⁸ For many disaffected young Chicana/os, a positive alternative was the adoption and immersion of indigenous cultural traditions. The *indigenismo* Acuña describes is not the problematic framework that implies indigenous erasure. It is more in line with what scholars now recognize as "indigeneity": "the state, quality, or condition inherent to a people, or individual, that exemplifies their position as original inhabitants born, or produced naturally, in a given land or region, including their descendants and relations."⁹

10. There are numerous studies on the Columbus quincentennial commemorations. These are just a few: Timothy Kubal, *Cultural Movements and Collective Memory: Christopher Columbus and the Rewriting of the National Origin Myth* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); Winona LaDuke, "We Are Still Here: The 500 Years Celebration," *Race, Poverty & the Environment* 3, no. 3 (1992): 3–21; Daniel Osuna (national chair of El Partido Nacional de La Raza Unida), "500 Years of Colonization & Resistance in Indio-America: Plus, An Interview with the Presenter" (lecture, Michigan State University, 1992), VHS; and Arellano, "Becoming Indian," 229–34.

11. Jennie M. Luna, "Danza Mexica: Indigenous Identity, Spirituality, Activism, and Performance" (PhD diss., University of California, Davis, 2011), 17.

12. Evelio "Chichilticoatl" Flores, personal communication with author, October 19, 2014. Also see Ruben "Tlakatekatl" Arellano, "The History of Grupo Mitotiliztli Yaoyollohtli: Narrated by Evelio 'Chichilticoatl' Flores," part 1, digital recording, Internet Archive (2014), <https://archive.org/details/2014historyofyaoyollohtlipt1evelioflores>.

13. For more on how Mexican holidays became part of the Mexican American cultural tradition, see David E. Hayes-Bautista, *El Cinco de Mayo: An American Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012). Though his focus is on Cinco de Mayo and the Fiestas

One of the best examples of this indigenous resurgence among Chicana/o youth comes from the activist-scholar and danzante Jennie M. Luna, whose dissertation on the subject includes her own personal account of how she arrived at her indigeneity through numerous experiences in the early nineties, including Danza Azteca. The defining moment manifested itself at an event held in Sacramento, California, in 1992: the Eleventh Annual Chicano Latino Youth Leadership Project Conference, "Nuestra Historia: The First 500 Years." This event, like many others throughout the Americas, was organized as an indigenous response to the quincentennial celebrations being held in honor of Christopher Columbus and the so-called discovery of America.¹⁰ Luna sums up her transformative experience thusly: "My involvement in this organizing since 1990 led to my involvement with Danza ... [and] for many of the youth in my cohort, was the first step to reclaiming our communities through going back to what was 'ours.'"¹¹ And by "ours," she refers to the danza tradition and other indigenous ceremonies.

There are numerous accounts like Luna's that give credence to the idea that it was the resurgent Chicana/o student activism that helped spread Danza Azteca throughout the Southwest and beyond. Luna herself started the first group in New York City circa 1999 when she lived there while attending graduate school. The experience of Evelio "Chichilticoatl" Flores, leader of the Dallas danza group Mitotiliztli Yaoyollohtli, is reminiscent of hers. Flores states that his involvement in the Chicano student movement of the nineties introduced him to Danza Azteca and placed him in a direct path toward embracing an indigenous identity. Along the way, he discovered a rich world of vibrant and spiritually fulfilling indigenous ceremonies.¹² Both Flores and Luna credit danza as a major factor in the growth of the dance in the United States. Thus, the roots of the first official Día de los Muertos celebration held in Dallas can be traced back to the cultural revitalization efforts of Chicana/o activists in the nineties.¹³

The Chicano movement of the sixties and seventies brought about much-needed social and political transformation. The overarching goals of the movement were the uplift of the Mexican American *barrios* (communities) and the empowerment of the people. By and large, the grassroots activism promoted by Chicana/os did help bring about positive change, but the force of the movement eventually came to an end for several reasons. Navarro's assessment comes to mind here: "Although some Mexicanos continued to practice protest politics, the overall movement had become debilitated by the pervasiveness of internal power struggles, ideological cleavages, growing apathy and complacency; and a shift to electoral accommodationist politics."¹⁴ After the Chicano movement waned, the cultural celebrations remained and so did the Danza Azteca.

It became common to see danza and danzantes at various events in ethnic Mexican communities where they were called on to bless the occasion with their indigenous dance and prayers. During the Dallas parade, which was broadcast on local television, thousands of people witnessed a danza blessing for the very first time. Afterward, the group led the parade through the city center, dancing as they went and capping the procession with a closing dance. Although this was done for public consumption, the performance maintained its ceremonial structure: it began with the opening blessing, which is an invocation used to request permission from the ancestors and from the natural elements to engage in the sacred dance; the dancing performed during the parade procession replaced the customary circular formation of the dance; and

Patrias, Hayes shows how these were part of a wider cultural milieu that later came to include *ballet folklórico* and Día de los Muertos. Also see Luna, "Danza Mexica"; and Mario E. Aguilar, "The Rituals of Kindness: The Influence of the Danza Azteca Tradition of Central Mexico on Chicano-Mexcohuani Identity and Sacred Space" (PhD diss., Claremont Graduate University, 2009).

14. Navarro, "Post Mortem Politics," 54–55.

15. I have had many conversations with *danzantes*, and the current interpretation of "conquista" is about gaining new recruits to their group and not necessarily a reference to the so-called conquest of Mexico.

16. Academic studies on *danza* are too numerous to cite here. Virtually all of them are anthropological in nature, and to my knowledge, a thorough historical analysis of the dance tradition does not exist. Nonetheless, there are a number of insightful dissertations and theses by scholar-*danzantes* that have added a much-needed voice on the subject, such as Aguilar, "Rituals of Kindness"; Luna, "Danza Mexica"; Enrique Gilbert-Michael Maestas, "Culture and History of Native American Peoples of South Texas" (PhD diss., University of Texas, Austin, 2003); and Kristina F. Nielsen, "Composing Histories: The Transmission and Creation of Historicity, Music and Dance in the Los Angeles Danza Community" (PhD diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 2017). There are also a few books on the

the ceremony concluded with a final dance and closing blessing thanking the spirits and the elements for allowing the dance to take place.

To most onlookers, this process might seem to simply be a stylized ballet performed by acrobatic dancers dressed in flamboyant indigenous attire, but the *danza* adherents see it very differently. Even though this is still a public performance, the act of donning the regalia and going through the process of lighting incense, dancing, and opening and closing the circle is taken seriously. It is not just a matter of performance or representation; the dance itself is a prayer and a ritual battle for the very souls of the people. The fact that it was executed during a parade presentation has no bearing on the intentionality expressed by the adherents. The dancers view it as a combination of spirituality, ethnic pride, and an opportunity to expose the tradition to a wider audience. In fact, public displays of *danza* such as this one are what helped it gain popularity among activist Chicana/os in the US in the nineties. During this troubling time of social and political strife, *Danza Azteca* became a significant source of ethnic reinforcement and revitalization. To that point, it is useful here to appreciate the deeper cultural origins of *danza* and the ways it came to spread its message beyond the borders of its national origins.

Among older *danzantes*, the dance is still known as *Danza de la Conquista*. According to their understanding of the term *conquista* (conquest), the goal is to win over new converts to their spiritual circle.¹⁵ Hence, *danza* is both a dance troupe and a quasi-religious community. It is also important to note that the act of *conquista* is reminiscent of the tradition among nomadic and hunter-gatherer Indian groups of replenishing their ranks after battles by taking captives to replace lost tribal members. While that cultural understanding might not register to most modern-day *danzantes*, it is deeply interwoven into the fabric of the dance in practice, performativity, and consumption. Equally, these cultural understandings are not readily apparent to the public and only become evident to those whose interest motivates their attendance to the group's (weekly) rehearsals.

Novice dancers learn that there is a whole other dimension to the dance than simply rehearsing for the next event. For instance, they learn that the opening and closing blessings are more than just performativity and that there is actual spiritual meaning behind each step. They also learn the importance of the cardinal points in the cosmovision of the *danza* tradition and of the ceremonial significance surrounding the four basic elements—earth, wind, fire, and water. While the spiritual aspects of the dance are a crucial component to the tradition, they will not be fully addressed here except for context where necessary. However, because this cultural-spiritual dance is misunderstood despite its growing public presence in the United States, a historical synthesis of the tradition is necessary.¹⁶ Thus, this article traces the history of the *Danza de la Conquista* from its colonial and rural origins in the Bajío region of Mexico to its urban transformation in late nineteenth-century Mexico City, in order to position *danza* as a transitional and fluid revitalization movement used by its adherents for spiritual and cultural affirmation.

Sangremal and the Concheros

The story of the *Danza de la Conquista* begins with the *Concheros*, a spiritual and syncretic folkloric dance that was developed in the Bajío region of Mexico, particularly in the state of Querétaro (see fig. 2). Oral history contends that this dance tradition originated during the time

subject, including Yolotl González Torres, *Danza tu palabra: La Danza de los Concheros* (Mexico City: Plaza y Valdés, 2005); Susanna Rostas, *Carrying the Word: The Concheros Dance in Mexico City* (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2009); and Martha Stone, *At the Sign of Midnight: The Concheros Dance Cult of Mexico* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1975).

17. Taylor does not call them “crosses of the conquest”; that is my wording for this phenomenon that needs further research. William B. Taylor, “Placing the Cross in Colonial Mexico,” *The Americas* 69, no. 2 (2012): 145–78.

18. Serge Gruzinski, *Man-Gods in the Mexican Highlands: Indian Power and Colonial Society, 1520–1800*, trans. Eileen Corrigan (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1989), 193.

of the conquest, not the one of the Aztecs but rather the conquest of Querétaro on July 25, 1531. This is but one of many military operations that transpired in the subsequent decades after the fall of the Aztec-Mexica capital of Tenochtitlán. Like many battles of the period, this one took on a religio-mystical meaning and can be considered as part of a trope I call the “crosses of the conquest.”

Figure 2. Concheros from Guanajuato, n.d. In the Martha Stone Papers, box 17, folder 17.5, no. 43, Benson Latin American Studies and Collections, Teresa Lozano Long Institute of Latin American Studies, University of Texas at Austin. Caption on back reads: “Do you want to take a photograph, señora?; Don Cecilio Morales & Maria.”

In an article on the topic, historian William B. Taylor describes this phenomenon of early colonial crosses in Mexico that were tied to purported miraculous circumstances.¹⁷ The “crosses of the conquest” existed in the same religio-cultural sphere as the *hermandades* (confraternities) that gained prominence among indigenous societies in the early colonial period. Serge Gruzinski, another historian who specializes in Mexico, describes the situation as one of exacerbation after the indigenous population had been reduced from twenty million to just under one million by the late sixteenth century. The despair felt by the indigenous population caused an almost frantic turn toward Christian religiosity and the widespread belief in the miracles of imagery, what he calls the “native *imaginaire*.” To stress this point, he cites the Third Mexican council of 1585 as stating critically: “There is no Indian so poor that he does not have a cubicle where he has placed two or three images.”¹⁸ These cubicles were called *santocalli* and were often filled with effigies of Jesus Christ, the Virgin Mary, and a host of other saints who could be called upon for favors. State and church officials worried that this was just paganism masked as Catholicism, and they were often unable to discourage these practices from occurring.

19. Rafael Heliodoro Valle, "Mitología de Santiago en América" (master's thesis, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1944).

20. Max Harris, *Aztecs, Moors, and Christians: Festivals of Reconquest in Mexico and Spain* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2000), 21.

21. The following works on danza form the basis for the historical synthesis here: Portia Mansfield, "The Conchero Dancers of Mexico" (PhD diss., New York University, 1953); Armando Solorzano and Raul Guerrero, "Ensayo para un estudio sobre la 'Danza de los Concheros de la Gran Tenochtitlan,'" *Boletín Latinoamericano de música* 5, part 2 (October 1941): 449–76; Frances Toor, *A Treasury of Mexican Folkways: The Customs, Myths, Folklore, Traditions, Beliefs, Fiestas, Dances, and Songs of the Mexican People* (New York: Bonanza Books, 1985), 323–30; Warman, *Danzas de la Conquista*; Warman, *La Danza de Moros y Cristianos*; and Justino Fernández, Vicente T. Mendoza, and Antonio Rodríguez Luna, *Danzas de los Concheros en San Miguel de Allende: Estudio histórico, costumbrista y coreográfico* (Mexico City: El Colegio de México, 1941).

22. David Wright, *Querétaro en el siglo XVI: Fuentes documentales primarias* (Querétaro, Mexico: Gobierno del Estado de Querétaro, 1989).

Closer to our topic, there is the related phenomenon of the supposed apparitions of *Santiago mataindios* (St. James the Indian slayer) during the decisive battles where the Spanish happened to be victorious. This martial-religious trope has precedent in the Iberian Peninsula during the *reconquista* when Spain waged a war to ethnically cleanse its social and political borders of Muslim Moors and Sephardic Jews. In that context, he was imagined as *Santiago Matamoros* (St. James the Moor slayer). During the conquest of Mexico, there were several battles that attributed Spanish/Christian victory to the apparition of St. James. These incidents were first studied by Rafael Heliodoro Valle who noted that there were three saints who illuminated the Spanish imagination in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries: St. Christopher, St. Michael, and St. James—or Santiago—who were perceived as being of flesh and bone by the Spanish militias. For indigenous people, he represented an invincible new punishing force who bore arms of thunder and lightning. In all, Valle lists fourteen Santiago apparitions, including the one at Sangremal Hill during the conquest of Querétaro.¹⁹

There is a more naturalistic interpretation of Santiago in the broader Danzas de Conquista complex. The humanities scholar Max Harris studied various folk danzas of Mexico—particularly those resembling the *reconquista* traditions from Spain—and found many overlapping traits between the two but noted the distinctiveness the dance took in the colonial period. He found that both traditions have the story of Santiago's apparition in the sky; however, in the Mexican context, he is not the Catholic saint but rather an anthropomorphic representation of a primordial Mesoamerican deity—the sun. Harris interviewed townsfolk from various rural communities and an artisan from Cuetzalan, Puebla, Pablo Huerta Ramir, who informed him that "the *santiagos* represent the sun."²⁰ Through this interpretation, the sun becomes both a witness to the battle and a facilitator to the victory of the Spanish/Christian contingent over the *Indio/gentiles*. Thus, the basis for the origin story of the *Danza Conchera* underscores the act of conquest and the acceptance of Christianity.

This intertwining of warfare and the spiritual places the dance tradition in the broader context of the "crosses of the conquest" trope. In conjunction with Santiago's apparition at Sangremal Hill, the cross in the sky marks the pivotal event in the story leading to the defeat of the Chichimec.²¹ Concheros maintain that their tradition is directly tied to the legendary Battle of Sangremal whose name translates to "bad blood" and is a reference to the struggle that occurred between Christianized Indians and the unconverted and unconquered Chichimec of the region. This region—which encompasses parts of the modern central Mexican states of Aguascalientes, Guanajuato, Querétaro, and Jalisco—is known as El Bajío (the lowlands). Concheros contend that the oldest danza groups come from this region and point to the legend of Sangremal to support this claim. They are known as *danzantes de la conquista* (dancers of the conquest) because they are keeping alive the memory of the struggle between Christianity and paganism. Nonetheless, despite the mythology surrounding Sangremal, colonial sources do not explicitly indicate that this specific battle and its attendant supernatural phenomena occurred.²² Instead, the legend illustrates the religio-ethnic conflict that defined much of the early colonial period and presupposes the larger narrative of how danza emerged.

In the years following the demise of Mexica (Aztec) rule, indigenous communities outside of the new empire of Nueva España continued to resist Spanish incursion and Christian conversion.

23. My usage of the capitalized term "Native" here comes from years of personal experience in and outside of the academy. It is used as a signifier to distinguish between non-indigenous people who choose to call themselves "native Americans" due to the simple fact of being born in the United States versus actual "Native Americans" of indigenous descent. The capitalized term "Native" is often used by indigenous scholars and activists in the United States as a self-referent and when referring to indigenous peoples. There are a few scholarly explanations supporting the capitalized "N," and one of the best comes from the Native Hawaiian scholar Haunani-Kay Trask, whose explanation is worth repeating here at length:

"As for capitalizing "Native" in this essay and elsewhere, the issue is complex. The word is colonial in origin, like "black" as a description of Africans transplanted to America. But just as "black" was politicized, used for self-identification, and capitalized, so "Native" has undergone similar transformations.

I capitalize it to emphasize the political distance between that which is Western and that which is Native.

But I also do it to highlight the word and therefore its referent.

In Hawai'i, we generally call ourselves Hawaiians. But since the sovereignty movement, the consciousness that we are Natives and not immigrants to Hawai'i has meant a greater identification with the term Native, especially as immigrant history here has been glorified and falsified at the expense of Natives. It is typically American

It took several decades, but most Native peoples eventually succumbed to the overbearing pressure of an expanding Spanish Empire, and the autonomous societies that once stood were supplanted with Western-European-styled polities.²³ In some cases, these were ecclesiastical societies that leaned on the legal authority of the Catholic Church through mission communities and *cacicazgos*—Indian settlements ruled by Christianized Native chiefs. With its pre-Hispanic roots, the Danza Conchera is believed to have originated as a syncretic response that blended indigenous practices with the new religion.

As the Spanish made their way into the Bajío from Mexico City, they encountered resistance from the numerous Otomí (Otomí) and Chichimecah (Chichimec) tribes of the region. An example of this resistance came from an Otomí cacique by the name of Cónin. He, along with his family and a group of Chichimec followers, avoided capture and religious conversion by taking refuge in caves while subsisting on what they hunted and gathered.²⁴ After numerous skirmishes with the Spanish, Cónin finally converted to Christianity and was baptized as Hernando de Tapia around the year 1530, but here is where fact blurs into fiction. According to the legend of Sangremal, Cónin is said to have dedicated himself to spreading the Christian faith by personally undertaking the conquest of the Chichimec peoples in the Bajío region. Together with the cacique Nicolás de San Luis Montáñez (a descendant of the rulers of Tula) and other Christianized chiefs, he supposedly commanded an army composed mainly of converted Tlaxcalan and Otomí Indians and led them into Querétaro to the fateful Battle of Sangremal in 1531.

The legend states that the battle was fought on pre-agreed terms, one of which was that no lethal weapons were to be used: in other words, this was to be largely hand-to-hand combat. This fighting style was a customary practice during the precontact period where the objective was to capture rather than kill on the battlefield. Frances Toor, scholar of Mexican folklore, described the epic moment of conversion thusly: "there appeared a shining cross, suspended in the air above the fields of battle, and at its side the image of St. James, whose day it was. The Christians had invoked his aid to detain the sun, as night was coming on and the fighting was bitter."²⁵ The belief by Concheros that "a shining cross" appeared during the battle with Santiago at its side is corroborated by the written account attributed to Montáñez by Brother Pablo Beaumont: "on the day of Saint James the Apostle war was made and won against these people, and on that day the sun stopped, which was the will of God."²⁶

Montáñez described in detail the lead-up to the conquest of Querétaro, a process that lasted from 1522 to 1555. He explained that the year 1522 was the first *entrada* (incursion) into the region then known as Xilotepec (Jilotepec), which was also the first time that he and Tapia fought with the Chichimecs of Querétaro. In the same account, Montáñez confounded the years and stated that the decisive battle at the hill occurred in 1522, but a close analysis contradicts that claim. Fray Isidro Félix de Espinosa (an early priest assigned to Querétaro) affirmed that the battle had occurred in 1531, which, coincidentally, was also the year that the Spanish first settled Santiago de Querétaro, establishing a significant presence in the region.²⁷ While the legendary battle and the supernatural sightings add color to the foundational myth of the region, the dates and stories do not correspond to actual events.

The confusion in the dates poses a problem in the chronology, and scholars who have studied Querétaro's history question the accepted popular narrative. Historian David Charles Wright,

to reiterate the claim that “we are all immigrants.” My use of Native is in opposition to that: the capital letter reminds the reader that some of us are not immigrants.

Thus, my usage is political on a geographic level (we are Native to Hawai’i and therefore not American), on an ideological level (we are neither Western nor Eastern but Native Pacific Islanders), and on a cultural level (we are not transplants who are “new” to Hawai’i but an ancient people who have learned to live in and with our Native place and whose culture is the least destructive and the most beneficial to the land)."

This explanation is found in Haunani-Kay Trask, *From a Native Daughter: Colonialism and Sovereignty in Hawai’i* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1999), 54n1.

24. The following is from Valentín F. Frías, *La conquista de Querétaro: Obra ilustrada con grabados que contiene lo que hasta hoy se ha escrito sobre tan importante acontecimiento, así como documentos inéditos de bastante interés para la historia de Querétaro* (Querétaro, Mexico: Imp. de la Escuela de Artes de Sr. S. Jose, 1906).

25. Toor, *Treasury of Mexican Folkways*, 329.

26. As transcribed in Pablo de la Purísima Concepción Beaumont, *Crónica de la provincia de los Santos Apóstoles S. Pedro y S. Pablo de Michoacán de la regular observancia de N. P. S. Francisco*, T. 4, Biblioteca histórica de la Iberia 18 (Mexico: Escalante, 1874), 559. All translations by the author. Original Spanish text: “el día del señor Santiago apóstol

who has dedicated his career to studying the region, posits that Espinosa’s dating is completely incorrect and doubts that the famed Battle of Sangremal ever occurred. Instead, Wright explains that Querétaro was settled in three main waves between 1530 and 1550, none of which involved a major battle as described in the Conchero legend.²⁸ If Wright is correct in his assessment that the battle is fictitious, then it may possibly represent the collective memory of the region’s inhabitants regarding the settlement of the region. Interpreting the legend this way corresponds to the widespread indigenous cultural tradition of using mnemonic devices to transmit history to posterity. More to the point, in this flattened historical narrative, the entradas into Querétaro and the brutal forty-year war (1550–90) that ensued between Spanish forces and the Chichimec confederacy are collapsed into a singular noteworthy event.

These type of discrepancies in the popular historical narrative also led ethnomusicologist Raúl García Flores to question the antiquity of the Danza Conchera. In a version of the story he found, the supernatural entities and the dates of the legendary battle are again changed. After careful examination, García Flores concludes that danza is no older than the eighteenth century—a difference of roughly two hundred years. García Flores’s version cites the joint force of San Francisco and the Virgin Mary as the supernatural entities that appear in the sky and not St. James and the cross: “It is probable that during those years the legend that justifies the origin of such dances was affirmed: it is said that in the middle of a fierce battle between barbarians and Spaniards (in 1531), San Francisco and the Virgin Mary stopped the sun. Impressed, the Chichimec surrendered and in memory of the event: ‘they happily came dancing, skirmishing, and shooting their arrows up [in the air].’”²⁹ To García Flores, the “years” in question are not those of the sixteenth century but rather the 1700s, showing that no contemporary sources of the period exist that mention the “miraculous” event in 1531.

Suffice it to say, his conclusion is that these Indian dances emerged in the dichotomous struggle between urban and rural, vassal and nomad, and Christian and gentile. In effect, what he describes is the quintessentially American trope of the frontier as a place of contention between the forces of progress and civilization advancing against the steady recession of savagery and backwardness. This is called the Frontier Thesis, or Turner’s hypothesis, and is named after historian Frederick Jackson Turner who first propounded this problematic historical framework in 1893.³⁰ Viewed through this lens, the dances become mere commemorative celebrations of the territorial subjugation, political control, and spiritual colonization of the indigenous populations north of the valley of Mexico. The Frontier Thesis interpretation is one of subjugation and dispossession, while the popular narrative offers a more palatable justification that advances a sense of spiritual reconciliation. In both versions, the indigenous are losing ground and accommodating to the new social order.

Nonetheless, Conchero legend attributes the celestial apparition as the precise moment when the Chichimec of the Bajío dropped their *arcos y flechas* (bows and arrows) in favor of the *concha* (shell) guitar from which their name is derived.³¹ The Chichimec interpreted their defeat in battle as a sign from God. Afterward, they ceased fighting, accepted the Catholic faith, and requested that a cross be placed on Sangremal Hill. Once the cross was installed, the Native converts displayed their reverence by dancing around it and periodically exclaiming, “El es Dios!” (He is God!).³² To this day, many dancers believe that this was the exact moment when danza was born.

se hizo la guerra y se ganó á este pueblo, y en aquel día se paró el sol, que fué permisión de Dios.”

27. Isidro Félix de Espinosa, *Chronica Apostolica y Seraphica de todos los colegios de propaganda fide de esta Nueva-España de Missioneros Franciscanos Observantes*, vol. 1, *Libro primero de la Chronica de los colegios de propaganda fide* (Mexico: por la Viuda de D. Joseph Bernardo de Hogal, 1746), chap. 3, approximately page 8 (the book is unpaginated).

28. David Charles Wright, “Andāmaxēi: The Three Foundations of Querétaro in the Sixteenth Century,” *Voices of Mexico*, no. 58 (2002): 73–77.

29. Raúl García Flores, *Puro mitote! La música, el canto y la danza entre los Chichimecas del Noreste* (Monterrey: Fondo Editorial Nuevo León, 1993), 129. Original Spanish text: “Es probable que por esos años se afirmara la leyenda que justifica el origen de semejantes bailes: cuéntase que de en medio de una fiera batalla entre barbaros y españoles (corría 1531), San Francisco y la Virgen María pararon el sol. Impresionados, los chichimecas se rindieron y en memoria de ello: ‘venían bailando, haciendo escaramuza, tirando sus flechas arriba y dando de contento.”

30. For more on the idea of the frontier in American historical thought and its role in the development of American identity, see Richard W. Etulain, ed., *Does the Frontier Experience Make America Exceptional?* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 1999).

31. A kind of ten-string guitar made with an armadillo shell as its box.

Revitalization and Militancy

The religious foundation of the Danzas de Conquista is a key marker of a “crisis cult.”³³ Successful crisis cults inspire people to turn to the security of their traditions as a form of escapism and as a means from which they can reassert their waning or lost influence, both socially and politically. As will be shown, the way these early colonial dances emerged in Mexico lend themselves to this interpretation. Crisis cults do not always lead to a revitalization movement, but they sometimes overlap. Before proceeding, it is necessary to explain what is meant by “revitalization movement.” Anthony F. C. Wallace, the anthropologist who coined the term, defined it “as a deliberate, organized, conscious effort by members of a society to construct a more satisfying culture.”³⁴ He added further that the members of this society must perceive their culture as a system that has become undesirable and is in dire need of improvement due to degradation. This can only occur through cultural innovations—gradual or sudden—and developmental change is the revitalization process at work. Therefore, applying this analytical frame to danza helps explain its evolution from *conchersimo* to *mexicanidad*.

It is now clear that the veracity of the Battle of Sangremal having occurred at all is doubtful and that the origin of danza dating to the sixteenth century is also questionable. Nevertheless, regardless of when the danza originated, it is my estimation that the Danza Conchera began as a crisis cult that eventually led to a revitalization movement offshoot in the twentieth century—the Danza Mexika. In this assessment, I am not alone. Mario Aguilar, another danzante turned scholar, also arrived at this conclusion, but he posits that danza “became a revitalization movement of the Cristero revolt [1926–29]” and later evolved “into the three groups of dance practitioners: The traditional Concheros that maintain their lineage to the past; the Danza Azteca groups that still follow the Indocristiano tradition of the Concheros; and the Mexí’ca movement or *mexicanistas* movement dancers that try to return to an idealized and mythic past.”³⁵ He also ties this trend to the broader pan-Indian movement, another revitalization trend that merits its own separate study. Following this line of thought, Chicana scholar Raquel H. Guerrero notes that the revitalization frame also applies to Chicana/os who are constantly in a “state of crisis,” because “they experience much external pressure by both Mexicanos and the dominant [American] culture regarding who to be. A culture in crisis emerges.”³⁶ Danzantes Chicanos try to resolve this crisis by adopting an indigenous identity and connecting their struggle to that of other indigenous people in the Americas.

It is well documented that indigenous peoples have resisted colonization, subjugation, and assimilation since the very beginning, and the Danzas de Conquista fit well into the wider spectrum of revitalization and cultural resistance. There are many instances of this type of resistance throughout the Americas, and the messianic Ghost Dance that emerged in the late nineteenth century in the United States is perhaps one of the best known. The Ghost Dance was a Native American spiritual movement that originated in Nevada around 1870. It is connected to the Wounded Knee Massacre of 1890 during which the US Army murdered hundreds of Indian adherents because white Americans feared a potential Indian uprising.³⁷ The fear, whether it stemmed from collective guilt as imperial colonizers or simply racism toward the “other,” was irrational and rooted in religious intolerance and political motivations. The movement was not advocating war against Anglo-Americans; it was a cultural expression of rebirth in response to

32. This rallying cry serves as a ritual greeting between the *compadres* (fictive kin) or *hermanos* (brothers and sisters) of the danza.

33. For more on this, see John W. Connor, "From Ghost Dance to Death Camps: Nazi Germany as a Crisis Cult," *Ethos* 17, no. 3 (1989): 259–88.

34. Anthony F. C. Wallace, "Revitalization Movements," *American Anthropologist* 58, no. 2 (1956): 265. Also see Ulises Chávez Jiménez and Fabián Frías Santillán, "Memoria colectiva (mítico-histórica) y tradición oral en un movimiento religioso Mesoamericano: La Danza de Concheros a través de sus cantos," Academia.edu, accessed May 25, 2020, https://www.academia.edu/4492518/Ch%C3%A1vez-Jim%C3%A9nez-Ulises-Fr%C3%ADas-Santill%C3%A1n-Memoria-colectiva_m%C3%ADtico-hist%C3%B3rica_y-tradici%C3%B3n-oral-en-un-movimiento-religioso-mesoamericano_la_danza_de-concheros_a_trav%C3%A9s_de-sus-cantos.

35. Aguilar, "Rituals of Kindness," 158–59.

36. Raquel H. Guerrero, "Dancing in the Street: Danza Azteca as Cultural Revitalization and Spiritual Liberation for Chicanos" (master's thesis, University of Colorado at Denver, 2010), 171.

37. For more on the Ghost Dance as a revitalization movement, see Alice Beck Kehoe, *The Ghost Dance: Ethnohistory and Revitalization, Case Studies in Cultural Anthropology* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1989).

the ongoing spiritual repression and dispossession of land and sovereignty. Although not exactly parallel, there are significant similarities between the Ghost Dance and the Danzas de Conquista, particularly the original Danza Conchera.

From the very beginning, the Danza Conchera was a spiritual movement born out of conflict and struggle. Harris notes that "indigenous practices suppressed by the colonial power take on a new meaning. What was once dominant becomes subversive."³⁸ With its numerous references to battles, conquerors, and military titles, Danza Conchera framed through a revitalization lens makes sense. It is, after all, part of the Danzas de Conquista milieu, and the dancers themselves describe what they do as *conquistando* (conquering). Perhaps emulating their conquerors, Concheros adopted a hierarchical structure that incorporated Spanish military titles, such as *general*, *capitán*, *sargento*, and *alférez* (ensign). As pseudo-militants, or *guerreros* (warriors)—a common moniker of self-reference—their mission as *danzantes de la conquista* was (is) to recruit more people to their interpretation of indigenous folk Catholicism. However, if you ask modern-day *danzantes* what they mean by it, they might tell you that it is all just spiritual symbolism. One cannot help but wonder if the origins of danza were not indeed martially oriented.

Anthropologist Gabriel Moedano, who intensively studied the Concheros in Querétaro, believed that their tradition belonged to a larger nativist phenomenon that emerged during the conquest as a response to the rapidly changing cultural and religious landscape.³⁹ As part of the conversion and cultural hybridization that was taking shape, indigenous people adopted the confraternity model for their religious organizations. The Conchero version of these religious fraternal orders eventually came to be called the "Hermandad de la Santa Cuenta," a secretive designation whose esoteric meaning and associated rituals were known by only a select few. The word *cuenta* in this sense is not easily translatable, but it generally refers to a specific ritual and sometimes is also used to refer to a group or collection of groups. Moedano noted that

the expression "Santa Cuenta" alludes to one of its [danza] basic rites, one that allows communication with the souls of the dead generals and captains who are venerated for having been the "conquerors of the four winds"; through which it is achieved that they are present during the vigils, giving their strength and protection to the group that invokes them, there is even the possibility of receiving them in a kind of trance state, which manifests itself with loud crying, which sometimes borders on screams and in extreme occasions with fainting spells (particularly among the women) ... it is said that in ancient times the ritual greeting was not only "El es Dios" [He is God] but "El es Dios y la Santa Cuenta." And in some recent documents of groups from Querétaro, the word "cuenta" is synonymous with a group belonging to a "mesa." Of course, those who know and manage completely and comprehensively these secrets are the old captains and generals.⁴⁰

This quote elucidates the bond among *danzantes* who understand the ancient rituals of the Santa Cuenta. These rituals are secret in that only a few understand their meaning and know how to perform them, and that fosters a brotherhood whose duty is to spread their message by "conquering the four winds," in other words, gaining *danzantes* by proselytizing far and wide.

The Santa Cuenta is sometimes referred to as the Sagrada Cuenta, and, as noted above, trying to convey the fullness of that expression is challenging, but fortunately we can turn to an authority on the matter for some clarification. Fernando Flores Moncada (1928–98)—known as "El Príncipe Azteca" (the Aztec Prince) for his various roles as a stage performer and recording

38. Harris, *Aztecs, Moors, and Christians*, 16.

39. Gabriel Moedano, "Los hermanos de la Santa Cuenta: Un culto de crisis de origen Chichimeca," in *Religión en Mesoamérica*, ed. Jaime Litvak, Mesa Redonda 12 (Mexico City: Sociedad Mexicana de Antropología, 1972), 599–610. Moedano was one of the first academics to take a critical look at the Concheros. Before Moedano, most anthropologists studying the Concheros were more interested in documenting the dance tradition and trying to find ways to explain its existence historically using the data they collected from their informants. There was little in terms of deep analysis and archival research until scholars like Moedano and Warman came along.

40. Original Spanish text: "la expresión la 'Santa Cuenta' alude a uno de sus ritos básicos, aquel que permite la comunicación con las ánimas de los generales y capitanes muertos, a quienes se les venera por haber sido 'conquistadores de los cuatro vientos'; mediante el cuál se logra que estén presentes durante las velaciones, dando su fuerza y protección al grupo que les invoque, existiendo incluso la posibilidad de recibirlos en una especie de estado de trance, que se manifiesta con fuerte llanto, que a veces raya en gritos y en ocasiones extremas con desmayos (particularmente las mujeres) ... se dice que antiguamente el saludo ritual no era solamente 'El es Dios,' sino 'El es Dios y la Santa Cuenta.' Asimismo en algunos documentos recientes de grupos de Querétaro, hemos visto

artist—was one of the most famous, controversial, and well-respected figures of danza in Mexico City. He is recognized as forming part of the cohort of dancers who initiated the transition from the Conchero style of song and dress to a more *aztequizado* (Aztecized) one in the late 1940s and early 1950s.⁴¹ Years after his passing, he is still fondly remembered by danzantes in the capital city. The journalist Ricardo Pacheco Colín noted in 2004 that "some captains of the Aztec dance are still remembered, such as Mario Andrés Pineda or the 'Aztec Prince' Fernando Flores Moncada (deceased), who gave impetus to the authentic dance of the Mexica in the 1940s, in which the instruments of European origin were set aside and the sacred pre-Hispanic ones, the Huéhuatl and the Teponaztli, were taken up with great reverence and restraint."⁴² Further cementing his role in the "Aztecization" of danza, Moncada wrote a short booklet titled *La tradición Mexica en Iztapalapa* (1996), in which he interpreted danza rituals and traditions through an Aztec lens. Among the many things that Moncada discussed in the booklet is the meaning of the Sagrada Cuenta.⁴³

According to Moncada, the Sagrada Cuenta is a sacred ceremony that involves the hanging of certain garments that are kept under the guardianship of lights, usually candles. This is done in memory of deceased danzantes and is prepared by the person who is heir to the group's *mesa*.⁴⁴ As with other danza-related concepts, *mesa* also has no direct translation but is usually construed to mean the group's foundation, seat of leadership, and place of ritual oratory, and is a synonym for the overall group itself.⁴⁵ The heir is usually one of the principal leaders and the *mesa* they keep is regarded as the symbolic seat of leadership of that group. The *cuenta* ritual is performed by the *mesa* heir to invoke the *animas* (the guardian spirits of the group) for personal protection and that of the overall group. The types of *animas* vary from *mesa* to *mesa*, but they are generally a combination of the spirits of deceased group leaders, religious figures (usually Catholic saints), and Aztec deities. Moncada further explained that the origin of the Sagrada Cuenta predates the arrival of the Spanish and the conversion of the indigenous population to the Catholic faith. In his telling, when warriors returned from battle, the groups counted the casualties they had suffered and the fallen were then remembered in acts of veneration by forming rubber figures of those dead warriors. The figures were fashioned with torches in hand and presented to the gods, after which the celebrants engaged in ceremonial war drills presumably in honor of those who had perished in conflict. Moncada's description of the ceremony is one that blends oral and written histories, spiritual mystery, and ancient rituals to convey a connection and continuity to deep historical time. Thus, the reader is meant to interpret this account as validating the antiquity of the Sagrada Cuenta ceremony and the danza tradition itself.⁴⁶

The Santa Cuenta's spiritual foundation, coupled with its militaristic ritual, adds weight to the hypothesis that it emerged as a "crisis cult" in the early colonial era. Through the early danza brotherhoods, Native people tried to save at least some aspects of their social and religious culture by masking it as Catholicism. Furthermore, given its martial aesthetic, it is interesting to speculate that perhaps the original objective of the brotherhood was to increase their numbers through conquests for a future indigenous rebellion. The Bajío's reputation as the cradle of Mexican independence surely is suggestive of this interpretation. Scholars have shown that the power struggles between the Spanish landed elites, the criollo bourgeoisie, and the mostly indigenous labor force shattered the stability of the region.⁴⁷ Those conflicts are often credited with playing a role in Mexico's ultimate separation from Spain (1810–21).

usada la palabra 'cuenta' como sinónimo de grupo perteneciente a una 'mesa.' Desde luego, quienes conocen y manejan en forma amplia y completa estos secretos son los viejos capitanes y generales." Moedano, "Los hermanos de la Santa Cuenta," 605–6.

41. For more on Moncada, see Yolotl González Torres, "Las nuevas religiones en México como forma de identidad colectiva" (paper presented at the 49th Congreso Internacional de Americanistas, Quito, July 1997); Nielsen, "Composing Histories"; Francisco de la Peña, *Los hijos del sexto sol: Un estudio etnopsicoanalítico del movimiento de la Mexicanidad* (Mexico City: Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, 2002); Renée de la Torre, "La fotografía y el imaginario de lo Azteca: ¿Rescate de la tradición o 'ficcionalización' imaginaria?," in *Pura imagen*, ed. Sarah Corona Berkin, *Teoría y práctica del arte* (Mexico City: Dirección General de Publicaciones del Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes, 2012), 265–305; and Renée de la Torre, "Tensiones entre el esencialismo Azteca y el universalismo New Age a partir del estudio de las Danzas 'Conchero-Aztecas,'" *Trace: Travaux et recherches dans les Amériques du Centre*, no. 54 (December 1, 2009): 61–76.

42. Ricardo Pacheco Colín, "En la colonia, al que tocaba el Huéhueltl le cortaban las manos," *La crónica de hoy*, December 12, 2004, <http://www.cronica.com.mx/notas/2004/157532.html>. Original Spanish text: "Se recuerdan a algunos capitanes de la danza azteca como

What is clear is that through the brotherhood's efforts, aspects of Otomí and Chichimec culture survived in the dance cult. Filtered through Catholicism, what emerged was more than the typical mestizo hybridization but rather the development of a socio-religious tradition whose objective was the preservation and maintenance of Native religion and cultural values.⁴⁸ This desire to retain their indigenous culture through religious dancing resulted in the creation of multiple mesas. When Moedano conducted his research in the 1970s, the Mesa General de Chichimecas from Querétaro claimed to be the oldest one in existence. He noted that they produced documentation that showed the formalization of their mesa dating to the year 1558.⁴⁹ That was the year that church officials erected the stone cross at Sangremal Hill. If these claims are true, that would make them one of the, if not *the*, oldest Conchero associations and would place them directly in line with the original postconquest hermandades. Complicating the matter further, Moedano noted that another unnamed group also asserted notions of antiquity and continuity, making these competing claims difficult to adjudicate.

If Danza Conchera emerged during the settlement of Querétaro in 1531, it went unnoticed by the regions' early chroniclers. We are forced to look elsewhere for documentation on danza during the colonial period. A 1649 account by Brother Alonso de la Rea provides what is possibly one of the earliest references to indigenous dancers associated with the stone cross at Santiago de Querétaro. La Rea was originally from Querétaro, but his Franciscan duties took him to Michoacán where he was given the task of chronicling the history of that province. In that account, he made a digression and commented on his hometown, noting the deep veneration of the stone cross during the religious feast day in its honor and the militaristic code and dress of the celebrants, saying: "The first thing they do is choose a captain, ensign and sergeant, ordering a militia in the manner of our Spain."⁵⁰ As he reminisced, La Rea lamented that the dance was not as prevalent as it had once been, signaling a period of decline.

In the old days they mixed with the militia some *mitotes* or dances of gentiles, with such beautiful feathers admired by vanity, and from two hundred to three hundred, and even more, those who danced, each carried in their head their headdress, and in their left arm a very big green feather, and to the beat of the militia they led the charge forming their dance moves as they went, and when they arrived at the church, the soldiery entered the Mass, and the *mitote* was then organized in the courtyard, so beautifully, that each Indian, wearing many and varied colors, represented a beautiful bouquet and all together a beautiful spring; this custom has been slowly coming to an end as the Indians have been consumed; yet still its remnants have survived in the towns of Querétaro, Pátzcuaro, Tzintzuntzan, Nahuatze, Celaya, and the great town of Uruápam; but not as common as when it first originated.⁵¹

Moedano noted that by the middle of the seventeenth century, danza had exceeded its regional limits and extended into Michoacán. The tradition La Rea admired was in danger of completely disappearing due to economic factors that forced provincial populations to shift and resettle in urban centers and places outside of the Bajío.

The Transformation of Danza

The eighteenth century brought intense capitalist development to the Bajío region. As a result, Native people turned from subsistence farming to mining, ranching, and mill labor. This caused cultural stress and led to a reduction in indigenous language and social norms as indigenous

Mario Andrés Pineda o como el 'Príncipe Azteca' Fernando Flores Moncada (finado), quienes dieron impulso en los años cuarenta a la auténtica danza de los mexicas, en la cual se dejan de lado los instrumentos de origen europeo y se retoman con gran reverencia y comedimiento los prehispánicos sagrados, el Huéhuetl y el Teponaztli."

43. Fernando Flores Moncada, *La tradición Mexica en Iztapalapa* (Mexico City: Delegación Iztapalapa, 1996).

44. For more on this, see Moedano, "Los hermanos de la Santa Cuenta," 604; and La Peña, *Los hijos del sexto sol*, 49.

45. For a thorough explanation of how the term "mesa" can refer to various elements of danza, see Moncada, *La tradición Mexica en Iztapalapa*.

46. Ibid. Original Spanish text: "La **Sagrada Cuenta** es tender prendas en custodias de luces de alguien que falleció. Se está invocando el anima que protege al heredero de 'meza' o adoratorio, que sigue en activo y es de jerarquía superior. El origen de la Sagrada Cuenta es prehispánico, cuando los guerreros regresaban de batalla, contaban las bajas que sufrían. Les recordaban en actos de veneración formando figuras de hule de esos guerreros con una antorcha en la mano y se les exponía ante los dioses, acto seguido se realizaban simulacros de guerra." The booklet is unpaginated and the quote is near the end.

47. See Eric R. Wolf, *The Mexican Bajío in the Eighteenth Century: An Analysis of Cultural Integration* (New Orleans: Middle American Research Institute, Tulane University, 1955).

people adopted Spanish customs to survive their new world.⁵² The economic development that ensued caused serious disruption to the Otomí and Chichimec ways of life, leading to social and cultural disintegration. In response to this transformative period, danzantes in Querétaro formalized their dance cult into the Hermandad de la Santa Cuenta, and through it, Native people tried to save some semblance of their social and religious culture by further masking it behind the veil of Catholicism.

To be clear, hermandades existed throughout the Bajío region and beyond, but Querétaro deserves special focus because of its direct connection to the foundational legend at Sangremal Hill. That place was not just the bedrock of the tradition, it was also the source of danza revitalization and its emergence as a crisis cult. Through their military titles, danzantes could feel a sense of leadership and duty and perhaps even bide their time before rising again as a people with control over their own destiny. As a result, it is not unreasonable to suggest that the danza brotherhoods could have been a mechanism through which a potential Indian revolt might be launched.⁵³ What is known is that after Mexico's independence, many indigenous laborers from the Bajío region moved to the new nation's major urban centers, and by the late nineteenth century places like Mexico City witnessed a great influx of *campesinos* (rural folk) from the outer provinces in search of a better life.

As people migrated, they took their dance tradition with them. The earliest documentation of danza in the nation's capital dates to 1876, when a certain Jesús Gutierrez from San Miguel de Allende introduced the hermandad to that city. Gutierrez's descendants would later form the core of one of the oldest danza fraternities in Mexico City, the Danza Chichimeca de la Gran Tenochtitlán.⁵⁴ Following the Mexican Revolution (1910–20), an offshoot dance association that went by the name Corporación de Danza Azteca arose in Mexico City. In time, the two Conchero branches, the Azteca and the Chichimeca came to be known collectively as the Danza Azteca-Chichimeca.⁵⁵ The danza tradition slowly grew, especially among the working class and urban Indians, leading to the creation of numerous groups throughout the city, but there were rules. Not just anyone could start a group at will. To be considered legitimate, a group needed to be sponsored by an existing *jefe de danza* (dance chief) and presented before mesa leadership (usually other *jefes*) for approval.

Information on danza during the first half of the twentieth century is scant, but there is no doubt that it was in a state of flux and clearly evolving at the time. As noted by Moncada above, one of the most significant changes occurred in the forties. He, Mario Andrés Pineda, and other forward-thinking danzantes formed part of a growing trend that was largely responsible for bringing change to the form of dress and the instrumentation of the dance, and this created friction and schisms. This was also a period when nationalist rhetoric promoted by the government and "neo-Aztec" indigenist groups began to filter into danza, and this caused a rift between the older conservative generation and the younger, more liberal one. The term "neo-Aztec" in general refers to an affinity toward things pertaining to a romanticized version of Aztec society and culture. The earliest manifestations of the neo-Aztec phenomenon date to the end of the sixteenth century when criollos began admiring the grandeur of a civilization that their forbearers had just destroyed a few generations earlier.⁵⁶ In recent scholarship, the term has been applied to ethnic Mexicans who have an Aztec, or "neo-Mexika," view of themselves.⁵⁷

48. Moedano, "Los hermanos de la Santa Cuenta," 603.

49. Ibid. He noted that this unnamed group showed him a parchment that was supposedly made from human skin that dated the group to that mid-sixteenth-century date.

50. Alonso de la Rea, *Cronica de la orden de N. Serafico P. S. Francisco, Provincia de San Pedro y San Pablo de Mechoacan en la Nueva España* (Mexico: Impr. de J. R. Barbedillo, 1882), 224.

51. Ibid., 227. Other than Querétaro, all these towns are in Michoacán, the subject of La Rea's chronicle. The old spelling of the towns of Nahuatzen and Uruapan were kept in the quote. The word *mitote* (plural *mitotes*) is an "Aztequismo" (Hispanicized Nahuatl), also known as a Nahuatlism; from the original *mitotiqui*—a dancer. Missionaries used the term to describe indigenous ceremonies, especially those performed at night that involved dancing. In time, *mitotes* became associated with witchcraft and the devil. In common Mexican vernacular, the term is used to describe tumultuous, rowdy, or gossipy behavior.

52. The transformation of the *Bajío* is nicely explained in Wolf, *Mexican Bajío in the Eighteenth Century*.

53. More research is needed on this. It would be interesting to see if a direct connection can be made between the indigenous people who took up arms during Mexican independence and those who belonged to danza fraternities.

54. Moedano, "Los hermanos de la Santa Cuenta," 607.

By the fifties, a wave of young urbanized *danzantes* organized their own groups, dropped the Chichimeca moniker, and began calling themselves simply Azteca (see fig. 3). They replaced the conservative regalia, which consisted of long modest attire, in favor of a more indigenous aesthetic. As attested by Moncada, Aztecas kept the *concha* guitar but placed a greater emphasis on the *huehuetl* and *teponaztle* drums. The *teponaztle* is a horizontal wooden drum with two resonant slats in different tones, and the *huehuetl* is a vertical drum with an animal skin head. They also kept the *ayoyotes*—invariably called *huesos* (bones)—which are strings of seeds sewn on a large leather patch and worn around the ankles. One important element of the dance that Aztecas retained were the syncretic rituals and ceremonies associated with Catholicism.⁵⁸ Though the rituals have evolved with the times, the core of their purpose and meaning has not changed much over the centuries.

Figure 3. "Aztec Indians" postcard, Cards Unlimited Inc., Albuquerque, New Mexico, mid-twentieth century, picture by Stephanie, CC BY-ND, 2009, <https://www.flickr.com/photos/koiart66/3964553421/>. According to Mario Aguilar, the Anaya brothers from Mexico City brought their group, Anaya Aztec Dance, to perform at the Gallup Inter-Tribal Ceremonials in Gallup, New Mexico, for many years prior to 1970, and this is likely them in the picture. Print on back reads: "An Aztec Indian dance team from Mexico, appearing in Gallup for the Inter-Tribal Ceremonials."

For example, the main type of ceremonies observed by *danzantes* are the *velación* (vigil) and the *danza* itself. The *velación* is a private ceremony reserved for members of the group, their families, the occasional guest, and the invited *danzantes* from other groups. This ceremony is always held at night, usually at the home of the host group's *jefe*. The celebrants erect an altar to pay homage to the saints of the Catholic pantheon and to the *animas conquistadoras*—the conquering spirits of deceased *danzantes* who protect their spiritual descendants. The ceremony varies according to the occasion of the celebration, but they all include the standard ritual songs grouped into three categories: the *cantos de ceremonia*—ceremonial songs that are sung at specific moments, such as greeting attendees and religious imagery, *pedir permiso* (the requesting of permission to hold the ceremony), and salutation/farewell songs; the *toques de ceremonia*—instrumental songs used for the *llamada de ánimas* (calling of souls) for protection;

55. For a thorough explanation of Conchero variants and how they refashioned themselves in response to sociopolitical contexts, see Francisco de la Peña, "Tres cultos religiosos populares en el México contemporáneo," *Itinerarios, revista de estudios lingüísticos, literarios, históricos y antropológicos* 9 (2009): 172–74.
56. One of the earliest scholars to address this cultural phenomenon was the Mexican historian Edmundo O'Gorman. Drawing on O'Gorman, American historian John Leddy Phelan introduced the subject to the English-speaking audience, noting that "Creoles ... gradually adopted the Aztec world of pre-conquest times as the 'classical antiquity' of Mexico." John Leddy Phelan, "Neo-Aztecism in the Eighteenth Century and the Genesis of Mexican Nationalism," in *Culture in History: Essays in Honor of Paul Radin*, ed. Stanley Diamond (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960), 760; and Edmundo O'Gorman and Servando Teresa de Mier, *Antología del pensamiento político Americano: Fray Servando Teresa de Mier* (Mexico City: Impr. Universitaria, 1945).
57. For more on this, see Arellano, "Becoming Indian"; Caroline Dodds Pennock, "Insights from the 'Ancient Word': The Use of Colonial Sources in the Study of Aztec Society," in *Engaging Colonial Knowledge: Reading European Archives in World History*, ed. Ricardo Roque and Kim A. Wagner, Cambridge Imperial and Post-Colonial Studies Series (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 115–34; Magnus Pharaoh Hansen, and *alabanzas*—songs of worship that narrate events associated with the specific group and the overall Conchero tradition.⁵⁹ Conversely, the dance ritual component of the danza ceremony has always been public. Paintings from the colonial period clearly show *danzantes* performing at churches for various engagements, including weddings (as depicted in fig. 4).

Figure 4. Detail of "Folding Screen with Indian Wedding and Flying Pole," unknown artist, Mexico, circa 1690, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Latin American Art Collection. Dancers are dressed in Conchero-style regalia.

More important, though, each group has ceremonial dances that require mandatory attendance at least four times per year. Though all dances are *obligaciones* (obligations), the ones associated with the four important sanctuaries located at *los cuatro vientos* (the four winds), or cardinal points, are *obligaciones principales* (main obligations). These main obligatory dance ceremonies include a fifth one representing the center, and they are as follows: the first one honors El Señor de Sacromonte (Christ of the Sacred Mountain) and is associated with Ash Wednesday and Lent; the second one takes place at the site of the Cristo de Chalma and is associated with Pentecost; the third one at Tlatelolco is the center point and is associated with the violence of Spanish conquest; the fourth is the Santuario de La Señora de los Remedios and is associated with *la noche triste* (The Night of Sorrows [literally "The Sad Night"] of Spanish retreat during the Spanish-Aztec War) and with the miracles that the image of the Virgin is believed to perform; and finally, the fifth and final one takes place at the Basilica de Guadalupe in honor of the Virgin Mary on her day, December 12.⁶⁰

All dance ceremonies, whether they are main or standard obligations, begin with the mandatory "request for permission," after which dancers then form a circle outside of the church. After making the sign of the cross with their feet, the first dance begins. Each dance is led by a different member who performs the traditional steps that the others then mimic. Depending

"Nahuatl Inside: Transracial Lives and Experiences of Neo-Aztec Activists in the US" (paper presented to the Anthropology Department at Yale University, New Haven, CT, 2017); and Pancho McFarland, "Mexica Hip Hop: Male Expressive Culture," in *Performing the US Latina and Latino Borderlands*, ed. Arturo J. Aldama, Chela Sandoval, and Peter J. García (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), 402–18.

58. There is more to their spirituality than the average Mexican religious syncretism. Danzantes believe that the saints they revere and the Christian rituals they practice are a cover for the continuance of an ancient form of indigenous religion.

59. These classifications are taken from the liner notes of Warman's LP, *Danzas de la Conquista*.

60. Sandra Garner, "Aztec Dance, Transnational Movements: Conquest of a Different Sort," *Journal of American Folklore* 122, no. 486 (2009): 425–27, <https://doi.org/10.1353/jaf.0.0104>.

61. For more on the matter, see Arellano, "Becoming Indian."

62. María del Carmen Nieva López, *"Mexikayotl": Esencia del Mexicano; Filosofía Náuatl* (Mexico City: Editorial Orión, 1969), 52–53. Although the book was published under María del Carmen's name, the words contained within are those of Rodolfo, her brother, who was the leader of the group *Movimiento Confederado Restaurador de la Cultura de Anáhuac*, to which they both belonged.

63. Arellano, "Becoming Indian," 144.

on the size of the group and the intended devotion for any given celebration, a danza will often last several hours from start to finish. Once concluded, the dancers return to the altar inside the church to sing the *agradecimiento* (gratefulness) and *despedida* (farewell) songs. This ritual is still carefully maintained by most traditional dancers, but a new generation of dancers brought about a consequential change that challenged these established norms, beginning with the rejection of the Catholic folk rituals important to the danza tradition.

By the mid- to late seventies, radical danzantes took a hardline stance against the legacy of the Spanish conquest and European colonization and made moves toward the restoration of the dance tradition to its untainted indigenous roots. This generation was inspired by the neo-Aztec rhetoric that had emerged under a new ideology called "Mexikayotl."⁶¹ This ideology was introduced by Rodolfo Nieva López, a lawyer from Mexico City who was heavily involved in politics and indigenist cultural nationalism. Nieva López described the new ideology as "METZXIKAYOTL (Metzxika de Metzxikatl, mexicano; Yo de yolli, corazón esencia; Tl, desinencia substantiva esencia del mexicano o mexicanidad)."⁶² This is usually translated into English as "the essence of being Mexican" or "Mexicanity"; it formed the basis of a novel philosophical worldview for neo-Mexikas.

When Mexikayotl emerged in the 1950s, it was guided by a restorationist philosophy "that anchored itself on the greatness of its founders—the political Aztec leaders and savants who embodied the untainted core of a utopian indigeneity."⁶³ Nieva López and his cohort conceived of themselves as the inheritors of an unbroken Aztec-Mexica tradition that predated the Spanish invasion. They hoped to return Mexico to its rightful place among the great nations of the world by restoring its Aztec greatness and rejecting all things foreign, especially Spanish influence.⁶⁴ In effect, Nieva López's ideology and the group that coalesced around him can be construed as a variation on the "crisis cult" theme. More on him below but suffice it to say that his group also had a spiritual component that ran alongside their primary focus of political and cultural activism.

The Mexikayotl ideology found its way into danza circles and slowly changed the way danzantes viewed their performative presentation and cultural positionality relative to the wider world. Their ideas became radical, the rejection of Catholicism was encouraged, and their dress became less flamboyant as they adopted a more natural attire. Instead of saying the customary greeting among *danzantes tradicionales*—"El es Dios"—these radicalized danzantes who were now calling themselves Mexikas (or Mexikas with a "k") exclaimed, "Ometeotl." Although clearly absent from the historical sources, the concept of Ometeotl was imagined by *mexicanista* scholars, such as Miguel León Portilla, as a monotheistic creator god of duality within Aztec cosmological thought. When filtered through the philosophy of Mexikayotl, Ometeotl was construed as a "dual energy," or "essence," and was used in opposition to the Catholic "Dios."⁶⁵ Another phraseological change in the 1980s was the introduction of "Mexica tiahui!"—which loosely translates to "Forward Mexicans!" This exclamation emerged among the Chicana/o student activists and replaced the more common chant of "Viva La Raza!"⁶⁶

Distancing themselves further from the danza tradicional, Mexikas fashioned their regalia out of leather and/or "manta" (white muslin cotton fabric) and adopted natural feathers in contrast to the brightly dyed ones used by danzantes Aztecas and Concheros (see fig. 5). Perhaps the biggest change came with the increased politicization of danza and the irreconcilable differences

64. Arellano, "Becoming Indian"; and La Peña, *Los hijos del sexto sol*.

65. The concept of "Ometeotl" was introduced by the Mexican scholar Miguel León Portilla in his book *La filosofía Náhuatl: Estudiada en sus fuentes* (Mexico City: Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, Instituto de Investigaciones Históricas, 1993). For a critical analysis of "Ometeotl" as a historical concept, see Katarzyna Mikulska, "Destronando a Ometeotl," *Latin American Indian Literatures Journal* 31, nos. 1–2 (Spring-Fall 2015): 57–127.

66. According to native Nahuatl speaker and language instructor David Vázquez, sometime during the 1992 UCLA hunger strike, Chicana/o studies activists wanted slogans that represented a more indigenous battle cry. In response to this, he offered the phrase "Mexico tiahui" which had been gaining popularity among *danzantes* Mexikas in Mexico City since the early 1980s.

For more on Vázquez and his connection to danza Azteca in the US, see Gabriel San Román, "For the Past 20 Years, a Santa Ana Man Has Kept the Language of the Aztecs Alive," *OC Weekly*, December 1, 2016, <https://www.ocweekly.com/for-the-past-20-years-a-santa-ana-man-has-kept-the-language-of-the-aztecs-alive-7710129/>.

67. I have gathered this information through experience in danza circles and personal communication with *danzantes* Mexikas over the years. There also exist numerous websites that espouse these ideas. One that has been consistent on this for over twenty years is mexika.org,

over religion and spiritual beliefs. Many young people wanted to connect to something greater than themselves during the turbulent times of the sixties and seventies, so they turned for inspiration to the decolonial movements developing outside of Mexico. Before long, Mexikas began decolonizing danza and stripped it of its Eurocentric/Spanish influence. This was especially noticeable in the religio-cultural sphere.⁶⁷

Figure 5. Tlacuilo Azteca, "Teotihuacan, Danza Guerrera Meshica Aniv. 2015," Danza commemorating the nineteenth anniversary of Calpulli Xolalpan Teopanacazco, Teotihuacan, Mexico, September 2015, YouTube video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fh-tXF1Tmlc>.

Decolonization involved liberating the mind of oppressive influences, including spiritual ones. Mexikayotl ran counter to Christianity, and its new devotees denounced Catholicism as the religion of the Spanish invaders. Ironically, under the new philosophy, the *Danza de la Conquista* transformed into the dance of decolonization, or de-conquering (if you will). Mexikas discarded Catholic rituals and replaced them with dances and ceremonies honoring the ancient gods. While the dances have in large part remained the same, those of the Mexika variety have gotten faster and have been embellished via artistic freedom. As the dance changed and evolved, older *danzantes* wondered if what these young people were doing by abandoning traditional religious rituals and ceremonies was really danza at all.⁶⁸

In Mexika circles, what were once construed as "gods" were now being redefined as "energies" and philosophical principles. This approach to Mesoamerican spirituality was undoubtedly influenced by nontraditional forms of esotericism, and its application was twofold. The first application involved the outright rejection of non-indigenous doctrine and was coupled with historical revisionism and pseudo-science. This philosophical interpretation of Aztec thought and culture can be traced to the early "aztekah" (neo-Aztec) groups that emerged after the Mexican Revolution in and around Mexico City.⁶⁹ One of the earliest *aztekah* organizations founded in the capital was the Ueyi Tlatekpaniliztli Iknihtik Aztekatl (Great Cultural Society of Aztec Friends, GCSAF) and was headed by Juan Luna Cárdenas, an individual who claimed to be of Nahua descent and a supposed heir to the throne of Moctezuma.⁷⁰ Organizations like the GCSAF were nationalistic and nativist and emphasized the eventual political restoration of the lost greatness

"The Official Website of Yankwik Mexikayotl," accessed August 31, 2020, <https://mexika.org/>.

68. For more on the evolution of danza, see La Peña, *Los hijos del sexto sol*.

69. Here I am referring to the neo-Aztec ideology that was promoted by Juan Luna Cárdenas from the 1920s through the 1950s, which had nothing to do with danza. Luna Cárdenas's ideas influenced Nieva López when he formed the Movimiento Confederado Restaurador de la Cultura de Anáhuac, and that group in turn eventually influenced the neo-Mexicas in the 1970s. For more, see Arellano, "Becoming Indian"; and Baruc Martínez Díaz, "Aztekayotl-Mexihkayotl: Una aproximación histórica al movimiento de la Mexicanidad (1922–1959)" (bachelor's thesis, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2010).

70. Arellano, "Becoming Indian," 107–11.

71. For more on this, see Lina Odena Güemes, "Los restauradores de la Mexicanidad," in *Diversidad étnica y conflicto en América Latina: El Indio como metáfora en la identidad nacional*, ed. Raquel Barceló, María Ana Portal, and Martha Judith Sánchez, vol. 2 (Mexico City: Plaza y Valdés, 1995), 197–216.

72. Arellano, "Becoming Indian," 134; Enrique Marroquín, *La contracultura como protesta: Análisis de un fenómeno juvenil*, Cuadernos de Joaquín Mortiz 37 (Mexico City: Editorial Joaquín Mortiz, 1975); and José Agustín, *La contracultura en México: La historia y el significado de los rebeldes sin causa, los jipitecas, los punks y las bandas* (Mexico

of the Aztec Empire.⁷¹ In due time, this worldview would evolve into the Mexikayotl of Nieva López who led the Movimiento Confederado Restaurador de la Cultura de Anáhuac (Confederated Restoration Movement of Anahuac Culture). By the late fifties, this organization had become the preeminent neo-Aztec/Mexika group in Mexico City after Luna Cárdenas and his Aztec society fell out of favor.

The second major influence on Mexikayotl came from New Age and Eastern philosophical ideologies via the *jipitecas* (Mexican hippies), who introduced indigenous religious practices into their counterculture movement. In the early 1970s, a Catholic priest by the name of Enrique Marroquín began to take notice of these youth whom he perceived as being troubled and in need of intervention. In 1975, Father Marroquín wrote a book that described the social ills of drug use and its association with the hippie culture in Mexico. He was perhaps the first researcher to notice the social hybridization between Mexican counterculture and neo-Aztec sensibilities. In fact, Father Marroquín coined the term that he used to describe those who were associated with the emergent Mexikayotl ideology as *jipis aztecas*, or *jipitecas* (xipitecas), to distinguish them from Anglo-American hippies who were a constant presence throughout Mexico at the time.⁷²

Drawing from these various threads—the rejection of traditional rituals and Catholicism, the adoption of neo-Aztec sociopolitical thought, the outspoken opposition against Eurocentrism, and the absorption of New Age and Eastern philosophies through cultural osmosis—the modern iteration of Mexikayotl emerged and with it followed a neo-Mexika version of danza. Now recast under the guise of *calpullis* (danza circles of the Mexika variety), danzantes Mexikas positioned themselves as the true keepers of Mexica-Aztec culture whose purpose was the complete purification and restoration of the danza to its pre-invasion roots.⁷³ Under this rubric of cleansing the tradición, Mexikas viewed themselves as *guerreros* whose mission it was to defend the ancestral ways and spread the gospel of Mexikayotl to the four winds.⁷⁴ And thus the Danza Mexika willed itself into existence.

Conclusion

The question regarding the antiquity of danza is often raised by scholars and the interested public. It is not uncommon for onlookers to approach danzantes after a dance presentation and inquire about the tradition; they are told that it is ancient and predates Spanish arrival. There is no doubt that dancing was commonplace among indigenous societies, and many studies have looked at this topic from that perspective.⁷⁵ What is not so clear is the degree of continuity between the Danzas de Conquista and those predating Spanish contact. If continuity did indeed persist after the social, cultural, spatial, and religious colonization of the Otomí and Chichimec peoples, it is reasonable to assume that the resultant hybridization developed in the form of the Danza Conchera. Although sources are limited, the depictions and descriptions available from the colonial period create a picture of danza that fits the Conchero pattern. Nevertheless, the focus here centers not on continuity and antiquity but rather on the question of whether the Danzas de Conquista belong to the broader indigenous revitalization movements of the Americas. Certainly, more research is needed, but the evidence strongly points in that direction.

Looking at danza through the crisis cult framework affords a conducive exploration into the process of change it underwent as it moved away from its rural beginnings in the Bajío region

City: Editorial Grijalbo, 1996).

73. The Nahuatl term *calpolli* or *calpulli* (plural *calpoltin*, *calpultin*, or *calpolti*)—also spelled with a “k” as in *kalpulli*—loosely translates to “longhouse” and is used today by *danzantes* to denote a *danza* or Mexika community, or organization. Remi Siméon defines it as “big house, great hall, neighborhood, suburb, village, settlement, district.” Original Spanish: “Casa grande, vasta sala, barrio, suburbia, aldea, poblado, distrito.” Rémi Siméon, *Diccionario de la lengua Nahuatl o Mexicana: Redactado según los documentos impresos y manuscritos más auténticos y precedido de una introducción*, 7th ed. (Mexico City: Siglo Veintiuno, 1988), 62.

74. Numerous *danzantes Mexikas* have expressed a version of this idea to me over the years.

75. See Catherine R. DiCesare, *Sweeping the Way: Divine Transformation in the Aztec Festival of Ochpaniztli* (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2009); Judith Lynne Hanna, “Dances of Anáhuac—for God or Man? An Alternative Way of Thinking about Prehistory,” *Dance Research Journal* 7, no. 1 (October 1, 1974): 13–27, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1478653>; and Maria Sten, *Ponte a bailar, tu que reinas: Antropología de la danza prehispánica* (Mexico City: Joaquín Mortiz, 1990).

76. In a recent conversation with me, a *danzante* acquaintance who resides in Mexico City stated that in his estimation, the Mexika dancers are not as huge in number as they once were. This might be a sign that they are being absorbed into the

of Mexico and resettled in large urban centers like Mexico City. Once there, the original *Danza Conchera* evolved into the *Danza Azteca* and ultimately produced a radical version of itself—the *Danza Mexika*.⁷⁶ This last one was instrumental in pioneering pan-Indian spirituality by borrowing from various indigenous traditions, such as the *inipi*-style sweat lodge and the Sundance of the Lakota Plains Indians in North America.⁷⁷ Complicating the issue, the “Nueva Mexicanidad” (New Mexicanity) movement—a New Age offshoot—appropriated Native American traditions and blended them with Buddhism and Mexican nationalism to produce their own brand of what might be described as “indigenesque” spirituality.⁷⁸ Some circles of the Nueva Mexicanidad even adopted *danza* and refashioned it for their own purposes. Before long, it became difficult to ascertain who had borrowed from whom and what beliefs were truly indigenous, and which were not.

Still, despite their differences and the occasional quarrels between groups and among individual members of the three branches of the *Danzas de Conquista*—*Concheros*, *Aztecas*, and *Mexikas*—they have maintained amicable associations. It is not uncommon to see groups from these various branches engaged in ceremony together, especially in places where there are few dance groups to begin with. This has certainly been the case in Dallas, where often you will see all three types of dance groups engaged in a major ceremony together. And, although the dance has been largely binational, existing primarily in Mexico and the southwestern US, that is also changing as *danza* becomes a transnational and global phenomenon.⁷⁹ Groups now exist in such unlikely places as Colombia, Spain, and Germany.⁸⁰ In an ironic twist, the *Danza de la Conquista* is, in a sense, “conquering” Europe, and it is interesting to think where the tradition will be in another fifty years.⁸¹ What we can be sure of is that it will continue to grow and evolve just as it has done since its inception, and that is something worthy of celebration.

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traditional danza groups, and there is evidence suggesting that the traditional Danza Azteca has been significantly influenced by the Mexikayotl movement.

Alberto S. Martinez, personal communication with author, August 20, 2020. Only time will tell what effect this current blending will have on the overall tradition. For more on this trend, see Moncada, *La tradición Mexica en Iztapalapa*.

77. For more on how this fusion of Native American spirituality is interpreted, see Francisco "Tlakaheel" Jiménez, *Nahui mitl: Las cuatro flechas* (Mexico City: Universidad Autónoma Metropolitana, Unidad Xochimilco, 1992). Tlakaheel was a modern-day Mexika Tlahtoani (speaker, leader) who promoted the idea that the Lakota Sundance had been practiced in Anahuac (Mesoamerica) before the Spanish invasion. He also led various kalpullis throughout Mexico, the United States, and Europe.

78. See La Torre, "Tensiones entre el esencialismo Azteca y el universalismo New Age." "Indigenesque" is a term of my coining and is meant to describe something that is trying to approximate an indigenous quality, in this case spirituality.

79. Garner, "Aztec Dance, Transnational Movements."

80. For an interesting analysis on how danza has spread to non-indigenous academics in South America, see Adriana Vergara Salazar, "El cuerpo en movimiento: Las prácticas de la Danza Azteca y los sujetos danzantes del grupo Tepéyolothli en Bogotá" (master's

Beaumont, Pablo de la Purísima Concepción. *Crónica de la provincia de los Santos Apóstoles S. Pedro y S. Pablo de Michoacán de la regular observancia de N. P. S. Francisco*, T. 4. Biblioteca histórica de la Iberia 18. Mexico: Escalante, 1874.

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81. For more on danza's presence in Europe, see Renée de la Torre, "Los Hispanekas en Santiago de Compostela. Antecedentes: La reconquista espiritual de Europa," in *El don de la ubicuidad: Rituales étnicos multisituados*, ed. Renée de la Torre (Mexico City: Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios Superiores en Antropología Social, 2012), 122–45; and Renée de la Torre Castellanos and Cristina Gutiérrez Zúñiga, "Los Hispanekas: Concheros con aire de nueva era," in *Nuevos caminos de la fe: Prácticas y creencias al margen institucional*, ed. Alberto Hernández (Mexico City: El Colegio de la Frontera Norte/ Universidad Autónoma de Nuevo León/El Colegio de Michoacán, 2011), 395–426.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Evelio Flores and Grupo Mitotiliztli Yaoyollohtli for providing many years of fellowship and the inspiration for this study. I would also like to thank Kristina F. Nielsen for reviewing and making suggestions on an early version of this article. A big thank you also to the archivists at the Nettie Lee Benson Latin American Collection at the University of Texas at Austin, especially Dylan Joy who worked during the COVID-19 pandemic and provided me with materials from the archives. Lastly, I am grateful for the insightful comments and suggestions made by the reviewers, which helped strengthen and make this work better. Any faults and errors that remain are mine.

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HOW TO CITE

Arellano, Ruben A. "El Es Dios! A Historical Interpretation of Danza Azteca as a Revitalization Movement." *Journal of Festive Studies* 3 (2021): 121–147. <https://doi.org/10.33823/jfs.2021.3.1.61>

The Journal of Festive Studies (ISSN 2641–9939) is a peer-reviewed open access journal from [H-Celebration](https://h-net.org/), a network of [H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online](https://h-net.org/), and is the inaugural journal published through the [H-Net Journals](https://h-net.org/journals) initiative. It can be found online at <https://journals.h-net.org/jfs>.