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"MEXICAN DEATH RITUAL AND MASKS"

BY

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Plate 1. Map of Mexico.

INTRODUCTION

> "The marvellous masks made by the Toltecs and the Aztecs had a practical purpose, which was to disguise the dead, giving them an ideal face for the journey to Mictlan (land of the dead). Proust said that after forty we all have the face that we deserve. Modern Plastic surgery has attempted the opposite : we can have the face we want at any age. It isn't true. Plastic surgery usually erases the beauty a face acquires and only gives in exchange an old age without character. The ancient Mexicans, much wiser allowed each human to obtain a new face but only for eternity."
> (Abbas, 1990, p. 2)

The combination of Mexican death ritual and Mexican masks, may seem quite obscure, but through my research I've learned that the face (according to the Mexicans and many other indigenous cultures) is the entrance to a persons soul and in turn the mask is an extension of that face. When that person dies the soul continues on in the after world. So for me, masks and death do go hand in hand, in the living and in death worlds.

The reason for choosing Mexico to base my thesis on, cannot be answered in one sentence so this introduction holds my reason why. For years I have been fascinated with the idea of the human head being the entrance to the individuals soul. A human spirit form that travels into further worlds. I have read of various kinds of masks which have taught me about the persona. The Mexican masks however enriched my thought, they held strength in history, were beautifully crafted and were used in richly potent rituals and celebrations. Masks in the past were used to transform the participants and to help shamans enter the spirit world. They were used in dances in praise to the gods for bearing fruit on the earth. The masks were spiritual icons and were themselves regarded as sacred they were central to the day to day living of the Mexican ancients. With the advent of the Spanish Conquest masks changed with influence from Spain, Africa, the Catholic Church and modern society. New styles in masks appeared, masks with european features began to appear and such styles remain in production to this day. Today's influences in Mexican villages have changed masks even further, television, cars, radios, electricity have appeared in villages, so naturally huge changes have occurred. Furthermore people are making masks for the tourist industry.

Even the Huichol Indians one of the strongest surviving native Indian tribes are making 'tourist masks the Huichol village mask of the Tate Nakawae has never been painted nor is it today. yet they sell very colourful painted Tate Nakawae masks to tourists. I see this as the price of survival in today's society. I am not proposing that these influences have destroyed the Mexican masks, but symbolism has changed a lot under the influence of the imperial cultures which have controlled Mexico's history and many of the indigenous religious styles are lost forever. Traditional Mexican dances are recorded in books and photographs but few dances are performed today. Modern society is different from our ancestors so it is only natural that changes have occurred whether it is for better or worse.

I have introduced the mask as the ceremonialists tool of entering the spirit world, death to the Mexican is a continuance of that spirit world. In order to understand the link between the two I had to separate them here and in the first chapter to give a comprehensive study on the spirit of the mask and the spirit of death.

The modern view of death is a derivative from Pre Hispanic times, for the Aztec death was a symbol of a stage in a constant cycle like morning comes after the night. In Christian Europe death was also seen as a journey but the destination was different. The Europeans saw the destination being either glory or eternal damnation. Through my own personal encounters of death I began to realise that the Mexican attitude to death was much more suited to how I wanted to perceive it. this 'attitude' is one of optimism.

> "Death in Mexico lacks the solemn powerful and funeral feeling that it generally arouses in other countries. In Mexico it is a part of the daily life into which people are born".
> (Benteli Catalogue, 1987, p. 431)

The 1st and 2nd of November each year belongs to the dead. According to popular belief the dead have divine permission to visit friends and relatives on earth so to share in the pleasures of the living. The idea of celebrating the dead with the living is truly Mexican but when he Conquest occurred immense changes happened with the view of death because of its non-Christian worship. Attempts at eliminating the ritual were no good. So the Catholics primarily changed it. Today's technological society is furthering that change.

This essay is essentially about change. How Mexico changed through each invasion but iconography still remained typically Mexican. I've included today's influence of our technological society further changing Mexican and many other indigenous cultures. I do not condemn this 'change' it is a natural result of human nature.

Chapter one contains a brief discussion on the essence of Mexico's past in masks and the death ritual. It also holds the 'change' the Christian Church brought forth with the Conquest.

In chapter two I have discussed the death ritual and how it changed throughout its history. I want in this section to paint a picture of the naturalness and optimism felt by the Mexicans for this celebration and how it differs from our western thoughts on death.

Chapter three is based on Shamanism. This is the link between the spirit world and the mask world. It furthers the image of death and is also linked with the mask. Again I've approached the change shamanism went through and is continuously going through today.

Chapter four is the last chapter which contains the major influences that have affected in them through the Conquest. Also how they are being marketed today as tourist icons; I've also documented how they are surviving through the particular mask makers.

CHAPTER I

ESSENCE OF THE PAST

According to some archaeologists man first entered the New World about 20,000 to 30,000 years ago when he began periodically to cross over land at low tide from Asia to Alaska. Some peoples had probably arrived within the boundaries of Mesoamerica some 10,000 years later. (Evans, 1972, p.10) Man at this time would have led a very difficult life. Nature was a very cruel and dualistic god the giver and destroyer of life. Masks were not unconnected fantasies but came as a result of mans difficult life with nature. The painted face (and body) was the first mask. The mask was a magical way of changing the ceremonialist into a god powerful enough to bring food, fertility and cosmic balance to the wearer's community.

The mask in Pre-Columbian times was for shamanistic purposes. The shaman was the village spirit healer. Mask making was exclusively a male occupation where the making of the mask was done under the influence of hallucinagenic drugs to enable the mask maker to enter the spirit world directly. Shamanism in Mexico is still alive today (though the Christian influence destroyed most of it) and is discussed furthermore in chapter three.

Bone was available to the ancient Mexicans, one of the earliest artifacts that is identified as a mask is fashioned (by use of simple tools) from the fossilised vertebrae of a llama to resemble the head of a coyote. According to Cordry it was found in Texucxquiae state of Mexico and dates from around 12000 to 10000 BC. It is small in size as are still used in Mexico today . (Cordry, 1980, p.80) (plate 2)

Sacrificial skin masks were also made in Pre-columbian times (a ritual I shall refer to later). Warfare was almost continuous in Aztec Mexico, though most of these were not territorial fights but to capture sacrificial victims. These were known as 'Flower Wars'. They wore masks of jaguars and eagles so to inspire fear in their enemies and also to receive the power of the animal whose image they wore. Today's masks still have these images but it is not known if they are of direct descent or simply repeating traditional motifs. (plate 3)

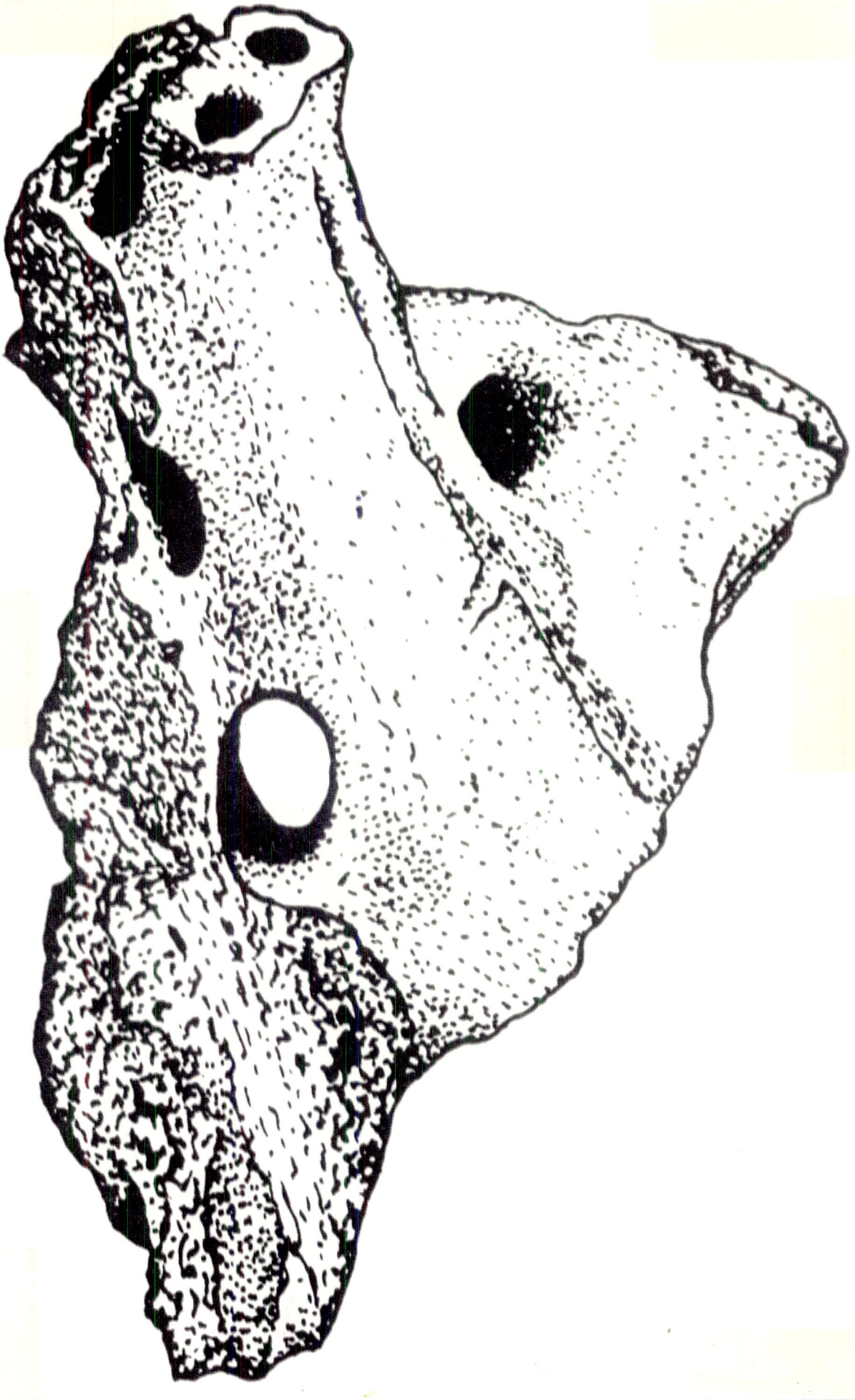


Plate 2. Bone Mask, Mexico.

Plate 3. Tigre Masks, Nahua village, Mexico, IV.A.C.

In religious rites in Ancient Mexico masks were worn not to simply represent a particular god but to transform the wearer into that particular god. This is the primary function of all masks. The Aztec god Xolotl for example was associated with the dog, Tezcatlipoca with burning or mirror eyes. The gods were also identified with specific vestments and objects held in their hands in much the same way as the Catholic Church used to identify their saints. The colouring of these symbols was also important. Many gods were associated with identical objects but of different colours.

> "The four world directions, north, south, west and east each had an associated sacred colour, a sacred tree, bird and in some sources an animal. Particular gods were also associated with each sector". (Sayer, 1991, P.26)

In Pre Hispanic Mexico masks were often worn for the protection from evil spirits or illness * and funeral rites **. In Aztec times at the rekindling of the sun (a fire ceremony held every 52 years), pregnant women and children wore masks of maguey leaves to protect themselves from changing into wild beasts and mice. Today's survival is not in the ritual but in the maguey material itself, it is still used in masks and is considered a spiritual material.

The mask in Pre-Columbian Mexico played a huge role in daily society. It is difficult to document what the symbols of each mask represented or how the gods were perceived because at the time of the Conquest a lot of the icons were destroyed along with documentation on panels. Most of the history of Mesoamerica is to be found in the ground. Very little documentation of their past was recorded at the time of the Conquest. Yet the masks with their symbols (whether understood or not) have survived till the present day as enigmatic and beautiful icons of Mexico's destroyed heritage.

DEATH

> "Mankind must make recompense to the gods that brought them into being. The life force must be offered sacrifice - blood and the human heart are the supreme sacrifice - vitally necessary to keep the sun moving in the heavens". (Sayer, 1991 p.35.)

The history of death ritual and sacrifical ritual revolves around the ancient Aztec story of Quetzalcoatl and how he journeyed the ninth and deepest level of the underworld which was the realm of the lord of death Mictlantecuhtli.

This was the place where the precious bones of humans were kept after the destruction of humans on earth. Quetzalcoatl told Mictlantecuhtli that he wanted humans put back on earth. Mictlantecuhtli set impossible tasks for him. Eventually Quetzalcoatl got the human bones (female and male) by magical means. On leaving the land of the dead he stumbled upon startled quail. The bones scattered and the birds pecked at them. He quickly gathered them up and brought them to the Paradise of the Aztecs (Tamoan chan). The earthgoddess Cihuacoatl ground the bones and Quetzalcoatl fertilized them with his blood. From this came the new human race, unfortunately this new human race was fatally flawed due to the biting quail, and the new humans were created mortal. All the gods did penance and since that time humankind has owed a reciprocal debt of penance. This myth was documented at the time of the Conquest. (Carmichael, 1991 p.25) (plate 4)

Sacrifice was important to the Mexican Indians, the ancient Aztecs held annually a huge festival in honour of the dead and offered the departed death sacrifices. The sacrifices were probably of different kinds accordingly, as they presumed their dead to be in the house of the sun or in gloomy Mictlan. Even human sacrifice seemed to have taken place. "Sacrifices of slaves were held in front of a large funeral pyramid in a round walled hollow. Skulls were found here and similar places. It is beyond doubt that these festivals and death meals took place". (Cordry, 1980, in passing)

Our knowledge of the Aztec gods of death and the afterlife is derived from an archeaological record and the Pre-Hispanic codices (painted screen fold books). The Aztec belief in the afterworld, which is still in popular currency today must be documented if todays Day of the Dead is to be remembered. The codices consist of the way people died and the paths they took in the afterworld due to their deaths. For example the souls who died an ordinary death went to Mictlan, the place of the dead, the shadowy underworld ruled by Mictlantecuhtli. They would journey for four years which was lengthy and difficult and they travelled a terrible path to the place of the ordinary dead. This belief has survived into recent times. In Mictlan the dead live as they did on earth hence burial goods found in the graves of the dead. Today "In Yuctan the Maya bury their deceased with food, drink, clothing and other elements for the journey to the place of the dead". (Sayer, 1991, p. 9)

Plate 4. Stone figure of Death God Mictlantecuhtli, Mexico, Aztec.

People who died by drowning, gout or were struck by lightening were sent to the paradise of the rain gods where they might never suffer again. The infant dead went to a place near to Tlalocan where a tree dripped with milk would feed them, and there they would await the inevitable destruction of earth and they then would be reincarnated as the new human beings. Warriors who died in battle went to the sky realm called Tonatuih Ichan, after four years they changed into humming birds. Women who died at childbirth (whose spirits were thought to have died just as honourably as warriors), went with the sun down to the western horizon. These 'Divine' women might reappear on earth some times and were very much feared. Among the indians of modern Mexico there are still remnants of beliefs in some of the various afterworlds of the ancients. (plate 5)

The Aztec solar year consisted of eighteen months, each month holding twenty days. Each month of the year, held time for celebrations in honour and appreciation of particular gods.

Included in this cycle were festivals that were associated with the cults of the dead. Two of these are widely recorded, they are called the Miccailhauitontli and Miccailhuitl the translation meaning little feast of the dead and great feast of the dead respectively (feast of infant dead and feast of the adult dead).

> "On the fourteenth month .... upon the fifth day one was only concerned with the dead, for them they made small arrows .... they bound four arrows and four pine torches and laid them where the dead laid buried. And they placed two sweet tamales and they remained there all day. At sundown they burned them for the dead in the same place". Sahagun mentions this of the Aztec year (Sayer, 1991 p.31)

By the end of the 13th Century 'all souls day' was accepted almost universally by western Christian society commemorating the faithful departed yet the church was still reluctant to honour the dead. The reason being that the church wanted to dissociate itself form the pre-Christian rites and ceremonies of the cult of the dead and ancestoral worship.

The church could not diminish what the Mexicans had been celebrating for thousands of years. It seems to me to be a compromise on both parts. There were many 'pagan' masks which were transformed by the Christian's into devil masks by the addition of horns. They also introduced european celebration and masks. (plate 6)

Plate 5. Stone sculpture of woman with skull face, Mexico, A.D. 1300.

Plate 6. European style masks (Christian king mask and Cavalier's lady mask) from Oaxaca, Conquest period.

The death celebrations were compromised also and the pagan idols were replaced with christian icons of 'Mary and Jesus'. Many more changes occurred which I have written about in the next chapters.

NOTES TO CHAPTER I

* As noted in D. Cordry Mexican Masks "When the King of Mexico is sick masks are put on Tezcatipoea or Viticpuchtli or on another idol and they are left there until he recourperates or dies.
(Cordry, 1980, p.92)

** When mortuary masks were the custom a mask of stone, wood or possible copper was tied to the top of the bundle. "Of the ceremonies with which they burned the lords, and those who were not in his New Spain .... All assembled together, they put the dead body in order, wrapping him up in 15 or 20 exquisite capes woven with a design .... When he was shrouded and his face covered they placed a painted mask on top" (Mendieta, 1945, 1:178) (Cordry, 1980, p.92)

CHAPTER II

DIA DE MUERTOS (Day of the Dead)

The Museum of Mankind in London held an exhibition in the spring of 1992 for the Day of the Dead in Mexico. I visited this exhibition and was immediately attracted to the array of colours and depictions of this joyous celebration. Walking through the exhibition I found myself asking questions like "why the religious iconography ? Why sugar skulls ? What's the reason for building an altar in the home and a smaller altar in the graveside ?" I have since discovered some answers. The Mexican view of death is different to ours, their perception of death being very optimistic.

Annually the living prepare for the return of the dead for a fiesta. In the beginning it seemed strange to me that it is celebrated with joy and frivolity whereas, in this country and other Catholic dominated countries mortality is seen as being morbid and macabre and death a cruel fearful destroyer of life. Today's celebration has indigenous tradition interwoven with the Catholic religion.

> "The lithurgical calendar has exploited to the full, with elaborate rounds of processions, dances, feasts, outdoor masses, penitential sessions and passion and nativity plays being eagerly devised to replace the pagan ceremonies" (Cervantes, 1991, p.5)

This annual celebration occurs on the first and second of November. These are the days where each household makes offerings of food and drink to the dead. The souls return each year for a few brief hours to enjoy the pleasures they once knew in life. The dead who return do not bring the dread of death with them. This resurrection is seen as the returning of souls from other worlds, which for many Mexicans are similar to the one we live in. The Day of the Dead is considered a private or family feast. Although it has a communal aspect in a celebratory from the essence of this feast stays in the privacy of the home.

The preparation for this event, also known as Todos Santos, (October 31st - November 2nd) occupies all year round but the bulk of preparation is in the week before the event. Markets fill with miniature skeletons dressed in modern and 18th Century attire, (plate 7) sugar skulls (plate 8) and papier mache skeletons (plate 9). Everything for the offering is on sale in rural markets; flowers, vegetables, breads, candles, sugar, pottery and many grades of incense etc.

Plate 7. Posada print by Aracio Vaneqas Arroyo, Mexico.

Plate 8. Sugar Skulls by Wenceslao Rivas Contreras. Toluca, state of Mexico, 1990

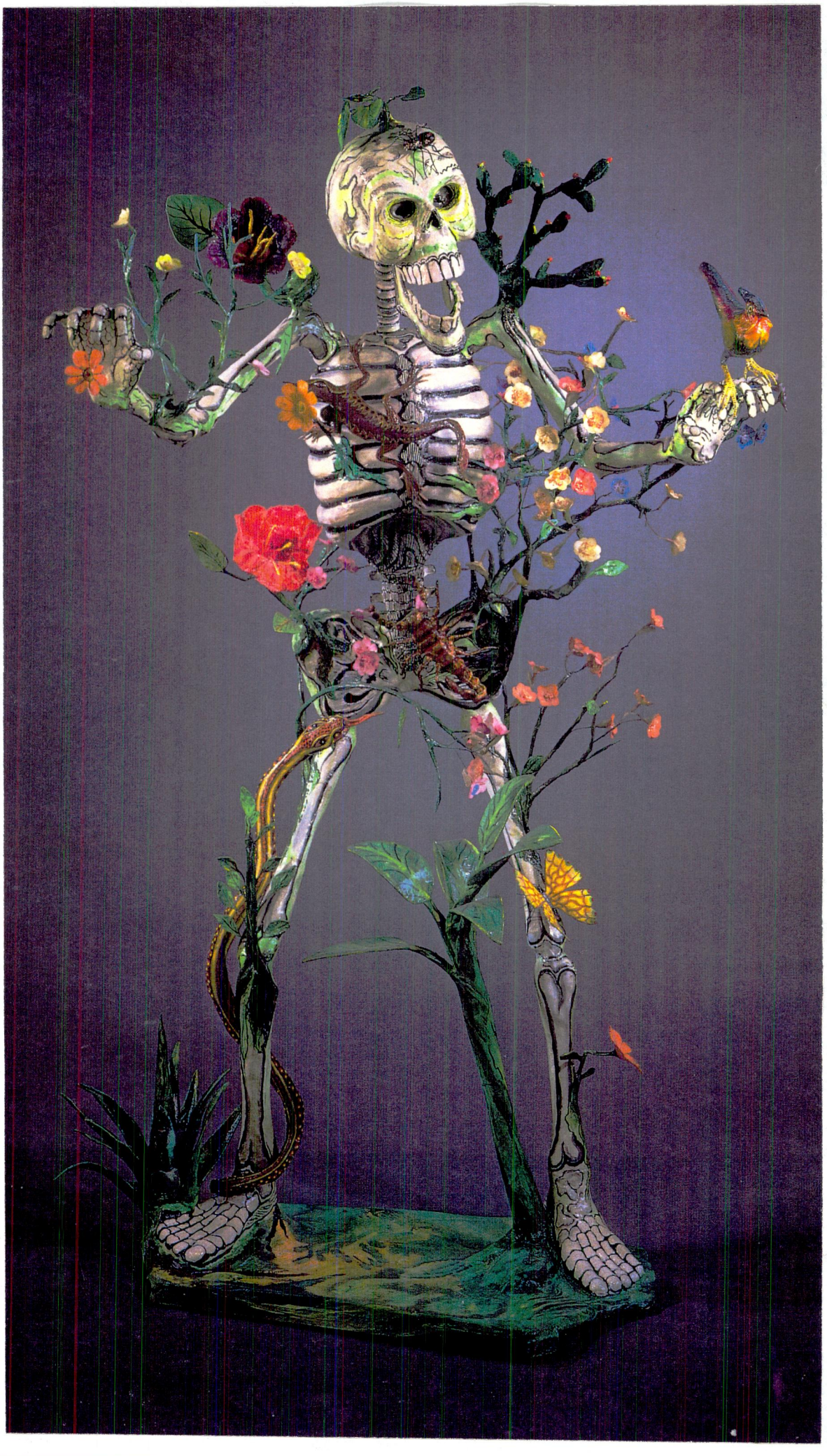


Plate 9. Lifesize papier mache skeleton by Filipe Linares. Mexico city.

The most widely used incense is copal. Copal is very important as it drives evil spirits away. It is generally believed that evil spirits are attracted to the homes by the aroma of food and the candles which they would like to share in, but the copal drives them away. In the larger markets there is a wider variety of goods. It is here that obvious change is taking place. There is still traditional hand made pottery being sold alongside factory made pottery. Also the occasional batman/spiderman, pumpkin and Halloween witch toys have also appeared. Traditionally everything must be new for the offerings from the clothes to the decoration material for the offrenda (offering table). But today (with increasing inflation) that cannot always be adhered to. The cleaning and dressing of the graves usually takes place on the days of Todos Santos. The women and older men (in most places) do this. A miniature altar is erected on the graves and flowers, candles and music are placed and played. (plate 10) Also in Todos Santos when a family have an oven they will bake the bread (this is 'offering' bread for the dead, the living also eat this). This duty is usually held by men, either the head of the family or a close relative. The preparation (cooking, offrenda construction, decoration of graves etc) is usually on the 30th October but this can vary from region to region. Special 'death foods' are cooked in advance of this date. If there is no oven at the home, the bakeries have a bountiful supply of 'bread of the dead' shaped as bones and other skeletal shapes.

On the 30th or 31st of October according to different regions the ofrenda will be constructed. (plate 11) The ofrenda is placed in the homes at this time for the dead. The whole family interacts in the building of it. A typical altar will consist of a table with a white cloth (embroidered by both women and men) or decorative plastic sheeting (a technological and western influence). The ofrenda is usually set up beside or in front of the permanent family altar for the Saints. On top or in front of the table there is an arch constructed of pliable cones which is then covered with green leaves and flowers. Fruits and ornaments are sometimes interwoven with the flowers. A cloth or plastic sheet is then draped over the arch to form a sky. There are many papeles recor tados (layered sheets of coloured papers) with cut out designs of virgins, churches, birds and flowers put all around the altar. (plate 12) Also there are cut out tin sheet skeletons as additional decoration. (plate 13) If a family has a photograph of the deceased it will get center-most position on the ofrenda. Christ and the Virgin are placed all around the photographs (traditional 'pagan' icons have been cast aside since the Catholic invasion). (plate 14) The depictions of the Virgin and Christ are not common in native indian households.

Plate 10. Scene in a cemetery at San Garbriel, Chilac, Puebla.

Plate 11. Ofrenda by Adrian Gonzalez, State of Mexico.

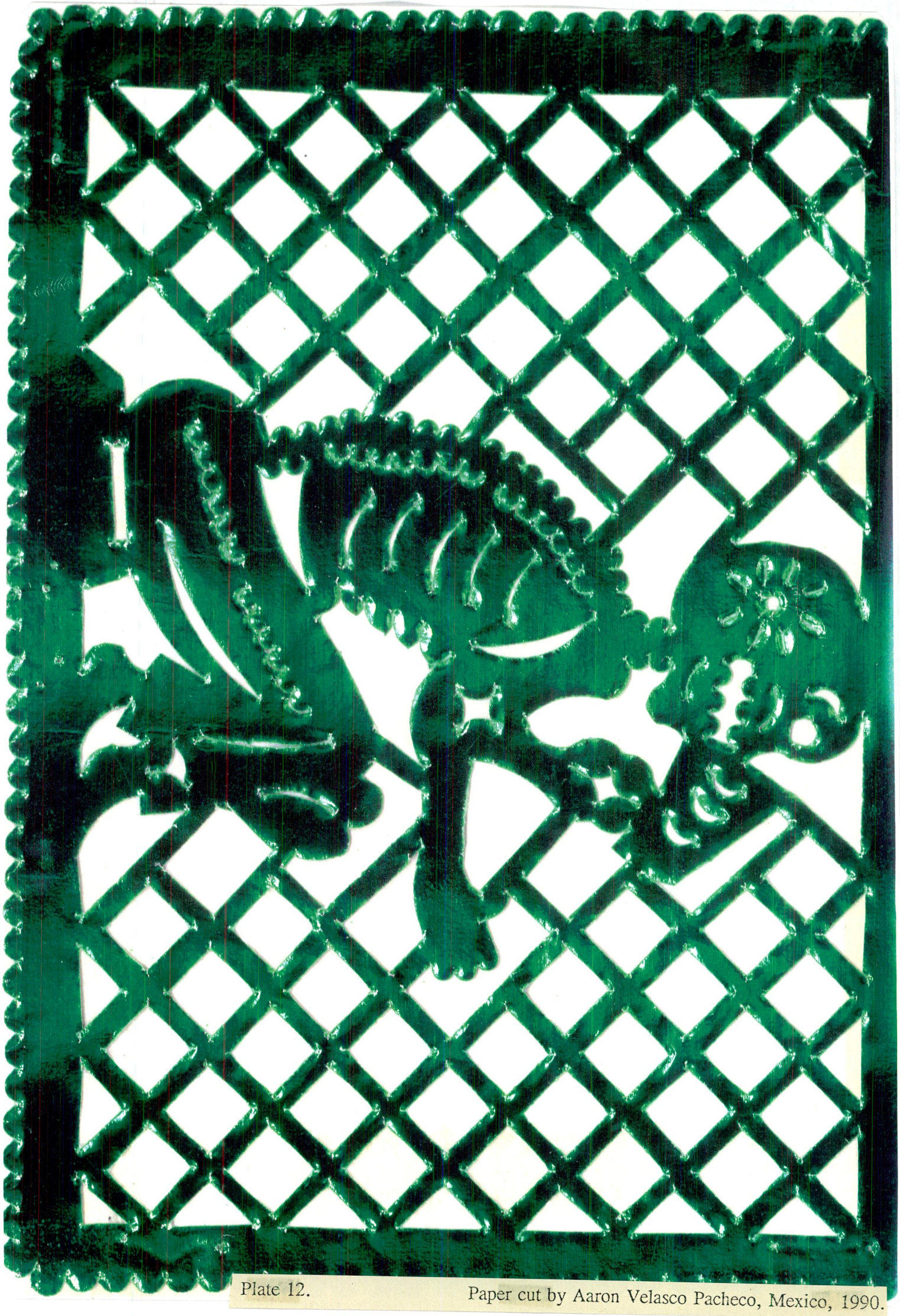


Plate 12. Paper cut by Aaron Velasco Pacheco, Mexico, 1990.

Plate 13. Tin skeleton by Maurilio Rojas, Mexico, 1990.

Plate 14. The 'Living Dead' (Muertos Vivientes) Guerrero.

Other ofrendas are made for people who died violently and these are assembled outside the home because these spirits are feared.

Flowers are very important to the Mexicans for this occasion especially the cempasuhil the flower of the dead. This flower has been used in this celebration since Pre-Hispanic times. It is seen as important because of its scent which is said to attract the souls. So paths are made with the petals and marigold petal's from the grave to the home and sometimes from the home back towards the grave as, if there is no returning path the soul may remain on the earth and trouble the living. (plate 15). Other flowers are also used like the gladioli and carnations, for decorative purposes. Children have to be especially good to animals and insects at the time of the Todos Santos because it is widely believed that the dead are returning on these trails in the form of creatures other than humans.

When the preparation is finished the souls return. The most widely held belief is that the 'little dead ones' return first. Foods, clothes and gifts will be laid out for them in accordance with their ages. The foods offered to the children are much simpler without as much chilli, salt and sugar added to the foods as with the adults. When the childrens' souls withdraw the adult souls arrive. In turn they are given the most splendid foods, cigarettes, drinks the family can afford. The foods are highly seasoned. Favourite foods will be made that the dead person (child and adult) enjoyed when alive. The spirits do not physically consume the foods, they 'absorb' the aroma and essence of the foods. When the dead are finished eating it is the turn of the living to eat. Some foods from the ofrenda will be shared out with relatives, friends etc. Other foods from the ofrenda will be brought along to the grave of the loved one, along with new garments offered to keep the deceased warm and protected in the underworld. This is symbolic, the clothes will then be worn later by a living member of the family.

DAY OF THE DEAD :

There are a number of the day of the dead dances, most of Pre Hispanic origins. One of these particular dances (most popular in Veracruz) is shown by transvestite dancing. (plate 16) There are two rows of people facing each other and dancing, it appears to be men and women dancing, both sets are masked. The 'women' in this dance are men. The male will have 'her' face disguised by a mask and ribbons, a veil will be attached to the hat (Carmichael, 1991, p.96) This traditional dance shown in the photograph has obviously taken on substantial change.

Plate 15. Children in the village of Atla, Puebla, making a path of cempasuchil.

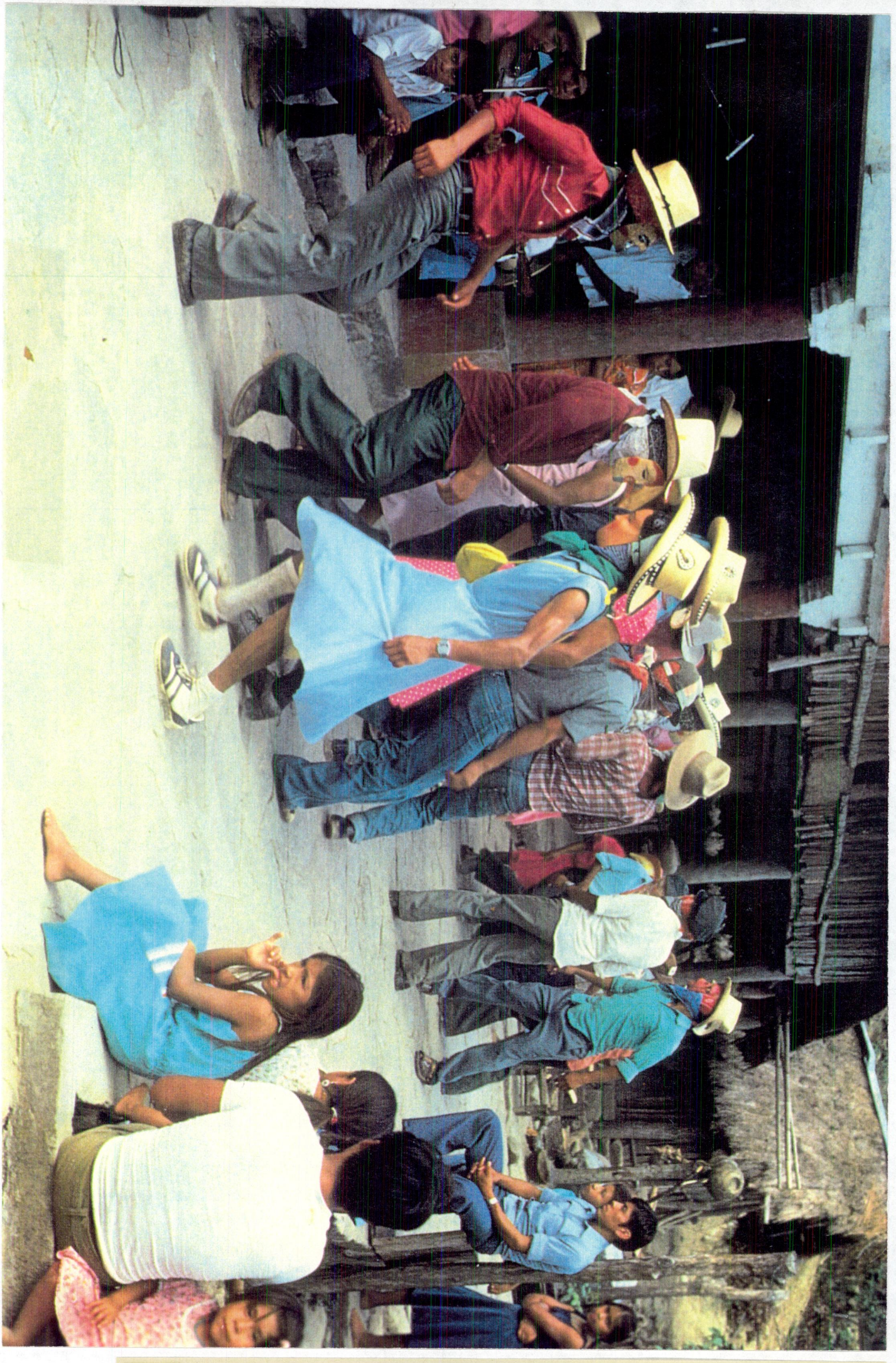


Plate 16. Xantolo dancers, Nahua village on 1st and 2nd of November.

Commercially produced masks of rubber and plastic have almost taken over the traditional wooden mask. The style of clothing has changed also.

In quite a few villages there are glimpses of traditions safely surviving today. The Huichol indians have kept their strong tradition alive, but in Mexico city, the traditional rites have changed considerably. Kodak has taken over the flashes of candles and batman has taken over the original masks. In Mexico city the sky is the limit ! The ofrendas are much more elaborate, they may not even have the 'bread of the dead' on the ofrenda. It seems to be more of a 'showy' and commercial time of year rather like our Halloween, we remember it, enjoy it, but many of us do not use it as a spiritual reunion with the dead.

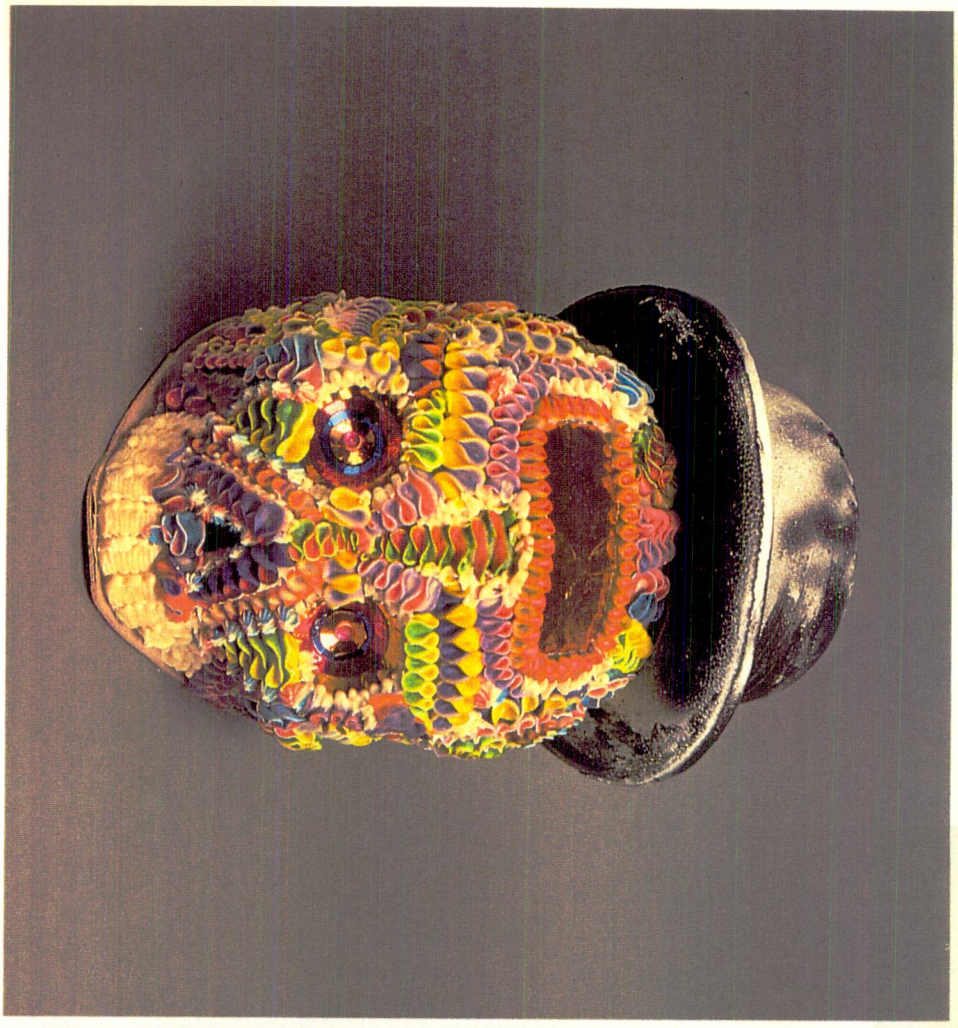
But as more ghostly and horrific our masks have become, the same has happened in Mexico city. This is the place where the skulls and skeletons have made their home. (plate 17). They rarely appear in rural areas, as with so many social changes with the effects of foreign cultural, religious and commercial influences upon the city it is predestined that the indigenous tradition would be gradually replaced with 'modern' concerns and desires, transforming the commemoration of a community's deceased loved ones, into a nation sized party.

> "Today in addition to the Mexican city repertoire are the dances and discos for Dia de Muertos, these are now a fixture, something like a 'Chelsea arts ball' in terms of elaborate costumes all associated with death, but in this case it is more macabre and holds bizarre aspects". (Carmichael, 1991, p.71)

Many public buildings, museums, galleries etc will set up an ofrenda. In museums these may be traditional copies or generalised versions of them. Everywhere in Mexico it is traditional to have breadshop windows painted depicting skeletons hugging and munching on the bread. But in Mexico city they have gone further, every shop have variants of these depictions on their windows. Competitions are held for the best ofrenda in Mexico city these run through schools also. It is a government run organisation fostering the arts and crafts also presenting more tourist attractions this way.

As I've mentioned above skulls and skeletons widely inhabit Mexico city. One manifestation of these inhabitants is the sugar skull. (plate 18). The origin of its introduction to the Day of the Dead's ceremonial inventory is somewhat obscure. On first glance I thought the skull was Mexican in its gleeful and celebratory appearance but yet again it is a Mexican adaptation of European influence.

Plate 17. Day of the Dead revellers in a Mexico city nite club.



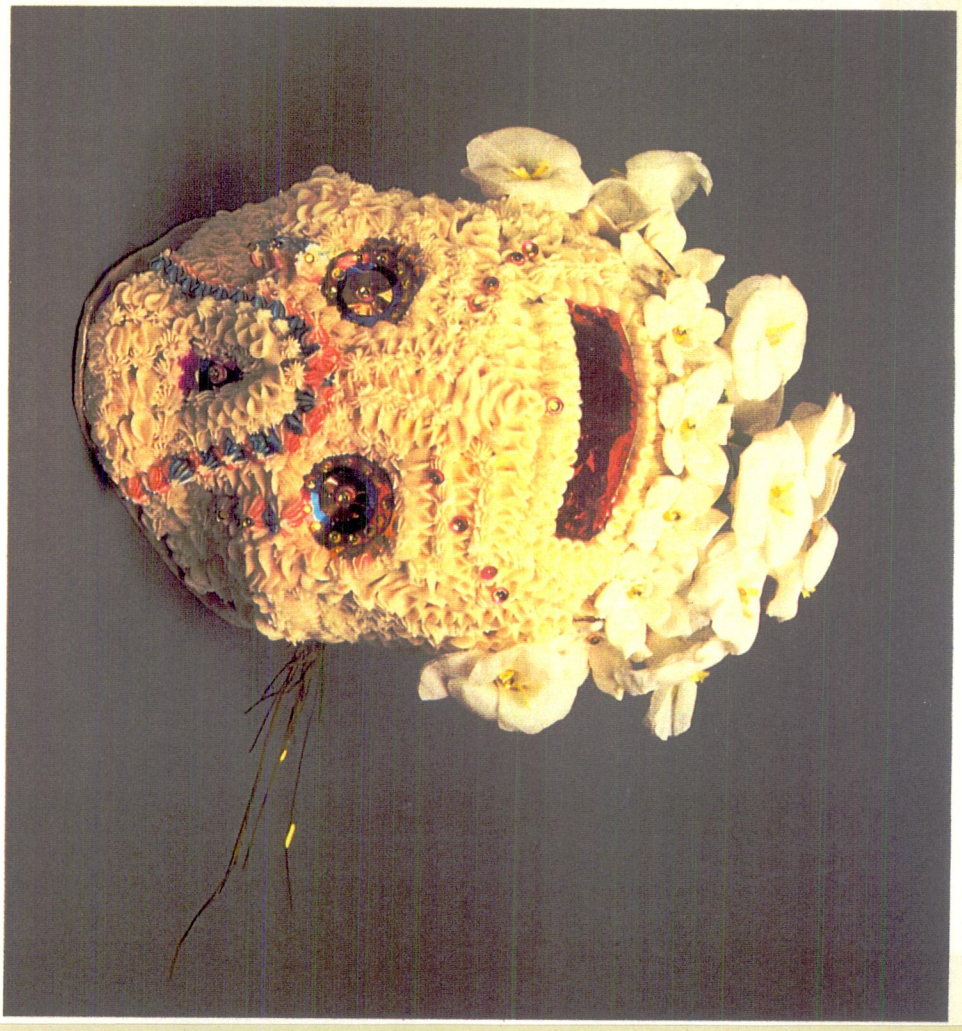


Plate 18. Lifesize sugar skulls representing a bride and groom by Wenceslao Rivas Contreras. Toluca, State of Mexico.

As Hugo Nutini suggests :

> "At first glance, sugar skulls appear to be a survival from Pre Hispanic times, perhaps having to do with the human skulls that were kept as trophies by households and offered to or displayed in honour of particular gods at certain festivals .... But the human skull as a symbol of death has a long history in Christendom and it could equally well be that the sugar skulls in the offrenda are of Catholic origin" (Carmichael, 1991, p.49)

John Lloyd Stephens in his book described by Sayer tells of his travels in the Yucatan of 1843. He discussed the possible evolution of sugar skulls. He is in a village near Kebah on the grounds of a church. Along a wall is a row of skulls. In this place he discovered skeletons and skulls wrapped in cloth, placed in glass boxes, wooden boxes, hanging baskets and some "still had long lengths of black hair still adhered to them". (Sayer, 1991, p.40) Stephens noticed skulls that had inscriptions attached. Every skull had the name of its owner and all ' begged a prayer'. One in particular read like this.

> "I beseech thee, pious and charitable reader to intercede with god for his soul, repeating an Ave Maria and a Paternoster that he may be released from purgatory, if he should be there and may go to enjoy the kingdom of heaven. Whoever the reader may be, God will reward his charity 26th July 1837" (Sayer, 1991, in passing)

The reason these skulls were presented in such a manner was that if they were buried in the ground they were forgotten, whereas having them within view and reading their prayer dispatches them to heaven faster.

Stephens has an illustration of one skull with an inscription on it, it is in the same place that the name of the intended recipient gets the sugar skull today. (plate 19). It could be a direct descent of the tradition of hanging the skulls. This may have died out due to the fact that it was less grizzly and more hygienic to make sugar skulls for this occasion instead. Today there are new styles of sugar skulls appearing, every year they seem to undergo more rapid transformations than the animals, fruits, flowers etc., that are sold at this time.

Even though Mexico cities 'adaptation' of the Day of the Dead which has become less traditional, I still view it as being typically Mexican involving masking oneself and enjoying the fiesta. Certain villages choose to be how they are, to celebrate this occasion in the modern or traditional form. It is important for them to keep their heritage alive no matter what shape it takes. In contemporary Mexico the celebration is kindled by a story of old.

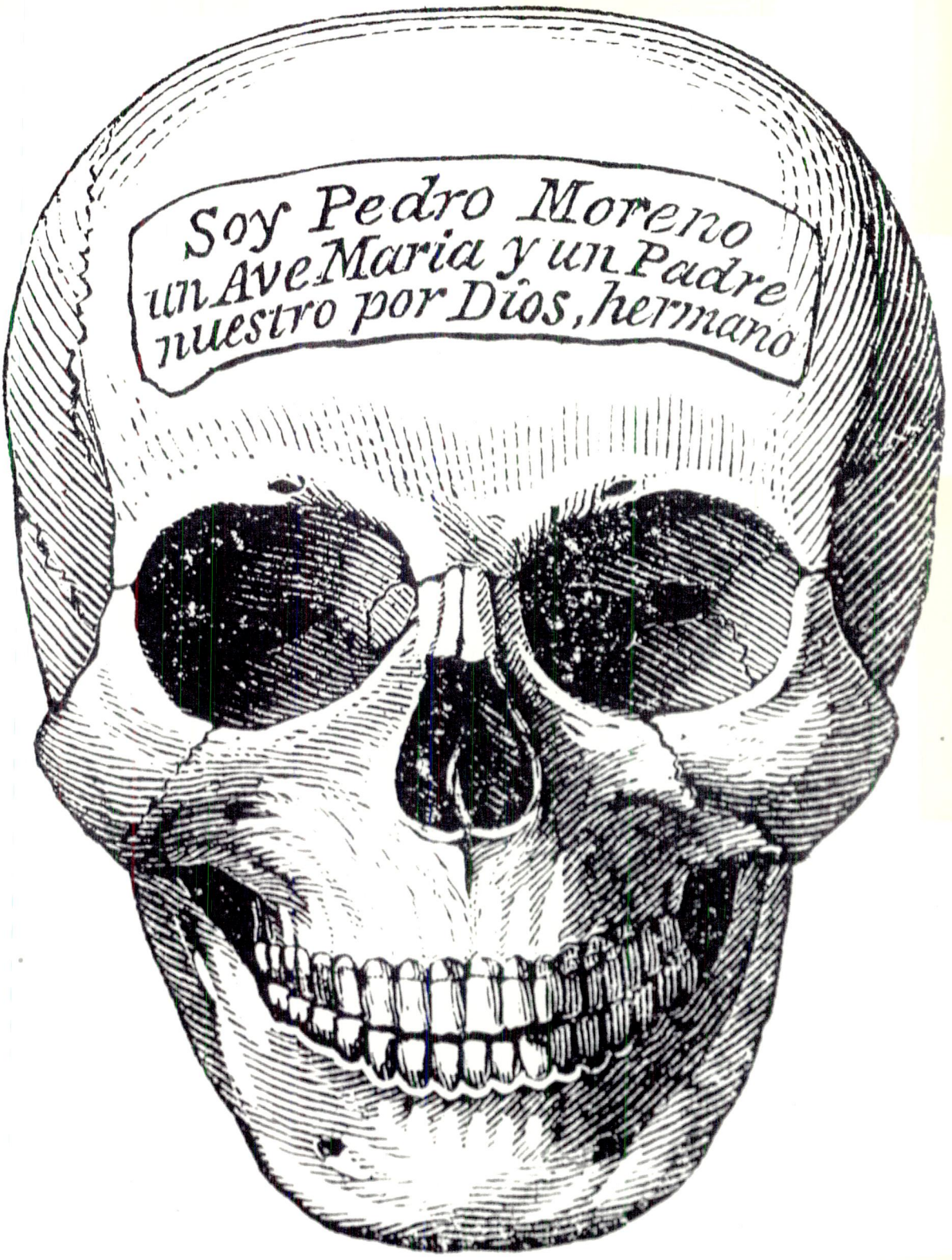


Plate 19. Engraving of a skull seen by John Lloyd Stephens in the Yucatan, mid nineteenth century.

It is about an event which happened long ago concerning a man who did not believe in the dead. He did not wait for the return of his dead parents and made no preparations for the day of the dead. As usual he went off with his friends. While he was returning he noticed people behind him. He realised these were the dead laden down with foods and presents the living had offered. He then noticed his own parents who were sobbing and holding in their hands broken pieces of pottery and candles were burning their hands. Having witnessed this he didn't doubt the dead anymore and he made lavish foods for the dead. He soon fell ill. The food that he made had made served as food offered at his own funeral. This story varies from village to village but it seems to be this that helps keep the celebration alive. (interview with Fredy Mendez, Carmichael, 1991, p.75)

"The day of the dead is the most distinctively Mexican of celebrations has become for those far from home a focus for the preservation of natural identity. The day of the dead is both alive and well both in its native land and abroad wherever Mexican culture is celebrated. (Sayer, 1991 p.71)

CHAPTER III

SHAMANISM

In our society today we know scientifically where rain, disease and death come from. We see our world as being real and rational and have scientific answers for everything that happens. To our ancient ancestors, this was not the case. In a hunting society man was ferocious and cruel in order to survive and at the same time was timid and weak in comparison to the forces of nature and animals that hunted him. In the mind of early man the borderline between the concrete and the symbolic was somewhat blurred. In order to gain control over the natural, man tried to become one with the elements and to be like his natural environment. This can be seen in cave paintings with depictions of animals and man united, this was the beginning of shamanism, the mask followed from this. He became the killer and the victim, the worshipper and the worshipped. It seemed that men were animals and animals were gods.

In ancient Mexico the idea of mystic unity between man and animals was widespread and important in the animalist beliefs of the ancient indians. The shaman was seen as a 'spiritual technician' who had the ability to allow his soul to travel to the spirit world and bring animal spirits to earth so that hunger could be avoided. The shaman was seen as the magician or medicine man. Resulting from his training he could directly contact the spirit world (with the aid of crowns, masks, bones etc) and serve as a guide to the members of his tribe. The shaman also had the ability to cure members of his village from soul loss and magical illness by travelling to the spirit world and helping the helpless from there.

The shaman used bone masks as they were readily available to the ancients. This material was easily worked with simple tools. Bone had mystical and magical properties within the shaman religion of Mexico. The bone embodied the soul and spirit of the animal. "These masks were (and still are though rarely) made from parts of that animal such as the bone or hide and thus more directly shared in the spiritual power of the animal itself" (Cordry, 1980, p.113) (Plate 20)

Shaman religion also held a strong belief in skin masks. In Pre Columbian times masks were made from the human skin of sacrificial victims.
Donal Cordry writes :

Plate 20. Moyiganga Procession mask. Made form the pelvis of a cow or other large mammal, Guerrero, pelvis bone IV.B.C.

> "They beheaded two female slaves at the top of the steps before the altar and the idols. There they flayed their bodies and faces and cut off their thigh bones. In the morning the leading indians put on the skins even the skin of the sacraficial face like a mask". (Cordry, 1980, p.86)

The sacrificial victims represented gods themselves thus these skin masks which were the faces of the gods represented the ultimate religious transformation for their wearers.

Crowns are a specific shamanistic icon. Because shamanism was widespread through Pre Hispanic Mexico crowns are thought to have existed at this time as there are many indications of their existence, although they were made of perishable materials. (plate 21) Andreas Lommel tells us that :

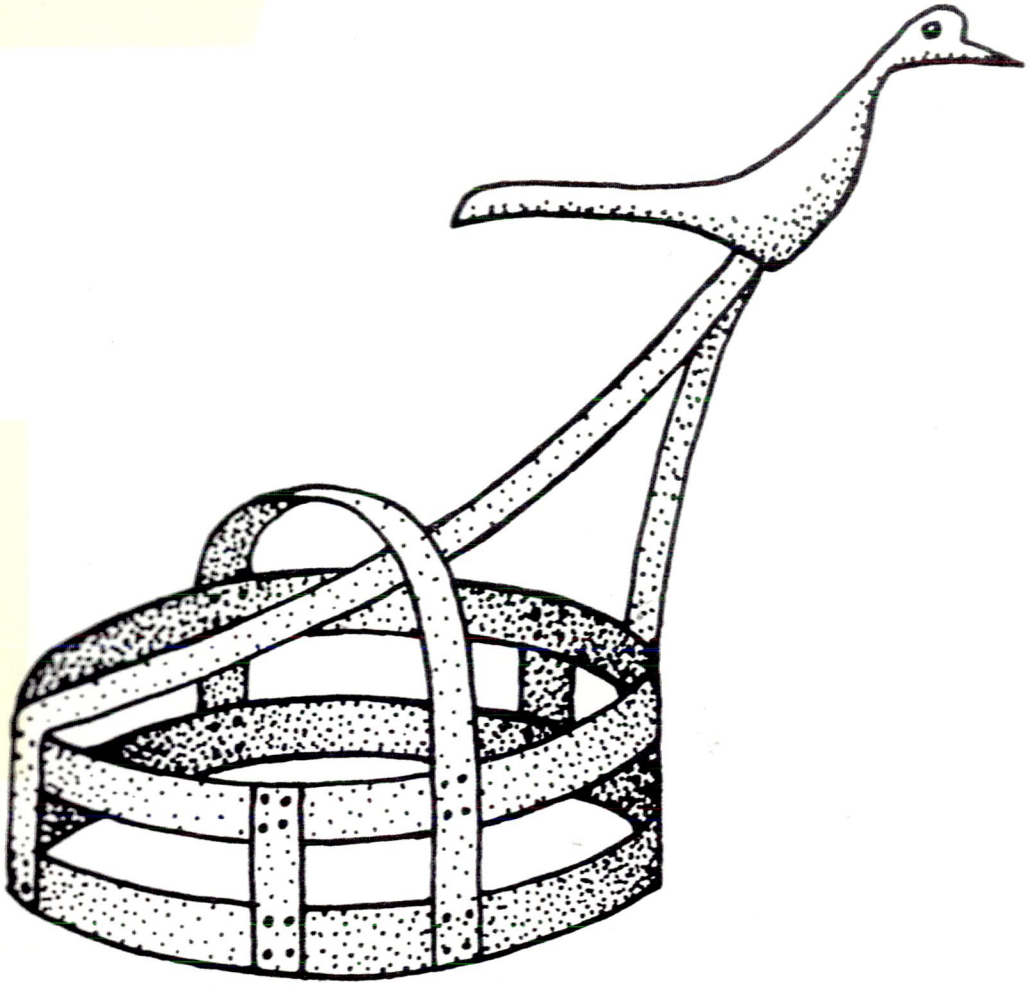
> "after a Buryat shaman undergoes a special ritual initiation he receives an iron shaped hat like a crown .... Among the Alti people these crowns were sometimes worn instead of masks". (Lommel, 1967, p.108-109)

Donning a mask was much more than just adopting a disguise; it was the equivalent to temporarily removing the personality of the wearer and replacing it with a being or spirit from the other world. It was a profound mysterious and magical transformation. The spiritual act of taking possession of or gathering the spirit represented by the mask to a point of becoming possessed by it or becoming it was the goal of the masked person as J.E. Cirlot states

> ".... therefore metamorphosis must be hidden - and hence the need for the mask secrecy tends towards transfiguration : it helps what one is to become and what one would like to be; and this is what constitutes its magic character .... a mask is equivalent to a chrysalis".
> (Cirlot, 1962, p.195-196)

This further explains why in a lot of masks the eye holes greatly restrict the wearers field of visions. They are so small the wearer must be entirely concentrated on their inner world of visions so the wearer waits passively for the coming of the spirits. As is well known one can best prepare oneself for an inner experience with ones eyes closed.

Through these manifestations masks developed as a part of the shamanistic basis in the Pre-Hispanic indian religions. They were used to transform the wearers spiritually and psychologically into gods and supernatural forces on another level of consciousness.



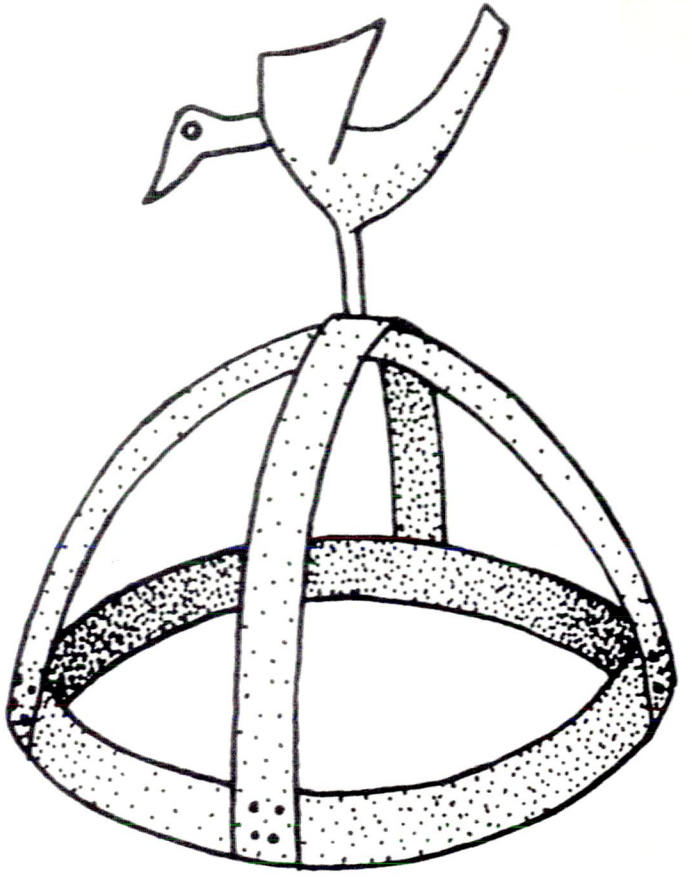


Plate 21. Sericrown (left); Nahua crown (right).

Seri crown (*left*); Nahua crown (*right*).

Masks were instruments that allowed the wearers to contact and acquire some control over the forces that were believed to affect their lives and community. A major part of this force was the animal forces hence an evolution of anamilistic iconography occurred which is widely used throughout Mexico both in the past and present.

Undoubtedly the jaguar (called tigre in Spanish) was the single most important animal to the indians of central and southern Mexico (plate 22) in Ancient civilisations the jaguar and the eagle represented war "flower wars" were called this as they were used to catch enemies or captives to be sacrificed. The warriors in these wars, normally wore terrifying masks of eagles and jaguars to create fear amongst the enemy. The wearer was to possess the qualities of the animal / god represented in the mask.

The jaguar is a god in its own right, the lord of all animals, associated with the Aztec god Tezcaltipoca and with caves, water, fertility and other hostile forces in nature because of the jaguars own fierce nature. The jaguar became a fertility symbol by being tamed by the appropriate rituals. The jaguar today is still one of the most popular mask types which is very surprising because the animal is almost extinct in Mexico now. Most if not all mask makers have never seen a real jaguar, what they use are the traditional masks as their source material.

The use of 'tigre' masks and costumes has again Pre Hispanic origins as Cordry notes. The dance of the tigre was prohibited in 1631 by mandate of a holy inquisition because of its offenses against our religion. (Cordry, 1980, p. 153)

In todays tigre dance the principal player is dressed as a tiger, that is that he wears a wood cloth or leather tigre mask and a matching coverall suit. The purpose of this dance is to protect the crops, domestic animals and field workers threatened by the tigre and to ensure crop fertility and abundance. The tigre is caught and killed time and time again.

Plate 22. Tigre mask. Tecani Dance. Guerrero IV.A.C.

A similar dance to this is the Caiman dance. This dance was performed until fairly recently in the Balons river area in Guerrero. Like the tigre the central character in this is the Caiman who, like the shamanistic hunting gods is both the destroyer and giver of life. He eats the fish that the people depend on. He is transformed into a symbol of abundance through the caiman dance in which he is 'caught' by the village fisherman and this assures good fishing in the year to come.

Animal iconography being rife in Mexico before the Conquest was somewhat changed when the Spanish friars tried to convert the natives into Christianity. They discovered it was easy in one aspect which was getting the individuals naguals (an animal spirit received on the day of ones birth) and simply adding horns to the nagual mask. The adaptation fitted in well with the church framework. The christian idea that it was evil to have animal characteristics or a dual nature (the Spanish brought the devil with them). Also these false gods were obviously the work of the devil and must have been devils themselves. Every mask that has animals on them would be considered today as being devil masks. (plate 23) There are two basic types of devils, the traditional european devils on top of the mask, and wild anamalistic devils. In the Pastorela dance the devil figure is now viewed more as a prankster rather than a figure of evil. He will go around keeping control in fiestas and telling jokes. Normally it is regarded as great fun by those concerned.

The influences in Mexico changed a lot of their beliefs which will remain lost in history but the Mexicans being strong where tradition was concerned kept alive much of their indigenous religious heritage by adhering to christianity, but still keeping their own essence.

> ".... Idols were constantly being hidden in caves not just with the purpose of protecting them against the fury of the missionaries, but in order to allow the indians to continue with their sacrifices ...."(Cervantes, 1991, p.6)

Today many elements of shamanism have been lost or destroyed or gone underground during the 470 years of domination by the Spanish and Catholic church. In a peculiar sense the surviving pagan rituals tend to coexist with the church.

Curanderos (Curers) and Brujos (witches) can be found in almost every village, town and major city in the country. While they do not use masks for their rituals they do share in many functional characteristics with shamans such as having direct contact with supernatural beings and curing individuals from soul loss or magical terror.

Plate 23. Devil masks, Nahua settlements of Copana toyac, Huey cantenango, Huitzapula and Colotlipa in the state of Guerrero.

In Fredy Mendezs' interview in the 'Skeleton at the feast' book he describes the survival of shamanism of how is seen in his village today.

> ".... we are not able to talk with the dead ... though there are those who can, some people possess this knowledge. Because they study books on Satan they know how to converse with the dead. Individuals can visit these people if they want to contact their dead. A murder victim could say who and why they were killed. Several women near Papantla possess these powers .... (Carmichael, 1991 p.80)

The shaman initiation has almost totally disappeared from Mexico except in peripheral groups such as the Yagui and the Huichol groups. A co-existence appears again in the Yagui indians. When the indian instruments such as the flute and the drum are being played the players wear masks fully on their faces. But when european instruments are being used (violin and harp) the mask is worn on the side or back of the head. The Yagui group give no explanation for this, it could well mean that transformation being fully masked did not fit in with the European / Christian belief. So when european instruments are played masks are purely for decoration. Although there is a Pre-Hispanic history of wearing a mask at the back of the head. "The codex Borgia shows a mask that may represent Xolotl worn on the back of the head of Cuaxolotl. This plate in the Borgia signifies duality". (Cordry, 1980, p. 148)

The most direct survival of shamanism is to be found specifically in the Huichol indians. Each year Hichol village send groups of pilgrims from the mountains of Nayarit and Jalisco to Wirikota in the high desert of San Luis Potesi led by their village shaman the pilgrims walk over 30 days and cover over 600 miles before they return (yet in recent years cars and vans have been used instead of feet). During the trip they fast, drink very little water and ritually purify their souls.

In part the journey to Wirikota is made to collect peyote a hallucinogenic cactus that is sacred to the Huichol because the visions it produces allows them to directly see and interact with their gods. In part it is also a spiritual journey to the centre of the Huichol universe to the place where creation began, to a state of mind in which each pilgrim experiences a direct personal communication with their gods. (plate 24)

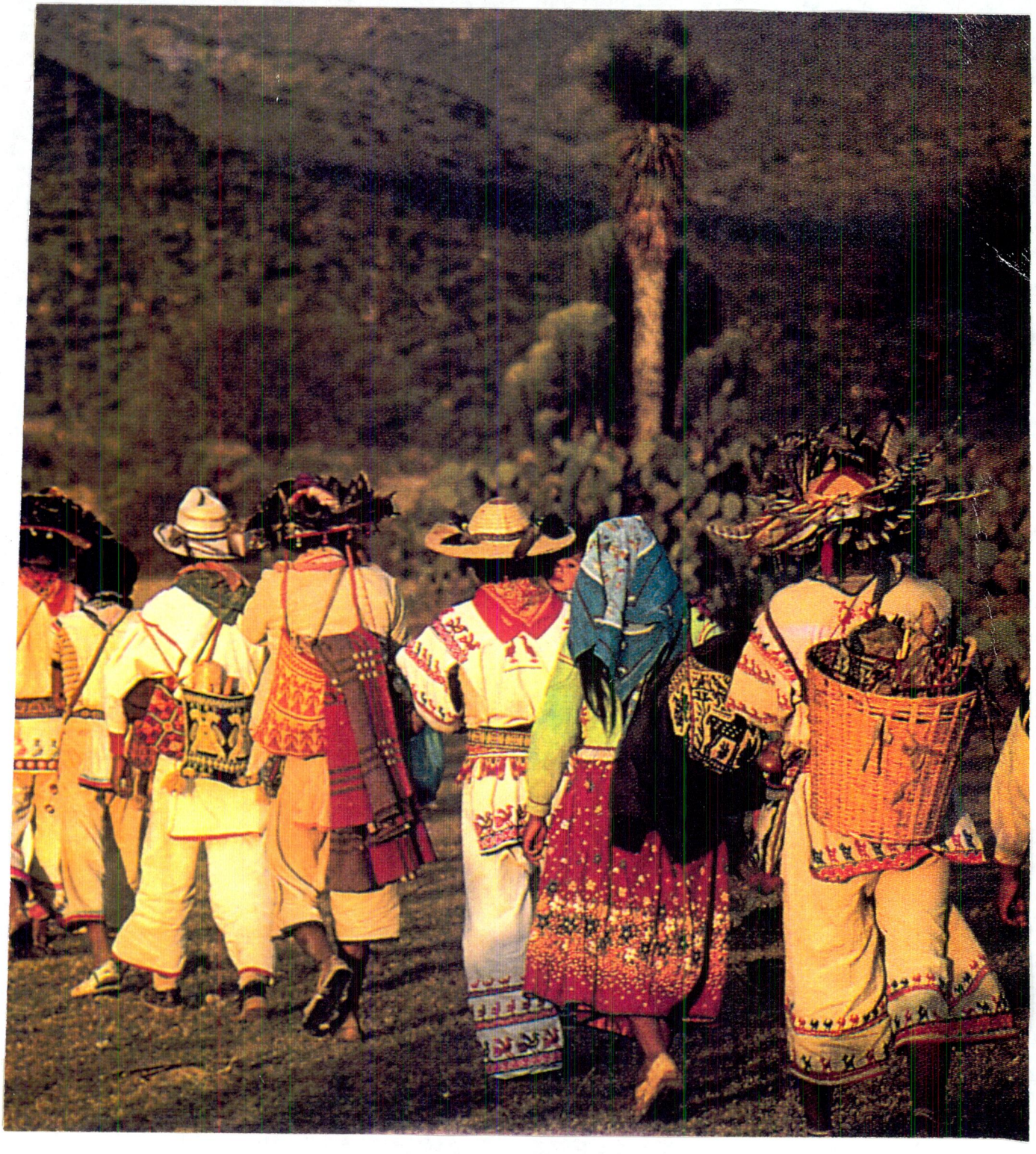


Plate 24. Huichol pilgrims.

Today as 'progress' reaches more and more remote indian villages, belief in shamanism and its masks is fast diminishing. In villages where 'progress' has not yet reached (namely the Yagui and Huichol villages) still practise shamanism today. The Conquest destroyed a lot of the original shaman religion by imposing other religions on it. The New Conquest which is basically our society of television, cars and tourists which fades even more of the shamanistic belief. Young village children and adolescents see their lives as primitive because we say it is. I don't think so, to be so in tune with spirits and other worlds in travelling to them is so much more advanced that I could ever imagine the society I belong ever achieving.

CHAPTER IV

MASKS

Masks are worn today of course, in many european countries at Carnivals, Christmas etc; people appear disguised as pirates, witches which ever picturesque or grotesque character takes their fancy. But it is a disguise only and the wearers have no desire of actually personifying the character whose mask they hide behind. Originally every mask was steeped in significance and the mask itself, or rather the person wearing it, mysteriously represented some power or spirit.

To a large extent the original significance of the mask has been forgotten in our modern world. Today we talk of unmasking someone meaning that we have exposed them for what they really are. The mask was much more than just a figure of speech. It's use was undoubtedly an important aspect of the religious and social aspect of Mexican ancestors.

Mexico has always been a mask making culture that stretches back for thousands of years. Many modern mask types, mask symbols and mask making techniques derive from this Pre Hispanic heritage. The objective of this section is to show that the four major influences Spanish, Catholic Church, Africans and todays commercial/tourist influence from our western society have changed how and what masks represent today from their past. I plan to write about the three different types of mask makers left in Mexico today and the array of mask materials used in the past and present. There are thousands of different Mexican masks each having its own history, dance and personal story to tell. But because I cannot discuss all of these individually I have chosen two specific types of masks which are the death and duality masks that are of interest for me as they further portray the image of the death character in old Mexico.

The surviving clay and stone masks are commonly classified as mortuary masks because they were usually discovered in tombs. Some of these masks have no eye holes to see through and were probably specifically made for the dead. Others of a later period such as the Gurrero and Chontal masks do have eye openings which could perhaps mean their possible use. It could be possible that these masks were made for the living because they have eye holes to see through, a space for the nose and even nostril holes so that the wearer could breathe through.

The sides of the masks were perforated so it is thought that the mask could be worn. There are three different explanations according to Cordry.

1. "These masks were possibly made for, worn by the living and simply burned with their owners.
2. "They may have been used on wooden idols within the tomb. The idols could have long since disintegrated.
3. "All this wonderful work could have been done so that the wearer could wake up comfortably in another world".
(Cordry, 1989, in passing)

One interesting Pre-Hispanic use of masks is found in the use of clay funeral offerings that depict a dog wearing the mask of the deceased. These offerings which are common in Colima show the belief that the Aztec god Xolotl in his guise as a dog leads the deceased in a journey to the underworld.

There are not to my knowledge any masks put on the deceased when they are buried today. The depiction of death through masks in Mexico is generally one of a skull. These masks are worn mostly in Mexico city as decoration in a similar way that we would wear our Halloween masks. These skull masks are happy representations of death. The skull (skeleton) was brought to Mexico by the Catholic Church, it was of origin depicted as a threatening morbid and macabre Harbringer of death which the Mexicans turned into a festival type icon. (Plate 25)

Duality masks could also be seen in one respect as a type of death mask with the representation of life and death in unison. It is viewed as two aspects of the one whole. It is a mask separated by a line down the centre of the face with each side reflecting the 'opposite' of the 'one', examples of this are female:male (human), good:evil (morality), day:night (time). All cultures are full of examples like these. A typical Mexican example of these representations would be of animals and gods. Masks are found with Tezcatlipoca with burning or mirrored eyes and the jaguar and Quetzulcoatl with the plumed serpent. (Plate 26)

Modern masks frequently incorporate many of these identifying symbols. Because of the long time span and the lack of documentation it is impossible to say that these symbols are direct descent, or simply represent traditional motifs that have been passed on from generation to generation but have lost their original meanings.

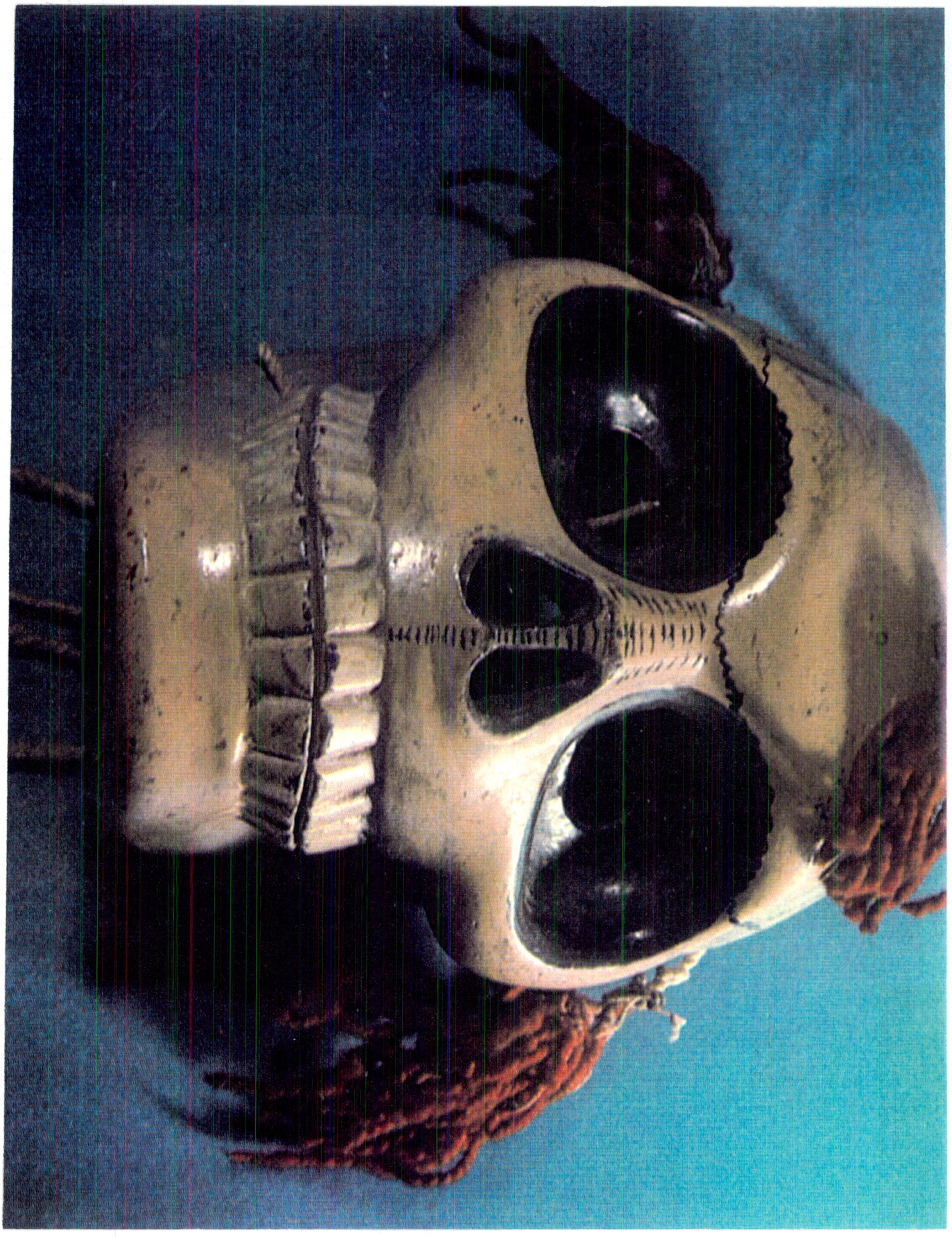


Plate 25. Death mask, Day of the Dead, Filiberto Lopez Ortiz, Mexico.

Plate 26. Life/Death (dual) clay mask. Middle, Pre-Classic culture, Mexico.

Duality is represented in many ways, one in particular is from the twisted mouth masks. (plate 27). One side of the face is pulled up in an upward smile and the other side is stretched in a downward frown. This twisted mouth would also depict facial paralysis (a common illness in Pre-Hispanic times). This dual nature has been an important motif for over two thousand years in Mexico. Possibly the twisted mouth in the rastrero mask character depicts both the hunter and the hunted as a continuance of the Olmec half man/half jaguar theme as a dualistic nature. (plate 28) This meaning of the twisted mouth is only a possibility through a lack of documentation.

Almost all of the gods and supernatural forces of the Mexican indian religions were, and are dualistic. Generally this duality is shown in two basic forms : sexual duality in that most gods are both female and male at the same time representing good and evil and the destroyer and bringer of fertility. One modern example of this type of religious duality is to be found in the first fruits rites of the Huichol indians.

Performed after the first rain of the rainy season, this ceremony uses the mask of the Tate Nakawe (grandmother growth) in a procession around a ceremonial fire. The person representing the Tate Nakawe follows behind the person playing the part of the Tate Wari (grandfather fire) when the ceremonial fire is dowsed the Tate Nakawe mask is removed and the sex of both gods is reversed as part of the symbolic plea for crop fertility. The smoke from the fire acts as a prayer to the sky for rain. (plate 29)

Cultural Influences :

It is hard to identify precisely all the cultural influences on the indians and their folk art that were introduced during the colonial period. There are four major cultural influences (as I would see it) 1. The Spanish, 2. The Catholic Church, 3. The African slaves, 4. our western society (tourists primarily). These influences are not distributed equally throughout Mexico.

The Spanish

The Spanish had a strong folk art tradition particularly in masks. This tradition in the new world was in the form of mascaradas. This was described by Irving A. Leonard as being a parade of people dressed in costumes and wearing peculiar masks.

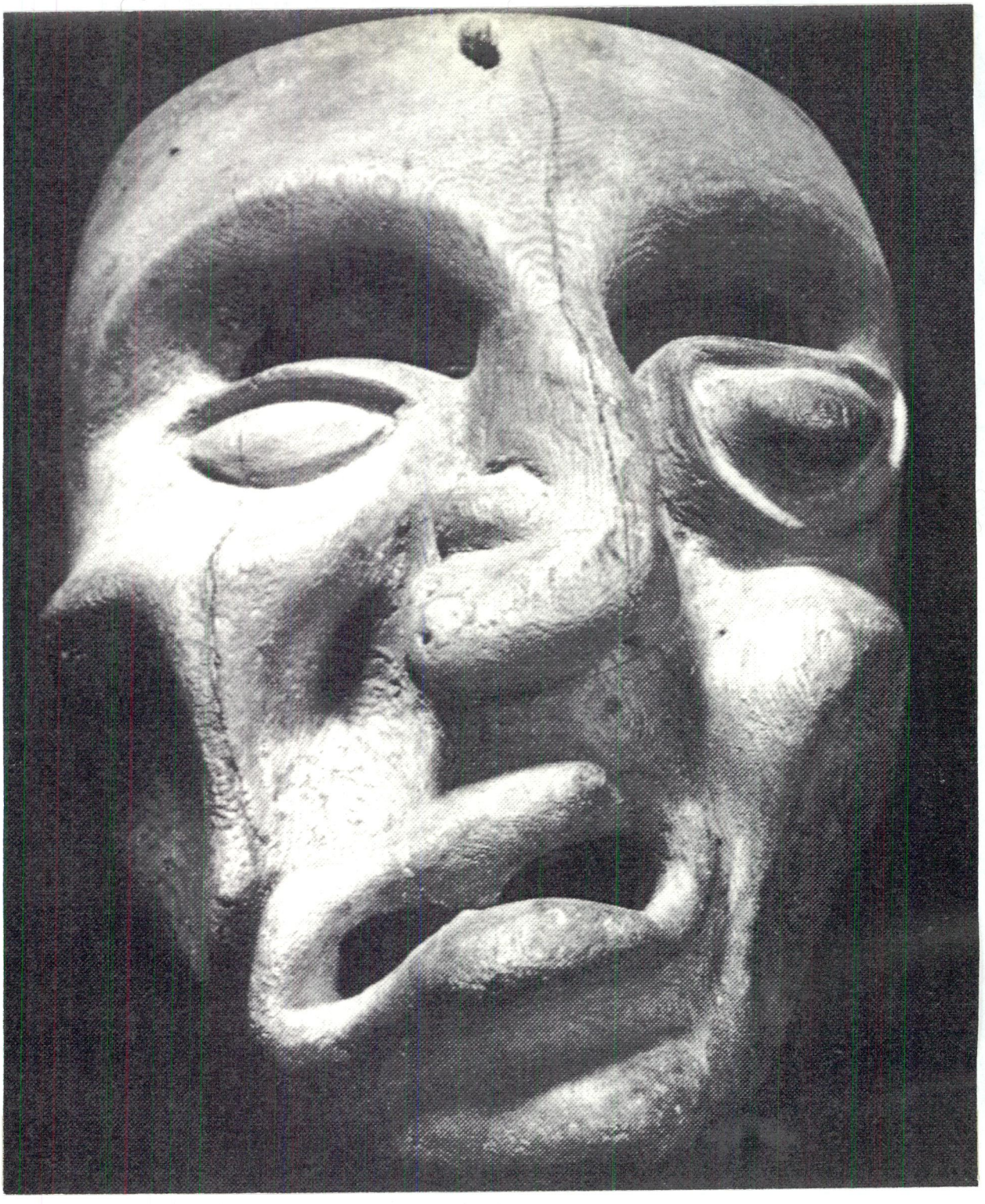


Plate 27. Viejo mask, Guerrero, State of Mexico.

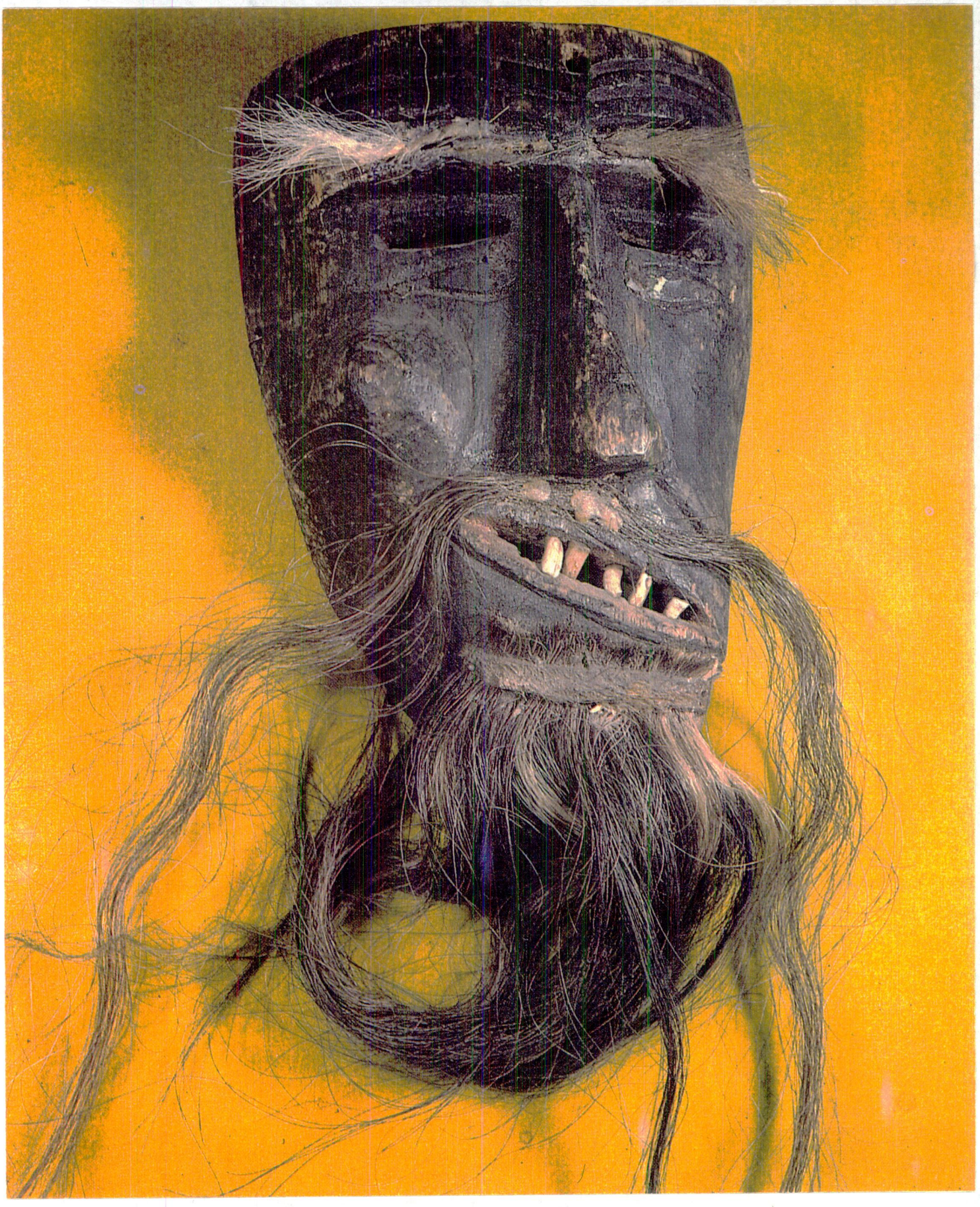


Plate 28. Rastrero mask, Tecuani Dance, Guerrero.

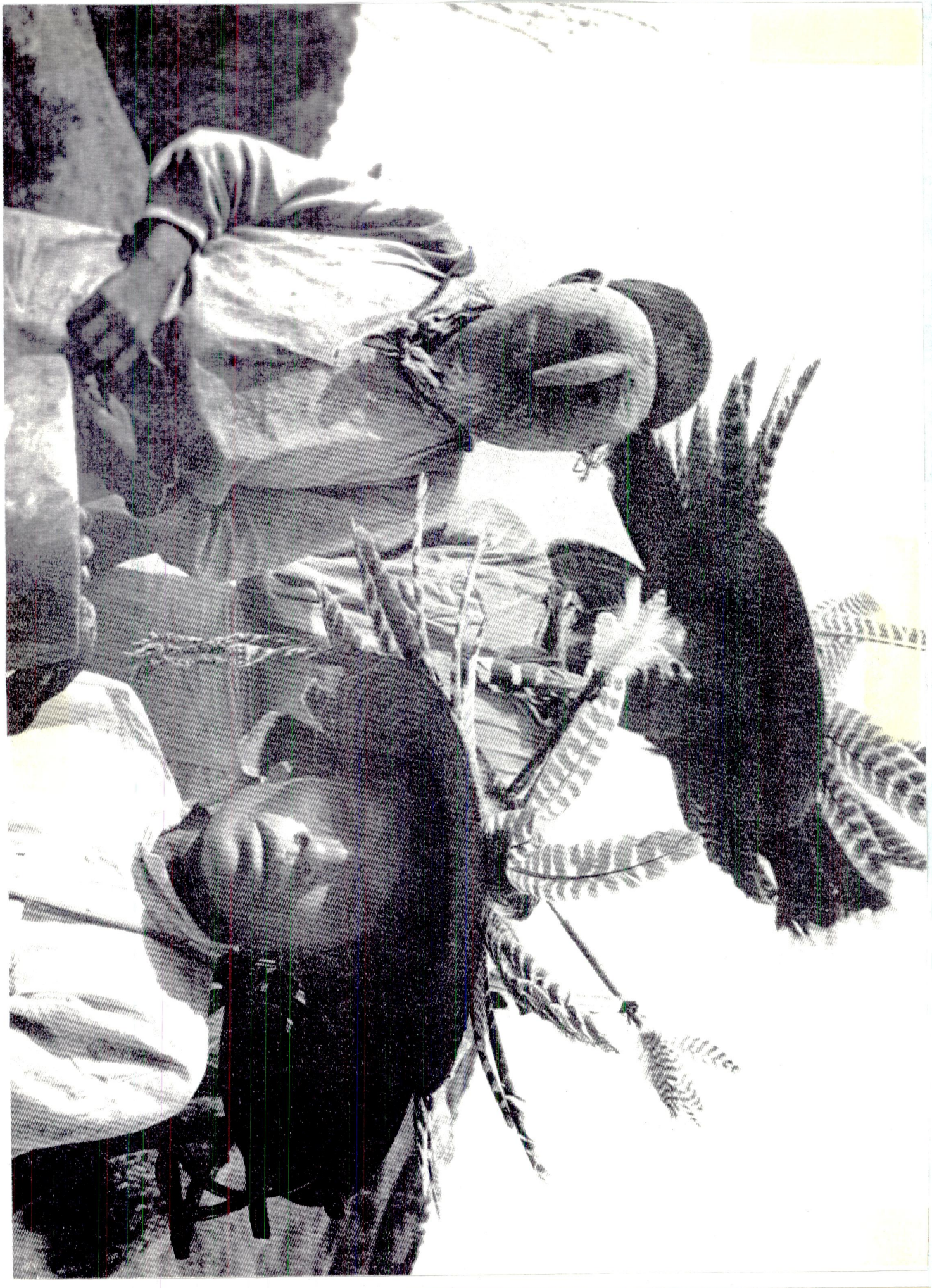


Plate 29. 'First Fruits' Fiesta, la Mesa, Nayarit, 1937.

They paraded by day and night on foot, horses or any other animal they could ride on. They represented historical, mythological or biblical people.

> "To an illiterate public the mascarada was like an animated magazine, bringing before their eyes a semblance of things real and imagined; it instructed, it diverted, entertained and often expressed their moods, their reverence and their resentment". (I. Leonard, 1959, p. 118-120)

Catholic Church

The second major influence was the Catholic Church. The missionaries made the most direct contact with the natives as they tried to suppress the indian religions and replace them with christianity. Every indian group had contact with this european Christian culture which had a rich complex iconography, complete with religious celebrations and processions.

> "The church did not fail to recognise this general passion for pageantry which it shrewdly utilized to its own advantage by sponsoring processions, displaying the richly clothed icons and ornate symbols of the faith with all its pomp splendour and wealth at its command".
> (I. Leonard, 1959, p. 118)

African Slaves

The third major influence was that of the African slaves. The African people were brought over to Mexico to work on the sugar cane. Although slavery never reached anywhere near the levels here as it did in the U.S.A. When the Africans first arrived in Mexico they were perceived by the indians as being very powerful and were given great status. "Tarascans applied soot to their faces before defending themselves in battle to acquire some of the power of the blacks" (Oettinger, 1990, p. 126).
The Africans with their strong, mask making tradition were accepted readily into communities where there they swapped and integrated African designs onto Mexican masks. (plate 30). Today there are a number of Indian groups that would be classified a negroid. Through the descent of Mexican/African masks they are now classified as Negrotos. They are often (people dressed in the Negrotos mask) masquerading as clowns, controlling crowds or paying homage to the saints. The dances are performed many times during the year.

Since the effect the two groups had on each other was not documented by the Spanish or the Church it is difficult to ascertain how much or little the African masks influenced the indian traditions.

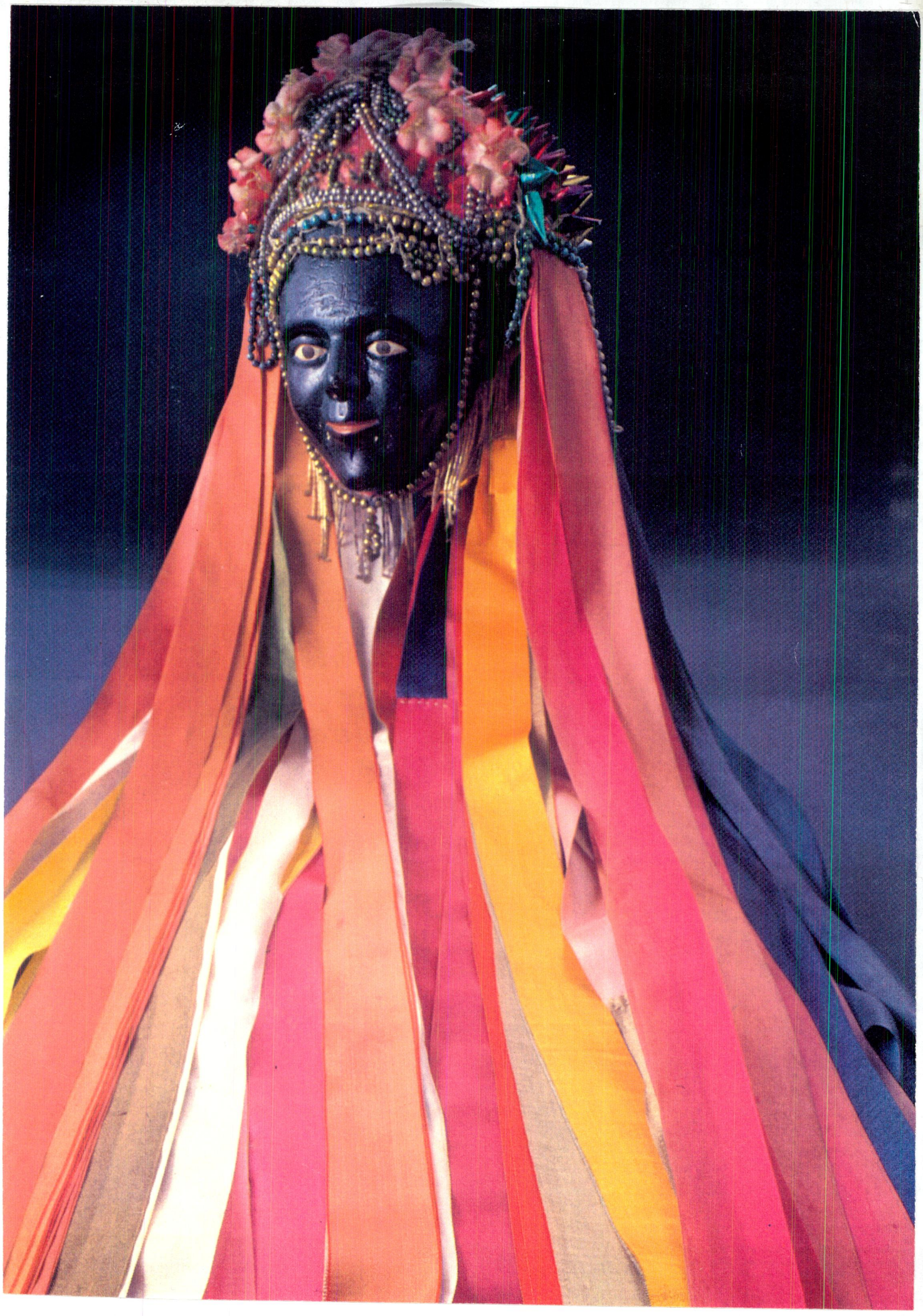


Plate 30. Negrito mask, Area of Nahuatzin, Michoacan 1930's.

Western Society

The fourth major influence is the most recent and probably the most subtly damaging of all the perversions to the original styles of the ancient masks. Mask making is disappearing in its original form as a religious/ceremonial activity this century and is becoming merely another retail business providing craft goods for the annually expanding tourist industry, due to the influence of Mexico's adaptation into a capitalist economic nation. Villages that took two to three days on horseback to get to now take two to three hours to get to because roads have been built and frequent busses run through these villages linking each village and the cities together, hence bringing tourist and modern influence. Medical care has improved so the population has increased with this, there is a shift from subsistence agriculture to more modern farming techniques. These have caused a major flight of the population from urban villages to the cities.

Over the past decade or so the government launched a major effort to the teaching of Spanish, this resulting in the loss of a lot of native indian languages corresponding with the loss of cultural traditions. Electricity has reached a lot of remote villages hence forwarding television and radio. The glamour of this 'advanced' race in the cities has ensured further flight from the village to the excitement of the cities. As the erosion of language and traditional values increase the function and importance of masks have also eroded. Fewer and fewer people see the use in becoming mask makers. Thus in many villages the craft of mask making is left to old men and is fast disappearing.

Those that do continue with mask making do so almost exclusively for commercial reasons. The symbols still exist but their meanings have died as the influx of tourists increases every year. Mask makers produce wooden plastic, rubber and wax masks simply for the tourist industry. (plate 31) Many of these masks may be mass produced in factories. The tourist has shown the Mexican villagers what their world is like, unfortunately for tradition, these villagers want more of the western/technological world and less of their own.

> "A good number of the craftsmen who made the masks shown in this book died from 10-40 years ago and their successors know little of their tradition" (Cordry, 1980, in passing)

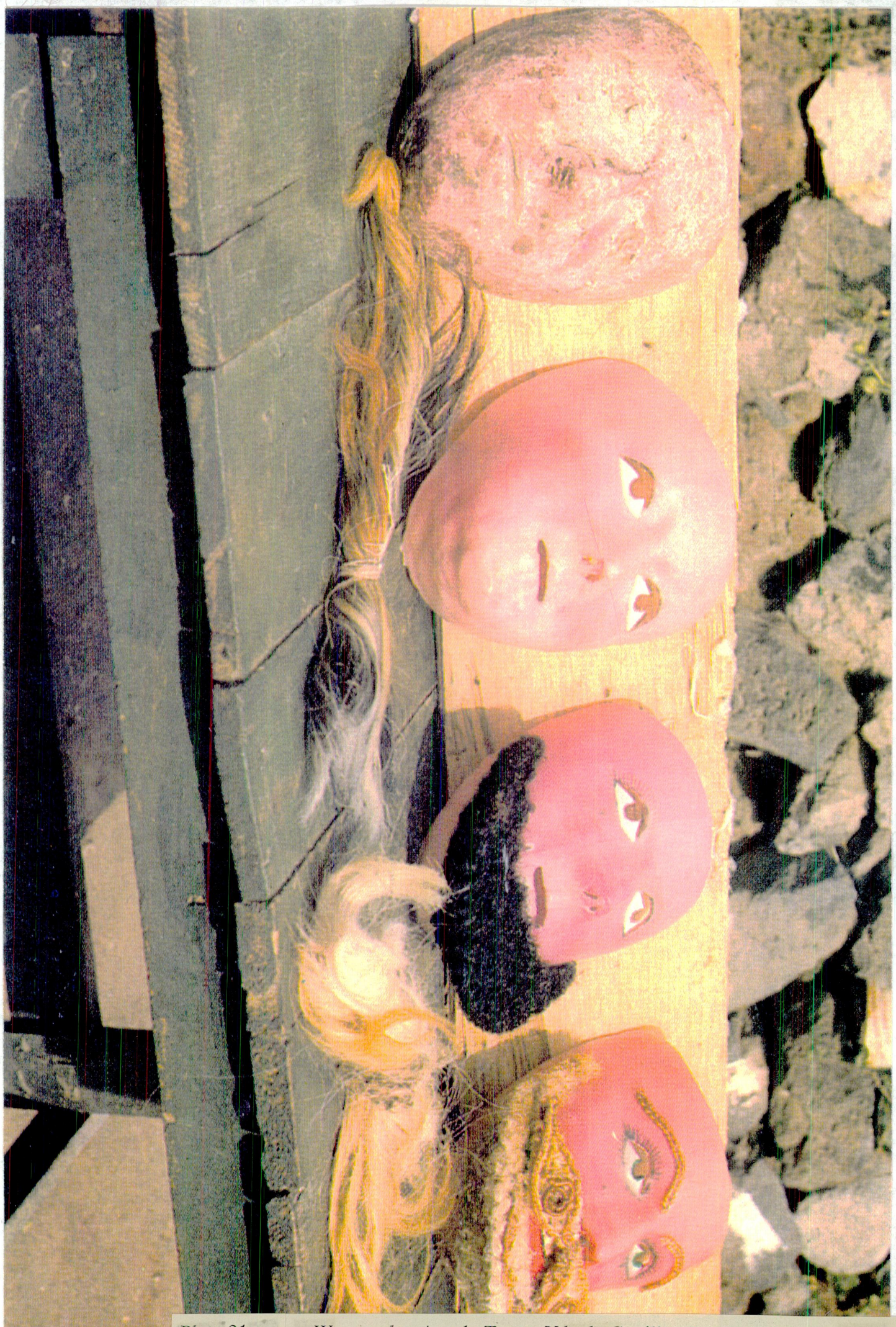


Plate 31. Wax masks, Angela Torres Vda de Castillo, Santa Maria Astahuacan, Federal District, 1974

There is still an array of mask materials used in Mexico, varying from papier mache to wooden masks. The ancient materials were basically bone, crowns, and skin masks. They were dealt with in the shamanism chapter. Wood was also in common use with the ancients because of its popularity today. The ancient masks would have disintegrated due to climatic conditions. Wood was and is seen to have spiritual properties. Particular trees like the maguey plant are thought to have magical properties which give the mask made from this material life and a soul protection.

There are three basic types of mask makers in Mexico today. 1. the santero, 2. professional mask maker, 3. amateur mask maker.

1. The Santero makes masks and church figures. He would usually have the approval of the local priest so his tools would be of a high standard also have access to good paint, hair, glass eyes etc. This person would produce fine well carved masks and religious statues with his own distinct style he would be known from village to village. (plate 32)
2. The professional mask maker who has neither the santeros training or standard of realism creates his masks with a certain naivety. He would have come into the trade by the degree of artistic flair he would also have inherited the craft form father or grandfather. This mask maker is likely to know the symbolism of masks and will incorporate these into the mask design appropriately. His work would be widely known. He would sell to other villages where the masks may be used in dances that they would not be originally indented. For example animal masks made for an animal dance with definite Pre-Hispanic origins often turn up elsewhere as devils for a devil dance. (Cordry, 1980, p. 105) (plate 33)
3. The amateur is a poor man who can't afford to purchase or rent a mask but has made a vow to the patron saint of his village to the dance on the Dia del Patron. This mask may be of an artful naive fashion. Its likely to be crudely carved and unpainted except perhaps for a bit of shiny oil paint here and there. (plate 34) (Cordry, 1980, in passing)

Masks, both past and present, were used to fend off evil spirits. They played an important role in ancient Mexico and still do to a certain degree today. The role of masks is different today for commercial, spiritual and aesthetic reasons. Mexico is rapidly changing and so many influences have entered that the mask had to change with it, yet they still manage to hold their own beauty and individual Mexican style.

Plate 32. Santero mask, state of Puebla.

Plate 33. Animal masks, Jose Rodriquez (professional mask maker), area unknown.

Plate 34. Comic mask (amateur mask maker) San Potosi.

CONCLUSION

In the indian world the use of masks functioned as a means of magical transformation from the persons soul or persona into some god or creature, depending on what the mask depicted. It had a shamanistic quality involving a journey into the spirit world. Life for the indian had no higher function than to flow into death. Sacrifice was the ultimate transformation as the blood was seen as giving cosmic health to the earth and also in paying the gods respect for their mortality. The forces of nature were cruel and giving, masks in their reflective duality represented this.

With the force of the Conquest immense change occurred, Catholisism took over a lot of paganism. Examples of this are shown in the ofrendas and how they were once filled with pagan gods. Today Catholic gods have taken their place. The 'nagual' masks were also changed into devil masks at the time of the Conquest. Many changes occurred with both forms.

Today these changes continue, the manual mask making tradition is disappearing and factory made masks are firmly residing in the market place. In the cities the death ritual has become a celebration with little meaning, a festival of fun. Yet through all the influences and changes that have occurred, they have made the Mexican culture what it is today. Their brightly coloured fun loving masks and skeletons remain unique and typically Mexican. They celebrate both living and dying in an optimistic manner which I find fascinating. If it was similarly celebrated in our culture I feel that death and the unknown path of the spirit world would be much less feared.

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