

# IMAGES OF AZTLAN AND TENOCHTITLAN IN 20TH CENTURY DANZA AZTECA

NANCY LEE RUYTER  
Dance Historian  
University of California  
Irvine - USA

From the painted illustrations of pre-hispanic and early colonial codices and from written descriptions in 16th-century works such as Fray Bernardino de Sahagún's *Historia general de las cosas de Nueva España* and Fray Diego Durán's *Historia de los indios de Nueva España...*, it is clear that the precortesian Aztecs of Mexico had a rich, varied and important dance culture closely tied to their religious and political practices and beliefs<sup>1</sup>. After the conquest, many indigenous dance traditions as well as other customs persisted, albeit in an altered religious and political setting. Many of the dances have continued to hold an important place in Mexican life alongside and sometimes merged with traditions brought to the western hemisphere from Spanish culture<sup>2</sup>.

A dance genre termed *danza azteca* (among other names) is believed by its adherents to have descended from Aztec times. It is currently practiced in both Mexico, mainly in the central states, and in the United States, particularly in the southwest. Countless numbers of people perform this dancing which is traditionally a ritual activity – in the terminology as used in Mexico, *danza* as opposed to *baile*. In the

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<sup>1</sup> Fray Bernardino de Sahagún. *Historia general de las cosas de Nueva España*. (Mexico: Editorial Porrúa, 1979; 16th cent.); Diego Durán. *Historia de los indios de Nueva España e islas de la tierra firme*. 2 vols. De. Angel María Garibay K. (Mexico: Editorial Porrúa, 1967; Vol. I, 1570; Vol II, 1579). Modern writings on pre-Columbian customs and dance include: Burr Cartwright Brundage. *The Jade Steps: A Ritual Life of the Aztecs*. (Salt Lake City: U. of Utah Press, 1985); Samuel Martí and Gertrude P. Kurath. *Dances of Anahuac* (Chicago: Aldine Pub.Co., 1964); Martí Sten. *Ponte a bailar tú que reinas*. (Mexico: Planeta, 1989); and Miguel Angel Cerón. "La reconstrucción documental de las danzas históricas: fantasías y realidades" in *Primer encuentro nacional sobre investigación de la danza* (Mexico: INBA, 1992), pp. 59-69.

<sup>2</sup> For information on the range of Mexican danza, see: Electra L. Mompradé and Tonatiuh Gutiérrez. *Danzas y bailes populares* (México: editorial Hermes, 1976); and Amparo Sevilla. *Danza, cultura y clases sociales* (Mexico: INBA, 1990).

last few decades, the genre has also appeared in entertainment or quasi-entertainment contests and sometimes in the service of political points of view or activist goals. The focus in this paper is on *danza azteca* in the United States. I will begin with the context into which its transplantation from Mexico occurred, then give some general information about the tradition itself in Mexico. Finally, I will discuss some of its manifestations in the United States in the late 20th century and its relationship there with Mexican-American culture and political concerns.

The original home of the great Aztec nation was not Tenochtitlan in the Valley of Mexico where the Spaniards conquered it in the early 16th century, but rather the mythical, or perhaps historical, Aztlán, a primordial homeland whose actual location is unknown. One theory, particularly popular among 20th-century Mexican-American political activists, holds that Aztlán was the southwestern area of what is now the United States, a territory that was wrested from Mexico in a victory ratified by the 1848 Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo<sup>3</sup>.

To the non-Mexican inhabitants of the United States, this territory is a part of the nation along with the other regions (all of which had also been taken from previous populations). For the Mexican residents of the Southwest, however, the perception is completely different. Up to 1848, these lands were part of Mexico and were peopled by a growing mestizo society largely involved in agriculture. That population was suddenly no longer in their own land, but in someone else's. As one historian expresses it:

*They were subject to direct economic and cultural domination within the confines of a foreign cultural, urban, and industrial framework<sup>4</sup>.*

And he concludes:

*Mexican people consciously or unconsciously perceive the Southwest as part of the homeland; the existing domination is perceived as a usurpation and unjust fact<sup>5</sup>.*

The number of Mexican inhabitants in the southwestern United States has been augmented continuously since 1848 by wave of immigration. For the most part, the growing Mexican-American population follows the pattern of unofficial but nonetheless common segregation in this country. They usually live in their own communities as do most Anglos, Blacks, Asians, etc., and as a group, they have suffered prejudice, marginality and often mistreatment at the hands of those in power.

In the 1960's a student-led movement began to develop to oppose the wrongs the

<sup>3</sup> See Rudolfo A. Anaya and Francisco Lomeli, eds. *Aztlán: Essays on the Chicano Homeland* (Albuquerque, NM: Academia/El Norte Publications, 1989).

<sup>4</sup> Juan Gómez-Quifones, "On Culture," Popular Series No. 1, UCLA-Chicano Studies Center Publications. First published in *Revista Chicano-Riqueña* VI/2 (Spring 1977), p. 9.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

Mexican-American community felt had been unjustly dealt them. The Chicano movement, or *chicanismo*, had several goals: to foster pride in Mexican culture and identification with the Mexican heritage – particularly its non-Spanish aspects; to oppose prejudice against people of Mexican descent and their consequent marginal status in the society; and to fight for greater opportunities in educational, economic, political and social spheres<sup>6</sup>.

The Chicano movement identified and promoted the concept of Aztlán as a rallying symbol. In 1969, at the first Chicano national Conference in Denver, Colorado, *El Plan Espiritual de Aztlán* was written with the following statement as its opening:

*In the spirit of a new people that is conscious not only of its proud historical heritage but also of the brutal «gringo» invasion of our territories, we, the Chicano inhabitants and civilizers of the northern land of Aztlán from whence came our foregather, reclaiming the land of their birth and consecrating the determination of our people of the sun, declare that the call of our blood is our power, our responsibility, and our inevitable destiny<sup>7</sup>.*

The idea of Aztlán as the spiritual homeland of the Mexican-Americans has continued to function as a unifying and inspirational symbol in the often intermingled arenas of political action, social change, and artistic creation.

The *danza azteca* is an embodied manifestation of the concept of Aztlán. In their dance, music and ritual acts, *danzante azteca* groups provide a living corporeal modern-day image of an illustrious and heroic Aztec past. In an effort to raise Chicano consciousness, understanding, and appreciation of their heritage, these «neo-Aztecs» hark back to ancient times to encourage themselves and fellow Chicanos in their struggles for the realization of spiritual, political and social aspirations.

Within the general category of *danza*, both the Mexican and the United States manifestations of this particular ritual dance practice belong specifically to the *conchero* tradition<sup>8</sup>. The name refers to the stringed instruments typically made from the *concha* or shell of an armadillo which the *danzantes* traditionally played while

<sup>6</sup> Sources on the Chicano movement include Anaya and Lomelí, *op.cit.*; and Rudolph Acuña, *Occupied America: A History of Chicanos*, 3rd ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1988).

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in Anaya & Lomelí, p. 1.

<sup>8</sup> For information on the Concheros, see: Armando Solórzano, and Raúl G. Guerrero, «Ensayo para un Estudio sobre la 'Danza de Concheros de la Gran Tenochtitlán'» *Boletín Latino-Americano de Música* 5 (October 1941):449-476; Pablo Poveda, «Danzas de Concheros en Austin, Texas: Entrevista con Andrés Segura Granados.» *Latin American Music Review* 2/2 (Fall/Winter 1981): 280-299; Gertrude P. Kurath, «Los Concheros.» *Journal of American Folklore* 59/234 (1946): 387-399; Martha Stone, *At the Sign of Midnight* (Tucson: U. of Arizona Press, 1975); Susan Rostas, «The Concheros of Mexico: a Search for Ethnic Identity.» *Dance Research* (London) IX/2 (Autumn 1991):3-17; Portia Mansfield, «The Conchero Dancers of Mexico.» Ed. D. dissertation, New York University, 1953.

dancing. This is clearly an imported contribution to the genre since stringed instruments did not exist in Mexico before the coming of the Spaniards. Unfortunately, as the 20th-century comes to a close, fewer and fewer Conchero dancers are learning to play the instrument. In Mexico, the *Danza de los Concheros* is also known as *Danza Azteca*, *Danza Chichimeca*, *Danza de la Gran Tenochtitlán*, *Danza de la Conquista*, etc., while in the United States, the term *danza azteca* predominates.

The number of Conchero dancers in Mexico probably runs into the tens of thousands<sup>9</sup>, and they can be found in and around Mexico City as well as in Puebla, Guanajuato, Hidalgo, Morelos, Querétaro, San Luis Potosí, and Tlaxcala<sup>10</sup>. Each dancer or musician belongs to a local group which in turn is part of a larger confederation of groups. They perform for various events in city plazas, the patios of churches, and other locations. For special Catholic fiesta days, large numbers of groups will gather and dance for hours. A particularly prominent manifestation occurs each December 12 at the Basilica de la Virgen de Guadalupe on the outskirts of Mexico City.

In times past the Conchero dancing was a rural or small town indigenous manifestation. People would join a Conchero or other *danzante* group to carry on a family tradition or fulfill a religious vow. The practice would be handed down generation to generation within a community. In recent years, however, some of the activity has moved into the cities where groups might include both indigenous migrants from the rural areas and middle-class mestizos interested in the pre-Columbian roots of their cultural heritage<sup>11</sup>. Men, women and children may join a group if they demonstrate a sincere commitment to adhere to the rules and obligations of being a Conchero dancer, and often several members from different generations of the same family will form the core of a group. Individuals within groups are organized in a military style hierarchy with each member starting at the lowest level and, with good service, working his or her way up through the ranks. Each level requires the fulfillment of specific duties, and all members also have the general obligation to support and help one another and to properly carry out the dances and ceremonies. Deviation from the rules can result in punishment or even expulsion from the group.

A recent development in the Conchero tradition in Mexico are groups who call themselves *Mexica* (pronounced meshika), the assumed Náhuatl pronunciation of Mexico. The Mexicas perform the same kinds of ceremonies and dances as the Concheros but have severed ties and allegiance to Catholicism. In fact, they reject

\* A 1947 estimate of 50,000 is cited in Frances Toor, *A Treasury of Mexican Folkways* (New York: Bonanza Books, 1985), p.323; and repeated in Mompradé and Gutiérrez, p.162. See also Rostas, p.11 and 17, n.5.

<sup>10</sup> Sevilla, p. 207.

<sup>11</sup> Rostas, pp. 11-13 and 17, n. 5.

all elements of Spanish culture as having been imposed on the native population by their conquerors and promote the study of and commitment to Aztec philosophy, principles and ritual practices. Some Mexica dancers study the Náhuatl language and Aztec history and culture along with the dance. Their performances, which can be seen in the *Zócalo* of México City as well as in other settings, are often followed by impassioned speeches on the value of the Aztec heritage and the evils of the Spanish. Associates of the *danzantes* sell literature and souvenirs related to the Aztec culture<sup>12</sup>.

Typically, all *danzantes* performing in the conchero tradition are spectacularly dressed in individually designed elaborate and colorful costumes modeled on illustrations from pre-columbian or early colonial codices. No two costumes will be the same. The dancers wear huge plumed headdresses and carry rattles, plumes or other ritual objects. After setting up an altar, a group begins their performance with ritual acts incorporating verbal texts, the burning of copal, and the blowing of conch shells. They thus seek permission to perform, purify the area, and salute and establish harmony with the four cardinal directions. They then go through a number of dances to flute, conch and drum accompaniment.

There is also consistency in the choreography and dance vocabulary of the concheros and their derivatives. While they will dance in lines while in procession, the spatial arrangement of a set performance area is typically a circle around the altar that has been set up, or, if the group is very large, concentric circles. The drums and musicians are outside the circle as are the viewers. Within the circle, dancers move toward and away from the center and also side to side. The rhythm is usually double time in 8 or 16-count patterns. A 16-count may be organized into an AAAB form (three repeating patterns of 4 counts followed by a 4-count variation or contrasting pattern). Movement vocabulary includes steps, hops, jumps, leaps, leg swings, squats, turns, stamps, heel or toe beats, and skips, some of which may involve arm and torso movement. There is great variation in the amplitude, dynamics and quality of the dancers' movement. While all dancers are performing the same pattern at the same time, there is as much individuality in the manner of performing as there is in the costumes.

Conchero dancers began to appear in California and Texas in the 1970's. In the middle of the decade, a group from Mexico known as Xipe Totec toured for about 1 ½ years in California, the rest of the Southwest, and beyond. It was under the direction of Florencio Yescas, who had originally been within the Conchero tradition in Mexico, but also had danced with the Ballet Folklórico de Amalia Hernández, the major professional folk ballet company of the country. Yescas had even choreographed a

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<sup>12</sup> Rostas, pp. 13-15; and personal observance and interviews with Mexica dancers in Mexico City, August, 1994.

Conchero dance work for the company. He had thus worked with the tradition — the Conchero dance — as both ritual practice and theatrical entertainment. When the group finished its touring, Yescas stayed in Los Angeles and formed the Los Angeles Xipe Totec group which still exists today. In 1979, Lázaro Arvizu, one of the members of the original Xipe Totec took over direction of the Los Angeles branch. In the late 1990's, he and his wife Virginia Carmelo still lead Xipe Totec, a group that includes their children as well as non-family participants to a total of about 30 members. They dance in both ritual and theatrical contexts, and they see their dance as an obligation within the context of the Catholic Church<sup>13</sup>. Other California groups are aligned with the Mexica branch, eschewing Catholicism and following and adaptation of Aztec belief.

Another branch of the Conchero tradition was established in Texas. In 1970, a group of *danzantes* from Mexico named Xinachtli performed in various Texas locations and in Kansas City. They continued coming each year until 1976, and then from 1976 to 1980 other groups came. Such groups stimulated interest among local Mexican-Americans and the desire to experience more of this aspect of their cultural heritage. In 1977, an Austin resident, José Flores Peregrino, traveled to Mexico to seek training in the Conchero dance tradition. He contacted Andrés Segura Granados, a Conchero captain who had traveled to Texas with Xinachtli in the early 1970's. Segura returned to Austin and founded a group whose members included politically aware Chicano university students. Significantly, he named the group «Xinachtli de Aztlán»<sup>14</sup> thereby demonstrating allegiance to the idea of the southwest as the Aztec homeland.

According to Segura, the fundamental purpose of the ritual dance wherever it is performed is integration with cosmic harmony<sup>15</sup>. But in line again with recognition of the symbolic Aztlán, he describes the more localized objective in the United States:

*Que todos nuestros hermanos tomen conciencia de su origen y del valor de la cultura de donde vienen. Y no sólo los de aquí de Austin, sino también los de todo Texaztlán, y los de Califaztlán, lo que la gente de aquí llama Aztlán, que es el lugar de donde venimos nosotros los México-tenochcas, los aztecas.»<sup>16</sup>*

One could cite many examples of the ways the *danza azteca* in the United States functions to create a sense of solidarity and a cultural pride among the Mexican-American population. On university campuses, *danzantes aztecas* appear as part of

<sup>13</sup> Interview with Virginia Carmelo, December 20, 1994.

<sup>14</sup> Poveda, p. 282; and Segura in Poveda, 288-290.

<sup>15</sup> Segura in Poveda, pp. 292, 295-96.

<sup>16</sup> Segura in Poveda, p. 296.

Mexican Cinco de Mayo holiday programs which celebrate Mexican cultural heritage. They also take part in political demonstrations such as occurred at the University of California, Irvine, in Fall 1995. In response to the University's abandonment of affirmative action (policies established to ensure equal access to students and employees regardless of gender, race, or ethnic origin) hunger strikers and other protesters were joined by an *azteca* dance group that appeared in the mornings thus connecting this political action with an ancient heritage. For such cultural or political events, the dance groups are usually engaged by Chicano student organizations and most of the viewers are Chicano. In such school and university performance, the dances are often interspersed with or followed by commentary that stresses the importance and value of the heritage.

In the United States as in Mexico, many *danzantes aztecas* also perform at Catholic churches for religious holidays, most notably on the day of the Virgin of Guadalupe. And there seems to be no sense of conflict about taking the same ritual dance material and presenting it in entertainment contexts. Two of the places that have regularly featured *danza azteca* groups in the Los Angeles area are the theme park, Knott's Berry Farm, in Orange County and the historical city center, Olvera Street in Los Angeles, a bustling tourist area featuring Mexican restaurants and craft stands. At the theme park, as in other theater settings, the dancers appear on a stage facing the audience, so the traditional circular choreography is adapted to be effective in one direction. At certain times of the year, groups from a broad area gather in one place for mass ceremonies where they perform the dances together in great concentric circles. For example, there are annual ceremonies at the statue of Cuauhtemoc, «Último jefe de la resistencia Mexica 1521», at the Parque de México in Los Angeles, and also at Chicano Park in San Diego, where one can see dramatic murals of Mexico's history on the supports of the freeway under which it is located.

The *danza azteca* has spread throughout the southwestern United States and beyond. It is impossible to say just how many groups and participants there are, or, at this point to trace its development in the United States since the early 1970's. While public performances can be seen in various locations at particular times of the year, the sub-culture of Aztec dancing is more or less unknown outside the Mexican-American community despite occasional newspaper photos or television images. All of the *azteca* dancers I have met in the United States are Mexican-Americans, although that is not a requirement. Acceptance into a group depends on commitment to its ritual, educational and social purposes and conformance with group discipline. As a member, the individual can learn the technique and style of the dance, the symbolism and ritual of the tradition, and how to play the drums and other instruments. The elaborate costumes are often made by the dancers themselves.

For a Chicano or Chicana in the United States there could be various motivations

for involvement in an Aztec dance group. On the individual level, it provides an opportunity to experience a different persona — to dress in an elaborate colorful costume and to perform dances associated with a heroic past. One can experiment with an image, an identity — and at the same time know the satisfaction of promoting worthy knowledge and values — of fulfilling a mission. The groups tend to include family members, so the activity not only fosters solidarity among Chicanos, but also among families. There is a strong religious component to all such dancing, so a sense of commitment prevails in the practise sessions and performances.

Politically, Aztec dancing privileges the indigenous aspect of Mexican culture over the European. It glorifies the achievements of the ancient cultures and sets them up as models for today. The political aspect is usually educational (as opposed to activist) and supportive of various causes: Chicanos are encouraged to emulate their distant forbears and achieve great things.

This paper was originally written for a Society of Dance History Scholars conference on the theme «Border Crossings» (Toronto 1995), so I considered how the Aztec dance phenomenon relates too this theme. In the first place (in evidence both in Mexico and in the United States), those who participate in this kind of dance are making a conscious effort to cross the border from present to past and to bring the past into the present. The border in this sense is the vanquishing of the Aztecs by Cortés in 1519. The image that is emphasized is not the Aztecs' downfall, but rather a modern perception of their pre-conquest culture.

Second, there is a conscious effort by United States Aztec dancers to cross the border into Mexico proper to find spiritual sustenance and a usable past, and to import these back across the border to help promote the Chicano goals of equality and status in American society.

Third, there is the border crossing that occurs in each individual *danzante* as she or he takes off blue jeans, sneakers and log'd t-shirt and dons sparkling clothing with exotic figures of pre-Colombian design and a great headdress with tall undulating plumes. What happens in the heart and mind and body of the person who makes this transformation and then performs the ritual dance as an individual and communal act in front of witnesses?

But there are not only border crossings in this phenomenon. There is also the establishment of borders: 1) between Chicanos and the rest of the United States population who are not inheritors of the Aztec traditions; 2) between those Mexican-Americans who take pride in their indigenous heritage and other who deny it and maintain that they are really Spanish; and 3) between those who reject Catholicism in favor of Aztec beliefs and their family members who remain within the Church and despair at their loved ones' apostasy.

These Aztec dancers form an important subculture within the general Mexican-



American communities. They are interesting from cultural, sociological and political perspectives and illustrate some of the many ways that dance can function and have significance within a community. Such phenomena merit the attention of historians of dance and culture.

#### Abstract

A través de los murales precolombinos y de los códices coloniales hemos tenido noticias de la existencia de una rica y variada dancística en la vida del México Azteca. Tras la conquista española, muchas de las tradiciones y bailes nativos pervivieron pese a las persecuciones religiosas. Algunos de estos bailes han mantenido su relevancia dentro de la vida mexicana y, en ocasiones, se han unido al folklore llevado al Nuevo Mundo por los españoles. Uno de estos bailes tradicionales es el aquí analizado: La Danza Azteca.