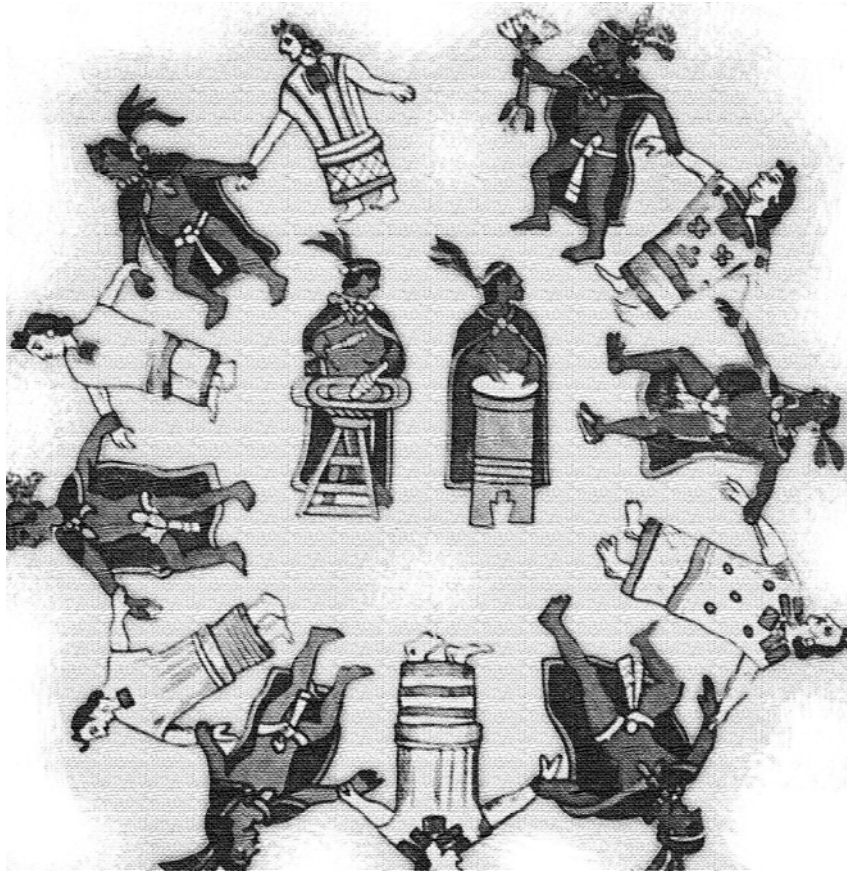


In Ipanoltimēh Mi'totli Me:xi'ca'/Conchera'/Chichimeca'

Los Pasos de la Danza Azteca/Conchera/Chichimeca
The Steps of the Aztec/Conchero/Chichimeca Danza



By
Mario E. Aguilar, PhD.
Capitán, Danza Mexi'cayotl
San Diego Kosoy
CalifAztlan

28th Anniversary Celebration for Danza Xitlalli, June 27, 2009

© 2009 The Mexi'cayotl Indio Cultural Center

In Ipanoltimeh Mi'totli Me:xi'ca'/Conchera'/Chichimeca'

Los Pasos de la Danza Azteca/Conchera/Chichimeca

The Steps of the Aztec/Conchero/Chichimeca Danza

From its beginnings as a system of convergence and syncretism, La Danza Azteca has been a vehicle for renegotiation and revitalization of membership and identity for its Indigenous practitioners. La Danza took the echoes of the state sponsored ritual ballet festivals, (as best remembered by the common agricultural and urban people), and interwove them with their daily experiences. These included their old agricultural dances, social dances, and the new ritual dances (such as the Spanish and Italian Mattacino dances) brought by the Spanish friars to the new world (Rodríguez, 1996).

In the decades after the Mexican revolution of 1910, La Danza became a revitalization movement of the Cristero revolt (Ramon, 1985). In the years 1950s to 2000, La Danza began its long evolution 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 Mexi'ca movement or *mexicanistas* movement dancers that try to return to an idealized and mythic past.

Within the Mexcoehuani communities, practitioners of the traditional Danza Azteca, as well as the Mexi'ca movement adherents, try to be involved within the pan-Indian movement of the U.S. This movement brings several conflicting ideologies and worldview to the fore in the Mexcoehuani community.

La Danza Azteca as part of the reawakening of "mexicanidad"

During the early years of the Chicano movement, young people with a need to discover their indigenous roots, had very little to go on. The obstacles to understanding their Mexican indigenous roots included a lack of understanding of Spanish, especially academic Spanish. In those pre-internet days, it was difficult to have access to the original sources of post conquest history. Most important sources of Mexican history written in Mexico, or were unavailable, or incomprehensible to Mexcoehuani. Most of the available sources of Mexican indigenous history and culture were restricted to university libraries and other academic institutions that were beyond the reach of most Mexcoehuani community members.

Adding to this vacuum of sources for the building of an indigenous identity was the problem that there has always been cultural elitism in Mexico against "Chicano," "Pocho," and "Pachuco," residents of the U.S. They have been seen as ignorant because they do not speak, read, or write, "Correct Spanish." It is what I call the "Pocho syndrome."

La Danza Azteca Como Parte del Movimiento Chicano/a
La Danza Azteca as part of the Chicano/a Movimiento

Andrés Segura and Florencio Yescas arrived in the U.S. at a critical time. The decades of the 1960s and 70's had brought great cultural and societal struggles throughout the world. The massacre of over 400 students, residents, and children in Mexico City on the eve of the Olympic Games in 1968, brought about a radicalization of Mexico's youth.

In The U.S., Mexican-Americans, Chicanos/as, Latinos were taking to the streets of Denver, Los Angeles, and other cities. Leaders like Reies Tijerina, Corky González, César Chávez, Dolores Huerta and others, lead struggles for equality, justice, and an end to discrimination. Chicano/a activists through the many MEChA organizations of schools and colleges, began to seek out alternative paradigms for their identity and membership in a society that rejected and persecuted them.

The two elders (who were followed by Pedro Rodriguez, Rosita Hernandez Maya, Moisés González, José Salinas, amongst others) brought the first cohesive, historically connected, and verifiable system of indigenous membership to the Chicano/Mexicano communities of Aztlan. Suddenly, the indigenous identity of La Danza Azteca became a lightning rod for nationalistic fervor against all things European and North American.

By the time both elders had passed away, a new, more militant ideology had emerged in the Mexcohuani communities, including some Danza groups. Some of the new radical participants of La Danza banished the Indocristiano roots of La Danza Azteca. In its place, a new convergence and syncretism began to immerge. More and more middle class, educated young people sought out an altogether identifiable Mexican version of the "new age" phenomena that began with the European and American interest in Hindu and Tibetan traditions (Armstrong, 1985; González Torres, 2005; P. Rodriguez, 1988; Yescas, 1977).

These new disaffected dancers had no stake in the previous 500 years of Indocristiano identity negotiation, resiliency, and evolution. Many wanted to recreate an alternative to the technologically complex world of the last part of the twentieth century.

Strident belligerence came to dominate their ideological framework for what they now called "Mexi'ca Danza" (using English grammatical rules with Spanish/Nahuatl words). The new age "political" Danzantes had no understanding or knowledge of the ancient ritual system of kindness that evolved through the syncretic negotiation and innovation of La Danza's ancestral lineages.

Most ignored or consciously evaded the intricate steps of La Danza, disparagingly calling them "Conchero-style" dance steps, as if this was a great insult. The new age Danzantes only knew of a world formed by social, political, and class warfare against those that practice racism and oppression. They saw the world in two distinct time periods: Before 1492 when the American continent was an Eden, and post-1492, when the Europeans destroyed everything indigenous. They were not aware (and most still are not aware) of the assertive and successful cultural,

spiritual, and technological negotiations carried out by the surviving indigenous peoples after 1492.

What they wanted, and needed to create, was a complete system of ideology that ignored and rejected the past 500 years of Mexican cultural development (Hernández Ramos, 2007; Mares, 2003; Monica, 1991). This view of La Danza was meant to be a new *raison d'être* for La Danza Azteca. First, it was to be a system of political and ideological identity; secondly, it was to be a form of a pan-Indian "identity card" that would open doors to other political struggles and activism. Finally, the new Mexcoehuani Danza Azteca was to be a purified Mexican indigenous identity that could be shared, compared, and exalted, free from any European and Christian corruption.

Unlike the situation in Mexico, LA DANZA was and in some cases is still seen in Aztlan by Chicanos and others, as a special intellectual, political, and spiritual way of life, which sets the Danzantes up and above the normal daily type of person. Danza is seen as a truly "Mexican" answer (or parallel) to Marxism, Black power, and the Native American Church.

In this Chicano view of La Danza, the Danzante is looked upon as a role model, as an "instant warrior" who will lead the nation into a new indigenous millennium. This means that the Danzantes have to keep a certain level of purity for themselves, their community and their spiritual obligation. In effect, the Chicano Danzante is always under the looking glass; he/she is expected to live up to certain mythological expectations, much as priests, marines and boy scouts are expected to follow a more disciplined order of life. Of course, like priests, marines, and boy scouts, a typical Danzante cannot expect to attain the almost theoretical requirements of a "spiritual warrior."

Thus, there is constant friction between the idealized Danzante, and the human Danzante. There is also a tendency to prefer the political image of La Danza over the spiritual reality. At its worst, La Danza Azteca can (and in some cases has) become an excuse for a cult of personality where a "leader" controls his "followers" with psychological manipulation.

La perdida de los Pasos de la Danza *The Loss of the Danza Steps*

La Danza Azteca/Conchera began entered a period of acceleration during the times (1940-1950) that the young leaders of La Danza (Manuel Pineda, Florencio Yescas, Natividad Reyna, Fernando Mocada, The Anaya brothers, Felipe Aranda, just to name a few) began to experiment with Danza uniforms based on the newly available facsimiles of the codices that had been hidden in libraries for centuries.

Through the 1960's-90's, as the warrior image of the "Azteca warrior" became more prominent in the hearts and minds of the youth; the measured, marked, and elaborate steps of La Danza that had been handed down for centuries began to disappear. What once had been kinetic forms of communal prayer began to turn into individualistic battles of ego and athletic ability. The voices of the ancestors began to be silenced by the grunts of gymnastics, and MTV posturing. Soon Victor Swalef's warehouse gained the rank of a pilgrimage site for those

Danzantes that were more interested in the weight of their *copillis* than the depth of their understanding of La Danza.

Soon the “*mecahuehuatl*,” “*chihuanda*,” or “*concha*” began to be seen as vestiges of Catholic Spanish imperialism by those that did not understand the encoding of the dance prayers. Metal drums began to overpower *huehuatl* and *teponaztli* alike. Soon, groups that did not have at least three drums, (preferably made out of old oil barrels) were out-gunned at ceremonies.

Then with the advent of the “fourth wave Mexi’ca elders,” anything that could be taught as “secret,” “sacred,” or “stolen,” could be sold for a price to unsuspecting Mexcoehuani who wanted a “genuine authentic” Azteca tradition. Modern “Aztec peyote songs,” traditional songs from northern plains tribes, and even songs from Africa came into vogue. By the mid 1980’s it seemed that the traditional Alabanzas of La Danza Azteca/Conchera, were destined to die out, especially in Aztlan, where so few Alabanzas were known.

Ompohui Tlacatquilitiztli Huicatl
Renacimiento del Canto
Rebirth of the Song

At the end of the Twentieth century, when it seemed that the “Conchero” tradition of Central Mexico would vanish into history like the “Chilillo” and the “nagua,” a new and inspiring movement began to appear. I do not know if it is due to the access to websites like *youtube.com*; the maturing of the children and grandchildren of traditional Danzantes, (who, now having their own economic facilities, could invest in technological innovation and tools); or just a reawakening of the Indocristiano spirit of mestizo Mexico; but suddenly more and more young persons were taking up the Concha, and learning alabanzas. Not just in Mexico, but even in Aztlan.

I attribute this to the constant travel of the second and third wave Mexcoehuani Danzantes to the traditional Danza Azteca/Conchera ceremonies of central Mexico. Also important to the realignment of La Danza Chicana, was the large influx of campesino/indigenous immigrants who held strong Indocristiano beliefs. These new immigrants did not bring with them a politicized *raison d’être* for being a Danzante Azteca/Conchero. Instead most held a powerful concept of membership in the rituals of kindness associated with the “Santo Patron” of their “*patria chica*.”

As La Danza Azteca/Conchera of the Mexcoehuani of Aztlan matures into the third and fourth generations of Danza, I believe that the traditions left to us by our ancestors will overcome the fanciful and even dangerous creations of the “new age Danzantes.”

Tlen Tlamantli Quinpiya' Tlamatiliztli huan Oliniztli

Las Cosas que Llevan sabiduría y movimiento

The Things That Carry Knowledge and Movement

No matter what Danza tradition a person has learned, there are universal constants within the varied formats of carrying out La Danza in and spiritual, honest, and kind manner. Some of the most important aspects of La Danza's "rituals of kindness" are:

- *El Paso de Camino*. Since precolumbian times, the ritual procession has had many important aspects. The ceremony of walking from one temple to another, from a battlefield to a temple, or from the home of a deceased person held great importance. In the Danza tradition, still carried out in central Mexico, the Danza group leaves the Kiva-like *oratorio*, also known as *el cuartel general*, and they proceed to the place of *la batalla*, where the dance sacrifice will take place. In Aztlan, Mexcoehuani Danza mirrors this ancient tradition by proceeding from the recreation center, church or home where the *velación* has taken place to the place of La Danzada.
- *La Cruz*. Some regions of Mexico turn first to the left, then to the right. Others do the opposite. While there are some self-proclaimed "maestros" who teach that only their way of making the *four directions* is the correct way, traditional shows us that if we are true followers of *Unión, Conformidad y conquista*, we will respect each others' request for blessings and for permission to carry out our ancient *obligación*. Some Danzantes however, use La Cruz as a tool to confuse, exasperate, or belittle other Danzantes. By carrying out elaborate, confusing, and sloppy *permisos*, these dancers show that for them the main purpose of La Danza is self-aggrandizement, and not communal prayer.
- *La Palabra*. Whether one used the ancient and traditional "El es Dios," or the newer "Ometeotl," Ye'hua Teotl," or even "In Lak-ech," calling out the essence of Ollin is critical for the rituals of kindness. By giving, accepting, or obeying La Palabra, the Danzante acknowledges their individual subordination to the greater good of the community.
- *Ollin*. Because La Danza Azteca/Conchera is a form of kinetic prayer, it is important to remember to use each Danza step as it was handed down to us. Some examples include: the knife step of Tezcatlipoca, the deer hoof/lightning step of Mazatl, and the ever-present bowing of the headdress in reverence to the powers of the central tree. When the dancer becomes more interested in how he or she looks moving the body, rather than how the prayer is carried out *in the oneness of the whole body... traje, armas, cuerpo y musica*, then La Danza becomes a performance, and not a spiritually centered ritual.
- *Los Ritmos*. The dictionary defines **Cardiac arrhythmia** (also **dysrhythmia**) as a term for..."conditions in which there is abnormal electrical activity in the heart. The heart beat may be too fast or too slow, and may be regular or irregular. Some arrhythmias are life-threatening

medical emergencies that can result in cardiac arrest and sudden death. Others cause symptoms such as an abnormal awareness of heart beat (palpitations) (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cardiac_arrhythmia). In the indigenous traditions of Mexico (like those of most indigenous people of the world), the drum is considered the heart of the dance. In the Mesoamerican tradition that is at the root of La Danza Azteca/Conchera, the drum is heart beat of the communal prayer, while the bodies of the dancers are the “sacred liquid” that feeds the “body present” of the people (that is the ancestors who have passed, the living who carry out the feeding of the souls, and the descendents not yet born). Thus it is imperative that the drummers FOLLOW the Danzante, and not the other way around. If each Danzante offers their prayer, and the drummers create **arrhythmia** instead of **hypnorrhythmia** (rhythm that creates a communal sense of peace, calm and spiritual energy), then “cardiac arrest and sudden death” can occur to the ceremony being carried out. How many of us have gone to a Danzada, and have felt the unity and energy of everyone dancing united, only to have the entire spiritual experience destroyed by someone who has a egotistical need to drum louder, faster, and angrier than everyone else? I have even witnessed instances that the drummer messes up the rhythm of a dancer’s offering, simply to show them “who is in charge.”

Tlahuilo’tli:

El Camino de la Luz
The Path of Light

Cuahcruzo’tli:

El Camino de la Cruz
The Path of the Cross

The *Rituals of Kindness*, known to us as *La Danza Azteca/Conchera*, can be seen as a series of paths that lead towards *communal spiritual nourishment*. *Individualistic salvation* and *dogmatic superiority* are emphasized by some religious teachings. The *Rituals of Kindness*, on the other hand, emphasis a reality of equality of spirit. This reality requires that self-sacrifice, constant learning, and the struggle for justice be most important.

The equality of spirit creates a sacred space that transcends time and space. We call this path of daily living “*El Camino de la Luz/El camino de la Cruz*.” The path of the cross can extend from a devout Catholic devotion on the part of a Danzante, to the precolumbian understanding of the crossroads as a place of strong spiritual power (Which can be dangerous if one is not careful). The cross in La Danza is a symbol of our short time on this Earth; our obligation to carry the burden of our people; and the important difference between *spirituality* and *superstition*. Each person must navigate the cosmic dance between *spirituality* and *superstition*;

between *humility* and *humiliation*; between *self importance* and *modesty*. Finally, each carrier of the cross, "*el penitente*," must accept his or her pitiful, weak, and imperfect nature. Only by seeking the *light of the lord and lady of creation* can a human being find the *Three Altars of Happiness: Peace, Justice, and History*.

Quenijqui Moilia Tlahuilo'tli?

¿Que Quiere Decir "El Camino de la Luz?"

What does "Path of Light" Mean?

It is a way of life that places the world before the individual:

- The people and things of the Earth
- The people and things of this continent
- The people and things of this nation
- The people and things of this community
- The people and things of this family
- The needs of myself and my things.

It is a way of life that acknowledges and accepts the fact that:

- I am not the first, nor shall I be the last to have walked this Earth
- I have thousands of years of community ancestral history and struggle in my blood, and I owe it to my ancestors to strive to excel in everything I do on a daily basis. Not for myself, but for the sake of our communities' future generations
- As far as I can tell, I only have one chance on this Earth to live in peace, dignity, and with compassion.
- A path that allows for two-way traffic
- A path that has many turns and many crossroads, but only one destination: To leave
- our Earth a better place than when we lived on it A path that may be parallel to another person's path, or may be weave in and out of many paths (spiritual beliefs)

Aquinqueh Nehnemi Tlahuilo'tli

¿Quiénes caminan el camino de la luz?

Who Walk on the Path of Light?

Those that navigate the cosmic dance between *spirituality* and *superstition*; between *humility* and *humiliation*; between *self importance* and *modesty*...They are the ones that walk on the Path of Light/ the Path of the Cross.

In Melahuac Yaomomachtianih

Los Verdaderos Guerreros/Estudiantes
The True Warrior/Scholar

The true warriors are those persons that create *atemporal hypnorrhythmia* (rhythm that creates a communal sense of peace, calm and spiritual energy that transcends time). The True warrior understands that only through the transmission of knowledge, tradition, and wisdom can a society hope to create timeless links between the ancestors, the living and the descendants.

A True Warrior recognizes that this transmission of sacred wisdom cannot occur when a person, group or society is based on hatred, anger, or vengeance. These three poisons are the darkness that the Path of Light seeks to illuminate. These are the illnesses that the Path of the Cross seeks to cure. A True Warrior must thus accept that he or she must also be a True Scholar.

Acquinqueh Melahuac Yaomomachtianih?

¿Quiénes son los guerreros/Estudiantes?
Who are the True Warrior/Scholars?

- A Warrior/scholar lives to defend her or his community from violence, hatred, illness, and self-destructive behavior
- A person that acknowledges and understands that he or she does not know everything there is to know, and thus must always seek to learn. A Warrior/scholar thinks about the consequences of his or her actions on future generations

In Chicome itepoztlatqui Yaomomachtianih

Las siete herramientas de los guerreros/Estudiantes
The Seven Tools of the Warrior/Scholar

- Respectfulness/Loyalty
- Discipline/Restraint
- Spirituality/Wonderment
- Family/Cultural/Historical Pride
- Assertiveness/ Self-determination
- Hope/Faith
- Confidence/Humility

Once a warrior/Scholar has attained mastery of the seven tools, he or she is ready to carry the Four Weapons of a Warrior/Scholar

In Nahui iyaotlatqui Yaomomachtianih

Las Cuatro Armas de los guerreros/Estudiantes

The Four Weapons of a Warrior/Scholar

- Love
- Compassion
- Serenity
- Kindness

Once a warrior/Scholar has attained mastery of the four weapons, he or she is capable of achieving the three Levels of Fulfillment

In Eyi itlaixpantzinco Paquiliztli

Los Tres Altares de la Alegría

The Three Altars of Happiness

- Peace
- Justice
- History

28th Anniversary Celebration for Danza Xitlalli, June 27, 2009

Mario E. Aguilar

Micc2@cox.net