



(PREPRINT) Dancing for the Saints in the Time of COVID-19: Responses to the Lockdown in the Texcoco and Teotihuacan Regions in Central Mexico

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ABSTRACT During religious feasts in the Teotihuacán and Texcoco regions northeast of Mexico City, people ‘dance for the saint,’ often to fulfill a vow made in a supplication for healing. Based on fieldwork carried out between 2011 and 2019, and online interviews and monitoring of Facebook postings in late 2020 and early 2021, in this article we explore the impact of the coronavirus on the devotional dances staged in the context of religious feasts. In particular, we examine the cases of new practices adopted during the lockdown. Drawing on Jeremy Stolow’s (2005) concept of “religions as media,” we show how a combination of digital and in-person media make it possible for local Catholic communities to maintain during the pandemic the relationship with their patron-saint, based on the principle of *do ut des*, “though differently.” We conclude by raising questions concerning the future of the devotional dances and religious feasts in these regions as pandemic restrictions enter their second year.

KEYWORDS devotional dances, Mexico, popular religion, coronavirus lockdown, media

IMPORTANT

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Introduction

Abundant use of flowers, music, fireworks and dances in ritual situations that bring together large numbers of people characterize the religious feasts celebrated in the Texcoco Region and the Valley of Teotihuacán, adjacent regions near Mexico City. All this came to an abrupt halt with the quarantine measures implemented by the Mexican government on March 23, 2020 to combat the spread of the novel coronavirus. Non-essential businesses were closed, in-person classes suspended, and extreme limits were placed on gatherings, including the closing of churches for three months. Dances, when performed, were staged on a reduced scale, termed “symbolic representations” by one of our informants. In some cases, increased use of digital media appears to have resulted in more on-line postings of photos and videos than in the recent past. [3]

In this article, we look at a form of public religious practices rooted in towns of pre-Hispanic origin where a specific type of lay religious organization was imposed during the sixteenth-century evangelization process. The complex town-centered ceremonialism in the present-day successors of these ancient communities is self-managed, i.e., in the hands of lay people, and in this sense, it is truly ‘popular’ (Carrasco 1952, 1976; Giménez Montiel 1978; Nutini 1989). Such communities are usually not categorized by the Mexican state or anthropologists as “indigenous” as twentieth-century Mexico witnessed a state-promoted “de-Indianization” process in which language loss determined the passage from Indian to “Mestizo” (Bonfil Batalla 1987; Robichaux 2007). Today, only three towns in the two regions where we conducted our research are identified by the State as “indigenous.” However, at the end of the nineteenth century and even far into the twentieth century Nahuatl was widely spoken, and all the towns retain forms of community ritual organization originating in the aforementioned sixteenth century evangelization process. [4]

In the ritual calendars of the towns in the two regions, the great and frequent expenditures on music, floral arrangements and fireworks in religious feasts, along with masses and the performance of dances, all form part of a large-scale offering to the patron saint in a contractual relationship whose object is the assurance of collective and individual health, prosperity, and general wellbeing.¹ Our previous research has found that many individuals participate in or organize dances to fulfill a vow to a saint or to God (Robichaux, Moreno Carvallo, and Martínez Galván 2020). In curtailing the celebration of these feasts, the COVID-19 lockdown brought to an abrupt halt the most salient practices of a highly public type of religiosity. The usual media of religious expressions were thus hampered or completely blocked, giving rise to alternate solutions to fulfill the communities’ and individuals’ part of this contractual relationship. Some people spoke of fulfilling their obligations to the saints, “though differently,” referring to substitution or scaled-down use of the customary media. [5]

In this article, we consider ‘media’ in its widest sense and identify masses, music, flowers, fireworks and dances as the primary media in local public popular religious practices. In this approach, we draw on the concept of “religion as media,” as formulated by Jeremy Stolow (2005). He argues that religion can only be manifested through a process in which techniques and technologies are employed. In his words: [6]

Throughout history, in myriad forms, communication with and about ‘the sacred’ has always been enacted through written texts, ritual gestures, images and icons, [7]

1 Each town has a patron saint and in many instances the name of the saint is part of the town’s name such as San Jerónimo Amanalco or San Pedro Chiauhtzingo.

architecture, music, incense, special garments, saintly relics and other objects of veneration, markings upon flesh, wagging tongues and other body parts. It is only through such media that it is at all possible to proclaim one's faith, mark one's affiliation, receive spiritual gifts, or participate in any of the countless local idioms for making the sacred present to mind and body. In other words, religion always encompasses techniques and technologies that we think of as 'media', just as, by the same token, every medium necessarily participates in the realm of the transcendent, if nothing else than by its inability to be fully subject to the instrumental intentions of its users. (Stolow 2005, 125)

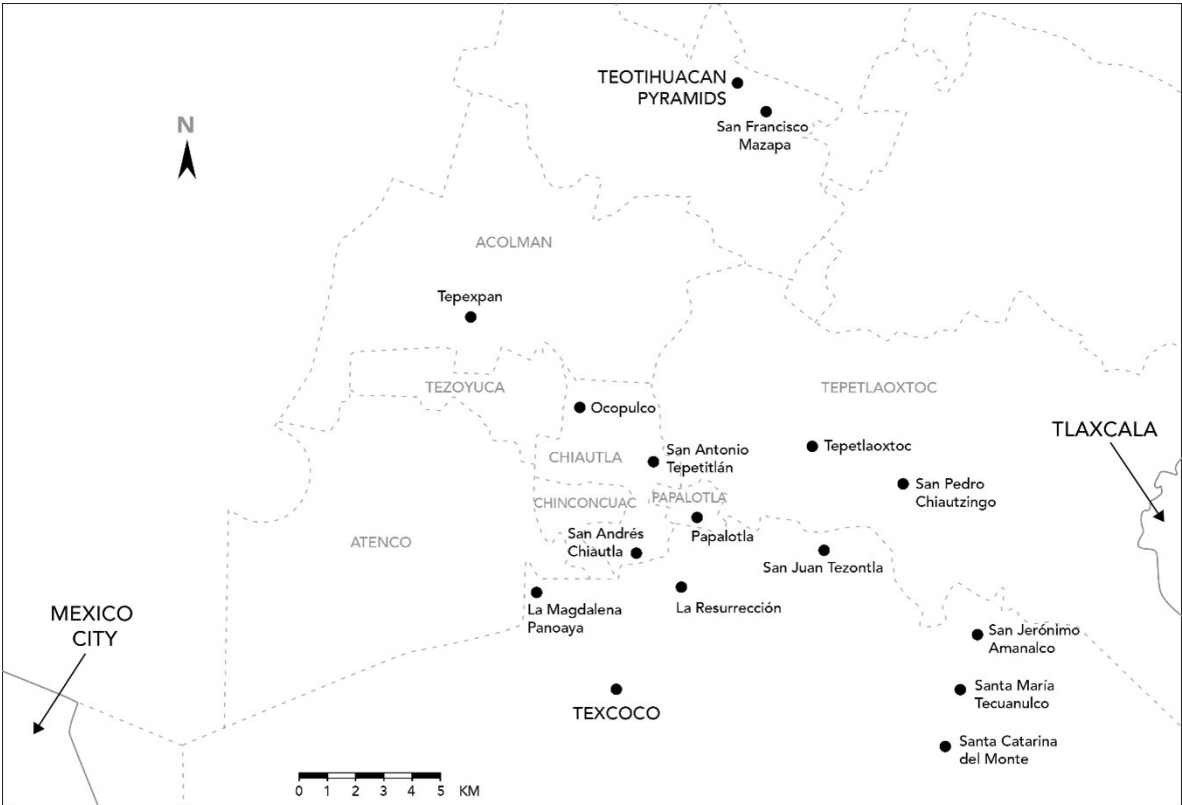
In this same vein of thought, Birgit Meyer (2015, 336) has emphasized that, in seeking to make "visible the invisible," religion involves multiple media for "materializing the sacred." She, too, understands media "in the broad sense of material transmitters across gaps and limits that are central to practices of mediation". To this effect, Meyer (2015, 338) coined the term "sensational forms," which include body techniques and serve as "formats" that "make present what they mediate." Undoubtedly, the dances and other media characteristic of the religious tradition we deal with here can be described in these terms. [8]

This paper is based on three sources: 1) fieldwork involving extensive participant observation since late 2011 focused on devotional dance groups in more than twenty-five towns in the Texcoco and Teotihuacán regions (see Map 1) monitoring of Facebook profiles of town governments, parishes, dioceses, local religious authorities (*mayordomías*), dance groups, and individuals from the two regions; 3) fifty-two interviews, conducted on Teams or Meet platforms and by telephone between October 6, 2020 and February 18, 2021 with twenty-six informants from fifteen towns. The authors already knew most of the interviewees from their previous fieldwork, while a few new research participants were contacted via Facebook. [9]

This paper is divided into three sections followed by final considerations. In the first section, we briefly describe the historical antecedents and current operation of a type of community-centered ritual organization controlled by the laity. Next, we describe the devotional aspects of the dances and their role as an offering to the saint as part of contractual relationship. In the third section, we present some of the responses to the lockdown measures affecting religious feasts, focusing on the experiences of specific dance groups and individual dancers. These include use of electronic media and other substitution strategies. In the final considerations, we summarize our findings and reflect on the future of the feasts and dances which, in some cases, have now been suspended for two years in a row. [10]

How Popular Public Religion is Organized in the Texcoco and Teotihuacán Regions

The term "popular religion" has been used in different contexts to refer to diverse practices and beliefs diverging from what has sometimes been called "official" or "organized religion" (Vrijhof 1979; Isambert 1982; Lanternari and Letendre 1982). Some authors have proposed discarding the term altogether, considering it to be "badly tainted by pejorative connotations" (McGuire 2008, 45), and alternative terms such as "lived religion" (McGuire 2008), "vernacular religion" (Fluekiger 2006) and "local religion" (Christian 1981, 178–79) have been put forward in its stead. "Popular religion," "popular Catholicism" and "folk Catholicism" have all been used in Mexico since the second half of the twentieth century to account for dif- [11]



LEGEND :
 - - - - - MUNICIPAL LIMITS
 _____ STATE LIMITS
 ● TOWNS OF ORIGIN OF INFORMANTS AND POINTS OF REFERENCE

Source: Based on Google Maps and INEGI Digital Map of Mexico
 Designed by Mariana Castellanos Arizmendi

Figure 1 “Texcoco and Teotihuacán regions with towns of origin of informants.”

ferent practices and beliefs outside the “official” teachings of the Catholic Church (Carrasco 1952, 1976; Giménez Montiel 1978; Nutini 1989). We use “popular religion” or “popular Catholicism” here to refer to a specific type of public religiosity based on a lay community organization whose purpose is to ensure that the rituals of the annual calendar are carried out according to custom.

In the process of contact of Catholicism with pre-Hispanic religion and its transfer to native populations in sixteenth-century Mexico, the missionary friars trained trusted Indian assistants to enforce obligatory attendance to Mass and catechism. In smaller towns with no resident priest, these lay assistants registered and even performed baptisms or burials and reminded residents of their religious duties (Ricard 1947, 206–7). Empowerment of lay officials in the early colonial period laid the groundwork for what became known as the “cargo system”—also known as the civil-religious hierarchy, fiesta or *mayordomía* system—in twentieth-century Mesoamericanist anthropology (Carrasco 1952; Cancian 1966).² The popular Catholicism, as discussed in this article, sprang from this tactic used by the official Church during evangelization, but today it exists independently of the latter. [12]

It is important to note that Catholic missionary parishes and their divisions were usually a continuation of pre-Hispanic socio-political and religious units, many of which had a long history of migration of specific groups that were under the protection of and identified with a tutelary deity. With Christianization, the deity was replaced by a saint who in some cases had some of the attributes of that deity (López Austin 1998, 49–50, 69, 76–77). Furthermore, churches were commonly erected on the sites of pre-Hispanic temples, thus facilitating the transfer of loyalty to the Christian saint. Aztec gods were thought to provide temporal means; failure to comply with ritual would incur their wrath, and loss of their protection would lead to want. The friars gave pagan songs and dances Christian motifs, and they were performed in Catholic ceremonies. In what William Madsen calls a process of “fusional syncretism,” “almost all visible vestiges of paganism” were eliminated and Our Lady of Guadalupe-oriented Catholicism became “the focal value of Aztec culture in central México.”³ Patron saints replaced tutelary gods in each village and received offerings, similar to practices in pagan times. Religion today remains “the means of obtaining temporal necessities” and, “As in ancient times, the neglect of ritual obligations subjects the individual or the whole community to the vengeance of supernatural beings who punish [...] with sickness, crop failure, and other misfortunes” (Madsen 1967, 370–81). [13]

Stressing the contractual relationship between the patron saint and the community in Mexico, according to Hugo Nutini, “by the end of the seventeenth century a folk Catholicism had been structured encompassing diverse elements of the indigenous and Spanish religions. Superficially, this folk religion had a predominantly Catholic appearance, i. e. structurally, ritually, ceremonially, and, in general, its physical manifestations were not much different from urban Catholicism of the time.” However, it included (and does so to date) “many ideological and structural elements of pre-Hispanic polytheism”, such as “the conception of supernatural beings and figures and the *do ut des* that obtains in the relationship between the individual and collective body with their makers.” For Nutini, “it is here that the pre-Hispanic contribution is most important and acts as a counterweight to the preponderance of more visible Catholic elements” (1989, 88, authors’ translation). [14]

2 *Cargo* means office in Spanish, as an office held by a functionary.

3 The Virgin Mary of Guadalupe, the Mexican national symbol, replaced a mother goddess formerly venerated on the site where the Virgin appeared in 1531 (Wolf 1958).

“[T]he essentially lay character of ceremonial organization” in the cycle of public religious festivities has been noted by Gilberto Giménez. When a priest is involved, his role is reduced to that of a “ceremonial auxiliary subordinated to requirements of the popular ritual,” including saying masses in the saint’s honor. Giménez states that popular religion is relatively autonomous with respect to the Church’s control and regulation systems. As diocesan priests replaced the religious orders that introduced community ceremonial institutions in colonial times, a process of “autonomization” began and, with Independence in 1821 and separation of Church and State in 1857, the gap between the clergy and popular religion further widened. The community institutions introduced by the missionaries in the sixteenth century—the so-called “cargo system”—was appropriated and became “traditional,” operating “parallel to the Church and, at times, outside of, and even against the Church” (Giménez Montiel 1978, 150–51, authors’ translation). [15]

Although much has been written on the cargo system, scholarly attention has centered on topics such as its function as a leveling mechanism that erased budding wealth differences in supposedly egalitarian communities; its role in reinforcing existing internal differences; acquisition of prestige by cargo-holders; and individual versus community financing of religious feasts (Carrasco 1952; Wolf 1957; Cancian 1966; Chance and Taylor 1985). Following Arthur Maurice Hocart, we view the cargo system in our regions of study as a ritual bureaucracy whose purpose is to organize collective ritual in order to ensure health and prosperity and to ward off illness, misfortune, and death (1970; Dehouve 2016). We consider the dance groups to be part of this ritual bureaucracy as they provide an offering to the saint, complementing those of flowers, music, fireworks, and masses, for which the cargo-holders are responsible. [16]

The term “*mayordomo*,” recurrent in the literature on the cargo system, literally means “steward,” a reference to the fact that these office-holders were formerly stewards of plots of ground cultivated to finance religious feasts (Carrasco 1961, 493). Today, *mayordomos* in the two regions under study are responsible for overseeing the organization of religious feasts. They usually hold office for one year and, depending on the town, are selected in different numbers and organized in different ways. While in some towns, a single group of *mayordomos* is appointed or elected to be in charge of the entire annual cycle of feasts, in others there are specific *mayordomos* for each feast. Certain towns have a system in which different offices rotate from house to house and all households eventually assume specific responsibilities in organizing the annual ritual cycle. Whereas in one town a group of as many as 100 *mayordomos* are responsible for most of the ritual expenses, in other places each married male or male eighteen years of age or older is responsible for contributing to help the *mayordomos* cover costs. Collectively, the group of *mayordomos* is known as the *mayordomía*. [17]

The responsibilities of this ritual bureaucracy include organizing the usual celebrations of the Catholic liturgical calendar, particularly those related to the birth and death of Christ, and that of the patron saint or other major feasts specific to each town. The major feasts usually take place over a nine-day period, from one weekend to the next. During this time, in the church and forecourt, many months of *mayordomos*’ work materializes in its most evident manifestations as masses, flowers, music, fireworks, and dances all form a collective offering to the saint. [18]

The *mayordomo* or *mayordomos* have the obligation to reserve the masses and pay officiating clergy. They are also responsible for having the interior of the church decorated by professional florists with flower arrangements sometimes covering practically all the walls and even hanging from the ceiling. They must also provide special floral adornments, known [19]

as *portadas*, that bedeck the façade of the church. In 2018 and 2019, the cost of interior floral decoration varied from US\$2,000 to US\$7,500, depending on the size of the church and elaborateness of the floral arrangements, while the *portada* cost US\$1,000 or more. The *mayordomo* or *mayordomos* must also contract one and sometimes two wind-instrument or other orchestras with sixteen to twenty-five musicians to perform in honor of the saint in the church yard during some sixteen hours each day and to accompany processions. In 2019 a wind-instrument orchestra of this size cost some US\$2,500 to play for five days, with three meals provided daily in addition to this fee.

Mayordomos are also responsible for fireworks used profusely during the celebration. [20] Rocks are shot off the entire route of the procession in which the effigy of the saint is paraded through the town, an event that may last up to eight hours. Dozens of rockets are fired off at the beginning and end of the masses celebrated during the feast, and in long bursts at the time of the consecration of the host. The feast ends with the lighting of a *castillo* (literally, a castle with one or several turrets), a structure erected in front of the church. Some *castillos* are as much as thirty-five meters high, and they contain explosive charges that often set off gyrating wheels flying into the air, as well as pyrotechnic representations of the saint or religious motifs or phrases. A large *castillo* with several turrets may cost up to US\$7,000.

As we have seen here, public popular religion in the two regions under study is a highly [21] organized, community-oriented affair aimed at providing the customary offerings to the saints. In the next section we specifically deal with the dances, one of the five media that, along with flowers, music, fireworks and masses, are the salient manifestations of a contractual relationship with the invisible.

Devotional Dances in the Religious Feasts

Dances were an important part of the elaborate rituals in honor of the gods in pre-colonial [22] times and were considered by some missionaries as a form of prayer (de Mendieta 1870, 99). *Maceua*, one of the Nahuatl equivalents of an English verb “to dance,” can also be translated as “to do penance,” “to obtain something,” or “to deserve or merit something” (Siméon 2010, 244). Pointing out that *itotia*, another Nahuatl equivalent of a word “to dance,” shares a common root with *ittoa*, the equivalent of the verb “to speak,” Alfredo López Austin (2007, 186–87) has proposed that dancing was a way of “speaking” to gods and a dancer was “a bridge” between people and deities. Sixteenth-century reports indicate that missionaries tolerated dances as long as they were Christianized. New words were set to pre-Hispanic rhythms and chants and Spanish songs were translated into Nahuatl. It was preferred that dance celebrations take place in public in churches, churchyards and houses rather than clandestinely, away from the vigilant eyes of the missionaries (Ricard 1947, 340–41).

In most towns in the two regions under study, the celebration of major feasts is inconceivable [23] without dances. Together with the numerous masses, flowers, music and fireworks, they are the key elements of a massive collective offering, or gift to the saint, in the sense of Marcel Mauss (1983). These five elements constitute the media through which the contractual relationship between humans and the divine is maintained. In interviews and casual conversations during our fieldwork, terms such as “devotion,” “penance” and “sacrifice” often appear in connection with the dances offered to the saints. This is not surprising considering the physical exertion involved in some dances. Furthermore, the dance principals—those responsible for organizing a dance and dance the main roles—must pay for musicians, rent

sound equipment, tarpaulins and platforms to dance, as well as organize meals, sometimes three each day, attended by hundreds of dancers and their families. They must also spend long hours in rehearsals and in some cases learn lines in dances with speaking parts. A common reason why some men and women organize or participate in a dance is to fulfill a vow made in an appeal for divine intervention in cases of personal illness or that of family members, and to give thanks for a divine favor received. The motivation may also be more diffused, such as expressing gratitude for enjoying a general state of good health or for having a favorable economic situation. These individual motivations take on a collective dimension as part of a community's offering to the saints (Robichaux, Moreno Carvallo, and Martínez Galván 2020, 235).

The devotional character of the dances is clearly evidenced in the rituals carried out at the beginning and the end of their performance, especially on the first and final days of the feasts.⁴ Public staging of a dance is always preceded by a group entry into the church in which the dancers make the sign of the cross and genuflect or kneel in prayer before the effigy of the saint. In some cases, they intone a chant (a prayer to the saint with references to their purpose) and perform a small part of the dance in the church. This opening ritual often takes place after a Mass. On the last day of the performance, a ritual known as the "coronation" takes place with great pomp and ceremony inside the church. It is accompanied by a slow, repetitive music and intricately choreographed movements, in which each dancer successively embraces each of his or her companions. This highly emotional ceremony may last two hours or more and some of those who have been "crowned" (*coronado* in Spanish, meaning they have made a vow to dance), or have fulfilled their vow make speeches, giving thanks to the saint, or asking for his or her aid to keep their vow the following year. It is believed that if the vow is not kept the wrath of the saint can be incurred and the dancer or a member of his family will be punished in the form of illness or an accident. [24]

The dances take place in designated spaces in the forecourt of the church or nearby, and in some towns as many as five or six groups of usually forty to sixty dancers may simultaneously perform from four to six hours with little rest. While certain dances have always had both female and male roles, others have been exclusively for men, children, or young girls. In the last few decades female versions of certain dances have appeared in some towns and women have assumed roles traditionally assigned to men. It is common to see parents dancing with babies and young children in their arms, and children dancing alongside their parents. Many dancers in their thirties and forties have spoken of first dancing with their parents at age of four or five, and some have stated that, only as they grew older, did they understand the full religious significance of what they were doing. In most cases, with the assistance of paid specialists, known as *ensayadores* (literally, "rehearsers"), rehearsals begin four to six weeks prior to the first performance. These ritual specialists not only teach the dancers the steps, choreography, and lines of dances with spoken parts, but, acting as ritual specialists, direct the previously described initial ceremonies and the coronation. [25]

The dances—of which the authors observed twenty-one types and their variations—always have a leading theme. But regardless of their content, the opening rituals and final coronation show that all the dances are dedicated to the saint and that vows and devotion are ever present (Robichaux, Moreno Carvallo, and Martínez Galván 2020, 235–38). As we will discuss in the following section, the lockdown was a challenge for dance groups, most of which have not [26]

4 Depending on the town, dances are usually performed one to five times during a feast.

been able to dance. However, some groups did manage to perform, “though differently,” and creative solutions were developed to fulfill the contractual relation with the saints.

Lockdown, Social Distancing, and New Ways to Fulfill the Contractual Relation in Religious Festivities and Dances

The Mexican Federal Government’s declaration of the health emergency on March 23, 2020 meant the immediate cancelation of nearly all the activities involved in the celebration of the feasts in the towns of the Valley of Teotihuacán and Texcoco regions. The media without which the celebration of the religious feasts had once been unthinkable—masses, floral adornment, fireworks, music, and dances—were put on hold or their use was greatly modified. For most of the time since the outburst of the pandemic, masses have been said behind closed doors with no one in attendance and livestreamed by Facebook. Religious processions have been held with the effigy of the saint paraded in the back of pick-up trucks with people viewing from their homes. The few dances staged have been performed with a greatly reduced number of dancers and for a much shorter time than usual. Digital media, already used before the pandemic by some groups of dancers, *mayordomos*, and parishes, have increased in importance in some towns and have become the primary means of communication and display. [27]

The varied strategies adopted during the feasts in different towns can be explained in part by the severity of restrictive measures at the time of the feast. In towns with feasts soon after the lockdown *mayordomos* and dancers had little time to adapt. For example, on March 21, the parish in the town of La Resurrección posted on Facebook a program of activities for Holy Week and the week following (April 5–19, 200) when the patron saint’s (Our Lord of the Resurrection) day is celebrated. It included the usual Holy Week processions and masses in addition to the participation of five different dance groups, scheduled to perform on two different days as in any other year during the week after Easter. But on March 28, following the declaration of the health emergency, it was announced that these activities would be “modified.” In fact, all processions were canceled, and since churches were closed, masses were celebrated behind closed doors and livestreamed on Facebook. Thinking the epidemic would soon be over, it was announced that the dances, music, floral arrangements, and fireworks would be postponed until Pentecost (May 31), the town’s second major feast.⁵ This did not happen, as it was soon announced that the Pentecost celebrations would also be canceled. [28]

The different *mayordomías* and dance groups of La Resurrección had already made partial payments for various services, including US\$12,000 for two *castillos* and all the rockets. One of the dance groups had made an advance payment of US\$1,000 for music and sound equipment. Another group had made a contract for US\$10,000 with an expensive group of celebrity musicians and had paid half the amount before cancelation. With cancelation of Pentecost, the advance payment on contracts for music, flowers, and fireworks were “lost.” With the new surge of the pandemic in December and early January 2021 severely affecting the town, festivities for 2021 were also canceled. It was decided that the *mayordomos* responsible for the 2020 celebration would remain in office in 2021 as they were not able to fully discharge their duties, and it remains to be seen what will happen next. [29]

With time, some dance groups developed creative solutions to substitute traditional prac- [30]

5 Facebook Parroquia. Accessed January 3, 2021. <https://www.facebook.com/ParroquiadelaresurreccionTexcoco/photos/a.1743867959053187/2595250977248210>

tices and renew the contractual relationship with the saints. One case in point is that of the *Serranos* dancers of Tepexpan who dance in honor of *Nuestro Señor de Gracias* (Our Lord of Graces), celebrated on May 3. Performed only in this town and on that occasion, this dance is unique in that it brings together up to 700 participants. After a meal attended by as many as a thousand people, the dancers go to the church and in two rows numbering as many as 350 each, in slow rhythmic steps, file in, intoning a melancholy chant that opens the dance. Many have their eyes fixed on the image of Our Lord of Graces above the altar and are visibly moved. After kneeling in prayer and making the sign of the cross, the dancers perform some of the dance steps. They then file out of the church and dance for five to six hours, in the view of hundreds of spectators.

None of this occurred in 2020. As one informant put it, the feast was celebrated “to the extent possible and with all means that were allowed [by the authorities], but with an enormous amount of faith to receive the blessings of Our Lord.” Although there were “few flowers, little music, few fireworks” and no dancers in the churchyard, digital media served to remind the town’s inhabitants of the dancers’ normal offering. In early April, when it became evident that the May festivities would be canceled, the principals⁶ of the *Serranos* dance group opened a Facebook account and appealed to the townspeople to share photos and videos from previous years.⁷ People were also requested to display arches, crowns, hats, and other regalia used in the dance outside their houses beginning at 3:00 pm on May 3. Several pickup trucks paraded through the town carrying pictures of the patron saint and playing recorded music from the dance, all the while livestreaming on Facebook. People from the households of many of the dancers came outside, some dressed in their dance costumes to greet the procession, and at one point a group of children in costumes performed some of the steps of the dance.⁸ Some dancers used their personal Facebook profiles to post photos of their household altars where they had placed dance regalia. Symbolically, at the end of the procession, the pickup trucks backed away from the churchyard gate, replicating the recessional movement of the *Serranos* when they file out of the church, never turning their back to the saint, all to the accompaniment of a recording of the chant intoned by the dancers on that occasion. Those riding in back of one of the pickups ended the procession with applause and shouts of “*Viva el Señor de Gracias*” and hugged each other as in the coronation ceremony.⁹ [31]

Over time, as people became accustomed to what Mexican federal authorities termed *La nueva normalidad* (The New Normality), some groups of dancers succeeded in honoring the saints by dancing, but on a much-reduced scale. The town of San Francisco Mazapa celebrated Pentecost (May 31, 2020), one its two major feasts, while lockdown measures were still in full force. The church was closed, and Mass was said behind closed doors and livestreamed. The [32]

6 *Principales*, in Spanish. Persons in charge of organizing the dance, referred to in at least one town as *mayordomos*. Among their responsibilities are collecting money to pay musicians and offering a meal to dancers and their families during the feast.

7 One of the authors of this article edited four videos from the recordings we made since 2015. These movies were posted on the “*Serranos de Tepexpan*” Facebook Profile and viewed thousands of times. *Serranos de Tepexpan Facebook Profile*. Accessed December 1, 2020. <https://www.facebook.com/100049879428660/videos/109660100706637/?extid=bEFwUPk1zlskHsA> <https://www.facebook.com/100049879428660/videos/118844669788180/?extid=2dghGE972RzIAm0h> <https://www.facebook.com/100049879428660/videos/121994952806485/?extid=ZeWgdU1x9gTeLbeL> <https://www.facebook.com/100049879428660/videos/124921319180515/?extid=LMnDuwJ6ygrJeCEQ>

8 *Facebook Parroquia*. Accessed December 1, 2020. <https://www.facebook.com/ParroquiaTepexpanOficial/videos/234357064327879/>

9 *Facebook video*. Accessed December 1, 2020. <https://www.facebook.com/100049879428660/videos/122478216091492/>

statues of the saints, normally displayed inside the church, were set up in the forecourt and honored with floral offerings and a band. In ordinary years, the *Alchileos* and the *Santiagos* dance groups, each with thirty to forty participants, perform for five to six hours. On this occasion, a group of *Alchileos* dancers paraded through the streets, and a small group of their representatives entered the churchyard, made “reverences,”¹⁰ and placed a floral offering before the statues of the saints, though they did not dance. A group of eighteen *Santiagos* dancers, accompanied by musicians, entered the churchyard and, after making the sign of the cross and kneeling before the saints, performed for about twenty minutes.¹¹

As cases of COVID-19 dropped off, sanitary restrictions were relaxed in early July and *mayordomos* and dance principals in San Francisco Mazapa began organizing and collecting money for the coming feasts. Churches were now open, but only at thirty-percent capacity. For the feast of the town’s patron saint, Saint Francis of Assisi on October 4, a greatly reduced number *Alchileos* dancers performed, beginning with “reverences” at the home of one of the principals. They then paraded through the streets and danced for a short while in the church forecourt.¹² These symbolic representations or acts substituting normal performances did not free the dance principals from their obligations, since they are expected to organize the full dance in 2021.

In San Jerónimo Amanalco, some six dance groups usually perform to celebrate the town’s patron saint, St. Jerome, on September 30. In April, although the number of deaths was rapidly rising in the town during the first wave of the pandemic, the principals of the *Arrieros* dance group decided that, regardless of the circumstances, they would perform the dance, at least on a reduced scale, either in front of the church or in some other open space. In May, the father of one of the principals, formerly active in the dance, died of COVID-19. No funerals were allowed then and when his ashes were interred in July some forty members of the group danced in the cemetery and at the municipal offices where the deceased had worked. Despite the fact that other dances were not performed and although other *Arrieros* dancers and members of their family had been stricken and died of COVID-19, the rest of the group became even more determined to dance for the saint and began rehearsing in August. As one of our informants put it, “those who died knew that we were going to dance. Let’s do it now for them. Let’s continue with this devotion to honor their memory.”

The *mayordomos* allowed them to provide a morning serenade and leave a floral offering for the saint, and the group principals went into the church to pray before the saint’s statue. Next, some forty dancers, most of them wearing protective masks, danced a while outside the church. Leaving the churchyard, the dancers also performed outside two of the town’s small chapels before proceeding to the home of the dancer where the rehearsals had taken place; there they danced for several hours. Photos and a video posted on the Facebook profile of a person close to one of the dancers elicited varied comments. One said: “This wasn’t like other years, but they danced with great faith for our holy patron”. But another more cautious comment read: “It’s great for those who had the courage to dance. But those of us who choose

10 A movement typical in this dance, in which dancers lower their upper bodies with outstretched hands in a “bowing” motion.

11 Facebook page. Accessed December 6, 2020. <https://www.facebook.com/106066384062216/videos/1520194508140138/>

12 Facebook Danza Alchileos. Accessed December 6, 2020. <https://www.facebook.com/DanzaAlchileosOficial/videos/335114391053998/>

to respect the confinement measures join in the sorrow of the families who have lost a loved one. San Jerónimo is in mourning!!!”¹³

A curious set of circumstances enabled some dancers from Papalotla to perform and honor the town’s patron saint in a unique way. None of the nine dance groups scheduled for the feast of the town’s patron saint, Saint Toribio of Astorga (April 16) was able to perform. The town has a strongly entrenched tradition of the *Santiagos* dance which reenacts a conflict between Christians and Moors in medieval Spain. In 2017, encouraged by local and state officials seeking to promote tourism, a group of thirty dancers obtained certification from the International Dance Council, an affiliate of the UNESCO. This was the subject of controversy, as some less-experienced dancers with greater financial resources paid the 164-euro fee, while others could not afford it or chose not to be certified because they felt this was contrary to the dance’s devotional character. In October, when the spread of the coronavirus was abating, Santiago dancers were invited to perform at a virtual cultural event sponsored by state authorities near the state capital of Toluca.

The interpretation of the dance, promoted on the festival program as one of the “cultural values of Texcoco,” was far removed from its religious significance. Nevertheless, one of the most seasoned dancers, who had adamantly refused to be certified, was more than happy to participate, explaining that this was an opportunity to dance for Saint Toribio. The festival organizers were informed that the *Santiagos* dance was not a “ballet or folk dance” like other dances on the event program, but a religious expression, and that a special wooden platform would have to be erected for the performance. On Sunday morning, October 18, before traveling to the festival venue, a group of twenty-six dancers, accompanied by a few relatives and fourteen musicians, gathered at the church. Their temperatures were taken, masks were required, a safe distance was maintained, and anti-bacterial gel was in abundant supply. For our informant, the purpose of going to the church was to “do honor to and ask permission” from Saint Toribio, for “his consent to perform his dance in his honor, to stage the dance away from his temple.”

As the video posted on Facebook shows, what took place inside the church was much like the initial ceremony prior to performance in the context of religious feasts. The ceremony started with a rendition of the Mexican birthday song, *Las Mañanitas*, by the musicians. The dancers next made the sign of the cross and knelt in prayer before the statue of the saint, and briefly executed several of the different dance steps.¹⁴ Once at the festival venue, the statue of Saint Toribio was placed on the platform set up for the dance. The dancers recited segments of the spoken parts, and the performance was livestreamed and later posted on the festival’s Facebook profile.¹⁵ In the view of our informant, participating in the festival allowed the dancers to honor, “though differently,” the saint in times of the quarantine. Although the dancers were formally required to wear masks, they took them off for the performance. As our informant put it, “once we were on the platform, with the blessing of God, practicing our religion, demonstrating our faith, we felt we would be aided. Although we were aware of the risk, God took care of us and nothing bad happened.”

The new surge of the pandemic in December 2020 and January 2021 dashed whatever

13 Facebook video. Accessed October 21, 2020. <https://www.facebook.com/100010996571284/videos/1216982425344965/>

14 Facebook video. Accessed December 8, 2020. <https://www.facebook.com/Cr%C3%B3nicas-de-Papalotla-M%C3%A9x-108439897360858/videos/1010572529459590/>

15 Facebook video. Accessed December 10, 2020. <https://www.facebook.com/FestivalInternacionalQuimera/videos/2135356990105397/>

remaining hopes of dancing as in normal times, at least for early 2021. “Symbolic representations” substituted the normal dances and Facebook and other social platforms came to play an important role in this process. During the eleven-day feast of Saint Sebastian (January 20) in Tepetlaoxtoc, eight dance groups performed in 2020. In early January 2021, the Facebook account “*Tepetlaoxtoc Historia, Tradición y Cultura*” invited its followers to “virtually celebrate” the feast by posting photos from past years of different events of the festivities.¹⁶ One of the *mayordomías* opened the “*Mayordomía San Sebastián 20 de enero 2021*” account and posted videos showing numerous displays of the traditional media—flowers, fireworks and music, as well as symbolic representations of two dances. One of the symbolic representations was that of the *Sembradoras* dance. Instead of the usual sixty to eighty dancers, a group of twelve heard Mass on the second day of the feast and entered the chapel where they genuflected and crossed themselves before dancing some twenty minutes. The other took place on the final weekend of the feast and, instead of the usual three to four hundred dancers, thirteen participants in the *Serranos* dance heard Mass and performed several steps of their dance for about twenty minutes.

During the feast, masses were said at the entrance of the church with few in attendance and the space in front of the church was cordoned off to limit access. Nevertheless, the façade of the small chapel was lavishly adorned with flowers and different musical groups played. Some of the videos posted have a professional quality and seemed to have been made specifically for livestreaming and viewing on Facebook. One of them attracted more than 8,000 views in just two days after it was posted on January 20. The fireworks display was, in fact, a sophisticated combination of pyrotechnics and laser technology. Geometric shapes and the figure of Saint Sebastian with the words, “Saint Sebastian, Bless Us” were projected on the walls of buildings on the chapel plaza accompanied by recorded music. All of this, including shots taken from a drone was livestreamed and later posted on Facebook.¹⁷ [40]

In the town of Tepetitlán, symbolic representations of two dances were performed during the festivities of the Purification of the Virgin Mary (February 2, 2021). Every year, on the occasion of this feast, the *Santiagos* dance group puts on a spectacular and costly performance. Although in 2020 a new set of principals had committed themselves to organize the dance in 2021, they decided not to perform. The reason was that their commitment includes having several sets of costly costumes as the combats in this dance nearly always result in torn and soiled costumes, making it necessary to have replacements on hand to continue the performance. Principals must also offer three meals a day during the three days this dance is put on, in addition to paying musicians. However, as the date of the feast approached, a group of dancers who had danced in previous years and thus had the costumes and knew the lines, decided that it would be an insult to the Virgin if this dance was not staged for her feast. Some sixty men, all wearing protective masks, danced for one hour to the accompaniment of musicians hired by the *mayordomos* for the general ritual needs of the feast, and recited some of the lines. [41]

The other symbolic representation made in Tepetitlán, that of the *Vaqueros* dance group, was somewhat different. In 2020, a group of several brothers and sisters and their adult children made a collective vow to organize this dance in 2021 in gratitude for the recovery from [42]

16 Facebook website. Accessed January 22, 2021. <https://www.facebook.com/Tepetlaoxtoc-Historia-Tradici%C3%B3n-y-Cultura-620321778108590/photos/a.623882814419153/1870976586376430>

17 Facebook video. Accessed January 22, 2021. https://www.facebook.com/Mayordomia-San-Sebasti%C3%A1n-M%C3%A1rtir-20-de-enero-2021-101745744811188/videos/d41d8cd9/762130577744155/?_so_=watchlist&_rv_=related_videos

cancer of a daughter of one of the brothers. Instead of traditional three full days of dancing, they performed in front of the church for about an hour in a space closed off to the public. Our informant, a member of this kin group, described this act as a “a small symbolic advance” [payment]. In this way, they partially fulfilled their vow to the extent allowed by local authorities, making a partial payment of their commitment that they expect to be able to fully honor in 2022. This will include rehearsing, paying musicians and offering three meals a day to hundreds of guests during the three days they dance.

Final considerations

Following Jeremy Stolow (2005), we have identified masses, the lavish public displays of flowers, fireworks and music, along with dances as the five principal media characterizing the religious feasts in regions of Texcoco and Teotihuacán in central Mexico. Although all five were severely curtailed by the measures adopted to slow the spread of COVID-19, the dances have been affected to the greatest extent. Most dance groups simply did not perform, although we learned of scattered instances of dance principals presenting a floral offering to the saint. All told, there were few instances of ‘symbolic representations,’ a term we have adopted from one of our informants to refer to scaled-down or modified forms of dancing. These instances bring to mind cases of substitution or reduction of offerings in contractual relations with the divine. For example, according to Edward Evans-Pritchard, among the Nuer of South Sudan a cucumber can either replace an ox or be offered with the promise of a future sacrifice of an animal (Evans-Pritchard 1956, 128, 148, 197, 205, 279). In the context much closer to our research, Danièle Dehouve (2009, 140–41) found that among the Tlapanecs of the Mexican state of Guerrero, in case of need, an egg or chick could replace a chicken in some sacrifices. The Tlapanecs even haggle and inform the power to whom the sacrifice is made that they are getting an egg instead of a goat, while presenting excuses explaining that they were not able to provide the customary offering (Dehouve 2009, 38).

Already considering the probable cancelation of the dance he was supposed to participate in, one of our interviewees expressed an idea echoing these customs. He said that on the day of the feast, he imagined going to the church dressed in his dance costume, kneeling and making the sign of the cross before the saint’s statue and saying: “I have come to see you, but You know how things are. I have to go now”. Other informants imagined a near future with performance of the dance under quarantine in terms similar to the symbolic representations we have described in the previous section. One said that the combat dance in which he is involved would have to be performed with a much smaller number of dancers who would wear gloves and simulate the battle, all the while keeping a safe distance. Another informant noted that some members of his group were considering an hour-long performance of twenty-five masked dancers instead of the usual three to four hundred, one day instead of two, with recorded music and lots of anti-bacterial gel available. He was aware of the possible risk of being fined by the civil authorities, but said he would gladly pay it, “After all, I owe more to the patron saint.” He also noted that the opening chant of the dance says, “We are here to fulfill our vow, Father”, and that most of the dancers had made a vow to dance, whatever the circumstances.

The words of another experienced dancer and *ensayador* reveal how important the religious significance of the dances is for many people in the two regions. They also bring out the deep principles underlying observable behavior that has often been seen as folklore in Mexico

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where ‘folk dances’ have been promoted by the State as one of the performing arts and part of the national identity. He envisioned a version of the dance in quarantine, stripped down to its bare essentials. The customary visits and performances of the dancers at key points in the town, along with the meals offered by the principals to dancers and townspeople, would all have to be canceled. Instead, they would provide food only to the musicians as this is a customary part of their payment. The dance would be performed inside the church, after Mass, once everyone had left. He emphasized that the spirit of the dance, its true purpose, was to perform for the saint. Omitting adjacent traditions, all carried out in normal times, would not be a problem.

The similarities between actual and imagined symbolic representations reveal that “the spirit of the dance, its true purpose”—or “the essence of the dance,” as another informant put it—is, indeed, an offering to the saint. They also show that these substitutions aim at maintaining an ongoing relationship with the saint in times of severe restrictions. But the use of livestreaming and posting on Facebook reveal another important religious need that we believe many people in the two regions have felt during the lockdown. In calling for an understanding of religion as ‘mediation,’ an attempt “to bridge the gap between the here and now and something ‘beyond,’” Birgit Meyer has stressed that multiple media are involved in “making the invisible visible” (Meyer 2015, 336). To the same end, she coined the term “sensational forms” to give account of “body techniques as well as sensibilities and emotions that become embodied in the habitus” (Meyer 2015, 338). Dancing is a sensational form and, as a public act, serves to make visible to the audience and the townspeople in general the covenant with the saint. It is in this sense that we believe that livestreaming symbolic representations, as well as posting pictures of dance regalia and videos and photos of past dances on Facebook all constitute an attempt by those having access to this technology to convey at least part of the sensorial dimensions involved in the performance of the dances in normal times. In this way, they remind viewers of the ongoing contractual relation that will one day be made visible again through the traditional means. [46]

It is still too early to weigh in on the full impact that the COVID-19 pandemic will have on the dances and religious feasts. The examples we have provided of limited use of traditional media, substitution practices, and use of digital media offer only a partial picture of a truly catastrophic situation that has disrupted the customary sociability revolving around an unusually rich public religious life. Due to the complexity of human emotions, the inner feelings of actors are not easy to penetrate, making the full breadth of the religious dimension of the dances difficult to capture even in normal circumstances. Furthermore, due to the pandemic, our research was mainly limited to people with telephones and internet access with whom we were acquainted before the lockdown and to those towns where substitution practices were posted on Facebook. Notwithstanding these limitations, we identified several crucial questions that warrant further study: Have illness and recovery from COVID-19 been a common motive for making a vow to dance as it was for one of our informants? Did the symbolic representations, in addition to maintaining the relationship with the saint, take on the added function of a supplication to end the pandemic? Has the pandemic shaken people’s faith, preparing the way for a possible repudiation of traditional practices due to perceived abandonment by the saint? Or, on the contrary, will it result in a reinforcement of the dance offering as a means to ward off future disasters? Further research, including in-person fieldwork, is needed to answer these questions and gain a better view as to how popular Catholicism in Mexico has weathered the effects of Covid-19. [47]

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