

The Spirit of the Río Grande/Río Bravo: Land, Water, and Cultural Identity

by Enrique R. Lamadrid

In an arid land, home is always by the water. In Colorado, New Mexico, South Texas, and the northern fringe of the Mexican border states of Chihuahua, Coahuila, Nuevo León, and Tamaulipas, home in the most primordial sense is the valley of a bounteous river that cuts an 1,800-

mile course through the largest desert in North America. A dozen cultures and languages over the centuries have named it: Poʼsoge — the “big river”; Río Grande — the “great river”; Río Bravo — the “wild and brave river.” To the most ancient inhabitants of the watershed, the river was a living



New Mexico *matachines* perform for numerous religious events, including the blessing of an *acequia* (irrigation ditch), saints' days, and, occasionally, funerals. Los matachines de Nuevo México se presentan en numerosos eventos religiosos, incluyendo la bendición de la acequia, los días de los santos y, en ocasiones, en funerales.

Photo by/foto de Peter Garcia



being, a life-giving serpent, sometimes quick and transparent, sometimes lethargic and the color of clay.

Since all human beings need to be by the water, the banks of this river are by definition a contested space. The *españoles mexicanos* or Spanish Mexicans, as they called themselves, arrived in the 16th century with all the fury and repressed desire of the Spanish peasant to possess the land. The price of arrogance was paid in blood in 1680 when the Río Grande Pueblo Indians arose and reclaimed their spiritual heritage. Afterwards, in the space of a few generations, the newcomers who sought title to the land were instead possessed by the land. As they mixed culture and blood with the natives, they too became indigenous to this place. The boundaries of the Campo Santo, their Sacred Ground, spread past the narrow churchyards and the bones of the dead towards valleys, plains, and mountains beyond. The greatest Native contribution to Mestizo or mixed-culture belief systems is their expansive sense of sacred space, that the earth itself is holy.

In the center of this sacred landscape are the Native and Mestizo peoples who have survived the rigors of the northern desert and the cost of each other's desire. They are dancing. The *matachines'* dance drama portrays the cultural and spiritual struggle between Spanish and Native cultures and is the prime example of Indo-Hispanic cultural synthesis in the entire region. The ritual dance drama is staged on key feast days in all seasons. It is often performed along the river itself and the banks of the *acequias*, or irrigation canals, which carry its life-giving water. In all probability the dance was brought to the northern borderlands by the Tlaxcalan Indians who accompanied the Spanish Mexican colonists on their trip north. It is performed throughout the region today.

From Taos to El Paso, from the mountains of Chihuahua to the plains of Laredo, the *matachines* step in unison to the insistent but gentle music of drums and rattles, guitars and violins. The fluttering ribbons that hang from their crowns and

shoulders are the colors of the rainbow. In proud formation, they do battle against chaos and reenact the terms of their own capitulation. The *toro*, a small boy dressed as a bull, runs wild through their lines. With three-pronged-lightning swords they carve the wind in symmetrical arabesques.

Christian souls or Aztec spirits, they dance in graceful reconciliation, now in crosses, now in lines. In their midst a great king receives the counsel of a little girl. She is Malinche. Elsewhere her name is synonymous with betrayal, but she is no traitor here. At the edges of the fray the *abuelos*, or grotesque grandfathers, guard the dancers, make fun of the people, and ridicule the new order. These old men of the mountains taunt and overpower the *toro*. They kill and castrate the *toro*. They cast its seed to the joyful crowd. Have they vanquished evil, as the people say, or has the savage bull of European empire met its consumption? *Gracias a Dios*, thank God, it is a mystery, we all agree. Legend says that long ago Moctezuma himself flew north in the form of a bird with bad news and good advice. He warned that bearded foreigners were on their way north, but if the people mastered this dance, the strangers would learn to respect them, would join the dance, and come to be just like them. A hard-won cultural tolerance and understanding are the greatest blessings of the people of the Río Grande/Río Bravo.

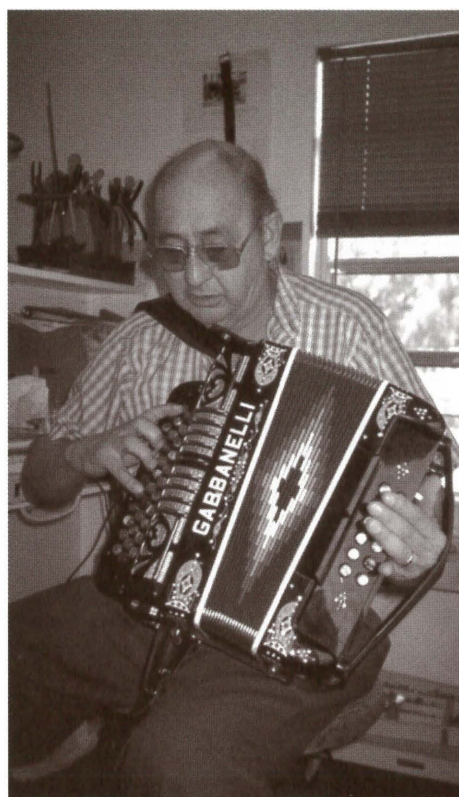
The greatest blessings of the land itself are rain and river water. The desert environment shapes the faith of its inhabitants. In the Pueblo world, clouds are the kachina spirits of ancestors returning and are always welcome since they bring rain and snow. Petitions for rain were prayed and sung to Christian saints like San Isidro (Saint Isidore the Husbandman), San Juan Bautista (Saint John the Baptist), and the Holy Child. Like the makers of kachina images, the *santeros* or saint makers still carve their holy images from the root of the cottonwood, a holy tree revered for its association with water.

When water blessed the fields, another cultural synthesis took place in the valleys. Native American corn, beans, and squash held their ground beside the wheat, legumes, and fruit trees introduced by the Europeans. The chiles and tomatoes of central Mexico found their way north as well to add their piquant flavors to the local diet. The most famous staple of the northlands is as hybrid as its peoples — the fluffy wheat tortilla gives a New World shape and texture to an Old World grain. Of all the elements of human culture, food is the first to be shared across cultural and ethnic boundaries.

By far the greatest changes on the land were wrought by the domestic animals that came north with the colonists. Horses, cows, pigs, goats, and sheep quickly became emblems of European culture, and missionaries used them to upset the power of Native hunting societies and their priests. Besides mobility and meat, the other animal products like wool and weaving technology brought revolutionary change to Native lifestyles.

The horse, which made exploration and trade possible, also upset the political balance in the northlands. When nomadic Native tribes such as Apaches and Comanches acquired horses, their pedestrian hunting and gathering ways changed forever. With horses they mobilized, refined the arts of equestrian warfare, and became a force to be reckoned with.

The lush mesquite forests of the lower Río Grande/Río Bravo were the perfect environment to support large numbers of wild cattle. The first phase of the development of ranching was cattle hunting. Whenever meat was needed, hunters sallied out on horseback with *reatas*, or lariats, and *media lunas*, or pole-mounted hocking blades, to immobilize and slaughter their prey. Only when the population grew did the concept of cattle ownership develop, along with the culture of the *vaquero* or Mexican cowboy, fully equipped with the knowledge and technology of large-scale stock management. The ecosystems of the upper Río



Amadeo Flores, a *conjunto* musician from South Texas, started playing accordion in 1947. "We used to play around the neighborhood," he remembers. German immigrants introduced the accordion to northern Mexico and South Texas sometime in the 1860s or 1870s, and *mexicano* musicians used it to create related but distinctive musics, *conjunto* in South Texas and *norteño* in Mexico.

Amadeo Flores, músico de conjunto del sur de Texas, empezó a tocar el acordeón en 1947. "Acostumbrábamos tocar en el vecindario," recuerda. Inmigrantes alemanes introdujeron el acordeón al norte de México y al sur de Texas entre 1860 y 1870, y los músicos mexicanos lo usaron para crear su propia música, conocida como "norteña" en México y "conjunto" en el sur de Texas. Photo by/Foto de Cynthia Vidaurri

Grande/Río Bravo were more fragile, and four centuries of grazing resulted in desertification, degradation of grasslands, and the loss of several feet of topsoil. Fortunately, the introduction of alfalfa helped offset this damage and fertilize the fields.

There is, in the valleys of the Río Grande/Río Bravo, a highly developed sense of place and cultural identity that the people themselves describe as "*querencia*," a folk term from the Spanish verb *querer*, to want or desire. *Querencia*



is a deep, personal, even spiritual attachment to place which collectively defines a homeland. Although in 1848 a national border was imposed along the lower Río Grande/Río Bravo, the sense of *querencia* is intact. Far from the centers of national power, this bio-region developed its own unique culture. As the pressures of urbanization and international commerce strain the ecological resources of the valley, some important lessons can be learned from the Native and Mestizo communities, who know how to survive in the desert. Their cultural and environmental knowledge can help meet the challenges of the future.

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The history and environment of the Río Conchos, the main tributary of the Río Grande/Río Bravo, which flows through the desert in the Mexican state of Chihuahua, is captured by muralist Luis Román. The mural illustrates how the spirit of the people who have lived on this frontier has made it bloom. La historia y el medio ambiente del Río Conchos, el tributario principal del Río Bravo/Río Grande que corre a través del desierto de Chihuahua, son captados por el muralista Luis Román. El mural ilustra el espíritu de la gente de esta frontera que la ha echo florecer. Photo by/foto de Olivia Cadaval