

# The Indo-Hispano Legacy of New Mexico

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*Enrique R. Lamadrid*

Struggle is as prominent a feature of the New Mexican landscape as its mountains and deserts. For centuries the successive inhabitants of the upper Rio Grande have resisted each other's attempts at social subjugation and cultural conversion. This history has produced one of the most culturally diverse regions in North America. Such conflicts find direct expression in folk traditions, whose evolution reflects the course of inter-ethnic relations between Hispanics, neighboring Pueblo Indians and the nomadic Indian groups, who were the Pueblos' traditional enemies.

When Spanish and Mexican Indian colonists settled New Mexico in 1598, they encountered Keresan and Tanoan agricultural settlements and pueblos clustered along the Rio Grande and its tributaries. Far to the west lay the remote Pueblos of Zuni and Moqui (Hopi). When they imposed tributes, relations with the Natives became tense and uneasy. Eventually, Franciscan missionaries did achieve a measure of success in Christianizing the sedentary Pueblo peoples. The Indians added the Holy Family and saints to their pantheon of kachina deities and gladly accepted the new plants, animals and technologies that the missionaries introduced. But the religious zeal and intolerance of these Franciscans coupled with the rapaciousness of the civil authorities inevitably led to conflict. A well-coordinated rebellion drove the Spanish colonists and their friends into exile in the El Paso area.

After the great Pueblo Revolt of 1680 and the Reconquest of 1692, the colonizing Spanish and the colonized Pueblo Indians were obliged to amend their position as adversaries. Surrounded on all sides by roving, generally hostile

bands of Athapascan (Navajo and Apache) and Shoshonean (Ute and Comanche) peoples, the Spanish and the Pueblo Indians gradually became trusted allies. They lived under this protracted siege through the 18th century. The alliance of Pueblos and Spanish increased their cultural accommodation and mutual tolerance. The Pueblos were able to retain many aboriginal religious and other cultural practices that were obliterated forever in many other areas of New Spain.

Needless to say, the enemy nomads resisted altogether the efforts of the twin majesties of Spanish State and Church to bring them into the colonial fold. The numerous victims of this conflict — orphans, captives and slaves — became known as *genízaros* ("Janissaries"), an emerging class of detribalized Indians. As *criados* ("raised ones" or "servants") living in the intimacy of Spanish households, they became more thoroughly hispanicized than the Pueblo Indians. As they moved into society to populate assigned military buffer zones, these New World Janissaries evolved their own unique style of hispanicity and made a major contribution to the culture, especially the folk Catholicism, of the region.

Despite the long New Mexican tradition of cultural autonomy, ethnic boundaries are permeable, and a subtle synthesis of Hispano and Native American cultures can be seen and felt all across the region. Basic foodways and architectural traditions have long been shared in the region. Although local Indians cultivated corn, beans and squash, chile was unknown in New Mexico until the Spanish and their Tlaxcalan Indian allies brought it from Mexico along with European domestic animals and crops. Pueblo Indians built with local timber, stone and mud, but the Spanish introduced the mud brick, or adobe, that they had acquired from the Arabs. Motifs and techniques of craft traditions were also selectively exchanged. In music, the cultural

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exchange can be easily heard. Widespread in the 19th century, the *indita* ballads sung and danced by Hispanos address the topic of cultural relations while they emulate and incorporate Indian melodies.

Spiritual traditions also mingled. At the Indian pueblos, ancestral dances for the Animal Spirits of winter and the Green Corn of summer are dedicated to Christian saints. For Holy Week, thousands of pilgrims converge from all directions to the Santuario de Chimayó, a chapel built directly above an ancient Tewa shrine famous even in ancient times for the healing properties of its earth. The Native concept of the sanctity of the earth is particularly strong in this place.

In both Indian and Hispano pueblos, allegorical characters of the *Matachines* dance reenact the spiritual drama of the Conquest in a play of indigenous and European symbols that combines sacred and burlesque elements. Decked out in multi-colored ribbons and shawls, two lines of dancers with rattles and hand-held tridents step, bow and turn to the graceful music of violin and guitar or drum and form geometrical patterns, including the cross. They are led by Monarca, a monarch figure also referred to in some communities as Montezuma. *La Malinche*, a little girl dressed in a First Communion dress, represents the first Christian convert. She dances and mimes with other characters, which include a bull and clown/bogey man figures called the *abuelos*, or "grandfathers," who kill and castrate the bull at the end of the last movement of the dance. The dance may vary in significance and details among communities. In Hispano communities like Bernalillo, it has a strong sacred character and is part of the devotion to San Lorenzo. In Indian communities like Taos it is a secular celebration with much clowning.

Hispanic cultural fascination with non-Pueblo Indian cultures developed quickly, in part because of the more intimate social relations they experienced with the nomadic Indian captives joined to Spanish households and families as *criados* (servants). Pueblo Indians might be allies and trusted neighbors, but a *genízaro* with Comanche, Navajo, or Apache roots might be living under the same roof, taking care of the children and singing them Native lullabies. Hispanos in the village of Alcalde impersonate their former foes in *Los Comanches*, a play performed on horseback which celebrates the military defeat of the great chief Cuerno Verde (Green Horn) in 1779. "Los Comanches" was originally performed in the villages west of Albuquerque as

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## LOS MATACHINES

On Christmas day, 1991, in Picuris Pueblo, a young girl in a First Communion dress dances the part of La Malinche in Los Matachines, a dance-drama that is performed in both Pueblo and Hispanic communities on important holidays (and is described more fully in the opposite column). During the colonial period, this symbolically powerful public performance was used for evangelization, and it seems to draw upon both Indian and European dance-dramas for its content and form. Its ultimate origins are still the subject of scholarly discussion.



Photo by Philippa Jackson

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part of a nativity play with the same name, in which a group of Comanches dances for the Holy Child then takes him captive. As part of its version of the play, the *genízaro* community of Ranchos de Taos preserves a large repertory of Comanche music and dance from the 18th and 19th century. This drama of captivity and redemption is performed on New Year's day and other special occasions. The Comanches celebrations are truly regional and cross-cultural, since they are also performed in the Indian pueblos as part of the winter cycle of "enemy dances."

For several generations of folklorists, it has



been the custom to separate and distinguish the Spanish traditions from those of the Indians of New Mexico. Conflict has indeed preserved cultural differences, but it has also created varied and complex Indo-Hispanic or mestizo traditions which serve as a fascinating register of cultural and historical relations.

### LOS COMANCHES:

#### An Excerpt Translated by Enrique Lamadrid

The following excerpt is from *Los Comanches de Castillo*, a play in popular verse once performed all over New Mexico but now only in Alcalde. Enacted on horseback, with frenzied harangues, the play is structurally similar to the Spanish folk drama, "Moors and Christians" and is based on colonial campaigns against the Comanches that occurred in 1774 and 1779. In this speech, Cuerno Verde, "Green Horn," the Comanche chief declares his readiness for battle.

From the sunrise to the sunset,  
From the south to the frigid north,  
It sounds, my shining trumpet.  
It reigns, this steel of mine.  
I campaign fearless and bold,  
And great is the valor  
That reigns in my breast...

I restrain the boldest.  
I devour the most audacious.  
In my bravery I admire  
The most arrogant bear.  
The fierce mountain lion I defeat.  
And only the Spaniards  
Restrain my valor.  
But today there will flow  
Blood from the vengeful heart.  
Memory reminds me  
Of a brave Spaniard  
Who proudly and with valor  
And with great, fearless spirit  
Dressed the body in flowers  
With blood for their colors.  
Of the dead stretching into the distance —  
Men, women and children —  
There is no counting,  
Nor numbering of the captives.

Hey, noble captains,  
Valorous Janissaries,  
Let my edict be proclaimed:  
That I as General will be ready.  
Let the drum and flute be sounded!  
To the dance, to the forward point of war!



Francisco Gonzales, Jr. celebrates his *genízaro*, (Hispanized Plains Indian) heritage in Comanche dances on New Years Day. Photo by Enrique Lamadrid

#### Further Readings

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