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**MEXICAN MASKS**

by

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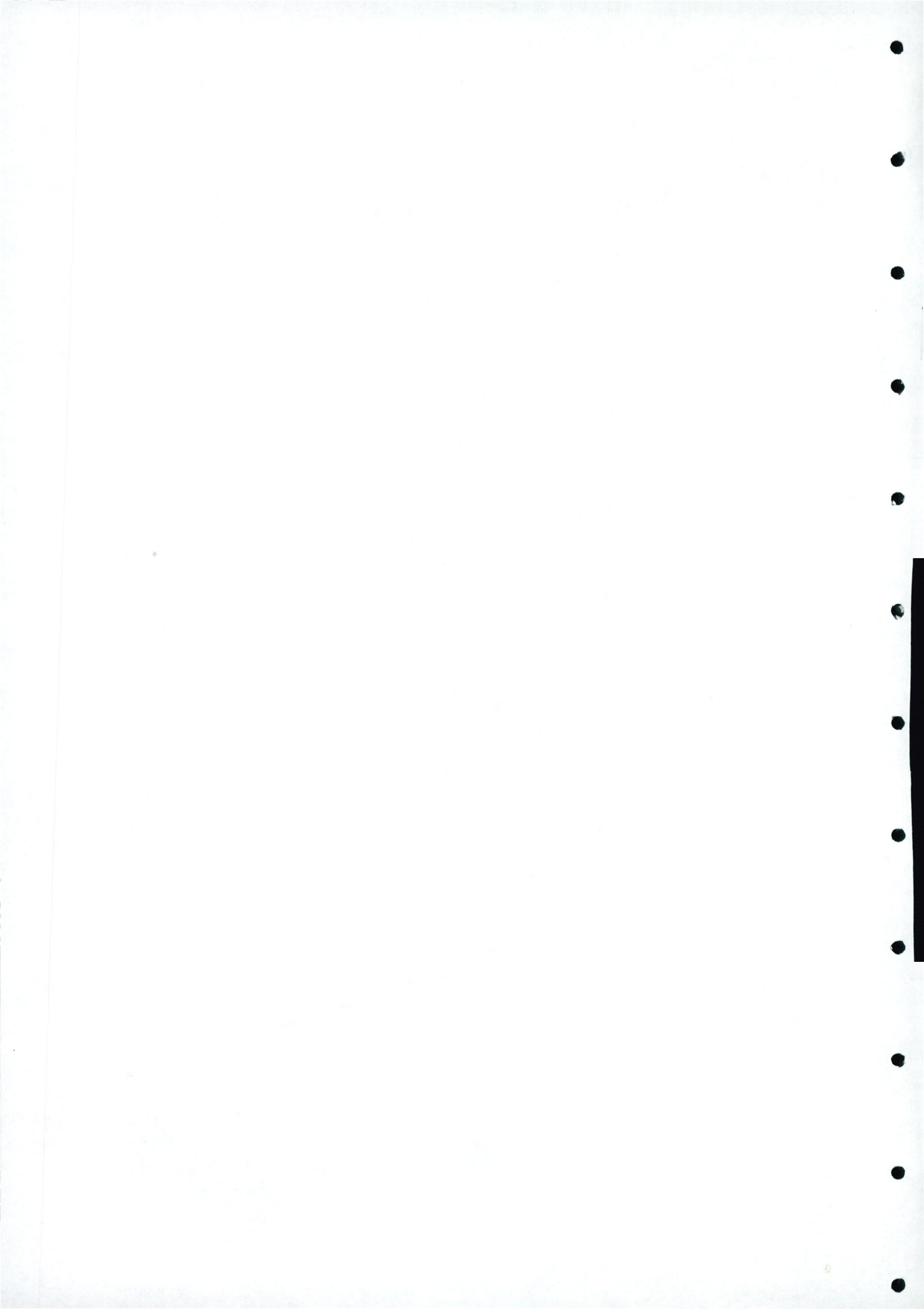
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B.DES.

1997



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My Family



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**INTRODUCTION**



“For the ancient races that once peopled Mexico, to dance was to pray.” (Gyles 1980, p.119) Masked dance ceremonies of ancient Mexico were performed by the indigenous Indians to worship the various gods, with the purpose of persuading them to act favourably towards the Indian people. Ceremonies developed because of a need to exert some form of control over the unpredictable forces of nature, over which these gods presided. They evolved from the Indians’ desire to understand their existence and the existence of the universe. The Aztecs believed that the gods brought us into being, but because of an accident, caused us to become mortal.<sup>1</sup> Ever since, they had been doing penance to atone for this tragedy. In return, the Aztecs had to repay the gods for this debt by offering them the ultimate sacrifice, human blood. Various events in the ritual calendar served to remind these societies of the powers of the gods which were continually being manifested in the world which surrounded them; lightning storms, droughts, volcanoes, earthquakes, extreme temperatures, animals, birds and insects, all served as daily reminders of the powerful forces which governed the world and the underworld.

Completely at the mercy of the gods, mortal men lived in sombre devotion with a view to the supreme moment when they would once again be joined with ancestors in the timeless beyond. (Le Clezio 1993, p.66)

Belief in the afterlife differed from that of the Christian faith. For the Indians, life after death depended on how they had died and on what role they had played in life, e.g mother, warrior. Eternity could be spent in various levels of the underworld where they would be happy, therefore there was no fear of death. Christian beliefs, however, differed radically.





For them, the choice upon death was heaven or hell. Depending on what kind of person you were during your life, eternity could be spent in either of these destinations.

The introduction of Christianity into Mexico in the sixteenth century completely altered the course of Mexican history. In some areas, the ancient traditions have been lost altogether, replaced by the new religion, while in other areas, the Indians' beliefs were gradually altered to suit Christian ideals and both have since existed side by side. Birth, marriage and death have always been the main concerns of people and the major events of our lives. After the Spanish conquered Mexico, these concerns were subject to new interpretations with the introduction of another all-powerful being, God, and His antithesis, the devil. The ancient cycle of festivals, which were organised to worship the gods, became a vehicle for the teaching of the Christian message.

To promote Catholicism, the Spanish friars made use of the Mexican fondness for masked spectacles and dances by utilising short plays as a method of conversion ; enacted by the Indians themselves, these plays would recount biblical events. With the passing of time a new range of dances evolved. (Lechuga 1994, p.8)

My interest in Mexican masks developed after a visit to the Musée de l'Homme in Paris where I was very interested in the Mexican artefacts. From this I decided to write a thesis on the subject. It was difficult to select just a few masks to discuss from such a wide variety. My research started off quite broadly, encompassing many different forms. These included the Internet, books, journals, lectures, videos. I also visited the



Museum of Mankind, the British Museum, and the Mexican Embassy in Dublin and sent faxes to various Mexican museums and to Chloe Sayer, an authority on the subject, to find out more information about Mexican Masks and specifically the type of Masks I had chosen to discuss. Through my initial research, I discovered that the mask-making tradition is still very much alive in Mexico and draws much of its inspiration from ancient Mexican history. Masked dances have been performed in Mexico for centuries. Despite many references and visual allusions, modern celebrations bear little resemblance to the ancient masked rituals, the significance of which has largely been forgotten.

I became very interested in the changes which the Spanish invasion and the subsequent arrival of Christianity caused in the indigenous societies in Mexico. During my research I attempted to discover what the effects of these changes were and how the Indians adapted to them. In this thesis I have discussed these changes by taking various modern masked dances and examining them in relation to ancient Mexican history. What follows is a discussion of the dichotomy of beliefs which exists between those of the original pagan Indians and those of Christianity and how this has affected the Mexican people to greater and lesser extents throughout the country since the Conquest. In many areas, the integration of Catholicism was not successful and it is in these often remote areas where the pure-blooded Indians live and practise their beliefs. Naturally, these beliefs have altered with the progression of time but were not affected by the Spanish invasion as other areas have been. It is these parts of Mexico, areas which have been radically changed, which I am



interested in and have chosen to discuss, using various masks and dance ceremonies to reflect this change.



## **CHAPTER 1 - Ancient Indian beliefs**

- Ritual cycle-Agricultural cycle
- Ancient purpose of masks





It is integrated into the ancient history of Indian culture that the human head is where the soul is. According to Miguel León Portilla, the ancient Nahua peoples of Mexico felt that, "Beyond doubt 'face' referred to that which most immediately characterised the intrinsic nature of each individual". (Cordry 1980, p.4) To recognise a person, it is their face which we first look at. The face is therefore the most important aspect of a person in terms of defining their identity to the outside world. For centuries the Indians have believed that the same was true of the inside world, the world of supernatural forces, from where a person's soul originates and to which it returns when they die. By looking at a person's face, one can often tell what they have endured, whether that person has had a hard or an easy life. Life leaves its indelible mark on the face. It is there that emotions are most obvious and the variety of expressions which the face can make is enormous.

The identification of a person and the manifestation of their emotions are focused on a person's face. If that person were to replace their own face with a mask, which is basically another face of some kind, they would undergo a total transformation. Their outward appearance would change. They would immediately look as though they had taken on another identity. To the Indians, this meant that the inner soul would also be totally transformed. To us, masks often have associations with a falseness, with theatre and pretence. For the ancient societies of Mexico, masks have entirely different connotations. The replacing of a face with a mask has a much deeper significance, which is rooted in the religious beliefs of their culture. They were not merely acting when wearing a mask and costume in the form of a deity, but believed that



their personality was completely taken over by the spirit whose mask they were wearing and whose form and likeness they had taken on. The head houses the brain and therefore it is from there that all creativity and thought processes begin. For the Indians the head was also the centre of control and the main means of communicating with the supernatural forces. It was also the ultimate sacrifice which they could offer the gods. Cirlot states that for the Aztec civilisation, "ritual decapitation arose from the discovery in prehistoric times that the head is the receptacle of the spirit." (Cirlot 1962, p.78)

Belief that the gods resided in the many forms of nature which existed in the varied environment in which they lived resulted in a very special and important relationship between nature and the Indians. It was the cause of great fear and of utmost respect. It controlled their lives. It had aspects which were wild and unpredictable as well as giving them sustenance and a means of survival. Masks were used in the forms of these gods to try and exert some control over them in order to reciprocate the control it seemed to have over them. The Indians' use of masked dances in ceremonies developed because of their needs as a society, which progressed from primitive hunter-gatherers to a seed-planting one. The primitives hunted and killed or cut down what they needed to survive. Societies eventually developed which realised the renewing force of nature and used it to their advantage. Yet these societies still had to appease the gods in an effort to gain some control over the unpredictability of nature. These early societies came together at various times during the year. The annual cycle of events which occurred in nature played a vital part in the lives of both the hunter-gatherers and the seed-planting peoples. "The whole ritual-cycle .... is concerned with agricultural success." (Carmichael 1991, p.66) The most



important events were the subjects of dances and rituals where Indian communities came together at designated locations throughout Mexico which had a special significance for the particular event being celebrated. Events, such as the change of season from the dry to the wet period or the annual migration of certain animals, enabled the Indians to create and maintain special spiritual bonds with each other and with nature. These were opportunities for them not only to strengthen their bonds with the deified forms of nature, the plants, animals, but also to remember their legends and history. It was a time to retell and re-enact their stories and so maintain tradition and keep it alive.

According to Beatriz de la Fuente, myths were invented to explain the existence of the universe. They are

realities in the inherited cultural consciousness of a community of people. They narrate events that occurred at the beginning of time and they tell how reality came to exist through acts of supernatural beings . (Townsend 1992, p.122)

Though the masked dances of Mexico are performed for a huge variety of events and reasons, they can be separated into three general categories, though in many dances these can overlap.

1. Private life cycle ceremonies e.g. births, marriages, deaths.
2. Public religious festivals
3. Historic ceremonies

The original purposes of dances seemed to be mainly related to nature. They were used to give thanks for the coming of rain, for a good harvest, to express devotion to a particular deity on their feast day, or because it was believed that the



gods had intervened favourably for them in some prayer they had made. Throughout the various regions in which dance dramas take place, the components which go into making up the dances are more or less the same. Each particular event is a combination of acting, dancing, music and costume.

In these civilisations costume was a principal means of communication proclaiming in visual metaphors the names and properties of powers and deities and the attributes and obligation of rulers. (Townsend 1992, p.46)

The reasons for wearing masks in the dances of Mexico today are mostly traditional. Masks are worn to help the audience to identify the characters being portrayed in the dances. On an even more fundamental level, they are merely part of the overall costume.

The masked dances of Mexico have two recurring themes in common. Through the myriad different languages, styles, dances, music, customs, reasons for and interpretations of the dances, they are all forms of entertainment as well as being ways of expressing beliefs. These beliefs are spiritual in that the ceremony is purposely organised as a form of worship in both ancient and modern day ceremonies. These beliefs are also non-spiritual in their commemoration of historic and civic events.

Mexico is made up of a varied and often very difficult terrain. It ranges from the depleting rainforests of the south, the mountainous central area, to the deserts of the north. Varied weather conditions and environment have always been very important in the everyday lives of the Mexicans resulting in a difficult relationship between them and nature. Carl Jung states that, "the further back we go in time, .... the more





primitive and close to nature society is.” (Jung 1979, p.236) It is an ancient Indian belief that nature is possessed by supernatural deities which exert an all-powerful force over animals, plants, trees, birds, the weather and all aspects of their environment. In order to communicate with these nameless and faceless forces, they gave them names so that these gods could be identified and located. They gave them forms which they could see and therefore understand to some extent. This is true of many cultures throughout the world. Nature is a giver and a destroyer of life. In order to control it, the Indians developed rituals as a way of interceding with it and of coaxing it to work in their favour. Masks played a very important part of these rituals. They were used as a means of communicating with nature. “Symbols and myths are expressions of the human desire to find order, meaning, and a sense of permanence.” (Townsend 1992, p.122) Masks were worn as a magical way for the Indians to replace their own souls and transform themselves by taking on the guise of a god. They have been used in many cultures throughout the world in conjunction with religious and shamanistic ceremonies, such as rites of passage, exorcisms, and healing rituals, examples of rituals in which changes of various kinds are taking place. Masks are symbols of change.

Nature itself played a vital part in the mask-making tradition, in their design, manufacture and use. Plants which had hallucinogenic properties were commonly used by the mask-makers as part of the process of making the masks. For the Indians, the night belonged to the spirit world but humans could enter that world with the help of plants and animals. Peyote, the sacred cactus, produces a chemical which prevents







creatures from eating it, but for humans a single peyote button can leave them in a trance which can last for days. These types of hallucinogens were used to stimulate the imagination of the mask-makers and help in the design process. They were also thought to enable the mask-maker to contact the supernatural deities and bring them more directly into the same world as that which these forces inhabited. Wearing the mask and costume of a god was also a way of entering this world. Since ancient times, masks have had many uses. They adorned the faces of deities and those who were to be sacrificed to the gods. Masks served as a part of the funerary bundles for the graves of nobles and other important figures of society. Since ancient times various media have been used to enable the Indians to portray the faces of ancestors and deities. Funerary masks were one of the first type to be used. These often took the form of a decorated skull and usually adorned the body of the dead person. Stone was also used in the form of sculptural pieces to portray the dead person, or as a mask, to adorn the deceased. These ancient masks were usually decorated in mosaic form with precious and semi-precious stones and gems. Fig.1.1 is an example of an Aztec funerary mask carved out of stone, with a mosaic of precious and semi-precious stones. The expansion of the various civilisations of ancient Mexico, such as the Olmec and the Aztec, occurred because of their desire for precious materials such as stones of a high visual quality for their masks and other forms of sculpture. Masks made of stone were never a common feature of dance ceremonies and today stone masks are most often employed as a mould for the manufacture of masks from other materials such as wax or papier-mâché. Leather and metal are examples of other media from which masks have been and are still being made. However, wood has always been the



most popular medium for mask making, and various types have been used. It was believed that spirits lived in the trees and the use of wood would thus protect them.





**CHAPTER 2** - Spanish Conquest

- Christian influences
- European influences
- Dance of the Conquest
- Symbolism of Malinche mask



In 1519 the Spanish Conquistadors landed in Mexico and ravaged many towns and villages on their way to Tenochtitlan, the centre of the Aztec empire and the seat of the Emperor Monctezuma II. The Aztec mythical calendar predicted that the god Quetzalcoatl would return as a fair-skinned god from the east in the year 1519 to claim back his land and people. A comet in the sky and a great tongue of fire foretold the arrival of this god. When the Spanish arrived from the east to Mexico led by Hernan Cortés, the Aztec prophecy was fulfilled. However, Monctezuma was reluctant to give up his empire and the resulting war was a long and violent one. In 1519, Mexico was home to twenty million Indians. Less than one hundred years later, only one million pure-blooded Indians remained. In his quest to increase his dominion of power, Monctezuma had created an empire so big that it had become weak. He had control over many tribes in this vast empire and the threat of war with the fiercesome Aztec warriors was enough to keep these tribes paying tribute to him. The Spanish Conquistadors arrived in Mexico on horses, animals which the Indians had never seen before. They were covered with armour and used swords, shields and other sophisticated weaponry new to the Indians. Unlike them, the Spanish did not use war to acquire sacrifices to offer the gods, but to eliminate. Cortés knew that to conquer, he had to divide and he had no problem enlisting help from disgruntled members of Monctezuma's empire in his battle to gain Tenochtitlan. He managed to get various tribes in the empire to join forces with his own army to fight the Aztecs by promising them both a share in the wealth which would be theirs should they succeed. Cortés' advantage lay not only in his more sophisticated weaponry, but also with an Indian woman called Dona Maria. This woman, who became Cortés interpreter and mistress,





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came to be known as 'Malinche' from Malintzen, the name given to Cortés by the Indians which means "our tongue." (Le Clezio 1993, p.12) Cortés' powers of persuasion were translated by Malinche and her assistance enabled Cortés to understand the Aztecs and in doing so, to conquer them. Cortés defeated the Aztecs but did not keep his promise to his Indian allies; they were soon reduced to the level of slaves and their land was seized. Malinche's participation in the downfall of the Aztec empire is seen in Indian history as an act of the ultimate betrayal of her country. She is viewed as a traitor who was instrumental in the downfall of Mexico and the victory of the Spanish because of her relationship with Cortés and the help she provided him with. Montezuma's empire had become the wealthiest civilisation ever to exist in Mexico and its desecration marked the beginning of the gradual erosion of the culture of the Indians and also of the integration of European and other outside influences.

As a subject, the Conquest of Mexico has become the most important and also the most popular of the historical dance dramas being practised today. FIG. 2.1 shows this dance taking place, with men playing the roles of males and females. The Dance of the Conquest is usually held on the feast day of a town's or village's patron saint and not on any specific commemorative national date. Therefore it is celebrated on various days throughout Mexico. It is thought to have derived (in terms of its format as an historical battle) from the Battle of the Moors and the Christians a masked dance drama which the Spanish brought over and introduced to the Indians as an example of the power of good over evil; good being personified by Christian Spain. The Dance of the Moors and the Christians documents the victory of the Spanish over the





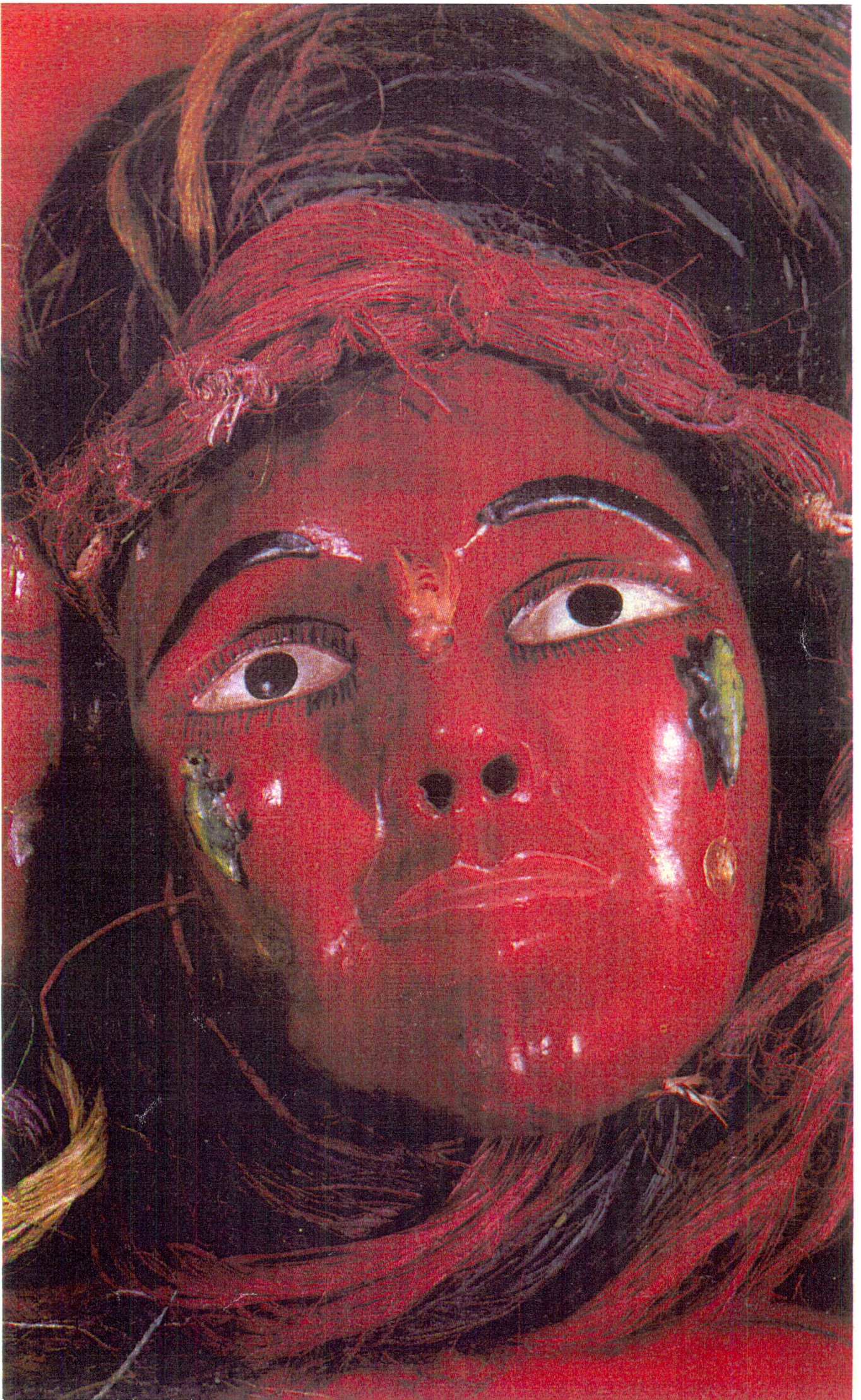
Moors and their banishment from Spain which occurred near the end of the fifteenth century and was therefore a recent event in the history of Spain. It was used as a method of converting the Indians to the virtues of the Christian religion. A moral undertone also underlines the Dance of the Conquest. Dance dramas were a feature of both Spanish and Mexican cultural history and were really one of the few ways in which the Spanish could communicate with the Indians. Neither party had any other way of understanding each other except through the use of drama, costume and action

To promote Catholicism the Spanish friars made use of Mexican fondness for masked spectacles and dances by utilising short plays as a method of conversion: enacted by the Indians themselves, these plays would recount biblical events.  
(Lechuga 1994, p.8)

Dramatisations such as these were a contrast to the more traditional zoomorphic dances of the Indians in which the appropriate animals' movements was used to animate the costume of the deity which was being portrayed. The Spanish friars realised the importance of masked dances in Indian culture. It was an ideal method for spreading their religion and so, naturally, they utilised it in their quest for converts. In such dance dramas, communication of the story would have relied more on actions than words.

The Dance of the Conquest generally depicts the march of the Spanish Conquistadors into Tenochtitlan, the meeting of Montezuma and Cortés and the battle between the two forces. It ends with the defeat of the emperor and his forced conversion to Christianity. This drama is acted out by the Mexicans and told from their own point of view and is depicted therefore as a tragedy documenting the immense







destruction of the Aztec Indian civilisation. It is not surprising that this dance is one of the most popular in Mexico today as it serves to remind the Mexicans of a monumental event which completely altered the course of their history. Performances of this dance become a way of preserving this event and keeping it alive in people's minds, while reminding them of who they are: a people with a deep and interesting past. The story of the dance ends with the arrival of Christianity. Its introduction however, is seen as a happy event as it resulted in the salvation of the Mexican people, although the coming of Christianity was responsible for much of the loss of traditions and beliefs of the majority in modern day Mexico. Differing interpretations of the Dance of the Conquest include various formats, dialogues and assemblages of characters.

*The Tenochtli Dance, Azteca Dance, Chichimec Dance, Plume Dance, Dance of the Concheros, Dance of the Cherudos* are all variations of the theme of the Conquest. The most important among the characters in these dances are Cortés, Monctezuma, Spanish soldiers, Indian warriors and Malinche. In the Museum of Mankind I was able to watch a video, 'Of Gods and Men' (Gyles, Sayer 1980), which featured scenes from the Dance of the Conquest documenting the confrontation between Cortés and Monctezuma. It was significant that the more colourful and elaborate costumes were worn by the Mexicans while those of the Spanish were less decorative. As with FIG.2.1, both male and female characters were played by men. Interpretations vary from region to region and it depends who among these characters will be masked. FIG.2.2 is an example of the type of mask the Malinche character would wear. This mask was probably made early in this century but it is not known in what region it was made or used. The Malinche character is among those



who are usually always masked in these dances and there are a number of different reasons for this. Because dancers have traditionally been male, a mask was needed to disguise this fact, though recently, both men and women have begun to occupy the various roles in these dances, from actors to organisers. The use of a mask for this character could also represent the fact that she is a woman who has betrayed her fellow Indians and her country and has become an outcast. She is different from them now. She does not belong and her red face is deeply symbolic of this. It represents sexuality, lust and the bloodshed she caused when she became Cortés' interpreter and then fell in love with him and became his mistress. Lust and sexuality are the traits which have become associated with Malinche. She is Mexico's archetypal amoral woman and is used in other dance dramas to represent such a character. For example, in the Dance of the Negritos she represents a woman called Maranguilla. The purpose of this dance is to kill the 'evil' sexual instincts in women. (Cordry 1980, p.197)

Judging by the smooth surface of the mask and the realism which the maker has managed to portray in her features, I believe the mask in FIG.2.2 was made by quite a skilled mask-maker. Other factors reinforce this opinion. Holes in the nostrils of the mask are there to enable the wearer to breathe comfortably. This is a consideration which a skilled mask-maker would take. He has ensured the wearers' comfort by allowing him/her to be able to breathe freely while wearing the mask. To enable the wearer to see, there are slits above the upper eyelashes which are so small that they are barely visible. In the ancient dances of Mexico, masks were worn in an attempt to control the forces of nature, to coax them to act





favourably. Mask wearers transformed themselves into the deity, a transformation which took place inside the person's head. In order to make this transformation, the eyeholes in the mask were very small to limit the view of the outside world so the wearer would be able to concentrate more successfully on the inner spiritual world. The small eye slits in the Malinche mask may be derived from such beliefs, or may just have been carved that size to make the mask more aesthetically pleasing. Ixtle fibre, which is similar in texture to sisal, has been used to make the hair. It is derived from the leaves of the agave plant. The fleshy part of the leaf is scraped off, leaving the fibres exposed. These fibres are very strong and have been used for various purposes; for spinning into wool, weaving and for making paper. They take dye very well and so result in strong colours. The fibre for the hair of this mask has been dyed red, purple and yellow. Red would have the same symbolism as the face. Yellow probably symbolises the death and destruction which resulted after the Spanish conquest. For ancient Mexicans, yellow and red were colours which were associated with death and with the sun and the south where the dead were thought to go. Yellow has also been associated with the east in ancient Mexican mythology. This perhaps links the myth of the god Quetzalcoatl returning from the east. Purple may represent Malinche's ascent from the ranks of her fellow Indians when she was allied with Cortés. Enough hair is attached to the mask so that it covers the wearer's head and makes it invisible. Carved onto the face of the mask are other significant features which reinforce the sexual connotation of the Malinche mask: tiny lizards on each cheek and a bee on her nose. The latter is significant as a symbol of Malinche and the way that she 'stung' her fellow Indians when she betrayed them by becoming allied with a Spaniard. Like the bee, the

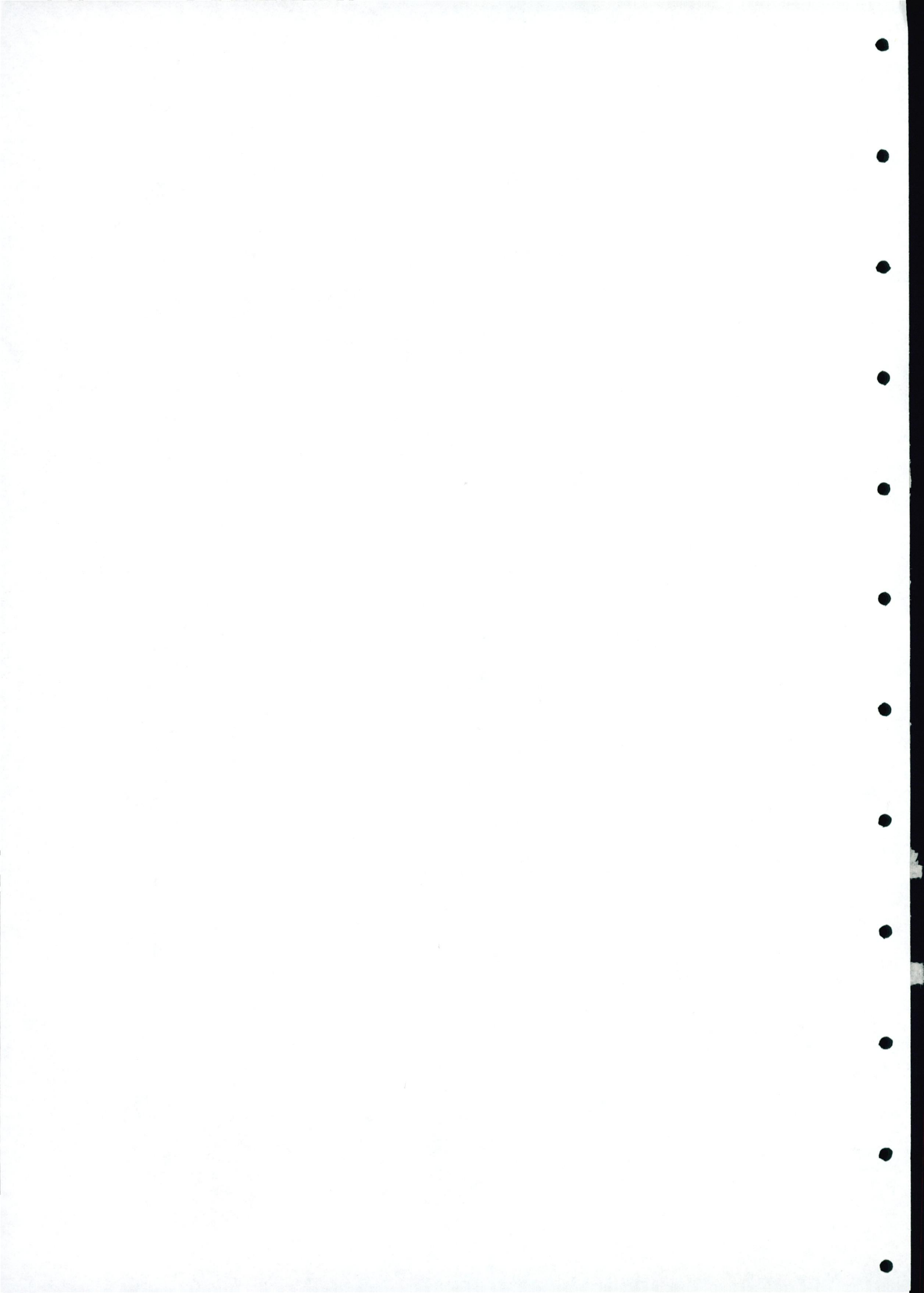


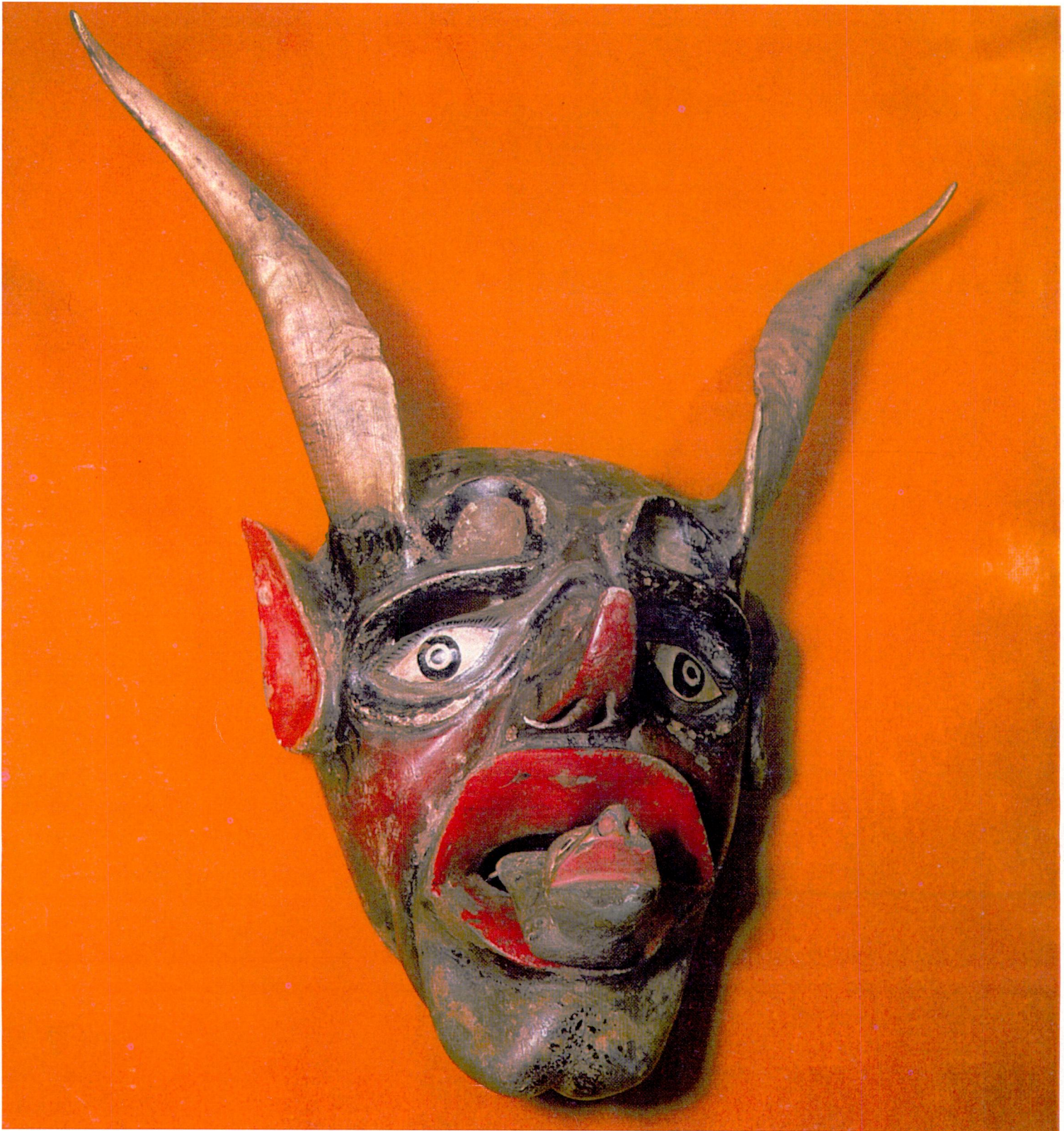
two lizards on her cheeks also underline her sexuality. Since pre-conquest times the lizard has been associated with the penis. It is therefore a symbol of sexuality and fertility which corresponds with the rest of the symbols on the mask and reinforces the sexuality of the Malinche character. Malinche represents evil and wantonness. Red is also an important colour used by Christians to symbolise the devil, lust and hell-fire. Devils are often portrayed with red faces and bodies a depiction which probably resulted from the fact that the devil lives in the fires of hell by which he has been burned. He represents evil and Malinche has been tarnished by association with such evil. This connection between the Malinche character and the devil is an example of the beginning of the fusion of Indian and Spanish beliefs in Mexico.



**CHAPTER 3** - Devil masks

- European and Indian origins
- Symbolism of devil masks





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Portraying the devil in Mexican masks is a tradition which developed only after the introduction of Christianity. Since then devil masks have been designed in many styles and variations. These can be divided into two general categories; European devils, and devils with pre-Hispanic origins. In pre-Hispanic Mexico, humans shared their souls with animals. Sand, ashes or dust were scattered outside their place of birth to see the footprints and so discover the identity of the animal associated with the soul of the dead person. As with the Christian belief in angels, these animal spirits acted as a guardian to the Indian throughout their life. 'Nahual' or 'tonal' are the Mexican names for these animal guardians. Deities, the earth, the underworld, the sky and water were all represented by various animals. Many pre-Hispanic dances included the masks of animals, reflecting the influence of the environment on the lives of the ancient Indians.

Animal masks ..... were among the first and most magical images and disguises for man, whose major and immediate experiences were with the animal world. (Cordry 1980, p.147)

Animals exist in a different sphere from humans and because of these differences, they were believed to be in closer contact with supernatural forces and with nature.

The eagle and condor, felines and coyotes, serpents, caymans and related amphibians were widely acknowledged as mediators and figured as emblems of rulership or as signs of priestly or shamanistic authority. (Townsend 1992, p.46)

FIG.3.1 is an example of a modern day wooden devil mask. These types of masks, which have obvious animal characteristics, recall the portrayal of animals in masks of pre-



Hispanic Mexico but they have been supplemented with influences from the European devil tradition. For example, the shape of the face of the mask is that of a human, not an animal. However, features of animals have been added to the mask. The addition of two horns, the actual horns of a goat, is derived from the European idea of the devil. When the Spanish friars realised the significance of animals to the Indians, they very often added two horns to the animal masks to represent the devil and to demonstrate to the Indians that their worshipping of pagan idols was evil. Though they are more animalistic than human, the shape of the ears in the mask in FIG.3.1 is a mixture of characteristics of both. The eyes are those of a human rather than an animal, as are the chin and the mouth, which has been exaggerated in size to accommodate a serpent on the tongue. Symbolising fertility, the serpent rests on a tongue which is movable when the wearer moves his own tongue. Moveable parts are a common feature of masks made in Mexico today. They allow the mask a wider range of expression while being worn and therefore make masks, which can otherwise be quite static, look very animated. This mask is made to fit an adult face. It is made to scale, allowing the wearer to be able to see out through ample slits above the eyes of the mask. The upturned nose is derived from the nose of a bat and is a characteristic which is particularly associated with devil masks. In ancient Mexico, the bat symbolised the underworld and water due to the fact that it dwells in caves, which the Indians believed to be the source of springs and therefore of life. Caves were also thought to be the entrance to the underworld of the rain gods. (Cordry 1980, p.185) By its association with water, the bat also symbolises fertility, therefore linking it with the serpent on the tongue of the mask. Its habitation of the darkness of caves and of the night also



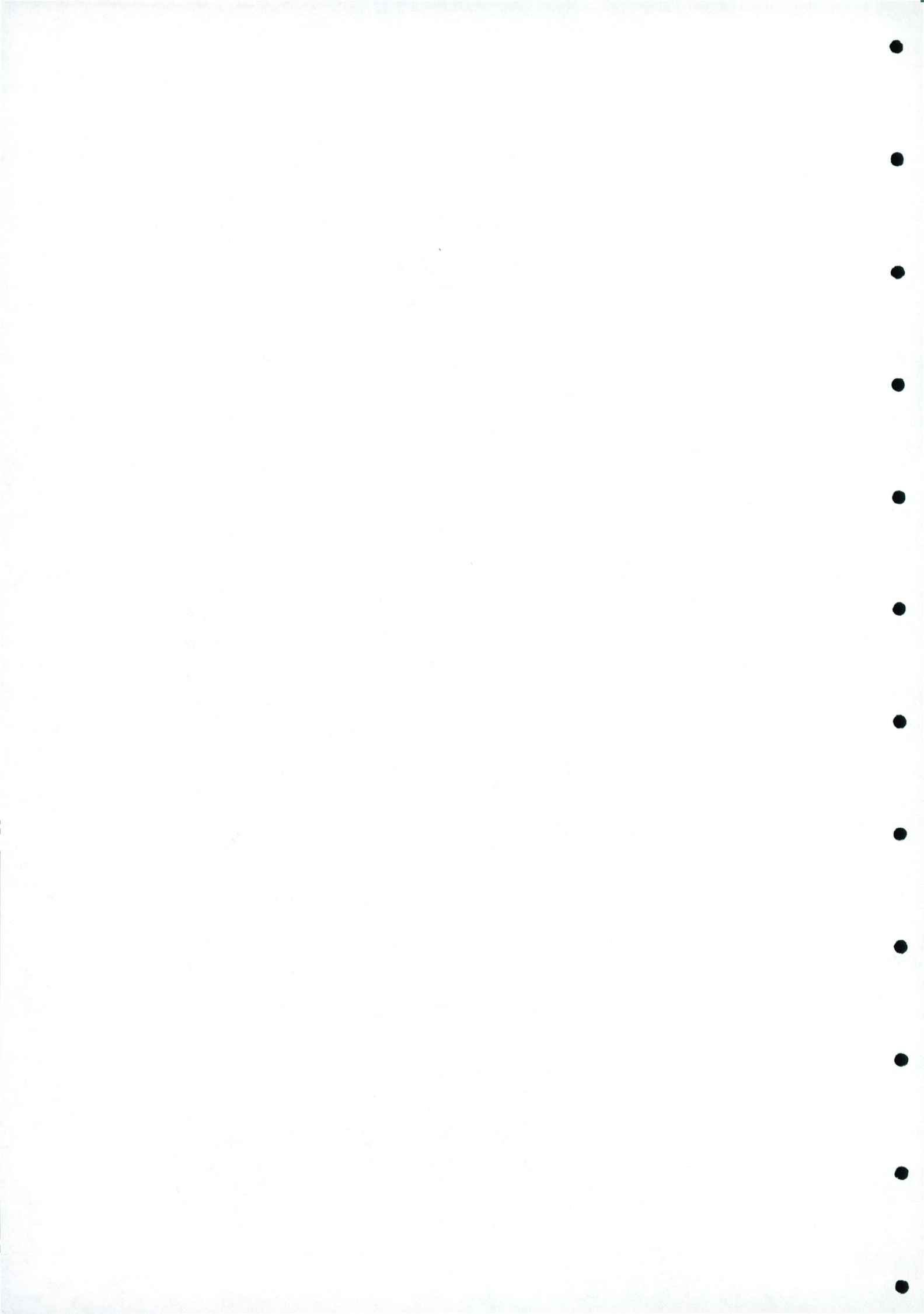




linked the bat with the underworld. The vampire bat is an animal which is native to Mexico. A dangerous animal, it lives off the blood of vertebrates, including humans. This evil animal is another reason why the bat is an appropriate feature of a devil mask. "Tezcatlipoca was a very powerful nocturnal god whose colours were black and red." (Lechuga 1994, p.78) These colours have a connection therefore with darkness and evil, especially the colour red. The fact that this mask is painted black and red is perhaps a symbol of this god and a modern link with an ancient past.

European devils have traditionally been painted red, as demonstrated by the mask in FIG.3.2 , which shows a devil in the very definite European tradition. Its face has human features which are typical of the Christian portrayal of the devil. This mask could portray the evil character the devil is meant to be, but the upturned eyebrows and the eyes give it a pathetic look. Devils take part in many different dances in both religious and non-religious traditions and with Mexican and European origins, usually playing the part of a clown or a comical character, providing light relief in some of the more serious dramas. In contrast to the Christian idea, these devils do not inspire fear or terror in the hearts of the onlookers. Their comical faces contradict the original purpose of the introduction of devils, which was to personify evil and act as a precaution against straying from the path of Christianity. According to Chloe Sayer,

At the time of the Conquest many European Dances had allegorical themes portraying the triumph of virtue and the downfall of evil. The devil, death, angels and the Deadly Sins still do battle at *fiesta* time in countless village squares in modern Mexico. (Sayer 1990, p.136)





The Dance of the Devils (*Danza de los Diablos*) does exist in its own right but also forms part of the events of other dances.

Though the only animal characteristic of the devil mask in FIG.3.2 is the horns, the mask in FIG.3.1 has features belonging to both pre-Hispanic and European traditions. It is made in the likeness of an animal and also has two horns. The second mask, FIG.3.2, is also derived from both traditions. This mask features a moveable tongue also, as well as animal teeth. These may represent the fangs of a viper, echoing the pre-Conquest idea of the rain god, Tlaloc, with a serpent encircling his eyes and the fangs of a viper in his mouth. Known as a vicious animal, the viper reinforces the evil aspect of traditional European devils as portrayed in this mask. The tongue is carved into the shape of a human figure and may be a symbol of the human sacrifices which the Aztec offered to the gods, as might the small human head carved on the forehead. This face may also represent one of the many evil facets of the devil or one of the seven deadly sins. The human on the tongue as a symbol of human sacrifice derives from the Aztec belief that they had to repay the gods for bringing them into being. Human blood was the ultimate sacrifice which they could offer to satisfy the gods in order to repay them. The word 'sacrifice' means "to make sacred," and these Aztec rituals had a divine purpose. One mythical Aztec belief was that the sun was devoured every night by an earth goddess in order to illuminate the underworld at night. She had to be appeased with the offering of human blood in order to give it back. The gods had created this world and they had the power to destroy it again. For the ancient cultures, the gods represented birth, death, and rebirth. The fusion of the features of European and Mexican traditions of evil, darkness



and the underworld mirrors the fusion of the two cultures in practically every aspect of the lives of Mexicans since the time of the Conquest.



**CHAPTER 4** - Jaguar cult -

- Olmec, Aztec

- Tigre Dances

- Fusion of Indian and Spanish beliefs



When the Spanish conquered Tenochtitlan in the sixteenth century, they were met with pagan spectacles of bloody, elaborate rituals in which human and animal sacrifices were offered to the Gods. The Spanish viewed the Indians and their beliefs as pagan and evil and felt that unless they could save them by converting them to Christianity, the Indians' souls would be lost on the path to damnation. Christianity is based on a belief in good and evil and its view of the afterlife is a corresponding dichotomy consisting of a heaven and a hell. However you have lived your life will affect you after you die. Destiny is shaped by our actions while we are alive and many people therefore have a fear of death. These beliefs have been engraved into Christian thinking since birth. Mass and the various religious events of the Christian calendar have reinforced these beliefs. Indian concepts of life and the afterlife were different. For them, there are several places to which the dead returned but, "unlike Christian religion these did not imply a punishment but only corresponded to a hierarchical division". (Le Clezio 1993, p.67) It depended on what you were and how you died, not who you were; warriors who had died in battle went to accompany "the Sun God, Tonatiuh, on his daily journey to the Zenith. After four years, they were transformed into humming birds." (Carmichael 1991, p.27) People who had perished by drowning, disease or being struck by lightning went to the paradise of the Rain Gods, Tlalocan. For the Indians, personal and other events, good or bad, occurred for reasons beyond their world; external reasons which were in the realm of the control of supernatural forces, the gods. The Aztecs had over 1,000 gods to deal with every eventuality.





Since the Conquest, a conflict of beliefs between Christian and Pagan has persisted in Mexico. The introduction of Christianity to an already deeply religious people has resulted in many varieties and mixtures of the various religious, historical and civic ceremonies and events in the lives of the Mexican people. Each religion has managed to survive in Mexico, although Catholicism is now practised by almost ninety per cent of the population. In the more remote parts of Mexico many of the indigenous Indian groups still do not speak Spanish, nor are they members of the Roman Catholic Church but practise the same traditional beliefs. The Spanish Friars arrived in Mexico in 1524 to begin their mission of converting the Indians to the Christian faith. They ventured into some of Mexico's less favourable environments in their quest for converts, places which had held little interest for the Conquistadors. Often the friars retreated as a result of the Indians' reluctance to accept and adopt the new faith. These remote groups of Indians still live very basic lives today compared to their more integrated counterparts in towns and cities. It is in these remote areas of mountains, deserts and rainforests which the three million pure blooded Indians who survive today are living.

Many changes have occurred throughout the centuries which have passed since the Conquest. A varied and interesting culture has arisen from the co-existence of the Mexicans and the Spanish. Prior to the Conquest there was no written information on the ways of the Indians. Things had passed down orally from generation to generation. Hieroglyphics were used to depict some aspects of their lives, however, no written information existed until after the Conquest when a



number of Spanish Friars developed an interest in the indigenous people and their culture. They learned to write and speak Nahuatl, the native language of the Aztecs, and began to take account of the Indians' cycle of life, religion, ceremonies, rituals, dances and costume. Manuscripts, which were made by Aztec artists under the direction of the friars, are the first written accounts of Mexican Indian culture.

According to Richard F. Townsend,

texts and pictorial manuscripts [were] written by Spanish Friars and descendants of the Aztec intelligentsia. This literature forms the largest single source describing an indigenous civilisation at the time of the first encounter with Europeans. (Townsend 1992, p.171)

There are also the accounts of native Indians who wrote about the customs of their ancestors after the Spanish Conquest. Naturally, the Indians would have been reluctant to divulge information about their culture, nor would the friars have understood all of their complex religious beliefs and symbols. Therefore, a lot of these texts are probably not always reliable.

Mexico has been home to many and varied cultures, from the early hunters, to the civilisation of the Aztecs. Richard F. Townsend states that,

it was not until 8,000 B.C. that a long, gradual and profound transformation began in central Mexico with the first domestication of maize, squash and beans. But as small plots of land were managed for cultivation year after year, the ancient habits of seasonal migration began to give way to more permanent settlements. (Townsend 1992, p.30)







The first among these settlers to develop into a civilisation were the Olmecs who lived along the Gulf Coast of Mexico between 1,000 - 400 B.C. Their belief in the spiritual power of the head is manifested in the many monumental stone heads and various other sculptural pieces of their legacy. "The colossal heads, located in the most important Olmec ritual centres, were intended to manifest a concept of humanity's relation to nature and the supernatural." (Townsend 1992, p.132) These sculptural heads are characterised by what the experts have likened to the features of the jaguar. "Some of them ... combine human and feline features, such as the mouth with down turned corners which suggests a jaguar mask." (Stierlin 1981, p.39) An example of this type of mask is shown in FIG.4.1. It combines human and jaguar characteristics, its mouth especially imitating that of a jaguar. These masks were not meant for wearing because there are no holes in the eyes or anywhere else from which to see out of, but they may have been used to adorn the face of a dead person as a funerary mask. They may also have been part of the costume of an idol. "The jaguar .... was primarily a symbol of the earth and royal power. Correspondingly, jaguar emblems were worn by Olmec Lords as signs of rulership", according to Beatriz de la Fuente. (Townsend 1992, p.128) The jaguar has been held in very high esteem by successive cultures. The Aztecs most respected and fiercesome warriors were the Knights of the Jaguar and the Eagle. The choice of names for both of these groups of warriors was representational of the courage and the power which the Indians believed these animals possessed. The jaguar is known throughout Indian history as the Lord of the Animals because of its strength and power in the animal world.







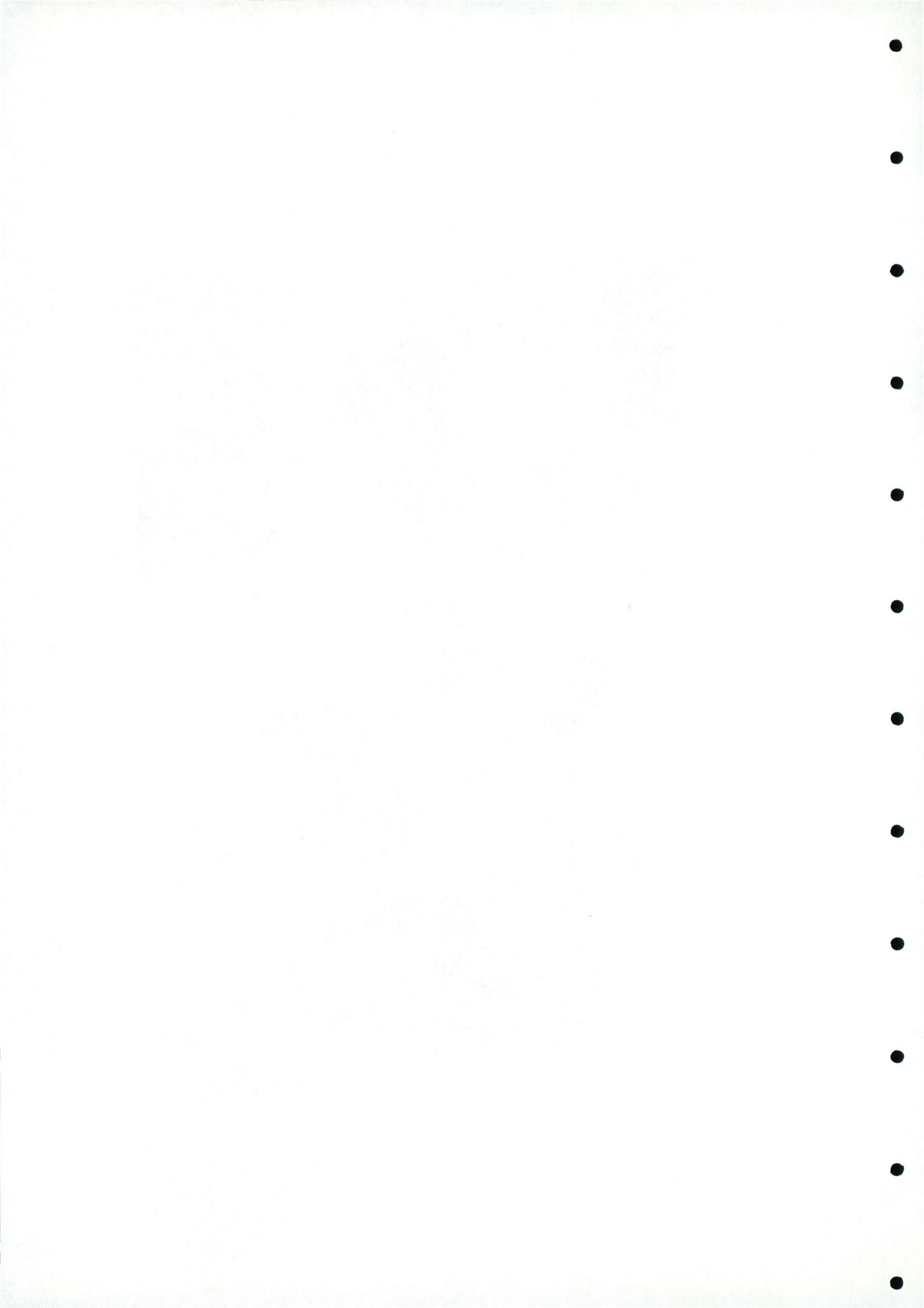


When the Spanish friars began their crusades in search of converts in Mexico, they encountered many different types of symbols and idols manifested in a huge variety of forms. In order to convert the Indians it was necessary to destroy these idols and ban their use. One of the most common forms in which gods were manifested was as animals. Masks and masked dances were also the subject of scrutiny but many animal masks have survived because, in animal form, these masks did not present an obvious threat to the introduction of Christianity. Therefore, some dances have survived relatively unchanged since pre-historic times and the 'Tigre Dances' are among these survivors. (Cordry 1980, p.238) Variations in performance, characters, storyline, costume and masks occur from region to region. Different names for the dances include Dance of the Wild Beast (*Danza de los Tecuanes*), Field Workers Dance (*Tlacololero Dance*), El Doctor and El Tigre. 'Tigre' has become the popular name for the jaguar. It is derived from the Spanish for jaguar and has become more of a word which portrays an image which has become an interpretation of an ancient symbol.

The jaguar acted as the guardian for Tezcatlipoca or 'the smoking mirror'. This god, who was nocturnal and invisible, was represented by an obsidian mirror which symbolised "his control over the hidden forces of creation and destruction." (McEwan 1994, p.60) The jaguar masks used today by the Mexicans in the various Tigre dances still bear this link with the past. FIG.4.2 is a Tigre mask from the Battle of the Tigres (*La Batalle de los Tigres*) from the Nahuatl village of Zitlala in the state of Guerrero, one of the most productive mask-making areas in Mexico, both past and present.. It was made in 1950 using several sheets of leather superimposed onto one another.







The back and front were joined together at the sides to form a helmet mask. FIG. 4.3 shows a mask-maker making a similar helmet mask in 1975, also in Zitlala. It is possible, from this photograph, to see how the mask in FIG.4.2 was made. The mask was then painted yellow with black spots to imitate the jaguar. In ancient times the black spots of the jaguar were thought to represent the stars, on a yellow coat of fur representing the night sky of the underworld. Interpretations of the image of the jaguar have been passed down through generations, since many of today's mask-makers have never seen a real jaguar as they have become practically extinct in Mexico. (Cordry 1980, p.180) An important feature of this mask are the mirrors which have been set into the holes for its eyes. This would represent modern day interpretations of the ancient obsidian mirror which represented the god Tezcatlipoca. Obviously the wearer of this mask would not have been able to see out of the eyes of the mask. It is, however, quite a large mask; so big that the wearer actually looks out through the mouth. It is covered with little holes, some of which still hold the bear's whiskers for which they were made, imitating the fur and whiskers of a jaguar.

Interpretations of the tigre dances are as varied as they are widely practised. It has remained one of Mexico's more popular dance themes. In some versions the tigre is portrayed as a fierce beast who must be hunted and killed, while in other versions he is regarded with affection as "the bringer of the harvest." (Carmichael 1991, p.48) The jaguar dance was originally performed as a cultivation rite as part of an important event in the agricultural cycle. It was performed to enlist the favour of the gods to ensure a good harvest. One particular dance in Guerrero is an example of the fusion of





Christian and Pagan beliefs in which the tigre goes around “from house to house collecting the first maize cobs of the year: only after he has taken these to be blessed in the church, can the ripe maize be eaten” (Lechuga 1994, p.48) In contrast to these tiges is another, also in Guerrero, where several people dress up as tiges and wear helmet masks like that in FIG.4.2. A petition for rain, this dance is also performed to ensure a good and plentiful crop. It takes place early in May, and involves a battle between green painted tiges and yellow painted tiges, these colours probably symbolising the corn in various stages of ripeness. This particular battle also involves the use of helmet masks. The reason why these masks are so thick and heavy is obvious then, as the tiges begin to beat each other over the head with knotted ropes. The purpose of this is revealed by one of the men playing a tigre. “Our battles are a kind of sacrifice. We fight to be sure of good rain in the future.” (Lechuga 1994, p.48) Whatever the interpretation, the dances usually have a narrative running through them telling the story of a tigre which is loose in the farmers fields and has been threatening the production of the maize crop. Besides the tiges, the farmers and trackers are usually masked, as are the tracker’s dogs.

Though the Tigre Dances are all related by the same general theme, they take on many different variations. Names of the dances change, as do the characters, storyline and format of each version. A large number of characters take part in the Dance of the Field Workers (the *Tlacololero Dance*), so a teacher or ‘maestro’ is required. According to Donald Cordry, “the maestro is very often a musician: in the case of the Tecuani Dance, he plays a small drum and bamboo flute.” (Cordry 1980, p.238) Both of these instruments are native to



the indigenous Indians of Mexico. Following the Conquest, brass and other instruments were introduced from Europe. Among the large cast involved in the tigre dances are the tigre or tigres, a *rastrero* (tracker) and his dog, a deer, a doctor to attend to the men who are wounded in the hunt, the hunters, who carry spears and ropes with which to kill and tie up the tigre, and lastly a farmer, in whose field the tigre is loose.

The Tlacololero Dance is also part of the cultivation rites and fertility rituals. In this dance, the field workers wear hats adorned with foliage and flowers to symbolise fertility, growth and life. They carry whips or ropes which symbolise serpents as, since ancient pre-Hispanic times, serpents have been used symbolise fertility due to the fact that they live and hunt along the surface of the earth and near water. Whips and ropes are used as part of the dance where the Tlacololero hit each other over the head and on the body. Tlacololero more accurately describes those who use the slash and burn method of preparing land for cultivation and the noise which the Tlacololeros make when hitting each other mimics that of burning stubble. Helmet masks such as that in FIG.4.2 are worn to protect the head during this part of the dance.

Following much interaction between the characters and with the audience, the whole ensemble follow the tracker and his dog as it hunts the tigre down and chases it out of the fields where it has been damaging the crops. "When the tigre comes into sight, there are wild skirmishes, and one or two people are 'wounded' before the tigre is killed and skinned." (Cordry 1980, p.241) In another area of Guerrero, the Tigre Dance is performed as part of festivities to honour the crucified Christ. "Before festivities can begin in his honour, dancers take part in a procession to the Church to pay their respects to the holy image, followed by villagers bearing candles and armfuls of



flowers.” (Gyles 1980, p.34) This is a very interesting contemporary example of the integration of Christian beliefs in an indigenous society, since their introduction in the sixteenth century, into the ancient Indian culture.



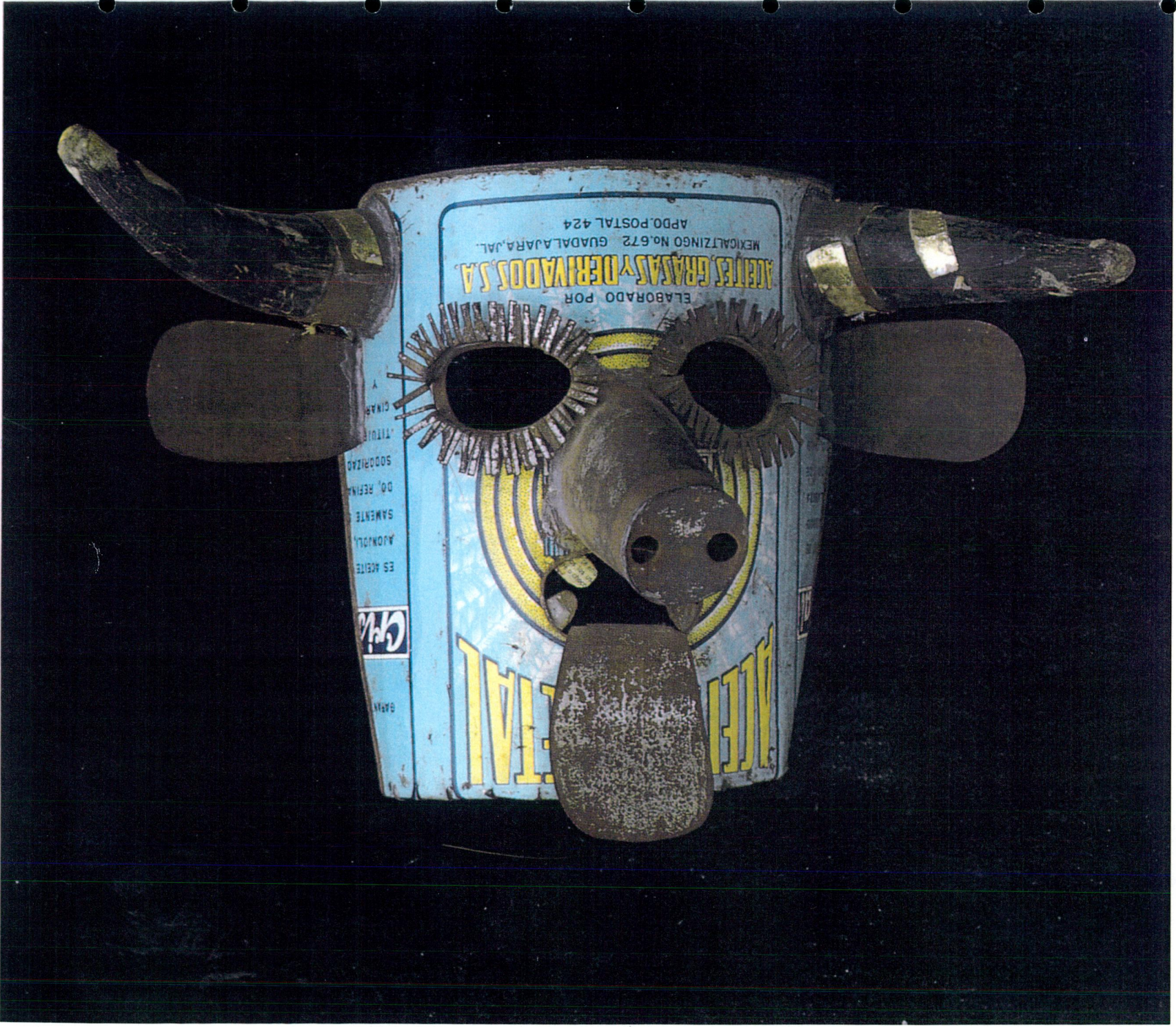
**CONCLUSION**





The majority of the contemporary masks I have chosen originate from the state of Guerrero on Mexico's south west coast. Here, as in many other states in Mexico, masks are still an integral part of the annual cycle of festivals of countless towns and villages. After the introduction of Christianity, the whole Mexican belief system was undermined. Consequently, the significance and importance of the deities declined, especially in areas where European integration has been more marked. Rituals honouring these gods were very much linked to nature. Therefore, changes and developments in agricultural patterns have been an important factor in the disintegration of ancient beliefs in many areas. The majority of the more developed regions of Mexico, such as Mexico City, have lost most of their connections with the culture of the past. Areas such as these have become very commercialised and masks are often made to cater exclusively for the tourist market. Modern day events in Mexico's social calendar are a conglomeration of beliefs and influences which have been formed and developed over thousands of years. These have all contributed to the integration and disintegration of Mexican culture throughout the centuries. Ironically, instead of being performed to remind the people of their often tragic history, the dances which resulted from the Spanish Conquest celebrated this event, as well as others belonging to the Spanish and Christian tradition. Originally organised to commemorate the annual cycle of nature and to worship the gods, the ancient pagan rituals were forced to incorporate these new celebrations and the newly converted Indians integrated them into their own beliefs. Thus the continuation of both the ancient and the new Christian beliefs was assured and they both now form the culture of Mexico today.





ACEITES, GRASAS Y DERIVADOS, S.A.  
ELABORADO POR  
MEXICALTZINGO No. 672 GUADALAJARA, JAL.  
APDO. POSTAL 424

ES ACEITE  
ALMONDIL  
SAMANTE  
DO, REFINA  
SODRIZADO  
TITIVU  
CINAH



ACEITES  
METAL



Over the centuries masks have undergone many transformations in purpose. Their uses have reflected the beliefs of the various civilisations which have existed in Mexico, from the death masks of the earliest peoples, to the masks used in the colourful parades of today. Ancient rituals have been replaced by festive occasions in which entertainment is often the most important factor.

The masks I have chosen reflect the changes which occurred as a result of the Spanish invasion, and are examples of how these changes have been adapted and integrated to become part of the culture of modern-day Mexican society. All of the contemporary masks I have discussed (e.g. Tigre Mask, Malinche Mask, Devil Masks) belonged to dances which are still being practised. However these dances stem from two quite different periods of Mexican history. Despite being the oldest, the Tigre dance is the most popular and is an example of the changes which the Conquest brought about. Its original function has changed from being a petition for rain and a plentiful yield, to a dance in which entertainment is much more important. It reflects the shifts in the attitudes of the Mexican people.

Although the functions of the festivals celebrated by the indigenous Indians and the Mestizos (Mexicans of mixed descent) are different, these differences are vital in order to ensure the diversity of mask design. FIG. 5.1 is an example of a mask which reflects this diversity. Though it was made in 1950, its recycling of a contemporary material, here a tin can, combined with a traditional design, could be symbolic of the changes which modern developments are bringing. I think it is also symbolic of changes in the mask-making tradition which



mask-makers will develop, while continuing to draw from the wealth of culture which the past has to offer.





## ENDNOTE

1. From, The Skeleton at the Feast , Carmichael 1994, p.25.

What follows is an Aztec myth, recorded after the Spanish Conquest, explaining what the gods had to atone for, and why the Indians reciprocated their penance.

“Human mortality is the result of an accident. Had Quetzalcoatl, the ‘Plumed Serpent’, the great Mesoamerican creator god, not stumbled and dropped the bones of our predecessors on earth, we might all be immortal. So tells a Nahuatl creation myth. It was on a journey to Mictlan, the ninth and deepest level of the underworld that misfortune befell Quetzalcoatl. This was the realm of the Lord of Death, Mictlantecuhтли and his cohort, Mictlancihuatl. There the precious bones were kept, the remains of the previous beings who had inhabited the earth before its destruction. This was the fourth time that the earth or ‘sun’ had been destroyed by cataclysmic events.

Poised at that moment after the end of the fourth sun, the gods were troubled for now there was no-one to live on earth.

Quetzalcoatl therefore undertook to make this journey, telling the Lord of Mictlan that he had come to collect and take away the precious bones. ‘What will you do with them, Quetzalcoatl?’ asked Mictlantecuhтли and Quetzalcoatl told him of the gods’ predicament.

Mictlantecuhтли set seemingly impossible conditions for the removal of the bones which Quetzalcoatl overcame by magical means. Finally, gathering up the bones of man and woman, he left the Dead Land; but he stumbled, startled by birds (quail).



The precious bones fell and were scattered and damaged by the quail who 'bit into them and nibbled them.'

Bundling up the bones once more, Quetzalcoatl finally reached Tamoanchan, the 'paradise' of the Aztecs. There the bones were ground up by the Earth Goddess, Cihuacoatl and fertilised with Quetzalcoatl's own blood. From them there arose a new race of human beings, who were however, fatally flawed: because of the damage the bones had suffered the inhabitants of the earth were mortal. All the gods did penance, and since that time, humankind has owed the gods a reciprocal debt of penance."



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