

Religion in Community Celebration

José Griego

Religion in the traditional cultures of New Mexico has played an important nurturing role, as people struggled to survive in a very harsh land over the course of many centuries. New Mexican communities celebrate together on religious feast days with intricate rituals from age-old traditions. Traditional dance, folk drama and music are common modes of religious expression that embrace celebrants and valorize spaces.

Some Pueblo dances such as the Rain Dance of the Keres and the Hopi Snake Dance have become closed to outsiders, due to their sacredness. But others are shared with whoever congregates at the Pueblo plaza on designated feast days, which sometimes coincide with Catholic holidays. Pueblo communities combine Christian and Native religious practices and perform social dances such as the Deer Dance, Buffalo Dance, Hen Dance and many others in particular cycles or at certain seasons of the year.

Like many of the Pueblo dances, the *Matachines* dances, which are shared by both Pueblo and Hispanic villages, are performed publicly and are considered social in nature although they have religious themes. The *mestizo* (Indo-Hispanic) prayer dance, San Luis Gonzaga, which contains verses in the medieval romance form, is evidence of a shared culture created by centuries of co-existence. The 16th century play, *Las apariciones de Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe* (The Apparitions of Our Lady of Guadalupe), is handed down in certain families and communi-

ties. The Indian Virgin has special spiritual significance for both Indian and Hispanic cultures.

For some Hispanics, the Christmas season is not complete without attending the humorous yet didactic folk drama, *Los Pastores* (The Shepherds), of medieval Spanish origin. The impression of this play is so strong that its idioms are repeated throughout the year. Franciscan priests used the didactic themes in its dramatic dialogue, dance and music to teach their message to Native American and Hispanic communities. In the village of Santa Cruz, the medieval drama that reenacts the re-conquest of Spain from the Moors, *Los moros y cristianos*, is performed on horseback annually for the feast day of the Holy Cross. The Penitente brotherhood, a lay organization that kept the faith alive for decades in many rural communities where a priest only visited once a year, uses the public dramatization of the passion of *Nuestro Padre Jesús* (Our Father Jesus) and the performance of hundreds of medieval *alabados* (hymns), to maintain the faith.

Religious pilgrims of several faiths in New Mexico converge on sacred places such as the Taos Blue Lake, the Santuario de Chimayó, the four sacred peaks of the Navajo and Chaco Canyon. The unique ambience created by isolated high desert, snow-capped mountains, ancient Anasazi ruins and the variety of religious traditions in New Mexico has drawn new religious communities to the state, such as Sikhs, Tibetan Buddhists and Muslims. A newly formed monastic community of Benedictine monks pray and contemplate at the Christ in the Desert Monastery in northern New Mexico, following the ancient tradition of monks who flee to the desert to pray and contemplate the Spirit of God.

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Two lines of dancers holding rattles and tridents form geometrical patterns in a *Los Matachines* performance. *Photo by Philippa Jackson*



An outdoor mass is held at Chimayó on Mother's Day, 1990. Women make an annual pilgrimage to the Sanctuary to pray to the Virgin of Guadalupe. *Photo by G. Benito Cordova*