The Rituals of Kindness:
A Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of Claremont Graduate University and San Diego State University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate Faculty of Education Claremont and San Diego, California
2009

Rafaela M. Santa Cruz, Co-Chair, San Diego State University

Lourdes Arguelles, Co-Chair, Claremont Graduate University

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We, the undersigned, certify that we have read this dissertation of Mario E. Aguilar and approve it as adequate in scope and quality for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

Dissertation Committee:

Rafaela M. Santa Cruz, Co-Chair, San Diego State University

Lourdes Arguelles, Co-Chair, Claremont Graduate University

Alberto Ochoa, Member, San Diego State University

John Regan, Member, Claremont Graduate University
Abstract of the Dissertation

The Rituals of Kindness: The Influence of the Danza Azteca Tradition of Central Mexico on Chicano-Mexcoehuani Identity and Sacred Space

by

Mario E. Aguilar

Claremont Graduate University

San Diego State University

2009

Since its arrival in the United States from central Mexico in the mid 1970s, the indigenous ritual cycle of dance known as La Danza Azteca (the Azteca dance) has had profound impact on the self-identification, resiliency, and concept of sacred space of the Mexican-American, Chicano, and other Latino communities. Using the Nahuatl term “Mexcoehuani” to identify these communities as one multi-faceted membership group, this study through an online survey, auto-historia narrative, and an auto-ethnography has studied the impact of La Danza Azteca on its practitioners.

The data collected in this research shows that La Danza Azteca tradition, known to its Mexican practitioners as the “rituals of kindness” has roots deeply imbedded in the ancient cultures of Mesoamerica. The arrival of the Spanish invaders in 1519 added a new tradition of Christianity to the old indigenous traditions. This lead to the creation of “Indocristiano” a new syncretic paradigm of resistance, resiliency, and evolution in religion, art, and dance. Through over 400 years of history, La Danza Azteca has given its practitioners in Mexico a system of membership, survival, and continuity with their indigenous identity.
The arrival of La Danza Azteca in the U.S. gave the Mexcoehuani community a new paradigm of identity, space, and spirituality. At first mixing in the non-Mexican traditions of the U.S. American Indian nations, the Mexcoehuani have had 36 years to learn the traditions of Mexico. The process of integrating themselves into the Mexican dance tradition, while still developing their own resiliency and self-determination, has been one of La Danza Azteca’s key features in the U.S.

The rituals of kindness of La Danza Azteca have given the Mexcoehuani communities of the U.S., a third space within the identities of the United States and Mexico, of identity, membership, and self-determination. The Mexcoehuani communities call this space “Aztlan.” Aztlan has no physical space; wherever there are Mexcoehuani, Aztlan is present.
Dedications

I would like to give *tlazcamati*, (thanks) to our creator, our lord and lady of creation for giving me the blessing of living to see the day when my lifelong dedication to La Danza Azteca was transformed into this dissertation.

I would like to give *tlazcamati* to my wife Beatrice Zamora Aguilar for her love, patience, and support in this journey. *Tlazcamati* to my son and daughter, Andrés and Sofia, for their love and inspiration. *Tlazcamati* to my parents, Leonel and Melly for my Mexican indigenous heritage. *Tlazcamati* to my sisters Caty and Lily for their love and beauty. *Tlazcamati* to my maestro and spiritual grandfather, Florencio Yescas.

*Tlazcamati* to Capitana Rosita Hernández, Capitán Pedro Rodríguez, Capitán Moisés González Barrios, Capitán Cruz Maldonado Aguilar, Manuel Pineda, and General Andrés Segura Granados for their knowledge. *Tlazcamati* to my compadritos José Salinas, Samuel Padilla, Salvador Sámano, and Sergio Velarde who have gone on before us. *Tlazcamati* to my compadritos and comadritas in our dance circle, Danza Mexi’cayotl, for their love, dedication, and support. *Tlazcamati* to all the pipiltin (children) in our dance circle, for they are why I took on this challenge. *Tlazcamati* to my Tlamachtiquetl John Sullivan, and the kind and gentle people of the Instituto de Docencia e Investigación Etnológica de Zacatecas: Delphina, Urbano, Manuel, Eliazar, Victoriano and Ofelia. *Tlazcamati* to my carnales Rolando and Rudy, whose love and support have helped me keep sane and happy throughout this 35 year journey. In addition, *Tlazcamati* to Chunky, Alurista, and Juan Felipe, for having gotten me involved in the path of the tree of life. ¡Él es dios!
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge the help and support of my dissertation committee members Drs. Rafaela Santa Cruz, Lourdes Arguelles, Alberto Ochoa, and John Regan. I would also like to acknowledge the help and support of my carnal Rudy Jacobo, and my sister Bonnie Reddick, who together, completed our gang of three. Thanks to John Sullivan, Ceci Necoechea, and Gwen Hoyt for your support in this journey.

I would like to acknowledge and thank Rafael Hernandez, our director at the UCSD Early Academic Outreach Program. Without your kind and humane approach to staff development and support, this research would have been tremendously more difficult to complete.

I would like to acknowledge the wisdom and knowledge shared by my friends Roger and Cynthia Maze, who have shown me the connections between our two nations. In addition, I would like to acknowledge the wisdom and knowledge shared with me by Eddie and Bernie Bautista, who have walked ahead of us into the spirit world.
PREFACE: REFLECTIONS

“It is better to die on your feet than live on your knees.” -Emiliano Zapata.

“Mexico looks to Spain, Chicanos look to the Northern tribes for acceptable identity and validation.” - Argelia Andrade, C. Phil.

“Wow, this is what I was born to be, this is what I came to this earth for... I felt as if from the time I was born till that day I was asleep, and from that moment on it was a spiritual awakening... -Dancer Xiuhcoatl in narrative.

“I can remember probably being about five or six; I was definitely running around already. But at that age it seemed that it was really normal, like that’s just the way it is. La Danza seemed like a natural part of family life.” -Dancer Metztli in narrative.

“It’s a way of being connected with your ancestors...it still connects us to our ancestors from Mexico, and keeps us connected to the traditions and culture of Mexico.”

-Dancer Ehecatl in narrative.

“The circle says unity. Whether you like the other person or not, it is a circle and it unites.” -Xipechihuatl in narrative.

“We believe we are caretakers of our Danza, so we carry it with pride taking care to dance only where we believe we should... It doesn’t make you better than others... but you work the Danza and you weave it into your modern life as best you can.” -Cihuacoatl in narrative.
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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction: An Historical Perspective

In the late 1960s, the Mexican-American communities of the U.S. were swept up in the civil rights struggles of the time. Mexican and other Latino communities, long victims of legal apartheid and cultural imperialism, began to coalesce in a historic movement towards self-identity, self-determination, and socio-political empowerment. The concept of identifying as a “Chicano” (a term long used pejoratively against English-speaking U.S. citizens of Mexican descent by residents of Mexico) became a touchstone for young activists. Rodolfo “Corky” Gonzalez’ epic poem “I am Joaquin” captured the quintessential macho mestizo nationalism of the era (see appendix 5).

The creation of a unifying consciousness through “Chicanismo” (the essence of Chicano political/spiritual hermeneutics) allowed the unification of urban barrio dwellers and rural farmworkers; first generation college students and Marxist faculty; artists and blue collar laborers and native-born and immigrant. The many stakeholders/participants that swirled around the Chicano nexus reflected the many powerful needs that drove “El Movimiento,” the socio-political, and cultural movement of the Mexican-American communities (Alurista, 1981) . Aztlan, the mythic homeland of the Nahuatl-speaking nations of central Mexico, became the countersign of Chicano mythology for the lands lost by Mexico to the U.S. in the Mexican-American War. El Plan de Santa Barbara and El Plan De Aztlan, although showing strong Indigenist values, nevertheless showed strong Marxist and nationalist overtones (see appendixes six and seven).
One of the most important and powerful currents of this social upheaval was the Chicano and Mexican search for spirituality and sacred space. Some saw Judeo-Christian paradigms as colonialism, imperialism, and patriarchy over Latino/Hispanic culture. Some Chicanos/Mexicanos sought out their “ancestral spirituality” amongst Native American tribes of the U.S. that were presumed to have preserved their pre-conquest cultures in a “pure” state. Others sought out non-western European spiritual paths such as Buddhism, Hinduism, the Kabala, Santeria, Voodoo, and Sufism (Torres, 1996).

It was in this time of turmoil, the mid 1970s that the first two of several traditional Azteca Dance elders arrived in the U.S. They began to teach the living cultural system of central Mexico known as “La Danza Azteca,” “la Danza de los Concheros,” “La Danza Chichimeca,” or “La Danza,” the Aztec dance tradition.

Chicano youth, who sought new and non-European spiritual paths, found a system of identity that was based on indigenous values and did not appear to be based on the Judeo-Christian dichotomy of good and evil. Even those Chicano /Mexicanos, who cherished the long held Christian traditions of their immediate ancestors, were mesmerized by this new paradigm of Mexican-American ideology and indigenous identity.

The power of La Danza was that it provided an extremely rich system of discourse for identity, spirituality, ritual communication, and community membership that allowed for a healthy tension between European Christianity and Indigenous spiritual traditions. This Danza Azteca system created a “sacred space” of Chicano /Mexicano lived reality that transcended class, gender, language, and immigrant/citizen status. La Danza Azteca
was a ritual space where “kindness” could be practiced in a kinetic, spiritual, and creative way.

La Danza Azteca came to the U.S. as an almost self-contained system of resistance to oppression and as a form of cultural resiliency, artistic creativity, and virile warrior belligerence. At the same time, it gave an indigenous voice to activist Chicanos and it was accepted by immigrant Mexican as well as long established Mexican-American communities as a traditional aspect of Mexican Catholic practice.

The image of Our Lady of Guadalupe, intermixed with the “Aztec” goddess Tonantzin, was a perfect metaphor for Chicano identity and sacred space. The early acceptance of Aztec dancing by Anglo Catholic clergy within church liturgy hastened its growth (Aguilar, 1980).

Yet, within months of its arrival in the U.S., La Danza took on the aspects of a political movement among Chicanos who needed a fundamentalist Indigenist world view, to replace (or perhaps augment and parallel) the worldviews of fundamentalist Christians, Black Muslims, and Marxists (complete with mythic beginnings, linguistic presumptions, and pan-Indian ideology). This socio-political overtone caused conflict with Marxists, traditional Catholics, and feminists within and outside of the Chicano /Mexicano communities (Armstrong, 1985; Movement, 2007)

Over the past 36 years, La Danza in the U.S. has had several swings of the cultural pendulum between following the long established traditions of Mexico, and absorbing non-Mexican indigenous traditions of American Indian nations north of the U.S./Mexico border (as preferred by the fundamentalist indigenists). Yet the flexibility of
La Danza’s core constructs, tied as they are to the traditions of Mexico, have kept La Danza growing within the mainstream of Chicano/Mexicano communities from California, Texas, Georgia, Wisconsin, New Jersey, and beyond (Aguilar, 2008a).

Up until the arrival of La Danza Azteca in the mid 1970s, Chicano identity was crafted on male dominated, Marxist or nationalistic paradigms (Alurista, 1981; Rendón, 1971; Silva, 1970). “Mexican-American,” and “Chicano,” identity were firmly placed within the mixed Spanish and Native American “mestizo” ideology of Vasconcelos (Vasconcelos, 1979). Beyond the nebulous imagery of ancient Aztec warriors and beautiful maidens seen on taco shop calendars, contemporary indigenous identity and existence was not a dominant current in Chicano art, literature, or music (Hewes, 1954; Lopez, 1973; Saldana, 1966). The non-“Aztec” indigenous nations of modern Mexico were practically unknown within the canon of Chicano identity, symbolism, and spirituality.

Even less acknowledged were the influences of Mexico’s African slaves, (Bristol, 2005; Restall, 1997; Young, 2004), and Asian sailors of the 17-19th centuries (Minghua Zhao, 2005). These “unseen” cultural groups deeply influenced Mexican (and thus Mexcoehuani) identity, spirituality, and culture. Yet Mexican prejudice, based on the Spanish caste system of whiteness, continued to nurture racism against these groups.

The mestizaje, or mixing of the “races” of Mexico (and thus of the Chicano) did not end in 1521, nor 1910 for that matter. Chicano identity and culture are currently syncretizing and negotiating their essence in the urban jungles of American cities with the cultures of Vietnamese, East Africans, Muslims, and Eastern Europeans. For those
that want to keep their Mexican identity strong, the need for understanding its underlying indigenous roots (and those grafts that have been grafted onto those roots) becomes important. In order to survive, flourish, and keep their identity relevant, “Chicanos,” “Mexican-Americans,” and other Mexicanos, have to have a deeper understanding of their historical, cultural, and spiritual heritage.

In this study, I propose the term “Mexcoehuani” as a unified cultural, political, and spiritual identity that encompasses all of the Mexican origin communities of Aztlan.

I propose that in the twenty-first century, Mexcoehuani and others who want to help their community rise above the prison-industrial complex, rise above the continual lack of educational achievement, rise above the constant lack of health care for low-income communities must study how the Mexcoehuani communities create empowerment and self-determination from their shared identity. We need to understand how the Mexcoehuani create their space: sacred and profane. We need to understand where they feel empowered and at peace, with a sense of self-determination. This search for Mexcoehuani empowerment takes place within a stage of spatial typologies. Cultural grounding is sought within the x/y/z quadrants of the physical world:

1. Birthplace identity (native born, immigrant, nationality, regional, etc)
2. Local identity (street, barrio, city, state of residence)
3. Physical identity where empowerment, peace, and a sense of self-determination can be found (church, sweat lodge, sacred landscapes)
4. Nourishing identity (home, dance circle) where traditions are nourished and passed on to future generations.
In the past, Mexcoehuani, identity has been defined through Eurocentric paradigms of First: the political. What are the political advantages to Mexcoehuani identity? Second: The anthropological. Where does the Mexcoehuani identity fit in to Mexican and U.S. cultural norms? Third: The Economic. What are the financial implications of Mexcoehuani needs and obligations (education, health care) to the larger U.S. community?

These definitions have always been based on the monetary or political cost of identity. I argue that in order to understand Mexcoehuani identity and space, we need to incorporate the qualitative aspects of culture: spirituality, art, and mythic history. The wars of the Middle East, of the Balkans, and of dozens of other places have as much basis in religion and mythic history, as they do politics and economics. Thus, it is important to look at these spheres of identity and space if we want to understand Mexcoehuani epistemology.

Mexcoehuani spiritual affirmations take place within the sphere of time (past, present, and future mythic reality). Music, theatre, painting, literature, and other artistic expression can represent the epochs of the Mexcoehuani search for empowerment (spiritual and political), as they can express the resultant changes within. They represent, chronicle, and reflect the historical processes of resiliency, reformulation, and negotiated bicultural significance. By their reflective, mirror-like nature, these artistic expressions also affect and influence the Mexcoehuani search for empowerment and self-determination.
Danza Azteca, with its living lineage to ancient precolombian cultures, colonial influences, and modern cultural and spiritual movements, is one of the most vibrant forces of spiritual and artistic Mexcoehuani expression. We need to understand its significance if one wants to see what the common, everyday persons feel about Mexcoehuani identity. Whether a participant or spectator; a Mexcoehuani or non-Mexcoehuani; low-income, working-class worker, or elite academic researcher— a person that experiences any part of the Danza Azteca cultural system will feel the multi-dimensional impact of this system of membership- as well as influence its evolution simply by being a witness to that system itself.

The impact of the indigenous-forming identity and spirituality of La Danza Azteca on current Mexcoehuani thought and politics can be seen in the “Nuevo Plan de Aztlan,” posed on the internet (Botello, 2008). This updated plan for MEChA and young Mechistas clearly shows the influence of the key concepts brought to Aztlan by La Danza Azteca (see Appendix eight).
Contextualization of the Study

Statement of the Problem

This study seeks to answer the core question: At the beginning of the twenty-first century, what have been the influences of La Danza Azteca on Mexcoehuani identity and sacred space? In order to answer this question the study was guided by the following seven sub-questions:

1. How is Chicano identity defined?
2. What is “La Danza Azteca?” What are its historical roots in central Mexico?
3. How and when did La Danza Azteca arrive in the U.S.?
4. What are the reasons individuals seek out membership in La Danza Azteca?
5. What, if any, are the differences between Mexcoehuani Danzantes who were part of the first wave of La Danza compared to the ones that started later?
6. What, if any, are the differences between Mexcoehuani Danzantes who were born into La Danza and those that learned it later in life?
7. What is the concept of the Mexcoehuani identity as a unifying force for Mexican origin communities?
Definition of terms

From Mexican to Chicano to Mexcoehuani.

I have decided to use the term “Mexcoehuani” (mesh-ko-e-wán-i) for identifying Chicanos/as, Mexican-Americans, Mexicanos, for several reasons. The main reason is that in Nahuatl (the language of the “Aztecs”), Mexcoehuani is gender neutral, thus avoiding the troubled waters of Chicano versus Chicana. Mexcoehuani also does away with the battle between “Mexican-American,” “Latino,” and “Hispanic.” As is the case with verbal nouns in the Nahuatl language, Mexcoehuani can be both singular and plural, thus eliminating the confusion of him/her, his/her/their/its.

For this study, Mexcoehuani in general means “a person whose ancestors arose, were born, or came from Mexico.” Particularly, I will focus on Mexcoehuani who seek membership in the indigenous heritage of Mexico, and that seek a spiritual path based on that heritage.

I learned this identifier (and how it relates to Chicano identity) in 2004, when I participated in the Summer Nahuatl Institute in Zacatecas, Mexico. I was fortunate to sit in and listen to the Macehual (indigenous) students from the Mexican states of Veracruz, San Luis Potosi, and Hidalgo discuss entries for an upcoming Nahuatl dictionary for Nahuatl speakers. A discussion of who was a Macehual (an indigenous person) and who was a coyomeh (non-indigenous people) began. One person said that a Macehual was a person born in Mexico who had indigenous blood. John Sullivan, the director of the
Nahuatl Institute, pointed to me and said that I was born in Mexico City, and I obviously had indigenous blood, so was I a Macehual?

The answer was a unanimous “axcana” “...no.” All Chicanos and I are “Coyomeh” (plural of “coyotl,” coyote, which is a trickster animal, not to be trusted), like whites, blacks, and Asians, because I did not speak an indigenous language from birth, I did not live an indigenous life, and I did not understand the indigenous worldview that permeates the daily lives of the Macehual.

I was devastated! For 31 years, I had been an “Azteca” dancer, studied Nahuatl language, thought, culture, medicine, food and music; my parents are proud of their Mexican indigenous heritage… and yet, I might as well be from Ireland! However, the students went on to say that John and I were “cualli coyomeh” “good outsiders” and that was the key. Coyomeh does not mean “white and un-trusted” as I have heard some claim. It simply means an outsider, one who does not belong to the local worldview of the indigenous community.

In 2007, I returned to Zacatecas to conduct more research with my Nahuatl friends. I recounted the incident with one of the young men teaching in that year’s institute. He laughed at my experience and then started discussing in Nahuatl with the other Nahuatl young people. He said to me “Yes you are ‘coyomeh’ an outsider, because of your destiny. However, you and all the “Chicanada” (Chicanos) living in “el otro lado” (on the other side of the U.S. Mexico border) are ‘Mexcoehuani’ (mesh-ko-e-wán-i). So you are still part of us.”
I had heard that term in Tepecxictla, Veracruz back in 2004, from the man who was organizing the Chicome Xochitl (seven flowers) ceremony there. However, at that time I did not understand what its significance was. “Mexco” is the modern Nahuatl name for the country of México. “Ehua” is a verb that means “to arise from, to come out of, and by extension, to be from a locality.” “-Ni” is a suffix that indicates an agentive verbal noun (one who does something often, for example if I speak, I am a speaker). “ Mexcoehuani” then, means “someone who has arisen, come out of (or come from) Mexico.

Later I found the term used as the first word of the Nahuatl version of the Mexican national anthem (Nahuatlajtoli tlen Uaxtekapaj tlali., 1995). There it is used for the noun “Mexicans,” thus re-enforcing my use of the word for Mexican, Mexican-American, and Chicano.

This is why, for my study, I used the term Mexcoehuani. This term was used for my writings, data, and opinions. However, I used the terms Chicano and Mexican-American when I quoted interviews, citations, or when it was important to see the differences in identity before and after the arrival of the Aztec dance tradition. I used the terms Chicano and Mexican-American, when I spoke of the Mexcoehuani communities before the arrival of La Danza (before 1974). After that period, I used the term Mexcoehuani.
Other terms used in this study

**Afro-Centric:** Pertaining to an ethnocentric worldview that values everything from Africa as superior to anything else, or that all of the world’s culture originated in Africa, especially Egypt.

**Afromestizo:** A Mexican person, whose genetic, cultural, and spiritual heritage is acknowledged to include strong African genetic and cultural traditions, brought to Mexico during the times of slavery. An example of a famous Afromestizo or “black Indian” was Mexican independence leader and President Vicente Guerrero (Vincent, 2001).

**Alabanza:** This word is translated from Spanish into English as “hymn.” In La Danza Azteca, an alabanza is a hymn dedicated to Catholic saints, virgins, or God. However, an alabanza is also a “meme” of bicultural significance. Even as the Danzantes sing their devotion to the Catholic paradigm of salvation, they are also (knowingly in the case of the elder Capitanes, or unknowingly in the case of the novice dancers and onlookers) reformulating the imagery, message, and significance of the words.

**Aztequismo:** An aztequismo is a loanword that originated in Nahuatl, the language of the “Aztecs” and was absorbed into other languages, especially Spanish and English. Common aztequismos include chocolate, tamale, chile, coyote, guajolote, zopilote, and chapulin.

**Ballet/Baile:** A ballet is a ritually choreographed form of dance in which body position, gesture, and technique are highly orchestrated and controlled. These dances are part of a cultural elite’s classical repertoire of knowledge. In the case of Mesoamerican
religion, extreme care, and planning for the ritual dances were needed so that the state’s needs and propaganda could be conflated with religion and cosmology: divine dance as prayer and identity.

**Barrio:** A low income neighborhood, as opposed to a “colonia” or “zona residencial.” In Mexcoehuani use, a barrio is any place that Mexcoehuani live, work or play.

**Chilango:** This term initially referred to people from the “interior of Mexico” that migrated to Mexico City, but later it came to be applied to those born and bred in the Mexican capital. Some, especially those of the “upper classes” see this name as derogatory, preferring the term “capitaleños” (capital folks). However, most residents of Mexico City now take pride in this identity.

**Concha:** The musical instrument used by Danzantes for the traditional dance ceremonies. It can be a 10-string guitar, or an eight-string mandolin. The conchas are made either from a large gourd, or from the carapace of an armadillo.

**Conchero:** A traditional dancer from the central states of Mexico who dances the Indocristiano dances of the area with a guitar or mandolin.

**Chromo-racial caste system:** The Spanish colonial system of quantifying racial purity, and intelligence, by skin color. This caste system still permeates Latin-American paradigms of beauty, with the lighter skinned, European-looking phenotype of the cities seen as superior, and more intelligent than the indigenous, African, or mixed race phenotypes of the urban ghettos or the rural areas (Carrera, 2003; Katzew, 2004a).
**Criollo/Creole:** A person, genetically of Spanish blood, who is born in the Spanish colonies of America. This was one of the approximately 26 “racial castes” used by colonial Spanish society to control society. Although the Criollos were identical in all but birthplace to the Peninsulares (Spanish born in the mother country of Spain), they were never allowed to hold the highest positions in the colony (Viceroy, and Archbishop of Mexico City). The criollos finally joined the mestizos in seeking independence from Spain in 1810. Father Miguel Hidalgo, who gave the famous “grito” (call for liberty) at his parish church in Dolores, Hidalgo in the state of Guanajuato, on the night of September 15, 1810, was criollo.

**Cuartel General:** These words in Spanish mean “the general quarters.” Every traditional Danza group is organized as a military unit. Its headquarters, where the group keeps their standard, their weapons (musical instruments and candles), and their relics is also known as the “oratorio.” From the Cuartel in the dance group leader’s home, the group departs to go into battle (the dance rituals). See Oratorio, palabra, mesa.

**Dance/Danza:** For my study, the capitalized word “Danza” means the Aztec Dance tradition. When used with a small “d,” it means the other indigenous dances of Mexico.

**Danza Azteca:** The most common name used in Mexico and the U.S. for the Indocristiano dance rituals that started in Tlaxcallan and went to Queretaro and then went to Mexico City.

**Danza Chichimeca:** La Danza is called Danza Chichimeca by many in the Bajío (the Mexican states of Guanajuato and Queretaro) where the Danza Conchera began.
**Danza Conchera:** This was the original name of what today is known as Danza Azteca.

**Danzante:** I use this word with a capital “d” to denote a person who is a practitioner of La Danza Azteca. When used with a lower case letter, it means a person who dances any of Mexico’s indigenous traditions.

**Esencia:** Literally translated it means “essence.” In the context of La Danza, esencia means the enduring yet unseen quality of legitimacy, lineage, and conformity to the traditions of the ancestral roots of a dance group or of La Danza as a system of meaning, identity, and space itself.

**Estandarte:** The “estandarte” (banner, standard, or flag) of a traditional Danza Azteca circle is the living representation of the founding ancestor “palabra” (word or obligation of the group leader). It is the visible focus of a dance group’s lineage to an ancestral Danza elder or tradition. On the front side of a traditional estandarte, there is at least one image of a Catholic saint, which is the patron saint of the dance group. Other groups can opt to have the images of four saints, one for each direction of the Earth’s surface where their lineages go yearly on pilgrimages. On the front of the estandarte, is the name of the group; the name of the Capitanes of the group; and what date the group was recognized as a traditional Danza Azteca “corporación” (incorporated as a traditional group with all the required group hierarchies). On the reverse side is usually a short description of when the estandarte was “levantado” (raised for the first time as a symbol of a group’s obligation to the Danza Azteca and the ancestors). When the jefe that started a dance lineage dies, his or her “herederos” (heirs) take the estandarte. The estandarte is
now a symbolic presence of the ancestor who started the lineage and is present at all

group functions. As such, it marches at the front of the dance group; it is the first one to

“eat” at the meals.

It is the object that grants authenticity and legitimacy to new Danzantes baptisms,
naming ceremonies, births, weddings, and death commemorations. It is the symbol of the
granting of a new dance group’s legitimacy. When the new estandarte is presented for the
first time, all of the older estandartes “greet and embrace” the new banner. Each group’s
Alférez (ensign) or jefe kisses the new estandarte to imbue it with his or her “ihiyotl” or
sacred breath and to acknowledge publically that the older group supports the new group.

**Huehuetla’tolli:** “Huehue” reduplicative of old “very old,” “tla’tolli” from
“tla’toa” to speak,” “word or words,” “the ancient words.” This was a title given to
ancestral oral tradition that was passed on from generation to generation. It included
advice on how to act in society and how to take care of the elders. It also contained a
history of the village, town, or tribe.

**Indigenous:** Having originated in and being produced, growing, living, or
occurring naturally in a particular region or environment (Merriam-Webster, 2007).

**Jefe/Jefa:** “The boss, chief, or head of an organization: one’s superior in an
organization” (Steiner, 1997). It is this last meaning that covers the use of these words: A
jefe or Jefe is a leader of a Danza group; more often than not, it is used as a title for a
group leader that has not received officially the title of “Capitán or Capitana.”

**La Conquista:** Literally translated, it means “the conquest.” In La Danza, it means
to conquer new persons for the dance tradition. It also means that when a group leader or
jefe brings in new dancers to his or her circle, or takes dancers from another circle, the jefe has conquered new souls for the group.

**La Danza:** For this study, La Danza with capitals refers to La Danza Azteca tradition. The Danzantes (also with a capital “D”) use the words “La Danza” to denote any part of the rituals of kindness that they participate in.

**La Palabra:** “The Word.” In La Danza Azteca, “la palabra” has several meanings. First it means the words of “El es Dios” or “he is God.” This is the ultimate word of authority and respect in La Danza Azteca. When one needs to ask for permission, give orders, or ask questions during a ritual of La Danza, one speaks these three words to get solemn attention and respect. Many Mexi’ca neo-nativists refuse to say these Spanish words. Instead, they replace them with the word “Ometeotl” the divine duality of the state religion of the Mexi’ca, and a late creation in the Mesoamerican pantheon (León Portilla, 1959; H.B. Nicholson, 1964). La palabra also means “the word of a Danza group leader.” Each Capitán or jefe, when he or she takes their oath of allegiance to the Danza Azteca, gives their “word” to live according to the rules of the elders. Thus, whenever a dance group goes to another ceremony, it is said that the hoist group is “receiving the “palabra of the guest group. The guests pledge to uphold the rules and orders of the host group giving them their “word” of command. Thus, la palabra is the “esencia” (essence) of a dance group’s lineage and conquest of new souls. This concept of “la palabra” is directly connected to the precolumbian concept of “ihiyotl” the spiritual breathe of life. This essence has symbolized since the time of Teotihuacan, by the butterfly: the symbol of the
fallen warriors who return to the world as revenants to take nourishment (blood) from the living warriors, and in return, give them their sacred breath and prowess.

**Malinche:** A Spanish Aztequismo from the Nahuatl word “malintzin” or “revered bent grass.” *Malinalli* “bent grass,” was one of the 20 day signs of the Mesoamerican solar calendar. Malintzin was the name of a Nahuatl woman who had been sold into slavery to a Maya speaking group. She spoke Mayan and Nahuatl. Through her, and the Spanish priest Gerónimo de Aguilar (who had been shipwrecked on the Yucatan peninsula, and therefore spoke Mayan and Spanish), Hernán Cortez was able to communicate with the indigenous leaders of Tlaxcallan and eventually the Mexi’ca.

**Memes:** These are units or elements of cultural ideas that are transmitted and spread like genes in a community of living organisms. Such elements as music, dance styles, fashion, or religious beliefs are typical memes (Dawkins, 1989). In La Danza, memes would be alabanzas, dance steps, styles of dance uniforms, and types of musical instruments used in the ceremonies.

**Mesa:** The word “table” is used interchangeably with the words “palabra,” “cuartel general,” and “oratorio.” In La Danza Azteca, a traditional group, headed by an acknowledged Capitán or Capitana, must have an altar where every ceremony begins and ends. This altar is usually in a special room in the leader’s home and is called the “oratorio” (oratory). In this room is the mesa or “table” where the altar is kept. The word mesa also means the ruling hierarchy of a group the Capitanes, the Malinches, the Alférez, and the Sargentos.
**Mestizo:** In the colonial Spanish caste system, this was just one of the various permutations of genetic identity of society. Specifically “Español con India: mestizo.” (Spaniard with Indian: mestizo). It was always promulgated with a Spanish male and an Indian female, as if the thought of an Indigenous man having relations with a pure-blooded Spanish woman was too horrific a thought. In modern usage, it is used to mean any mixed blood combination visible in Mexico’s ethnic identity (see: Katzew, 2004a; Vasconcelos, 1979 for more on the Spanish caste system in Mexico).

**Mexi’ca Nazi:** As in every collection of human communities, there are always some, usually a strident and vociferous minority that take a community’s membership, identity, or values, to their most illogical extreme. The people I call the Mexi’ca Nazi are the extreme example of what happens when Mexcoehuani become perpetrators of “Aztec identity indigenous extremism.” The Mexi’ca Nazi believe that the Azteca nation of Mexico was the greatest creation of this continent; that Nahuatl should be the only language spoken by Mexcoehuani; and (never mind the original inhabitants of North America, north of the U.S. border) the lands that once were Mexico should become a separate nation called “Aztlan.” The Mexi’ca Nazi are proud of their anti-white, black, Gay, Asian, Christian, and Jewish beliefs. Some go as far as espousing “ethnic cleansing of the America continent to create a “precolumbian Eden.”

**Mulato:** At the bottom of the Spanish Chromo-racial caste system was the mulatto: *Africano con india—mulato.* “African male with Indian female—mulatto.”

**Neopagan:** Neopaganism is a polytheistic religious movement, practiced by persons who cannot find spiritual peace in traditional monotheistic religions of the
western world. Many seek out pre-Christian religious traditions, because they are seen as being closer to nature. Many persons in the industrialized world seek out such religions of the past because they find it difficult or spiritually painful to keep up with the dizzying pace of technological innovation, global poverty, oppression, environmental degradation, and the disappearance of human-to-human contact and understanding in the urban jungles of modern cities. Many seek out esoteric paths, for example, the traditions of the ancient Egyptians, Greeks, and Kelts.

For the Mexcoehuani, the sources of this mystic re-birth are much closer: the indigenous traditions of the American continent. Within the Neopagan movement, there are those that want to revive what they understand as the “ancient traditions that have been hidden for centuries.” Others seek to amass the worlds “ancient truths” into a new and holistic knowledge that will transform the world into a better place for all living things (see new age). Still, others see the influence of extraterrestrials in world religions and spirituality and seek out new ways to make contact with the “chariots of the gods” (see: Däniken, 1971; Poveda, 1981; Rountree, 2002 for examples of these movements)

New Age: The New age movement began a wide spread movement in the late 1960’s as an outgrowth of the hippie and flower power movements. It can be described as a phenomenon of industrialized societies that, having gained material, political, and economic superiority over the rest of the world, these societies now look for meaning beyond the established church-state paradigms of western patriarchal monotheism. The new age movement seeks out universal truths, free-flowing beliefs, and ritual centered on the individual, with a communal focus in ritual. It includes ecological activism and a
search for social justice and equality of all living things. Many practitioners of the new age paradigm are vegans. The new age movement is also blended with worldwide forms of astrology, alternative medicine, organic or biodynamic farming, and the Gaia hypothesis or principle (Blain, Ezzy, & Harvey, 2004; Hanegraaff, 1996). For the Mexcoehuani, new age spirituality fits in with the idealized and mythic past of the ancient indigenous peoples of this continent.

**Oratorio:** The word “oratorio” is used interchangeably with the words “palabra,” “cuartel general,” and “mesa.” In its simplest sense, it is a physical space where the Danza group is centered. The group’s altar, weapons (musical instruments) estandarte, and relics are kept there. In its sense as a third space of identity, it is a room that is alien to normal Euro/African-American concepts of home décor and function. The oratorio is an enlarged and expanded version of the Mexican home altar. Persons, who are proud of their Mexcoehuani roots, usually have some type of altar in their home year round, even if they do not practice any religion. The altar is an identity marker. For the Danza group leaders, the oratorio further delineates their roles and obligations as leaders of spiritual warriors with an ancient lineage.

**Pachuco:** There are various etymologies to this word. Some say it comes from the name of a city in Mexico “Pachuca, Hidalgo.” Immigrants from that city who went to live in El Paso, Texas were called Pachucos. The Pachuco was the first Mexcoehuani prototype. In the 1930-50s era, they wore distinctive clothes and had their own dialect (Caló or Pachucismos). See Pocho (Cobos, 1983; Gaspar de Alba, 2003; Hernández Palacios & Sandoval Palacios, 1989)
Pocho: A derogatory term used in Mexico against Mexcoehuani who have lost their Spanish language, do not have close ties to Mexican culture, and who born in the U.S. Pochos have their own dialect called “pochismos,” “Span-glish,” or “Chicano” (Cobos, 1983; McKenna, 2004; Mejía Prieto, 1985).

Postconquest: The historical period that has dominated Western Eurocentric culture, society, and academe in regards to indigenous identity, culture, spirituality, and linguistics on the American continent. In La Danza it is called “el tiempo de la conquista.” See la conquista.

Preconquest: The historical period that resides in various realms. Among them are the realm of archeology, the realm of cultural and ethnic identity, and the realm of spirituality. This meme like “postconquest” has taken on various meanings, positive and negative, over the past 400 hundred years. For today’s Mexcoehuani, it represents a time of indigenous self-determination. For some neopagan or new age Mexcoehuani, the preconquest time of the American continent is a mythic time when the indigenous people of this continent could do no wrong; they were untainted by war, sickness, greed, and other human failings.

Reformulation: In this study, I call the long-term negotiations of bicultural significance (that which occurs over generations and without conscious intent), a reformulation of cultures. Unlike a syncretic process, where two or more cultures encounter, clash, and then reconcile their disparate and contrary beliefs and values into an amalgamation (not quite one, not quite the other), reformulation implies a process where there is not only a re-coding of conflicting semaphores, constructs, and paradigms, but a
re-interpretation of memes and schemas. In this reinterpretation or reformulation, the original parts from each culture do not magically blend into a third. Instead, I argue that they maintain to a large degree their “pre-syncretic” meanings. This “echo of cultural resiliency” from the original cultural encounters, exists within a multidimensional space of meaning. In La Danza Azteca, Catholic saints, pre columbian deities, political ideologies, and economic systems all cohabitate within a sacred space of ritual self-sacrifice and shared identity: the Mexcoehuani third space.

Reliquia: A relic is an object esteemed and venerated because of its association with a saint or martyr. It can also be something personal of cultural, political, or historical significance, carefully preserved with respect, veneration, and honor as a tangible memorial for future generations to revere and esteem. In La Danza Azteca, “Una reliquia,” is an object that has a direct link to an honored ancestor of a dance group, of a dance region, or (as in the case of the alleged burial of Cuauhtémoc in Ixcateopan, Guerrero) the Mexican and Mexcoehuani nations. Relics can be troubling objects because in every culture and in every historical period, relics have been fabricated to control societies, control economies, and to spread ideologies ("Compact Oxford English dictionary of current English," 2005).

Ritual Ballet: I define ritual ballet as a form of cultural communication that is heavily inscribed with the social and political identity and power of a national or metacultural level. Cultural systems such as the Bolshoi Ballet, the Latino “quinceañera,” the cheerleaders present at every high school, college and professional
game, are all instruments of the elite’s collective control of the under classes. These ritual ballets define what it is to be an outstanding member of the dominant society.

These institutions speak of selective membership in groups that exclude those that cannot share in the power system of the elite; whether it is the nobility of the “ancienne régime,” the new middle class, or the NCAA. Non-dance events can also be ritual ballets; inaugurations of presidents, graduation ceremonies at educational institutions, and funeral corteges, are examples of ritual ballets that do not require dance music or steps. Nevertheless, the do require staged and controlled choreography of the participants, as well as subservience to social norms, traditions, and ideologies that are out of the control of the common person.

These ritual ballet norms, traditions, and ideologies, are controlled by the state; by religious, academic, or financial institutions; or by the “arbitrators of good morals and taste,” who happen to be defined by the above metacultural institutions.

**Rituals of Kindness:** The ritual calendar of La Danza includes several ceremonies. They are called the rituals of kindness because underneath their militaristic organizational veneer, these ceremonies are about respect for the ancestors, the children, the future, and the Mother Earth. In sum, they are neither about military conquest nor destruction. Rather they are about harmony and cosmic balance amongst people who value traditional and spiritually sacred space. These ceremonies reflect the agricultural roots of the reformulation of the Indocristiano roots of La Danza:

**El Paso de Camino.** When a group prepares to attend a ceremony, the group gathers at the oratorio of the group jefe. From there they travel to the oratorio of the host
je fe where they are received. In past centuries, Danzante walked for days to arrive at an “obligación.” In the last century, railroads, buses, automobiles, and finally jet airplanes, began to be used by the Danzantes. Today the Pas de Camino is usually a ritual entrance to the ceremonial site of “La Batalla” (the battlefield), or “el sacrificio,” (the place of the sacrifice). The battlefield is where the battle between light and darkness, life and death, and ignorance and wisdom play out in the bodies, the movements, and the songs of the dancers.

**Recibimiento:** The “Recibimiento” is a ritual where the host group receives a visiting Danza circle. Ceremonial welcomes between the two Danza groups’ estandartes are carried out. Offerings and La Palabra are offered by the guests, as is a pledge to uphold the rules and traditions of the host dance circle.

**La Velación:** Most Mexcoehuani Danzantes do not realize that this ceremony is the most important of La Danza Azteca. In the vigil, the spirits of the ancestors are invoked and welcomed. Prayers are said, alabanzas are sung, and the medicine of the flowers is carried out.

**La Limpia:** At the end of the velación, when the flowers’ medicine has been fulfilled, it is believed that the spirits of the ancestors and of the descendants no yet born are present in the sacred space defined by the participants in the Velación. With their permission and support, the dancers who will offer their sacrificial dance energy are cleansed with the flower medicine.

**La Danza:** After all of the participants of the velación have been prepared in the limpia, the dance circles gather to create the sacred space of the dance ceremony. Using
their bodies, their energy, and their prayers, the Danzantes create a space where all eight
directions of the Mesoamerican worldview are present and complete.

Each one of these rituals by itself is incomplete and in itself cannot bring down the
ancestral spirits necessary to guide the “teoyahulli” (sacred circle, or family) towards a
spiritual path of kindness, respect, and humility. El Paso de Camino and el Recibimiento
are rituals that take the Danzantes through a journey of all eight directions of
Mesoamerican ontology. The velación is a ritual that takes the participants through a
journey of ancestral linkage, and prepares the young Danzantes to become the next
generation’s elders. Finally, La Danza itself, (the ritual of self-sacrifice, of going into
battle against one’s own weaknesses, and overcoming the darkness of fear with the light
of faith, tradition, and unity) is a culmination of “unity, conformity, and conquest.”

**Schema:** A mental codification of experience or cognition that includes a particular
organized way of perceiving a structured framework or plan (Merriam-Webster, 2007).

**Semaphores:** “A system of visual signaling by two flags held, one in each hand.” A system of signaling where the sender and the receiver both understand the underlying meaning of a symbol and there is no ambiguity to the signs. ("Compact Oxford English dictionary of current English," 2005; Merriam-Webster, 2007; semaphore.," n.d.).

A stop sign and a rest room sign are two examples of semaphores. In this study, I use the term semaphore in the La Danza Azteca as a symbols of emic unambiguousness: La Danza Azteca has a structured system of semaphoric meaning (rituals, language, space, musical instruments) with memes that evolve around the needs of the community
that practices La Danza and imbues it with meaning (uniforms, headdresses, hymns, politics).

**Teoyalhualli:** “Teo(tl)” a god, the divine, sacred. “Yahualli” something circular, a circle from “yahualoa” to go around something (Karttunen, 1983). I use this term to define the circle of La Danza. It is not just a circle in the physical sense, but it also speaks to the circle of meanings of Mexcoehuani identity, agency, empowerment, and trans-generational communication. The divine circle in Mexcoehuani sacred space connects the ancestors with the living and the descendants not yet born. The divine circle replicates the sphere of the dimension of time that envelopes the other seven dimensions of indigenous thought: East, West, South, North, Up, Down, and Center.

**Unión, conformidad y conquista:** Unity, conformity, and conquest are part of the Danza Azteca “motto” and are the guiding principles of every traditional group. These three words must appear on every traditional Danza group’s estandarte (standard). In order for La Danza and its rituals of kindness to succeed and survive, a group must be united. There has to be a concept of the group as a military unit of an extended family complex. As part of La Danza Azteca’s indigenous heritage, the community has primacy over the individual. One of the great laments of the older generation of Danzantes in Mexico is that many young dancers from Mexico and the U.S. today do not respect the groups as dancers did in the past.

They attribute this to the influence of today’s alienated global society (influenced by the U.S. concept of the individual’s primacy over the community). They are saddened by the egos that have created an “arms race” of feathered headdresses and glitter that is
seen at many ceremonies. In the big cities of Mexico and the U.S., the lack of roots in an urban society, has caused the concept of “unión” to be forgotten. Nevertheless, through unity, La Danza’s traditional practitioners feel that this ancient tradition will continue to evolve. Since the 1960s, “Conformidad” (conformity or agreement) has taken on an unpleasant if not dire connotation in American (and thus Mexcoehuani) society. Conformity in our “me” dominated society infers dullness, conventionality, and an acceptance of the status quo. However, in Danza Azteca, conformidad means allegiance to group membership, acceptance of the group’s hierarchy and rules, and a willing for self-sacrifice for the sake of past, present, and future generations of Danzantes. “Conquista” (conquest) is the result of unity and conformity. A traditional Danza group is always seeking out new members. Through the self-sacrifice of the rituals of kindness, the practitioners of La Danza conquer new dancers, and thus nourish the ancestral spirits that come down to Earth during the rituals of kindness.
Assumptions of the Study

This study was based on the following assumptions:

Danza Azteca is rooted in the precolombian cultures of central Mexico as far back as the 1500s A.D.

All of the documents, books, and academic sources used in this study have met rigorous academic standards of research, including (but not limited to) ethnographic, linguistic, and psychological disciplines.

Sources written or documented by practitioners of the cultural systems analyzed in this study will also be used whether the author has academic credentials or not, since they were assumed to have “lived” knowledge instead of, or as well as “academically learned” knowledge.

All of the sources for oral interviews and online surveys on La Danza Azteca spoke truthfully, and to the best of their ability conducted themselves in an honest manner.

I am assuming that my recollections of the historical period of La Danza Azteca’s arrival are to the best of my ability, truthful, and complete as much as time and memory will allow.

Limitations of this study

This qualitative study can only be generalized to the following populations:

1. Mexcoehuani that are involved in the Danza Azteca tradition.
2. Mexcoehuani that have been a part of the Danza Azteca tradition for more than two years.
3. Mexcoehuani Danzantes who speak and read English well enough to fill out the online survey.

4. Mexcoehuani that follow a mainstream Danza Azteca path that is within the realms of Mexican tradition (indigenous with Catholic Church influences) as carried out in traditional sacred sites Central Mexico.

This study does not look into the sub-culture of Mexcoehuani fundamentalists that seek to “return” to an idealized and puritanical way of life that is presumed to have existed before 1492. Since these groups are well outside the traditions of Central Mexico, they need to be studied in depth in a separate research project.

The anonymous online survey is only valid for Mexcoehuani Aztec dancers who have internet access and feel comfortable answering questions online.

The study can only be generalized in its historical value to the history period I lived, experienced, and remember. Other persons who were involved at the earliest times of La Danza’s arrival in the U.S. may have differing recollections of how things happened. All I can offer is my recollection that I substantiate with research in academic sources, oral tradition, and the teachings of my Danza elders.

The Significance of the Study

This study seeks to fill an important gap in the understanding of Mexican origin/Mexcoehuani identity. Although there are many sources for the political, gender, and economic roots of Mexcoehuani identity, there are few, if any, that include the spiritual quest of the Mexcoehuani. Also missing from the literature is a connection
between Mexcoehuani identity and the indigenous movements of Mexico and the U.S. Specifically, what is the link between Mexcoehuani spiritual movements (as exemplified by La Danza Azteca) and the Pan-Indian movement?

The complex of indigenous Mexcoehuani membership called La Danza Azteca would in other times be only an interesting topic for academic research. In the past, this study might have garnered interest only from musicologists, choreographers, anthropologists, or researchers of religious studies.

Today however, demographic realities now point to the “Latino/Hispanic” and “Mexican origin” immigrant and native-born populations of the U.S. as being the largest “ethnic minority group”. Within this monolithic generalization, the Mexican origin (Mexcoehuani) population is the largest group (Center for Latin American, 2000; De la Cruz, 2003, June 2003; Population Reference Bureau, 2000).

For U.S. society to better understand, respect, and absorb the cultural strengths and needs of the Mexcoehuani community, it needs to understand what has formed their roots, and how they have evolved within the constructs of “American” society at the end of the twentieth century and at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The multiple communities of the U.S., indeed of the whole world, need to understand better each other if they are going to make positive changes in the future.

As the first decade of the twenty-first century draws to a close, there are worldwide movements of people who are, perhaps, frightened of the world as it exists today. Technology, genetics, global warming, and a feeling of doom pervade first world to third world nations. Many seek solace and understanding of what is going on in spiritual or
pseudo-spiritual movements. Innocent persons fall for what passes as “ancient” wisdom, or to one of many “new age paradigms” created from a multitude of spiritual and religious traditions. Some of these movements can be misleading or even dangerous.

The Mexcoehuani communities of the U.S. are no different. That is why a holistic approach to understanding the indigenous roots of Mexico, and the people who have their roots there is so important. As new generations arrive and try to learn about their indigenous heritage, it becomes very easy to manipulate, or even hide the facts of their history. Community and institutional memory fade under the pressure and weight of politically orchestrated dogma, and once ancestral memory is gone, so are the lessons it could have taught future generations. As George Santayana, said “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it” (Santayana, 1998).

I set out to create this study in the spirit of the Mesoamerican “huehuetla’tolli” (the old words). Each tribe, each nation had their own creation stories, and written books called “amoxtli” (Karttunen, 1983). In these picture books, each nation told of their history and their lineage. It is my hope that future Mexcoehuani scholars and practitioners of the rituals of kindness will create their own amoxtli for their communities.
CHAPTER TWO: A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

In order to understand the roots of La Danza Azteca, and its impact on Mexcoehuani identity and sacred space, I need to take a holistic approach to understanding the roots of this central Mexican tradition. The literature review will use the following historical questions as a guide:

1. What are the Native American and Spanish Catholic roots of La Danza Azteca?
2. How did the apocalyptic meeting of these two civilizations transform Mexican religious practices?
3. What precolumbian traditions survived into the modern Danza Azteca?
4. How did La Danza Azteca influence the Mexcoehuani/Mexicano’s place within Latino and American Indian constructs of membership in identity and space?
5. What are the reasons individuals seek out membership in La Danza Azteca? What if any are the differences in reasons native-born Mexcoehuani join La Danza and new immigrants from Mexico and Latin America?

The results of this study will give future researchers a tool for understanding how La Danza Azteca and its cultural attributes influenced Mexcoehuani spirituality and sacred space at the end of the twentieth century. It will also add to the literature on the role of spirituality and sacred space in the formation of an individuals’ identity and group membership.
The Agrarian Roots of Mesoamerican Culture

*We Are What We Eat: The Plants*

The people born of the land known as Mexico have struggled for self-determination, self-identity, and sacred space since the arrival of the Europeans in 1519. This struggle (which has gone on for almost half a millennium), finds new meaning, and urgency for the Mexicans who have immigrated to the United States, as well as for their children born into this new “American” reality.

The complex social, cultural, economic, and spiritual conflicts that have created the modern Mexican identity, once transplanted to the U.S., now find new currents and tensions within the dynamo that is modern U.S. society. Throughout this Diaspora of indigenous, mestizo, and afro-Mexican workers, the one link that ties them to their past is the food they bring with them. The roots of Mexican (and thus Mexcoehuani) cuisines are one of the few precolumbian survivors of indigenous culture that have gone on to circle the world.

If Mexico had not been invaded and colonized by the Spanish, the indigenous civilizations that lived, flowered, and evolved on Mexican soil, could have evolved into important global players in the 21st century; perhaps like the cultures of Japan, India, or China. But the vagaries of history: chance, mistakes, greed, and plagues, reduced the original cultures of Mexico into building blocks of a new, unique, and complex national identity known as “Los Estados Unidos Mexicanos” (United Mexican States). Neither Native American nor European, Mexico is greater than the sum of its parts. European,
African, and Asian parts were brutally grafted onto the original roots of indigenous life, left as bloody stumps by the conquest. As Stuart B. Schwartz recounts:

…the fighting in these last few months was bitter, and at times at the end, it was often house by house combat. The Mexica had to contend not only with the reinforced Spanish troops and the thousands of native allies that accompanied them, but also with another enemy: epidemic disease in the form of smallpox…. The Spanish destroyed houses to eliminate their rooftops as platforms from which the Mexica could fire arrows or hurl stones…The result of these tactics was the leveling of a large part of the city. Even Cortéz regretted the loss [of the city] (Schwartz, 2000, pp. 184-185).

The tragic beginning of the Mexican people, of the Mexican psyche, even after half a millennium, still carries the open wounds of the arrival of the Spanish to the “new world.” Eurocentric people see the new world as beginning in 1492 with the “discovery” of the continent by Columbus. Yet it is important to understand that humans have lived on the American continent for at least 20,000 years (Dillehay, 2000, p. 45). Though there is great controversy as to from where the first immigrants arrived, it is generally accepted that agriculturally based civilizations have flourished on the American continent for at least 9,000 years. Squash was cultivated in Oaxaca by 7,500 B.C. (Long-Solis & Vargas, 2005, p. 4). Scientists have found the earliest samples of corn in the Tehuacan valley of
southern Puebla and northern Oaxaca states in Mexico. It dates from about 5,000 B.C. (Coe, 1994, p. 11). By 3,500 B.C., the classic indigenous food plants of the modern Mexican/Mexcoehuani cuisine were in full domestication. Like other cultures in the world, Mexican/Mexcoehuani identity and space is deeply rooted in the comestibles that define and imbue the daily meal. Table One shows the pre-Columbian legacy that is encountered in a typical Mexican or Mexcoehuani kitchen. Although many Mexcoehuani and non-Mexcoehuani do not know the provenance of these important victuals, they are nevertheless critical in the development of indigenous identity.

Maize (corn in the U.S.), or \textit{Zea mays} \textit{L.} ssp. \textit{Mays} (Agriculture, 2008), is a case in point. It is considered the tree of life that sits at the center of the universe. Its roots sink in deep into the land of the dead where it is nourished by the spirits of our ancestors, and the dead sun of the previous day. Its leaves rise up to greet the living sun that creates nourishment for living beings. It is sacrificed by humans for food, and thus humans must sacrifice themselves to the universe as thanks and nourishment to the eternal cycle of life.

Humans were first created from nixtamalli (or “masa” in Spanish, dough in English), and so our body and spirits spring forth from the same source. In Nahuatl alone, there are over a dozen words for various forms of corn (i.e. dried corn cobs, corn kernels, young tender corn, corn that has been soaked in lime water). The linguistic complexity of \textit{Zea may} reflects its importance in the lives of the indigenous peoples of the American continent.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nahuatl (Aztec) Name</th>
<th>Spanish Name</th>
<th>English Name</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Centli</td>
<td>Maiz</td>
<td>Corn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elliotl</td>
<td>Elote</td>
<td>Corn on the cob</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nixtamalli</td>
<td>Nixtamal</td>
<td>Corn paste for cooking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chilli</td>
<td>Chile</td>
<td>Chili</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tomatl</td>
<td>Tomate</td>
<td>Tomato</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Huauhtli</td>
<td>Amaranto, alegria</td>
<td>Amaranth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chalchocotl/ Xalxocotl</td>
<td>Guayaba</td>
<td>Guava</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Etl</td>
<td>Frijole</td>
<td>Bean</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exotl</td>
<td>Ejote</td>
<td>Green bean</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Epazotl</td>
<td>Epazote</td>
<td>Epazote, skunk weed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No’palli</td>
<td>Nopales</td>
<td>Prickly pear cactus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nochtli</td>
<td>Tuna</td>
<td>Prickly pear cactus fruit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chocolatl</td>
<td>Chocolate</td>
<td>Chocolate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ahuacatl</td>
<td>Aguacate</td>
<td>Avocado</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tlihxochitl</td>
<td>Vainilla</td>
<td>Vanilla</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Matzahltli</td>
<td>Pina</td>
<td>Pineapple</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
By the beginnings of “discoverable history” (1,500 B.C.), that is, the history that archeologists can document with stone artifacts (in the case of Mesoamerica, stone is the only material that has been able to withstand thousands of years of humidity and heat), the very roots of modern Mexican and Mexcoehuani identity (the food) were already there. Whether it is Chicago, New York, London, Paris, San Antonio, or San Diego, wherever a Mexican or Mexcoehuani community sinks its roots, the food of the ancestors is present in every home, in every kitchen.

The Mexican/Mexcoehuani need for membership in a cultural safe zone amongst the wilderness of foreign lands is expressed by the fervor that people from different regions of Mexico and the U.S. defend their own particular way of preparing Mexican food (Palazuelos & Tausend, 1991).

If the food makes indigenous Mexican/Mexcoehuani culture real and deeply rooted in the American continent, then the home’s kitchen is the temple of Mexican/Mexcoehuani sacred space. Here, the ancestors mix and mingle with the living. By sharing the ancient foods of indigenous America, the living Mexcoehuani are planting the seeds of traditional heritage for their yet unborn descendants. Indigenous food is an integral part of Mexican and Mexcoehuani identity and sacred Space.

Table 2 shows the imported plants of modern Mexican/Mexcoehuani cuisine and their original homelands. This gathering of the world’s foodstuff is a prime example of how the cultural heritage of the Mexican and Mexcoehuani communities are as complex as any in the world.
Table 2: The imported plant foods of modern Mexican/Mexcoehuaní cuisine

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Spanish Name</th>
<th>English Name</th>
<th>Original homeland</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Limón, Lima</td>
<td>Lime, Lemon</td>
<td>China</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cilantro</td>
<td>Cilantro, Coriander</td>
<td>Asia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Albaca</td>
<td>Basil</td>
<td>Europe, Asia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romero</td>
<td>Rosemary</td>
<td>Europe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perejil</td>
<td>Parsley</td>
<td>Europe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tomillo</td>
<td>Thyme</td>
<td>Europe, Asia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arroz</td>
<td>Rice</td>
<td>Asia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ajo</td>
<td>Garlic</td>
<td>Europe, Asia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aceitunas, Olivos</td>
<td>Olives</td>
<td>Europe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canela</td>
<td>Cinnamon</td>
<td>Asia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tamarindo</td>
<td>Tamarind</td>
<td>Asia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mango</td>
<td>Mango</td>
<td>Asia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Platano</td>
<td>Banana</td>
<td>Africa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coco</td>
<td>Coconut</td>
<td>Asia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caña de Azucar</td>
<td>Sugar cane</td>
<td>Africa</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Ingredients such as cilantro (Chinese parsley), are thought of as being deeply Mexican, yet cilantro arrived with the Spanish galleons from the Philippines and China in the late 1500s. On the other hand, such staples of Italian cuisine as zucchini and tomatoes did not appear on the menu in Italy until after 1492.
*We are what we eat: The animals*

Although many of the indigenous animals are no longer in common use, they nevertheless were important sources of protein. Table 3 shows the main animals used for food in Mesoamerica. Today, the turkey is perhaps the most widely domesticated bird in the world, after the chicken. On the other hand, few in America would consider eating a dog as being moral or tasty. Today, the imported animals brought by the Spanish are more important to Mexican and Mexcoehuani cuisine.

**Table 3: The indigenous animal foods of Mesoamerican cuisine**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nahuatl (Aztec) Name</th>
<th>Spanish Name</th>
<th>English Name</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hueyxolotl</td>
<td>Guajolote, pavo</td>
<td>Turkey</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canauhtli</td>
<td>Pato</td>
<td>Duck</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Huillotl</td>
<td>Paloma</td>
<td>Dove</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tochtli</td>
<td>Conejo</td>
<td>Rabbit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ocuillin</td>
<td>Gusano</td>
<td>Worm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chichi, itzcuintli</td>
<td>Perro</td>
<td>Dog</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coatl</td>
<td>Serpiente</td>
<td>Serpent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Axolotl</td>
<td>Ajolote</td>
<td>Water salamander</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Azcatl</td>
<td>Hormiga</td>
<td>ant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapollin</td>
<td>Chapulin, saltamontes</td>
<td>Grasshopper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Axayacatl</td>
<td>Rostro de agua</td>
<td>Water bugs</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Today to most Mexicans/Mexcoehuani, the preceding list of indigenous animals contains several “unappetizing” species. The pre columbian world lacked large
domesticated animals; these smaller and now more “distasteful” species (dogs, ants, water bugs) are not used in daily cooking. Instead, the larger imported domesticated animals of Europe, Africa and Asia, quickly became favorites of the indigenous, and later mestizo populations.

Table Four lists the imported animals that have become entrenched in Mexican/Mexcoehuani nourishment.

Table 4: The imported animal foods of modern Mexican/Mexcoehuani cuisine

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nahuatl (Aztec) Name</th>
<th>Spanish Name</th>
<th>English Name</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pizotl</td>
<td>Puerco</td>
<td>Pig</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Piyoitl</td>
<td>Gallina</td>
<td>Chicken</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ichcatl, bollego</td>
<td>Borrego</td>
<td>Lamb</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Huaca</td>
<td>Vaca</td>
<td>Cow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tenzontli</td>
<td>Chivo</td>
<td>Goat</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The culinary heritage of Mexican and Mexcoehuani identity has strong European roots in its animal foodstuff heritage. Nevertheless, the vegetable foodstuff of Mesoamerican heritage gave rise to the first civilizations of Mesoamerica. Today it is part and parcel of the indigenous identity of Mexicans and Mexcoehuani alike. If the common Mexican saying of “dime con quién andas y te diré quién eres” (tell me who you walk with and I will tell you who you are) is true in a culinary sense, then the Mexican/Mexcoehuani is walking with ancient indigenous plants, imported animals and a hybrid of European, African and Asian culinary traditions.
A Brief history of Mesoamerica

The first nations of Mexico

Once the inhabitants of Mesoamerica had domesticated their animals and had
developed their agriculture, they began the process of creating their unique cultures and
civilizations. Table Five shows the currently accepted chronology of Mesoamerican
civilizations (Davies, 1977c; Smith, 1987).

Table 5: The historical periods of Mesoamerica

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Historical Period</th>
<th>Date in Gregorian Calendar</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Early formative</td>
<td>3,000-1,000 B.C.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle formative</td>
<td>1,000 – 400 B.C.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Late formative</td>
<td>400 B.C. – 100 A.D.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early Classic</td>
<td>100 – 500 A.D.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Late Classic</td>
<td>500 – 900 A.D.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Epi-classic</td>
<td>900 – 1100 A.D.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-classic</td>
<td>1100 – 1519 A.D.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post - conquest</td>
<td>1519 – 1600 A.D.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colonial</td>
<td>1600 – 1821 A.D.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The following section outlines the different cultures that have given modern
Mexican and Mexcoehuani culture its unique character. This review will only cover the
cultures that have been the root of Mexican and Mexcoehuani identity and ideology.
The Maya, Zapoteca, Mixteca, Totonaca, Huasteca, and other native nations have been important in Mesoamerican history. Yet, not enough was known about them at the time of the Mexican colonial and revolutionary Mexican eras to foment national identity; or they were only historically important in much smaller geographic areas and did not have influence on Creole and mestizo identity during the critical formative era of Mexican identity, 1650 – 1930 (Lafaye, 1976). This is not to say that they were not (or are not) important to the evolution of Mexico. It just means that for the coalescence of Mexican identity and nationhood at the time of Independence, and at the time of the Mexican Revolution, the nations of the central highlands gave the mestizo nation its imagery, its neo-nativist mythology and its nationalistic identity.

The Olmeca

The first indigenous people that left substantial archeological records were the Olmec. In their article for the book that accompanied the landmark exhibition of Olmec art at the Art Museum at Princeton University in 1996, Richard A. Diehl and Michael Coe state that:

The Olmec problem concerns the true nature of Olmec society and history. It arises from two very different visions of the Olmec and the entire Mesoamerican world during the Early and Middle formative periods. One can be labeled the Olmec-centric school while the other has been called the Primus inter Pares school [first amongst equals]. Olmec-
centric scholars hold that the Olmec created Mesoamerica’s first true civilization— that is, a complex, hierarchical society dominated by a small elite with political territories, long distance trade in exotica, and Mesoamerica’s oldest known art style and symbol system.

The Primus inter Pares school denies the Olmec priority and considers them just one of many similar Formative period societies in central and southern Mesoamerica…(Coe, 1995, p. 11)

Whether the Olmec where the “mother culture” of Mesoamerica, or just the brightest light amongst other great formative indigenous civilizations (such as the Zapotec, Maya, and Izapa del Coro), the fact remains that the Olmecs left the first Mesoamerica calendar (circa 700 B.C.), known as the long count, that was later adopted by the Maya (Edmonson, 1984). According to the groundbreaking analysis of Olmec, Zapotec, Teotihuacan, and Aztec deities by the Mexican artist Miguel Covarrubias, the Olmecs also gave later Mesoamerican cultures the imagery of the reptilian based rain deities, the cult of the snake, and the ritual of human sacrifice (Covarrubias, 1957). Some of the faint echoes of Olmec tradition that still permeate Mexican indigenous cultures of today are the traditions of sacred caves, the four petal flowers as symbols of “flower mountain,” the three sacred mountains as the three stones of the hearth, corn as the tree of life, and the concept of a divine ruler connected to a serpentine Earth spirit (Andrews, 2003; Coe, 1995; Taube, 2004).
While the archeological, calendrical, and epigraphic legacy of the Olmec might be of special interest to researchers, there is an important link between the cultural patterns of the Olmec “mother culture” of Mexico and modern Mexicans and Mexcoehuani expression of identity and space. As Daniel D. Arreola says in his article on Mexican American exterior murals for Geographic Review:

…Chicano mural painting began to appear in the American urban landscape during the 1960s, but the art form has roots in pre-Columbian Mexico….(Arreola, 1984, p. 409).

An emphasis on particular themes, bright colors, and bold outlines characterized early Chicano murals. Some common symbolic associations drew heavily on Mexican themes and included pre-Columbian iconography (Figs. 5 and 6), representations of the mestizo (Fig. 3), Mexican patriots (Fig. 4), union motifs and La Raza symbolism (Fig. 2)….

(Aurreola, p. 418).

Yet, most Mexcoehuani conflate the various cultures of pre-Columbian Mexico and claim them as theirs under the generic term of “Aztec.” In his review of Armando Rendon’s Chicano Manifesto, Lopez sees that: “Rendon argues a historical link between the Aztecs and present day Chicanos,” …. If [one is] Chicano, one begins to identify with the splendor of Aztec royalty and conjures up images of bronze-skinned warriors and queens in traditional Aztec garb” (Lopez, 1973, p. 582). Richard L. Nostrand in his Article for the Pacific Historical Review muses that:
For one of Mexico’s nationalistic themes after acquiring independence was the emphasis on its Indian ancestry and heritage, a development which led Ruth Barker to quip that it is more insulting to call a Mexican in Mexico a "Spaniard" than it is to call a Spanish American in the United States a "Mexican." (Nostrand, 1973)

This “Indian” heritage of the Mexican goes far beyond the historical Aztecs. The Olmec civilization as the main progenitor of Mesoamerican culture, has left as its legacy a continuum of indigenous heritage that still vibrates daily in the barrios of Mexican and Mexcoehuani communities.

*The Olmec question: African, Asian, or extraterrestrial origins?*

Since the arrival of Columbus to the “new world,” scholars, theologians, and ethnocentric theorists have debated the origins of the many Native American civilizations that have flourished for over four thousand years. From the earliest theories of Fray Bartolomé de Las Casa on the Jewish roots of Native Americans (Hoberman, 1978; Soldatenko, 1997; Vigil, 1981); to west African sailors and emperors (Baxter, 2000; Meggers, 1975; Montellano, Haslip-Viera, & Barbour, 1997; Sorenson, 2005); to Chinese fleets (Meggers, 1975), a considerable number of pseudo-historians, religious fringe groups, and alternate life style leaders have sought to portray the native populations of this continent as totally incapable of creating their own unique civilizations without the helping hand of older, wiser, and more technologically superior “old world” explorers.
The Mormon church has as one of its key beliefs that the native populations of the American continent were the ten lost tribes of Israel ("Research and Perspectives: Recent Studies on the Book of Mormon; Sorenson, 2005). Even the extraterrestrials get credit for the beginnings of Native American Civilization (Däniken, 1971). Peter T. Furst of the University of Pennsylvania argues that:

The racist implications of denying Native Americans the capacity to develop their own ancient civilization without input from “gods from outer space,” Chinese or Polynesian seafarers and emissaries from Egypt and Nubia have long been noted (Haslip-Viera, Montellano, & Barbour, 1997, p. 434).

Ann Cyphers of the Instituto de Investigaciones Antropológicas, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México comments that the real story of the ancient Olmecs and their creativity, is more exciting than any of Van Sertima’s (a proponent of Afrocentric diffusionism) claims (Haslip-Viera et al., 1997).

A final comment from Gerald Early, of the African and Afro-American Studies Department of Washington University of St. Louis Missouri, gives a final analysis of the problem:

Haslop, Viera et al. assert that Afrocentrism “in all its complexity emerged from the cultural nationalism of the 1960s and 1970s.” Yet the complexity of Afrocentrism is that it is more than the result of supercession of the cultural
nationalisms or Black aesthetic movements that themselves arose from the civil rights movement.

No matter what ethnocentric fad of cultural imperialism maybe in fashion, the cultural attainments of the Olmec civilization cannot be denied in the history of Mesoamerican, and thus in the heritage of the Mexcoehuani in the U.S. Afrocentrism is the result of a much older preoccupation of black Americans (and some of their white sympathizers) to provide a usable black past which would incorporate Egypt as a central image and place or origin. This has been called contributionist historiography; that is to say, blacks have insisted on a history that recognizes their contribution to world history and American culture (Haslip-Viera et al., 1997, p. 434).

It is ironic that in the epistemology of the Mexcoehuani the Olmeca hardly register as lineages of identity, where as some African American nationalists, would like to claim the Olmeca as their own.

*The Teotihuacano*

The next great civilization that had a direct bearing and impact on Mexican and Mexcoehuani identity was the culture that created the mega-city of Teotihuacan of the classic period (Coe, 1994). Teotihuacan culture was an amalgamation of Olmec influence
and the Valley of Mexico’s indigenous cultures (Matos Moctezuma, 1990b). It was the first of the many “mythical” Tollans (Headrick, 2007; Healan, 1989; Matos Moctezuma, 1990a). Tollan-Teotihuacan in the classic period (100-700 A.D.) and Tollan-Xicocotitlan of the early post-classic period (the historical Tula of the Toltecs, in the modern Mexican state of Hidalgo, 900-100 A.D.) were the archetypical centers of political, cultural, and spiritual power, that the later Mexi’ca (Aztec) tried to emulate.

The Zapotec, Maya, and other great cultures of Mesoamerica were influenced by Teotihuacan during the classic period. Matos Moctezuma elegantly states that:

> In the Nahuatl language, the word Teotihuacan means "the place where the gods are created." No name could be more appropriate for a place whose awe-inspiring dimensions prompted the Aztecs (who first discovered the ruins) [six hundred years after it was abandoned] to transform the city into a myth. Before its fall in A.D. 750, Teotihuacan was the first large town in Central Mexico, with a population of over 100,000 souls and the problems typical of a complex city that had gradually developed over many centuries. The influence of Teotihuacan was felt in distant lands, as far away even as Kaminaljuyu in Guatemala. Owing to its mysterious disappearance, Teotihuacan was hailed as the "City of the Gods" and incorporated into the myths of later races. Thus, Teotihuacan was said to be the birthplace of the
Fifth Sun, which brought light to men (who had been created by the god Quetzalcoatl) (Matos Moctezuma, p. 11).

This mythic sacred space had a profound impact on the Mexi’ca (later known as the Aztecs) and their Mexican and Mexcoehuani descendants. The Mexi’ca, as the last of the “Chichimeca” (barbarian) hunter-gatherers to immigrate from the north, saw this great city as beyond the creation of mere human beings. Only giants could have built it. As Matos Moctezuma writes:

The first to probe beneath the topsoil [of Teotihuacan] were the Aztecs, who migrated into the Valley of Mexico many centuries after the fall of Teotihuacan. They did not take long to grasp the unique significance of the mysterious city and, although it was hidden beneath a thick mantle of vegetation, they declared it sacred and incorporated it into their mythology. It is hardly surprising that the Aztecs were prompted to dig up the treasures of the sacred city. Otherwise, there would be no explanation for the original and imitation Teotihuacan artifacts in the Templo Mayor of the Aztecs capital, Tenochtitlan. Indeed, the indelible link between the two civilizations is corroborated by the similarity of remains found in their cities. Among the many features linking Teotihuacan with the Aztec capital, which
stood on the site of today’s Mexico City, was their common urban plan (Matos Moctezuma, p. 23).

Thus, the great Olmec tradition was filtered, enhanced and developed into a culture that had impact on other peoples from the Anasazi in Colorado (Ericson & Baugh, 1993b), down into Guatemala (Braswell, 2003). This shared heritage was one of the powerful roots of the Mexcoehuani communities search in indigenous cultural roots and a place to call their own, i.e., their own sacred space.

The Teotihuacan culture was the one that gave Mesoamerica its greatest cultural and political hero: Quetzalcoatl. This mysterious deity has always been associated with the Toltecs of Tula. However, recent research has shown that rather than being a non-violent, God of wisdom who preferred to sacrifice butterflies instead of human beings, he was the deity associated with war, rulership, and the Venus war cult (Florescano, 1999; H. B. Nicholson, 2001; Sugiyama, 2005). What the post-conquest mendicant chroniclers did not understand, was that butterflies, bees and hummingbird were Mesoamerican symbols for warriors who died in sacrifice or battle (Sugiyama, 2005).

After the fall of Teotihuacan, the concept of Tollan, the mythical place where great artisans lived, and wise priest-kings ruled, was taken on as a source of legitimacy by the Tolteca, the Cholulteca, the Xochicalca, and the post-classic era Mayans of Yucatan and the highlands of Chiapas and Guatemala (Blanton & Feinman, 1984; Miller, 1985; Read, 1995; Schele & Freidel, 1990). This sense of magical lineage was transmitted by the Tolteca, through their descendants the Culhua, to the Mexi’ca. From there, it spread to Chicanos in the U.S.
Before the 1970s, many Mexican-Americans were distanced by language and space from their personal “ancestral homeland” known in Mexico as “la patria chica” the little fatherland (i.e. the local community where a family came from). This local identification was more powerful at times than the national identity of many Mexicans.

Thus, some of the newly self-identified Mexcoehuani sought out “indigenous spirituality and identity” in the pueblos of the Rio Grande River Valley, where in ancient times the cultural influence of Teotihuacan had been a great influence (Aguilar, 1980; Ericson & Baugh, 1993a).

The links between the great city of Teotihuacan (even if they were unknown at the time by Chicano intellectuals) and the American Southwest were another important reason why the idea of Aztlan, as the mythic homeland of the Aztecs, was so critical and powerful. Sites that include Chaco Canyon, Snaketown, and Paquime, to name just a few, (Ericson & Baugh, 1993a; Hedrick, Kelley, & Riley, 1973, 1974; Riley, 1974; Whalen & Minnis, 1996) all show signs of Teotihuacan influence. Whether it was through direct contact, or more likely through the extended range of “pochtca” traders (Merchants who also served as spies for their homelands), the historical link that united these areas was strong. Chicanos, desperately seeking a space to call their own; free of racial, economic and cultural imperialism, quickly invoked this historical bond (Alurista, 1972, 1981).

However great and long lasting the influence of the great city of Teotihuacan was on Mexican and Pueblo Indian cultures, today, most people, including indigenous-centric Mexcoehuani, are ignorant of the historic chain that links them to this great city. If
Teotihuacan is remembered at all, it is as the great tourist attraction just north of modern Mexico City: “las piramides.”

At the end of Teotihuacan’s power, a new and migratory tribe entered central Mexico. This tribe spoke Nahuatl and was to become the great link between the grandeur of Teotihuacan, and the mythic prowess of the “ancestors:” the Tolteca.

*The Tolteca*

Around 750 A.D., the great ceremonial center of Teotihuacan was burnt and destroyed. No one knows if it was a civil war that brought down the great culture, or if it was the arrival of northern barbarians (Matos Moctezuma). Whatever the cause of the demise of this great civilization, its cultural legacy lived on in the cultures of the epiclassic and post-classic cultures of Mesoamerica (see table five). Michael D. Coe succinctly explains that:

> There have been four unifying forces in the pre-Spanish history of Mexico: the first of these was Olmec, the second Classic Teotihuacan, the third Toltec, and the last Aztec. In their own annals, written down in Spanish letters after the Conquest, the Mexican nobility and intelligentsia looked back in wonder to an almost semi-mythical time when the Toltecs ruled, a people whose very name means ‘the artificers.’ Of them, it was said that ‘nothing was too difficult for them; no place with which they dealt was too
distant.’ From their capital, Tollan (Tula), they had dominated much of central Mexico in ancient times, as well as parts of the Guatemalan highlands and most of the Yucatan peninsula. After their [the Toltecs] downfall, no Mexican or Maya dynasty worth its salt failed to claim descent from the wonderful people (Coe, 1994, pp. 131-132)

The city of the Toltecs, Tollan – Xicocotitlan (also known as Tula) became known as the mythic city of great artists, featherworkers, writers, and artisans. Future peoples, like the Mexi’ca (and centuries later, the Mexcoehuani) would take the legends of the grandeur of Teotihuacan, and mix them with the militaristic power of the Toltecs. Coe writes:

It has been the misfortune of modern scholarship that there are not one, but many places named [or considered as] Tula in Mexico – a quite natural circumstance from the meaning of the original name Tollan, which can be translated not only as ‘place of the reeds,’ but also as ‘Place where people are common as reeds.’ Thus, the term was applied indiscriminately to great ancient centers like Teotihuacan and Cholula. (Coe, pp. 134-135).

The Toltecs gave the modern Mexican psyche the images of the Chac-mol, that recumbent figure that holds a bowl upon its chest (and countless ashtrays in Mexican curio shops). They gave the Toltec warrior columns of Tula that grace many a Mexican
and Mexcoehuani Mural as symbols of Mexican warriorhood; and they left the gigantic serpent heads that adorned the temples of Mayan Chichen Itza, and later, through the creations of the Mexi’ca, the Templo Mayor in Mexico City (Matos Moctezuma, 1990b).

The Toltec ruling lineages that survived the destruction of Tula were critical in fomenting the nationalistic worldview of the later Mexi’ca immigrants of the Valley of Mexico. In essence, the subconscious memory of the Olmec and Teotihuacan lived on through the mythic accomplishments of the Toltec on down to the present day. Nigel Davies writes:

As heirs to Teotihuacan and ancestors to the Aztecs, The Toltecs stand astride the history of Mesoamerica. They occupy a central or pivotal position; one might thus compare them with the creators of Tiahuanaco in the northern Andes, with the Egyptian Middle Kingdom, or perhaps even with the European Middle Ages (Davies, 1977c, p. 3).

Mexican and Mexcoehuani artists, poets, and essayists have looked back through the eyes of the Aztec to see a utopia based on indigenous identity and sacred space. The mission statement of the Toltecas En Aztlan, (the seminal San Diego Mexcoehuani community arts group that in 1969 took over an abandoned water tank in Balboa Park and created the Centro Cultural de la Raza) states:

[Toltecas en Aztlan is] dedicated to Human Truth (social, economic, political, historical, and ecological) and Chicano Harmony which in our belief can only be practiced through
Mutual Self-Respect, Self-Determination in our endeavors, and the Self-Sacrifice of our individual differences for the sake of a Centro Cultural de la Raza where our indigenous ancestral spirit of brotherhood and sisterhood, justice and peace can flourish in contemporary Chicano art forms (Toltecas En Aztlan, 1974, p. 2)

The rise and fall of the Toltec nation is deeply buried in myth and controversial analysis of the oral traditions finally written down in Latin script by the Nahuatl scribes of the sixteenth and seventh centuries. Whatever the final cause of the end of the epi-classic period of Mesoamerica (see table 5), the link between the great cities of Teotihuacan and Tula has gone on into the barrios and minds of Mexicans and Mexcoehuani. Davies states:

… The city was not built in a day, nor did it fall so quickly…. Tollan-Xicocotitlan [the Tula of the Toltecs] had kept alight the lamps of civilization for two centuries and had reunited the central nucleus of Mesoamerica after a period of divided influences following the fall of Teotihuacan…. Two more centuries were to elapse before the first Tepanecs and then the Aztecs were to begin anew the reunifying process…great traditions remained, again to become fully manifest in the ecumenical empire of the Aztecs, who were proud to call themselves Culhuas
[descendants of the grandfathers, i.e. the Toltecs] and to claim Toltec heritage as their own (Davies, 1977c, p. 414).

Mexcoehuani and Mexicans, especially after the Revolution of 1910, looked through Aztec eyes to see the Olmec and Teotihuacan past shimmering in their indigenous heritage of Mexico through the culture of the Toltecs.

The Otomi

One of the most important ethnic groups in the evolution of La Danza Azteca was the Otopamean family of nations: Otomi, Pame, Chichimeca-Jonaz, Matlatzinca, and Mazahua language families. They are found in the Mexican states of Guanajuato, Queretaro, Hidalgo and Mexico (R. G. Gordon, Jr. (ed.), 2005); exactly the areas where La Danza “Azteca” actually began.

The Conchero tradition recalls that the battle of Sangremal was between the “Chichimeca,” and the Spanish (with their Tlaxcalteca and Otomi of Metztitlan and Tutotepec). The Chichimeca they recall are the Otopamean family of nations. These nations are some of the oldest in central Mexico (Carrasco, 2001; Galinier, 2004) having arrived in the formative period long before any Nahuatl speaking tribes had arrived.

The Otomi were hunter gathers, although by the time of the epi-classic period (900 – 1100 A.D.), many had settled down into villages and cities. The cities of Xaltocan, Otumba, and Teotenango were capitals of their kingdoms. Very important to the history of La Danza Azteca was Conin, who took the Christian name of Fernando de Tapia. Conin was an Otomi merchant turned warrior who fought the Chichimecas and founded
the city of Queretaro. It was Conin and his troops that were credited with bringing the newly nascent Danza tradition to Queretaro and Guanajuato.

The Otomi were related to the Chichimeca-Jonaz tribes who caused great grief to the Spanish explorers who were looking to open new silver mines in what today is Zacatecas.

*The Tlaxcalteca*

One nation of indigenous people that was very instrumental in the formation of modern Mexico was the Republic of Tlaxcallan. Tlaxcala, as the land is now known, was in many ways the precursor to American-style democracy, in that its four leaders were elected for each kingdom, and a fifth to govern over the rest was chosen by the people. Its armies were instrumental in helping the Spanish conquer the overwhelming larger armies of the Aztecs. Lockhart, Berdan and Anderson state:

….Tlaxcala surely can be said to have been a unit in preconquest times, but was not an ordinary altepetl [city] with its single dynastic ruler; it consisted of four altepetl, each with its own ruler. The four had come into being, according to historical lore, through a hiving-off process, so that they had a genetic unity, yet in effect they were a confederation. Tlaxcala occupied a special place in preconquest central Mexico in being the region’s second-ranking power after the Aztec confederation itself, the only
major segment of the central Mexican Nahuatl-speaking world to retain unadulterated independence from the Aztecs. Upon the arrival of the Spaniards, the predictable happened; in an often-repeated scenario, the first power (the Aztecs) resisted the Spaniards to the extent of its ability, while the second power (the Tlaxcalans) became their greatest ally.’ As auxiliaries and combatants, Tlaxcalans accompanied the tide of Spanish conquest not only to Mexico City but as far as Guatemala to the south and New Mexico to the north (Lockhart, Berdan, & Anderson, 1986, p. 2).

One of the results of the symbiotic relationship between the Spanish and the Tlaxcalteca was that it was Tlaxcalteca Nahuatl, not Aztec Nahuatl that spread into the northern regions of Mexico. If any Mexican/Mexcoehuani whose family originates in the states of Zacatecas, Chihuahua, Sonora, Coahuila, Texas, New Mexico, Arizona and California claims to have “Aztec blood,” it is more likely that it is Tlaxcalteca blood. As Capitán (traditional dance elder) Antonio Oliva Mares of Guanajuato, Mexico, recollected in a 2003 interview: “Ironically, as the oral tradition of the Azteca dance tells, it was the Tlaxcalteca that began the tradition of what we call today the Aztec dance tradition.” (Mares, 2003)

The Tlaxcalteca were the first indigenous people to accept willingly the Christian faith. They adopted and evolved the European artistic, architectural, and musical heritages of multicultural Spain into the new postconquest aesthetics, ontology, and
epistemology that is modern Mexico. They were the first to begin the process of creating a new Mexican esthetic, spirituality, and culture.

Like the Olmec and Teotihuacan cultures that preceded them, the Tlaxcalteca deeply influenced the identity and sacred space of the modern Mexican and Mexcoehuani, even as these groups attribute the Tlaxcalteca legacy to the “mighty Aztecs.” The Tlaxcalteca, by virtue of their mercenary status, accompanied the Spanish into Mexico, Michoacán, and Guatemala.

Their ability to change to absorb new ideas, religion, and food set a precedent for the rest of Mexican history. Theirs was not a traitorous position in Mexican history. Instead, it was the beginning of the creation of the Mexican mestizo consciousness and national pride. This resiliency in the face of overwhelming change and cultural imperialism is a strong example to Mexcoehuani who face similar challenges in education, politics, and cultural spheres in the U.S.

**The Azteca**

In every barrio, in every village, town or city, where reside, work, or play Mexican or Mexcoehuani people, the ideological, spiritual, and political *signum plus ultra* of the Aztecs waves in the wind: The golden eagle perched upon a cactus, with a serpent in its mouth- the flag of Mexico. Even though this image is in fact an erroneous reading of a
Mexi’ca glyph, it nevertheless represents membership in the Mexican ideal of history and identity.

Since the first Mexican flag was raised above the Republic of Mexico, this symbol of Aztec power, empire, grandeur, and spirit has inspired heroism, nationalism, hope, greed, and bloodshed. More than any indigenous nation, the Aztec “empire” is at the heart of Mexican and Mexcoehuani identity and spirituality.

However, the “Aztec” never really existed, if one takes into consideration that the people we know as the Aztec never called themselves by this name. Nor did any of their allies, or enemies use this name. Inga Clendinnen discusses the complexity of the name “Aztec:”

In August 1521 the city of Tenochtitlan—Tlatelolco, once the magnificent centre of a great system of tribute exaction, but reduced in the course of its long and desperate defense to a place of desolation, fell to a body of Spaniards led by Hernando Cortés and a shifting coalition of Indian ‘allies.’ So ended the public political existence of the Aztecs, as we have come to call them. The word ‘Aztec’ has been used to mean a number of things, from the ‘empire,’ which sprawled across much of modern Mexico, to the people of the magnificent lake city who were its masters. It is the people of the city in their last unthreatened years who are the subjects of this study. While the ‘Tlatelolca’ and the
‘Tenocha’ of the twin city strenuously maintained their separateness between themselves, they collectively called themselves the ‘Mexi’ca,’ as I will do, not least to avoid the heavy freight that ‘Aztec’ has come to bear. That word I will reserve for the tribute empire that the Mexi’ca, in confederacy with other Valley of Mexico peoples, had constructed by the close of the fifteenth century (Clendinnen, 1991, p. 1).

This rise and fall of the Aztec have been told and retold, so I will only touch on the image and symbolism that centuries of scholars, politicians, and philosophers have veneered onto whatever historical facts that can be surmised. Coe gives us a synopsis of the “official” history of the Aztecs as the elite royalty wanted posterity to believe:

… [The Aztecs were] the last barbaric tribe to arrive in the Valley of Mexico, ‘the people whose face nobody knows.’
The official Aztec histories claimed that they had come from a place called ‘Aztlan’ (meaning ‘Land of White Herons’), supposedly an island in a lake in the west or northwest of Mexico, and thus called themselves the ‘Azteca.’ One tradition says that they began their migration toward central Mexico in AD 1111, led by their tribal deity Huitzilopochtli (‘Hummingbird on the Left’), whose idol was borne on the
shoulders of four priests called teomamaque (Coe, 1994, p. 18).

Here, even Coe perpetuates the myth that the Mexi’ca were called “Aztecs.” The myth of the Mexi’ca as “Aztec” was an elaboration of the 18th century, ironically, the work of Creole Caucasians who wanted to create a Hispanic Mexican homeland for themselves on par of the Spanish homeland (Lafaye, 1976). Clendinnen (see above), has already discussed the imperial connotation of the term Aztec. Aztec was a nonspecific term for the people who had left the northern ancestral regions. Davies asserts:

The actual term ‘Aztec’ is apt to confuse. Originally, in their own language [Nahuatl] there existed the terms Aztec or Aztlan[t]eca— the name deriving from their traditional place of origin, Aztlan. They were subsequently renamed by the fiat of their patron god, and became known as Mexica [pronounced ‘Me-shie-h-ka’ or ‘Me-shee-ka’]; from this appellation come the modern [words] ‘Mexican’ and ‘Mexico.’ When the Spaniards arrived, the people concerned do not appear to have referred to themselves as ‘Aztecs,’ and earlier chroniclers do not usually employ this term. It was not until the eighteenth century that the term ‘Aztec’ was brought into more frequent use by the historian Clavijero; in particular, he wrote of the ‘Aztec Empire’, and as such, it has subsequently come to be known. The term
‘Aztec’ has really become an indispensable convention, for want of a better one. This is because the term ‘Mexi’ca’ or ‘Mexican’ is the name of only one of several peoples who conquered the Empire. The latter is best, therefore, referred to as ‘Aztec,’ in accordance with the established custom. As regards the Mexica, who were in fact the backbone of the Empire, it is preferable, at the risk of appearing pedantic, to describe them as ‘Mexica’ rather than as ‘Mexicans’. This latter, or Hispanized, version is confusing, since the term has subsequently come to embrace all the inhabitants of modern Mexico, relatively few of whom are, strictly speaking, descended from the original Mexica (Davies, 1977a, p. xiii).

This idealized Aztec imperial mythology has played a great role in the formation of Mexican, and later Mexcoehuani identity and sacred space. By invoking the grandeur of the Aztec empire, philosophers, writers, artists, and politicians can create an aura of destiny, rebirth, and pre-ordained power. The 1922 manifesto of the Sindicato de Obreros Técnicos, Pintores, y Escultores de México (the Syndicate of Technical workers, Painters, and Sculptors of Mexico) organized by the Mexican muralist David Alfaro Siqueiros, stressed that “even the smallest manifestations of the material or spiritual vitality of our race spring form our native midst” (Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1990, p.
Octavio Paz writes in his forward to Jacques Lafaye’s book *Quetzalcoatl and Guadalupe: The formation of Mexican National Consciousness*:

Quetzalcoatl disappeared from the historical horizon of the nineteenth century, except in the cases of those writers and artists who, without much success, chose him as the subject of their works. He disappeared but did not die, he was neither longer god nor apostle [as the Creole Spanish had assumed that Quetzalcoatl was in reality Saint Thomas], but a national hero. He was called Hidalgo, Juarez, Carranza; the quest for legitimacy has continued down to our own times (Lafaye, 1976, p. XXI).

In the conscious creation of Mexican (and later Mexcoehuani) identity, the Mexi’ca, in their avatar of the mighty Aztecs, gave cohesion, mythic virility, passion, and pathos to the Mexican psyche. Tenochtitlan, the capital of the Aztecs, becomes a symbol of self-determination, power, and destiny.

Although only a small part of the ceremonial center of the Mexi’ca nation can be seen today, it has become as Mecca, a Jerusalem, for the new Mexi’ca cultural warriors. Young people of all ages, class levels, and ethnicities gather every night in the areas that surround the visible ruins of the “Templo Mayor” the main ceremonial temple at the time of the arrival of the Spanish in 1519. They know nothing about the dances they are trying to carry out. They know very little about the actual history of the Mexi’cas. Nevertheless, what they do know is the symbolic membership the dances give them in the glory that
was Mexi’co-Tenochtitlan. The Mexi’ca ceased to exist as a national/genetic people, but their history, power, and myth remain very much alive in México as well as Aztlan.

**A Linguistic Overview of Mexico**

If there is a generalized mythology of Mexican/Mexcoehuani indigenous identity, it is that all Mexicans once spoke Mexican (also known as Nahuatl, and Macehuatlalhtolli), or if not, they spoke Maya or Yaqui. Only in the last twenty years or so have the languages of the Ñañu (Otomi), the tu’un Zavi (Mixteco), the Zapoteco, P’urhépecha (Tarascan), Totonaca, and many others come into Mexican (and especially Mexcoehuani) mestizo consciousness. Yet, it is Nahuatl, which has had the most influence on Mexican and thus Mexcoehuani identity. Even though it is not the original language of La Danza Azteca, it has over the past 200 hundred years become the symbol of La Danza. In order to understand how this happened, we need to understand the role that Nahuatl played in Mesoamerica at the time of the Spanish invasion.

Nahuatl was the lingua franca of Mesoamerica at the time of the invasion by the Spanish. Every trader, artisan, or diplomat who worked outside his/her homeland had to have a common language with which to interact with distant nations. Norman A. McQuown writes in *History of Studies of Middle American Languages*: “…”Typical of these cases [of grammars written by friars to convert the “heathens”], Andrés de Olmos (1547) published the first grammar of Nahuatl, the language of the Aztec overlords of Tenochtitlan and the official trade language of large stretches of middle America” (McQuown, 1964, p. 56).
In their preface to the 1992 four-volume edition of the *Codex Mendoza*, Frances Berdan, and Patricia Rieff Anawalt state that:

Because the Aztecs were the mostly fully documented of all the newly discovered peoples in the Age of Exploration, they provide a gateway through which scholars [and lay persons] can work back in time to even more ancient pre-Hispanic peoples (Berdan & Anawalt, 1992, p. xiii).

The importance of Nahuatl as the language of diplomacy, commerce, and conquest can be seen in the following statistic:

The Codex Mendoza is well known for its impressive inventory of Aztec name glyphs: indeed, it is one of the finest and most basic sources for studies of central Mexican glyph writing. The codex contains 612 place name glyphs…(Berdan & Anawalt, p. 163).

These Nahuatl place names included many towns and provinces that did not speak Nahuatl (such as the Mixtec kingdoms, the Tarascans, and the Maya). To this day, an estimated 1,000 place names in Mexico, the U.S., Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador are Nahuatl. Many of these (for example Tuxpan, Mexico; Analco, Santa Fe, New Mexico; and Temascal, California) are duplicated wherever Tlaxcalteca and Mexi’ca Nahuatl speakers traveled as mercenaries of the sixteenth and seventeenth century Spanish conquerors and priests (Macazaga Ordoño & Peñafiel, 1978).

Nahuatl is a member of the southern branch of the Uto-Azteca family of languages (Ethnologue, 2007). Today it is one of 291 living indigenous languages or dialects of
indigenous languages in Mexico (R. G. Gordon, Grimes, & Summer Institute of Linguistics., 2005). This language, the most influential of Native American languages on a global scale, was not only the language of the Aztecs, but also of their archenemies the Tlaxcalteca and the Huexotzinca. It was, in fact, the Tlaxcalteca, as mercenaries to the Spanish, that spread the influence of Nahuatl out of its central Mexican home and into the farthest reaches of what is today the United States (Montaño, 2004).

There are currently 27 modern dialects of spoken Nahuatl in Mexico, one Extinct (Classic Nahuatl), one sister language extinct (Pochutec) in Oaxaca, and one almost extinct Pipil (extinct in Honduras, 20 speakers left in Nicaragua). La Comisión Nacional Para el Desarrollo de los Pueblos Indígenas de México (The national Commission for the Development of the Indigenous Pueblos of Mexico) states that in the 2002 census there were approximately 2,445,969 Nahuatl speakers: 67.5% of these speakers were bilingual Spanish/Nahuatl, or monolingual Nahuatl (Nacional, 2007).

Today, the Nahuatl speaking peoples of Mexico emphatically reject the name of “Azteca” or “Mexi’ca” for their language. They call it “Macehualtlahtolli” (the words of the common [indigenous] people; or Nahuatl. For the modern agricultural people of the sierras of Veracruz, Puebla, Hidalgo, the grandeur and power of the Mexi’ca is not part of their identity. If they recognize the Aztec, it is as one undocumented farmworker in the U.S. from the Tehuacan area of Puebla put it: “They invaded us and took our food, our women and made us pay tribute (2007 personal communication).
In fact, the modern Nahuatl name for the United Mexican States (the official name of the Republic of Mexico), is “Mexco” which has gone from Mexi’co, “the place of the Mexi’ca,” to a noun, stripped of its linguistic and historical meaning.

It is no wonder that the Nahuatl language has become an integral part of Mexican/Mexcoehuani identity. Equating Nahuatl language with “Aztec glory,” the Mexcoehuani have enveloped themselves in Nahuatl. From calendars given away free at the grocery store and tortillerías, to T-shirts and blankets sold at Mexcoehuani events, Nahuatl iconography and language are repeated endlessly.

Even membership in street gangs is measured by criminal prosecutors by the number of “Aztec” tattoos a man has on his body (Aguilar, 2007). The arrival of the Aztec dance tradition only reinforced the identification with the “glory that was Nahuatl” the language of the Aztec.
An Overview of the Religious Systems of Mesoamerica

The Gods

H.B. Nicholson states that the religious systems of Mesoamerica had:

All aspects of what are usually considered by anthropologists to be the religious aspects of a culture were richly developed: ritualism, extensive pantheon of individualized deities, cosmogony, cosmology, mythology, esoteric and exoteric symbolism, hierarchically organized, formal priesthood, sophisticated religious art and architecture, theological and philosophical speculation, magic and shamanism. (H. B. Nicholson, 1955, p. 26).

At the apex of the divine architecture were Ometeucuhli and Omecihuatl (Two Lord and Two Lady). These two separate but connected gods were part of Ometeotl (Two God) the supreme but distant creator of the universe (Graulich, 1997). Because of their distance from the mere mortals that inhabited the Earth, lesser gods were invoked for the daily needs of humanity. These lesser gods were below Ometeotl; they were a vast pantheon of regional deities worshiped throughout Mesoamerica (albeit with various names according to the language spoken). Regional and local deities and the deities of clans, moieties, and extended family units were worshiped and invoked (Graulich, 1997; H. B. Nicholson, 1955).
Each region, city, and language group had their titular deities. So did different professions:

1. Xipe Totec “our lord the Flayed one” (the god of spring) was the deity for the goldsmiths.
2. Quetzalcoatl was the “feathered serpent” or the “precious twin.” He was the god of the high priests, of knowledge, supreme rulership, and political power. His other identity was that of Ehecatl, the wind; Tlaluhuizcalpantecwltli, Venus as the morning star; and Xolotl, Venus as the evening star.
3. Chalmatecutli was an avatar of Tlaloc, the rain god, and the patron of the priests that carried out the human sacrifices.
4. Mixcoatl “Cloud Serpent” (Camaxtli of the Tlaxcallans) was the patron of the hunters, of war, fate, fire and patron of the Otomi people.
5. Chantico “in the home she is” She was the deity for the hearth fires, personal treasure, and home.
6. Chicomecoatl (also Chalchiuhciquatl, Chicomecoatl “seven serpent” also known as Chalchiuhciquatl, “jade her skirt” and as Xilonen, “young corn doll” for new maize and produce. She was an Earth goddess of fertility and abundance.
7. Huehuecoyotl was the “old Coyote.” He was the god of dance, music, and carnality, and the patron deity of featherworkers.
8. Coatlicue was also called as Teteoinan "the gods, their mother." She was the mother of Huitzilopochtli. Also called Toci, “our grandmother”
10. Tlaloc was one of the most ancient gods. He can be seen very early on in Teotihuacan. He was the bringer of rain, and thunder.

11. Cihuacoatl, “snake woman” was a fertility goddess and the patroness of midwives, and the patroness of woman who die during childbirth

12. Huehuetotl, he was “the old god,” the deity of fire.

13. Ehecatl was the deity for wind. His attributes merged in post-classic times with those of Quetzalcoatl.

These gods of the common people, that were concerned with the everyday battle for sustenance and life, more than the gods of the elite nobility (such as Tezcatlipoca, Xiuhtecutli, Ometeotl), were the ones that survived the Spanish conquest and were quickly synchronized into the Roman Catholic iconography of saints, virgins, and various images of Christ.

*Survival, resiliency, convergence and syncretic negotiation of the pre columbian gods*

It was this vast pantheon of multiple deities, and their surprisingly similar rituals, that allowed Christianity in its Iberian Roman Catholic form to take roots in post-conquest Mexico. The military conquest of Mexico was quickly translated by the Europeans as the triumph of Catholicism over the Mexican gods or, in a more sophisticated fashion, over a fundamentally misguided brand of religion. Osvaldo Pardo states in his book “The origins of Mexican Catholicism: Nahua Rituals and Christian sacraments in sixteenth-century Mexico”:
As the [Spanish Missionary] friars familiarized themselves with local practices and beliefs, some were quick to detect striking similarities between Mexican ceremonies and the sacraments of the church, such as baptism, communion, and penance (Pardo, 2004, p. 24).

The Native population began to syncretize their old deities with the new Christian as soon as the mendicant clergy was able to learn their indigenous languages and begin to teach the basics of Christianity. Villaseñor Black states in her book *Creating the Cult of St. Joseph*:

That a Catholic saint would be grafted onto, or conflated with, a pre-existing native cult is not surprising. Although much investigation remains to be done in this area, initial evidence seems to indicate that this was not uncommon in colonial Mexico. Other studies have suggested Huitzilopochtli’s conflation with Christ, that of St. Anne with the goddess Toci, and the Virgin of Guadalupe with Tonantzin. By melding together Catholic saints and indigenous deities, native converts were able to transform imported European Catholicism into their own hybrid religion (Black, 2006, p. 33).

Indeed according to Danza Azteca Capitanes Yescas, Oliva, Hernandez, and Rodriguez (personal communication) the following table shows a twin identity for each
Catholic saint according to various Danza Azteca elders in the 1940 – 1950s. Table six shows a schema of the principle translations of Catholic images to precolumbian deities:

**Table 6: Syncretism of deities**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Catholic Image – Saint</th>
<th>Precolumbian Nahuatl Deity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe</td>
<td>Tonantzin- our revered mother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Santa Ana</td>
<td>Toci- our grandmother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jesus Christ</td>
<td>Huitzilopchtli, Tonatiuh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>San Miguel</td>
<td>Quetzalcoatl</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Santo Niño de Atocha</td>
<td>Ehecatl</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Señor Santiago</td>
<td>Yacatecutli, Huitzilopchtli</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>San Lázaro</td>
<td>Huehueteotl, Xiuhtecutli</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>San Jose, San Ysidro</td>
<td>Tlaloc</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nuestra Señora de los Remedios</td>
<td>Mayahuel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nuestro Señor de Chalma</td>
<td>Chalmatecutli, Tezcatlipoca</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nuestro Señor del Sacromonte</td>
<td>Tepeyolotl</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nuestro Señor del Buen Despacho</td>
<td>Mictlantecutli</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nuestra Señora de la Candelaria</td>
<td>Chachiuhtlicue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Santa Bárbara</td>
<td>(via Santeria’s Oya)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Peterson, when discussing the postconquest murals of Malinalco states that:

> Within the larger and more complex category of pre-Columbian and European features come together in varying degrees; the blend can be one of form and/ or meaning.
Moreover, the interpretations brought to a single image can either merge or differ, dependent on the discrete readings given the image. The ability to distinguish native from Euro-Christian iconography requires not only knowledge of both cultures but also a large enough wall painting sample, preferably a mural cycle, to reconstruct the overall composition and theme, thereby securing the meaning of the individual components. In convergence, interpretations by the native and European cultures may coincide in icons that share a similar form. That is, when an object's bicultural significance is alike, a pictorial rendering of that object will often elicit the same (but never identical) association of ideas. (Peterson, 1993, p. 8)

The syncretism between Christianity and the indigenous belief systems was a source for some of Mexico’s monumental architecture and arts that still influence modern design in Latin American as well as in the U.S. Samuel Y. Edgerton discusses the uniquely Mexican indigenous creation of the sixteenth and seventeenth century convents of Mexico and Central America:

Similar to the conventional European medieval monastery, the Mexican *convento* complex established soon after 1524 consisted of standard friars’ living quarters abutted to a church, along with other architectural features that were
either adapted from European prototypes of especially invented in situ to serve the special demands of the Mexican Mission. There is no evidence of building plans ever having been imported from Europe. Like the pre-Columbian temple precinct, the sixteenth century Mexican convento evolved into a uniquely Mesoamerican creation (Edgerton & Pérez de Lara, 2001, p. 49).

This unique form of Christian architecture and arts held great influence as far south as Peru, and as far north as the distant lands of New Mexico and Arizona (Edgerton & Pérez de Lara, 2001). The style of stone work used in this period of indigenous and European syncretism is known as “tequitqui” (McAndrew, 1965). Tequitqui which means “laborer, worker, one who pays tribute” in Nahuatl (Karttunen, 1983), was first proposed as a name for this period of architectural stone work by José Moreno Villa in his text “Lo mexicano en las artes” (1949).

This free-flowing explosion of indigenous creativity was soon followed in the arts and crafts of daily life. Indigenous inspired Talavera tiles and dishes, ironwork, wood, and leather crafts, all of these started out with Spanish/Moorish templates brought by the European missionaries. Soon, they were quickly absorbed into the indigenous aesthetic and tradition that went back thousands of years. This complete system of sculpture, crafts, manuscripts, and mural painting is called by some “Indocristiano” (Peterson, 1993). This is the term I will also use as a descriptor of the new indigenous and European cultural expression of music, and dance—as exemplified by La Danza Azteca.
The line of continuity from the Olmec civilization to the colonial period was unseen by the Spanish and their Creole descendants. An example of this architectural continuity are the convent “Posas” or wells, that were a part of the original atrium complex of the missionary churches of the 16th century (McAndrew, 1965). These were used in processions that walked counterclockwise, just as precolumbian processions had done before (see Edgerton 2001, pp. 41, 68; and McAndrew, 1965, pp. 291, 295). The posas also symbolized to the Indocristiano sensibility, the sacred caves of precolumbian mythology where the original tribes sprang forth; where water flowed out from the ancestral homeland of Chicomoztoc; and as a place where the living could communicate with the ancestors and deities (Sullivan, 2008). Here the architectural bicultural significance was complete.

To the indigenous communities, the link to their preconquest past was very much apparent. James Clifford (cited in Peterson, 1993) argues that cultures are constantly being reformulated and “negotiated.” Today’s historic churches, convents, and palaces in colonial Mexico should not be seen as symbols of colonial oppression and imperialism. These architectural gems were made by indigenous and mestizo hands, and they are more correctly seen as symbols of resiliency, creativity, resistance, and ultimately, as the groundwork for the “New” mestizo Mexican nation.

In a subconscious manner, and many times in a very conscious manner, the religious art, architecture, and crafts of post-conquest Mesoamerica have deeply influenced what Mexican/Mexcoehuani view as culturally appropriate and historically
accurate depictions of “Mexicaness.” Indigenous culture was layered upon Spanish culture, but the indigenous culture never lost its essence or identity.

First the colonial authorities and then the Creole governments of the new Mexican republic sought to create an image of a Mexican nation that was deeply European. For many centuries, the picture that was painted by the Catholic Church, the colonial government, and scholars was that there had been a wholesale change of the indigenous world by implanting the Spanish European world onto Mesoamerica. Others felt that only in the periphery of the inhospitable mountains and deserts could indigenous culture have survived. As John Lockhart states in *The Nahuas after the Conquest*:

A counterview pointed to the isolation of the Indians from the social-economic centers of Hispanic life in cities and mines, with the consequent wholesale survival of indigenous elements untouched by outside influence. Supporting such notions were two kinds of evidence. First, institutional historians found in Spanish law a well-developed doctrine of two separate commonwealths: one for Spaniards, centered in the newly created Spanish cities; the other for Indians, consisting of towns and villages dotting the cities' hinterlands. The illusion of two entirely separate spheres was augmented by the fact that, in order to throw their own activity into higher relief, friars and others wrote as little as possible about the role of competing agencies or of the
Spanish civil population that almost immediately began to spill out of the cities. An apparently compatible message was delivered by twentieth-century ethnographers. Interested from the outset in continuities reaching back to the preconquest period, these scholars found (usually in relatively isolated areas) irrefutable evidence of survivals in diverse matters, including religious beliefs, kinship, medicinal practices, and material culture.

A breakthrough in the direction of giving more weight to the Indian side in shaping Spanish-indigenous interaction came with the work of Charles Gibson. First, Gibson showed that in the important central Mexican province of Tlaxcala, Hispanic-style municipal government was introduced and flourished in the sixteenth century not merely by Spanish design or fiat, or entirely on the Spanish model. Rather it was extensively adapted to the local indigenous situation and took hold in part because of the Tlaxcallans' perception that it could serve their interests. Then in his pivotal *Aztecs under Spanish Rule*, Gibson gave an entirely different perspective to the history of Spanish-Indian interaction and hence to postconquest Indian history. He showed that the local indigenous states of the Valley of Mexico survived
long into the postconquest period with their territories and many of their internal mechanisms essentially intact, giving the basis for all the structures the Spaniards implanted in the countryside….The friars had stepped into a situation already made for them (and for the governmental officials to whom they had given less than full credit). The extent of their success depended precisely upon the acceptance and retention of indigenous elements and patterns that in many respects were strikingly close to those of Europe. Relatively few of the friars' innovations were entirely new to the Mesoamericans. It was because of such things as their own crafts and writing systems, their tradition of sumptuous temples as the symbol of the state and the ethnic group, their well-developed calendar of religious festivities and processions, their relatively high degree of stability and nucleation of settlement, which they could quickly take to similar aspects of the Spanish heritage.

As to the notion of isolation shared by the institutionalists and the anthropologists, post-Gibsonian scholarship has cut into it deeply. The encomienda has been seen to involve a whole staff of Europeans, Africans, and Indians in permanent Spanish employ. Communities of humble
Hispanic people, including small agriculturalists and stockmen, petty traders, and muleteers, soon grew up inside many Indian towns’ populations and most opportunities for personal interaction. As things now stand, then, it has become apparent that straightforward clash, simple displacement, and indigenous survival through isolation are modes more characteristic of areas on the fringe, where Spanish immigrants were few and indigenous people less than fully sedentary, than of a core region such as central Mexico (Lockhart, 1992, pp. 3-4).

Thus, Mexcoehuani heritage is not a battle between forgotten, oppressed indigenous cultures versus European imperialistic culture that has been rammed down the throat of powerless natives. As Peterson states: “In an era of continual change, improvisation and transformation become coping mechanisms that permit the disenfranchised to both adapt and survive” (Peterson, 1993, p. 7). In the past 100 years of Chicano history, cultural survival of Mexican traditions and language have been continuously negotiated by the Mexcoehuani population with the dominant Euro- and Afro-centric societies of the U.S.; in politics, in education, and in spirituality (Alurista, 1981; Ceseña, 2004; Darder, 1995; Ford & Graduate Theological Union., 2000; Hernandez-Avila, 1996).

It was not until the 1970s, when Mexcoehuani self-determination and cultural awareness came to the forefront, that the pre-Columbian architecture and religious systems of the Aztecs became the dominant source of self-identity and sacred space. The
European colonial expression of Mexican spirituality was upended by the Mexcoehuani realization of the wealth of tradition still alive in indigenous spirituality (Alurista, 1973).

*The Flower Road, the Flower Mountain and the Santo Xochil: a visible continuum of Mesoamerican beliefs*

Be pleased for a moment with our songs, O friends. You sing adeptly, scattering, dispersing drum plumes, and the flowers are golden.

The songs we lift here *on earth* are fresh. The flowers are fresh. Let them come and lie in our hands. Let there be pleasure with these, O friends.

Let our pain and sadness be destroyed with these.

Let no one be sad! Let no one recall them to earth! *Ah, but here are our flowers, our good songs. Let there be pleasure with these. Let our pain and sadness be destroyed with these.*

Only here on earth, O friends, do we come to do our borrowing. We go away and leave these good songs. We go away and leave these flowers.

Your songs make me sad, O Life Giver, *for* we're to go away and leave them, *these*, these good songs (Bierhorst, 1985, p. 241). Circa 1573-1593 A.D.
If one looks at the indigenous communities of modern Mexico, one sees the critically important role that flowers, music, and incense play in the ritual life of these community’s ceremonies. Flowers, with their beautiful colors, scents, and short lives, have been a perfect representation of the transitory nature of life for the indigenous people of Mesoamerica for thousands of years. The multiethnic communities of modern, urban, mestizo Mexicans have incorporated this Native American worldview of flowers into the Judeo-Christian use of flowers that was brought over from Europe.

Flowers, as one of Mesoamerica’s pre columbian ancient symbols, held multi-leveled meanings to many cultures within Mesoamerica, as well as those cultures to the north that were influenced by it via the turquoise for macaw trade routes of the classic and post-classic eras (100 – 1521 A.D.) (Ericson & Baugh, 1993a; Hedrick et al., 1974).

Karl A. Taube, in his insightful analysis of the concept of “Flower Mountain” amongst the classic era Maya, writes about what is the almost continent-wide use of flowers as images of spirituality:

In an important, pioneering study, Jane Hill (1992) defined the extremely widespread concept of a floral paradise present among native peoples of Mesoamerica and the American Southwest. Terming it Flower World, Hill noted that this ancestral place of origin and return is closely related to the sun, heat, music, and brilliant or iridescent colors. In fact, Flower World is commonly identified with the path of the sun: "The image of the flowery road, with its
prototype in the path of the sun across the heavens, is one of the most widely diffused Flower World metaphors" (ibid.:215). According to Hill, the paradisal Flower World is especially developed among Uto-Aztecan-speaking peoples, including the ancient Aztec, the contemporary Huichol, Tarahumara, and Yaqui of western Mexico, and the Hopi and O'odham of the American Southwest. In addition, Hill (ibid.:123,134-135) noted that the Flower World complex also appears in contemporary beliefs of the Tzotzil Maya of highland Chiapas. More recently, Kelley Hays-Gilpin and Jane Hill (1999) described the presence of Flower World symbolism in ancient Puebloan art, suggesting considerable antiquity for this belief in the American Southwest…Hill (ibid.) also suggested that Flower World might have been introduced into other areas from southern Mesoamerica during the early dissemination of agriculture. The present study finds a good deal of support for the latter scenario. The Flower World complex is very ancient in Mesoamerica and can be traced to the Middle Formative Olmec as well as the Late Preclassic and Classic Maya. Among the ancient Maya, Flower World concerned a floral mountain that served both as an abode for gods and ancestors and as a
means of ascent into the paradisal realm of the sun. The floral paradise closely related to the concept of the breath soul, a vitalizing force frequently symbolized by flowers or jade. (Taube, 2004, p. 69)

Jeanette Favrot Peterson, states in her book on the early mix of European and indigenous spiritual aesthetics, *The Paradise Garden Murals of Malinalco*:

A final form of syncretism uses uniquely indigenous forms to convey Christian themes, yet due to their long-established native usage, the species undoubtedly retains the older meaning. When a New World plant as important ritually to the Aztecs as the zapote fruit tree is cast as the Tree of Knowledge in the Malinalco paradise frescoes (figs. 22 and 74), the substitution must have conveyed a non-Christian meaning to the native viewer that, at the very least, compromised the original Christian message. (Peterson, 1993, p. 6)

In the case of the Murals of Malinalco, the use of butterflies was specifically a case of bicultural significance. The use of flowers as a symbol of sacrifice, spirit, and as paths to the heavenly abode of the gods is carried on in the use of flowers as “stairs that take you to heaven” in the Danza Azteca hymn “Recibe Estas Flores” (Hernández Ramos, 2007). In this “alabanza” (hymn), the Catholic devotion to the Virgin Mary is conflated with the indigenous concept of the sacred scent of flowers, and their power to
take the worshiper to a higher state of spirituality. Susan Evans in her discussion of the scents associated with martyrs in various religions comments that:

Scent has long been associated with the world of the gods. Many of the Greek gods were noted not only for having a powerful smell themselves but also for having sensitive noses and taking great joy in the smell of an altar well stocked by a faithful follower. The Christian tradition is full of stories of martyrs and subsequently saints who had the aroma of sanctity about them. These stories became part of a larger olfactory understanding of the relationship between humans and the divine. Islam also has significant stories of fragrant martyrs set within a tradition that has an appreciation for scent and its ability to communicate the closeness of purity and paradise.

The aroma of sanctity is often described as an incomparably beautiful perfume, but sometimes the description is more specific: florals such as roses, lilies and violets; spices, including cinnamon, cloves, ginger and myrrh; and food such as apples and bread. Tales describing the aroma of sanctity exist from ancient to modern times and are often explained as deriving from the use of incense and perfumes in funerary rites. (Evans, 2002, p. 49)
This explanation however, does not capture the strength of the symbol and its inherent value of joy in overcoming death and sharing in divine immortality.

In Mesoamerican ritual, precolombian, and modern, the role of flowers intersects the role of incense in the rituals of kindness that call back the ancestors to give wisdom and power to the living:

This breath soul is also expressed by music and sweet-smelling aroma, both carried by air and wind. It will also be noted that some of the secondary traits found with the Classic Maya Flower World, such as Flower Mountain and the floral breath soul, can be found with Uto-Aztec speaking peoples, including the Aztec and Hopi. (Taube, 2004, p. 69).

Music, because it too is transitory, ephemeral, and carried by the wind (like butterflies, flowers and incense), is used to call back what Bierhorst calls the revenants (or ghosts of the ancestor warriors (Bierhorst, 1985).

The Ancestors: Día De Los Muertos as an Indocristiano Sacred Space

From deep within the historical record, from the time before Teotihuacan to the time of the post-classic Maya city-states, the concept of obligation to the ancestors has been an integral aspect of Mesoamerican culture (Carrasco, Jones, & Sessions, 1999; Taube, 2004). Flower mountain, the return of ancestral spirits as butterflies, honeybees, and hummingbirds are all living aspects of modern day indigenous culture. According to
some precolumbian legends, the very first humans of the current era of the fifth sun were made of the ground up bones of previous era humans. The god Quetzalcoatl offered his blood to bring the bones back to life (Graulich, 1997; Metraux, 1946; Miller & Taube, 1997).

Thus, living humans are indebted to the gods and to the ancestors for giving them life. This reciprocity of ritual kindness is at the heart of many of today’s indigenous ceremonies and rituals.

The resiliency of the indigenous bicultural negotiation (the concept of Indocristiano) between the indigenous people and the Spanish Church was critical in creating one of the most Mexican of Mexican celebrations: “el día de los muertos.” The day of the dead (and one that has been tragically commercialized in the U.S. as a “Mexican Halloween”), is traditionally (depending on the region of Mexico) commemorated from October 30th to November 2 (Brandes, 1997; Toor, 1947). There is some controversy on how much of this celebration is, in fact, precolumbian in origin and how much was brought over by the Catholic Church from Keltic tradition (Harris, 2000), the medieval “dance of the dead” (Brandes, 1998); or from ancient Egyptian traditions (Greenleigh & Beimler, 1991). Nevertheless, there are undeniable aspects of the celebration that have direct links to Mesoamerican preconquest cultures.

The medieval tradition of honoring the souls in purgatory (Weckmann, 1992) easily combined with the deeply ingrained tradition of remembering the warriors who had died in battle or sacrifice; the women who had died giving birth; and the remembrance of a tribes ancestral lineages.
The new hybrid Mexican celebration was not so much about praying for the souls of loved ones who were stuck in purgatory (Harris, 2000) as it was to welcome them to their homes to take part in the daily rituals of life: eating, singing and crying. Día de los Muertos in México is for the living. The sugar skulls, tiny toy skeletons and Day of the Dead art “are small, light, and transportable” (Brandes, 1998). It represents a widening of the bicultural significance of Christian belief and indigenous concept of the duality of life and death.

One of the main features of the el día de los muertos rituals is the feeding of the departed souls with food and drinks that they loved. Photos and other memorabilia of the departed are arranged on an altar, usually at the cemetery where the loved ones are buried. A path of flowers is created in front of the home’s altar. The path leads outside to the street, so that the spirits of the departed family members can find their way home (Toor, 1947). This path has deep precolumbian antecedents (Taube, 2004, 2008). Even today, throughout parts of Mexico and Guatemala, people create incredibly complex and beautiful mosaics in front of their churches out of flower petals. This is another example of the continuity of precolumbian ritual into modern times.

This reverence for the ancestral lineages of the living can be traced back to the widespread preconquest Mexican tradition of the “sacred bundles” and totems (Headrick, 2007; Sugiyama, 2005). These bundles were the cremated remains of the departed elite rulers and priests, who then became god-like in their spiritual power. These ancestors were consulted for divination and for protection of the living. The ancestral bundles became messengers between the living and the spirit world (Headrick, 2007). The spirit
of the ancestors became butterflies, hummingbirds, honey bees, and dragon flies (Durán, 1971).

Although the Catholic Church tried to eliminate the tradition of ancestor “worship,” it has survived within many indigenous traditions and cultures. It can be seen in the Danza Azteca concept of the “estandartes” (banners) that are living representations of the founding ancestor of the group; in the focus of a dance group’s lineage to an ancestral Danza elder; in the elaborate creation of altars for the Danza ceremonies; as well as the altars for the day of the dead.

La Danza Azteca, taken as a whole, is a cycle of ritual obligation to the ancestors, to the living participants in the La Danza Azteca, and to the descendants not yet born. Through a cycle of dance, vigil, and patterns for living, the members of this tradition can maintain continuity with their ancestors (González Torres, 2005; Graulich, 1989; Hernández Ramos, 2007).

The Precolumbian Antecedents of La Danza Azteca

For the past four hundred years, most if not all of the understanding of Mesoamerican ritual and belief systems were based exclusively on the extensive written record left by the Spanish missionaries on the Mexi’ca, their first converts in Tlaxcallan, in Mexico and areas nearby, or by the highly educated indigenous or mestizo descendants of these converts (see Davies for in-depth examples Davies, 1974; Davies, 1977b, 1980, 1982, 1987; Martí & Kurath, 1964).
Up until the early 1960s the decipherment of the large corpus of Maya glyphs, (inscribed in stone, or in the four surviving Maya codices) had not advanced enough to gather historical information. The Olmec civilization was not “discovered” until the 1940s; their writing system has not been deciphered as of yet (Andrews, 2003; Coe, 1995).

Until the recent developments in iconography at Teotihuacan (Berrin, Millon, & Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco., 1988; Pasztory, 1974, 1976; Sugiyama, 2005), the Maya heartland (Schele & Freidel, 1990; Schele & Miller, 1983; Schele, University of Texas at Austin. Art Dept., University of Texas at Austin. Institute of Latin American Studies., & History, 1989), and the recent developments with correlating the Mayan Popol Vuhl with Classic Mayan mythology (Taube, 2004; Tedlock, 1996), there were few resources available to better understand Mesoamerican cosmology and history. One was the ethnological gem of the Florentine Codex (Sahagún, Anderson, & Dibble, 1950), the Codex Chimalpopoca (Bierhorst, 1992a). Another was the codex Chimalpahin (Chimalpahin Cuauhtlehuanitzin, Anderson, Schroeder, & Ruwet, 1997). All of these books are based on the recollections and writings of the Valley of Mexico or areas nearby (Berdan & Anawalt, 1992; Miller, 1985; Nash, 1957).

This is the most important reason why modern Mexican and Mexcoehuani identity and sacred space give so much weight to the cultural achievements of the Mexi’ca: until recently there were no other icons upon which to build a national identity or cultural political movement. This paper will divide the precolumbian sources of the use of dance into two epochs:
Epoch One: the written sources available since 1521. These include writings by the first missionaries, their indigenous students, or descendants of indigenous rulers that wanted to collect their people’s histories before the old people passed away. Epoch Two: the iconographic sources deciphered since 1900. These include notable analysis by epigraphers, linguists, art historians, and even cryptologists (Miller, 1985; Pasztory, 1974; Schele, Miller, Kerr, & Kimbell Art Museum., 1986).

The Different Types of Dance: Ritual and Social Dances

Dance was known by two words in Nahuatl, “i’totia” and “macehua.” I’totia is translated by Molina in his 1571 dictionary as bailar o dançar (to ballet or to dance). Macehua is also translated by Molina as bailar o dançar (Molina, 2004).

This important dictionary does not differentiate between the two words. Ballet is derived from the Italian balletto, “a little dance.” The Oxford dictionary states that ballet is: “An artistic form of dancing performed to music using set steps and gestures.” Thus for this paper, the formal organized dance of state sanctioned rituals will be referred to as “ritual ballet.”

Although the term “ballet” is heavy with European connotation in English, in Spanish it does denote a dance tradition that is not necessarily distant from the common people. The term “ballet folklórico” in Spanish denotes dances which at one time were social dances that came and went with fashion, and, now, have become part of the national consciousness as part of a nation’s cultural identity (Toor, 1947).
The dances that are, for the most part, of an informal, entertainment, or social focus, will be referred to as dance. Informal dance is defined as “the social gathering at which people dance” ("Compact Oxford English dictionary of current English," 2005).

The only early colonial source that suggests a difference in meaning between the two words, i’totia” and macehua, is Motolinia’s dictionary:

En esta lengua de Anavac la danza ó el baile tiene dos nombres: el uno es macevaliztli, y el otro netotiliztli. Este postrero quiere decir propiamente baile de regocijo con que se solazan y toman placer los indios en sus propias fiestas, así como los señores y principales en sus casas y en sus casimientos, y cuando así bailan y danzan dicen netotilo, bailan ó danzan; netotiliztli, baile ó danza. El segundo y principal nombre de la danza se llama macevaliztli, que propiamente quiere decir merecer: tenían este baile por obra meritoria, así como decimos merecer uno en las obras de caridad, de penitencia y en las otras virtudes hechas por buen fin. De este verbo macevalo viene su compuesto tlamacevalo, por hacer penitencia ó confesión, y estos bailes más sólones eran hechos en las fiestas generales y también particulares de sus dioses, y hacíñalas en las plazas. (Scolieri, 2003).
“In this land of Anahuac the ballet or dance has two names: macevaliztli (the modern spelling is macehualiztli), and the other is netotiliztli. The latter properly means a dance of rejoicing. With it, the Indians get solace and take pleasure in their own festivals, as do the lords and princes in their homes and lodgings. And when they dance thusly they say: netotilo, they dance; netotiliztli, ballet or dance.

The second and principle name of the dance is macevaliztli, which properly means to merit: they had this dance as a meritorious work; thusly as we say, one merits works of charity, of penance, and the other virtues, done for a good end. From this verb root macevalo comes tlamacevalo: “to make penance or confession;” and the most solemn dances were made in the general festivals and in the particular ones of their gods; and they carried them out in the plazas.” (my translation)

It is critical to note that the term for the social dances of the precolumbian common people, netotiliztli, is the one closest to the modern name for the dance mihtotiliztli. Karttunen (Karttunen, 1983) gives the following glosses:

Mihtotia: to dance

Mihtoitliztli: the essence of dance

Mihto-tli: the dance/baile
Mihtotiani: a dancer/Danzante (regional variant)
Mihtotiquetl: a dancer/Danzante (regional variant)

These all have as their root the Nahuatl verb *ihtotia* (the “h” here represents the glottal stop consonant of Nahuatl and not the “h” sound of English, nor the silent value of the “h” in Spanish). Karttunen glosses this verb as “vrefl, vt (verb reflexive, verb transitive) to dance, to get someone to dance/ bailar o danzar (M), hacer bailar a otro.” The “m” present at the beginning of the words related to dance (mihtotli, mihtotiani mihtotiqui, etc) represents the reflexive. In Spanish, one would say “se baila, se hace bailar.”

It is critical to note that the Nahuatl speaking indigenous of the past 400 years have continued to use the verb for the common social dances of the people (mihtotia), and not the verb for the dances of the elite (macehua) (Martí & Kurath, 1964).

I argue that this important distinction in the use of the Nahuatl verb *mihtotia* is due to the fact that it was the commoners, especially the rural agricultural peasants with their interest in rain, fertility, and local deities that kept alive the dance traditions of Mesoamerica that we know call La Danza Azteca.

The warrior class, the nobles, and the priestly class that would have known, taught, and carried out the ritual ballet dances of the state religion, were quickly exterminated, or at the least, melted into the new novo-Hispano mestizo society.

The farther one lived from the main political economy of the colonial cities of New Spain, the better the opportunity to maintain the syncretized “new indigenous biculture” and carry out the ancient dance traditions of Mesoamerica.
I believe that during the Colonial period, this process of the separation of the working indigenous classes, (especially the agricultural communities gave rise) from the disappearing elite classes, gave rise to the tradition of unisexual dancing in La Danza Azteca. Unlike most indigenous dance traditions, where there is a distinctly segregated dance space for men and women, in La Danza Azteca, men and women all dance the same dances, in the same circle, and in mixed company (Alarcón, 1999; Toor, 1947).

The people who were charged with keeping alive the dances in each family unit, or village, had to learn both the dances that used to be for women only (coming of age, birthing, and weaving dances) and the dances for men only (hunting dances, war dances, coming of ages dances). In addition, the division between dances for children, youth, adults, and elders was lost over the centuries (González Torres, 2005; Hernández Ramos, 2007; Hernández, 2002).

During the constant reformulation and negotiation of a new third space, first the indigenous, and then the mestizo communities, created a new paradigm of Nativist Christian Mexican identity through Danza Azteca, and the other dances of the 16th through the 20th century Mexico (Toor, 1947). This negotiation continues to this day, amongst the Mexcoehuani who take on the discipline of La Danza in the U.S. (Ceseña, 2004). Christensen notes that:

After the first decades of the Colonial period, these [the nativist religious movements] were led primarily by lower class Indians, as the elites quickly adapted to the dominant system. Numerous messiahs sprang up throughout New
Spain, and even later in independent Mexico. ...In the
development of Nahua ‘man-gods’ from Andrés Mixcoatl,
tried in 1537 to Gregorio Juan, tried in 1659... Andrés
Mixcoatl was the incarnation of Tezcatlipoca, and interacted
with contemporaries of his who took the roles of
Huitzilopochtli and Tlaloc. 83 He called for the overthrow of
the Christian Church. Gregorio Juan, on the other hand, was
the Son of God and spoke in Christian language
(Christensen, 1996, p. 463).

It was unavoidable that then as now, a few individuals would realize the personal
power and control that the new ideology could give them. In the Mexcoehuani neo-
nativist of today, the nativist religious movements of four hundred years ago, comes full
circle. However, this time instead of indigenous demagogues using Christianity to enrich
themselves with power, prestige, and fame, it is their mestizo descendants that seek
personal power using a revisionist, neo-Indigenist vocabulary of signs.

The focus of the dances

The ritual ballet dance (macehualiztli) of the state religion was the center of
worship of the national cult. Francisco López de Gómara, Hernán Cortez’ personal
Chaplin from 1540 on, describes a ritual ballet ceremony:

These two drums [teponaztli and huehuetl] playing in
unison with the voices stood out quite strikingly, and
sounded not at all badly. The performers sang merry, joyful, and amusing tunes, or else some ballad in praise of past kings, recounting wars and such things. This was all in rhymed couplets and sounded well and was pleasing.

When it was at last time to begin, eight or ten men would blow their whistles lustily. The drums were then beaten very lightly. The dancers were not long in appearing in rich white, red, green, and yellow garments interwoven with very many different colors. In their hands, they carried bouquets of roses, or fans of feathers or of feathers and gold, while many of them appeared with garlands of exquisitely scented flowers. Many wore fitted feather-work hoods covering the head and shoulders, or else masks made to represent eagle, tiger, alligator, and wild animal heads. Many times a thousand dancers would assemble for this dance and at the least four hundred. They were all leading men, nobles, and even lords. The higher the man's quality the closer was his position with respect to the drums. . .

At first they sang ballads and moved slowly. They played, sang, and danced quietly and everything seemed serious, but
when they became more excited, they sang carols and jolly tunes. The dance became more and more animated and the dancers would dance harder and quicken their pace.

All those who have seen this dance say it is a most interesting thing to see and superior to the zambra of the Moors, which is the best dance of which we have any knowledge in Spain.' (Stevenson, 1952, p. 26)

An important note to this description is how La Danza Conchera, the direct precursor to today’s Danza Azteca, still carries out the sequence of dance: The dancers start off slow, sing verses between each dance sequence, and slowly build up the speed and energy of the dances. The Concheros (and the Danzantes Aztecas that still follow the ancient tradition) also continue to place the persons with the higher “quality the closer was his position with respect to the drums” (Stevenson, 1952).

Today that special place of respect is held for the elder dancers, and for the youngest dancers; this is because they are the past and the future of the dance tradition (P. Rodriguez, 1988).

A description of another state sponsored ritual ballet ceremony is given in Sahagún’s Florentine Codex book two, chapter 8:

Uei tecuihuitl [Huey tekʷihuitl “the great feast of the lords”]
The eighth month they called Uei tecuilhuitl. On the first day of this month, they observed a feast to the goddess named Xilonen (goddess of the tender maize). On this feast they gave food to all the poor men and women—old men, old women, boys, girls—in honor of the goddess. They slew a woman, on the tenth day of this month, arrayed in the ornaments with which they represented the same goddess.

For eight uninterrupted days before the feast, they fed men and women, young and old. Then, very early in the morning, they gave them to drink a kind of gruel which they call chienpinolli. Each one drank as much as he wished. And at noon they placed all in order, seated in their rows, and they gave them tamales. He, who gave them [out], gave each one as many as he could hold in one hand. And if one of them exceeded the bounds of custom so much as to take {tamales} twice, they mishandled him and took from him those which he had, and he went with nothing. This [feasting] the lords brought about in order to give comfort to the poor; for at this time, ordinarily, there is a want of the necessities of life.
All these eight days they danced and moved in rhythm, men and women together performing the ceremonious movement, all heavily adorned with rich vestments and jewels. The women wore their hair unbound; they went with hair down, dancing and singing with the men. This dance began at sundown, and they continued in it until nine o'clock. They carried many lights (like great torches) of resinous wood, and there were many braziers or bonfires which burned in the same courtyard in which they danced. In this dance or solemn movement they went with hands joined [to those of other dancers], or embraced—the arm of one grasping the body of another as in an embrace, and the other likewise [holding still] another, men and women [alike] (Book two, chapter eight Sahagún et al., 1950, p. 14).

In contrast to the ritual ballet ceremonies, for the feast of the Mexi’ca’s titular deity, Huitzilopochtli social dances were carried out on:

The ninth month they called Tlaxochimaco. On the first day of this month, they held a feast in honor of the god of war, named Uitzilopochtli [Huitzilopochtli]. In this, they offered him the first flowers [grown] in that year.
…Then, very early in the morning of this feast, the priests of the idols decked Uitzilopochtli with many flowers; and after the statue of this god was adorned, they decorated the statues of the other gods with garlands and strings and wreaths of flowers. Then they decked all the other statues in the calpulcos [neighborhood meeting halls] and young men's houses. In addition, in the houses of the majordomos and leading men and common folk, all decorated with flowers the statues, which they had in their houses.

…and, a little after eating, they started a kind of dance in which the noblemen, with women, together danced grasping each other's hands, and the ones embracing the others, arms thrown about each other's necks. They did not dance solemnly in the manner of a ceremonial dance, nor did they go through the movements of a ceremonial dance; but they went step by step, to the rhythm of those who beat [the drums] and sang, all of whom were standing, a little to one side of those who danced, near a circular altar which they called momontli.

This chanting lasted until nightfall. Not only in the pyramid courtyards but in all the houses of the leading men and the common folk they beat [the drums] and sang with a great
din until night. Moreover, the old men and the old women drank wine; but neither young man nor young woman drank it. And if [any] of them did drink it, they punished them sorely. Many other ceremonies were performed in this, which are [described] at length. (Book two chapter nine Sahagún et al., 1950, p. 16)

Dancing and singing were critical parts of both the ritual ballet performances for the state religious festivals, and the local popular dance gatherings of the barrios, villages, and outlying communities. So great was the importance of carrying out the dances in a perfect manner, that Sahagún’s informants tell us that:

The ruler was greatly concerned with the dance, the rejoicing, in order to hearten and console all the peers, the noblemen, the lords, the brave warriors, and all the common folk and vassals.

First, the ruler announced what song should be intoned. He commanded the singers to rehearse and practice the song and [to prepare] the two-toned drums, the rubber drum hammers, and the ground drums, and all the properties used in the dance. And [he appointed the kind of] dance, him who would give the pitch, those who would lead, him who would beat the two-toned drum, him who would play the ground
drum. All was first arranged, so that nothing would be left out…

Then also they arrayed and accorded favors to all the lords, and noblemen, the men [at arms], brave warriors, and the high judges, and the [lesser] judges, and brave warriors, men [at arms], and masters of the youths, and singers. And the ruler gave them drink and food, all the things which have been mentioned.

And if the singers did something amiss—perchance a two-toned drum was out of tune, or a gourd drum; or he who intoned, marred the song; or the leader marred the dance—then the ruler commanded that they place in jail whoever had done the wrong; they imprisoned him, and he died.

(Book eight, chapter 17 Sahagún et al., 1950, p. 150)

Each city-state, and each barrio, village and town within that polity had their own musical traditions. Whether the dancing was ritual ballet or social dancing, the instruments were similar. Motolinia (as cited by Stevenson) describes the use of music and dance:

In the following extract, which combines passages selected from Chapters 26 and 27 in Part II of the Memoriales, Motolinia offers his description of pre-Conquest music; he tells how music functioned in Aztec life, what kinds of
instruments they used, how the Aztecs rehearsed their songs and dance music; how it was rendered in actual performance, how musicians were evaluated in Aztec society, and why composers enjoyed special prestige:

One of the commonest occurrences in this country were the festivals of song and dance, which were organized not only for the delight of the inhabitants themselves, but more especially to honor their gods, whom they thought well pleased by such service. Because they took their festivals with extreme seriousness and set great store by them, it was the custom in each town for the nobility to maintain in their own houses singing-masters some of whom [not only sang the traditional songs, but] also composed new songs and dances.

Composers skilled in fashioning songs and ballads were held in high repute and were everywhere in great demand. Among singers, those who possessed deep bass voices were the ones most sought after because it was customary to pitch the songs all extremely low at the frequent private ritual observances held inside the houses of the principal nobility. Singing and dancing were nearly always prominent features in the public fiestas which occurred every twenty days. . . .
The big fiestas were held outdoors in the plazas, but the less important ones either in the private patios of the nobility or indoors in the houses of the nobles.

When a battle victory was celebrated, or when a new member of the nobility was created, or when a chieftain married, or when some other striking event occurred, the singing-masters composed new songs especially for the occasion. These singing-masters also sang, of course, the old songs appropriate for the various observances in honor of their gods, or in celebration of historical exploits, or in praise of their deceased chieftains.

The singers always decided what they were going to sing several days beforehand and practiced diligently on their songs. In the large towns (where there was always an abundance of good singers) those who were to participate in a particular fiesta got together for rehearsal well in advance…(Stevenson, 1952, p. 20)

In precolumbian Mesoamerica, great care was taken to teach the youth their societal obligations. The young males as well as the females were expected to be adroit at dancing, singing, and playing musical instruments. Fray Diego Duran, an early missionary and chronicler recounts how:
In each of the cities, next to the temples, there stood some large houses which were the residences of teachers who taught dancing and singing. These houses were called Cuicacalli, which means House of Song. Nothing was taught there to youths and maidens but singing, dancing, and the playing of musical instruments. Attendance at these schools was so important and the law [in regard to attendance] was kept so rigorously that any absence was considered almost a crime of lese majesty. Special punishments were inflicted upon those who failed to attend, and, besides these penalties, in some places there stood the God of Dance whom absentees feared to offend (Durán, 1971, pp. 289-290).

This concern for the youth’s societal obligation was not limited to the urban centers. Even today in the indigenous communities of Mexico, wherever globalization and Protestant Evangelicalism have not taken their toll on indigenous culture and values, youth are exhorted to serve their saints/gods, their elders, and their traditional ceremonies (González Torres, 2005).

Children 12 to 14 years of age went to the Cuicacalli to learn to dance and sing. They would live there if they helped serve the priest. The boys were lead by male elders, the girls by female elders. Each group was led carefully from their dormitories to the school and back. Durán continues:
In the cities of Mexico, Tetzcoco, and Tlacopan (and we are most interested in dealing with these, for they are the kingdoms which possessed the greatest refinement and breeding of the land) the Houses of the Dance were splendidly built and handsomely decorated, containing many large, spacious chambers around a great, ample, and beautiful courtyard, for the common dance (Durán, 1971, p. 291).

The children would dance into the evening and then they would go back to their homes or to the dormitories. The learning that was given at the house of song was meant to last an entire lifetime. This ritual code of living is similar to the code of conduct that traditional Concheros carry as part of their discipline (González Torres, 2005). For the past five hundred years, the common people had to pass on through oral tradition the dances, music, agrarian ceremonies, and ritual meaning of the dances steps. Men and women were able to teach equally to the youth of the next generation. They taught that to live the life of a dancer was to live a life in a different mindset. Duran makes much of the fact that:

Extreme care was taken to see that the youths were brought up in great chastity, filled with awe, well-bred, well disciplined in all ways of virtue. For this reason, there were different houses, some for boys from the ages of eight to nine; and others [for boys] from eighteen to twenty. There,
both had their masters and preceptors, who taught and made them practice all kinds of arts: military, religious, mechanical, and astrological, which gave them knowledge of the stars. For this, they possessed large, beautiful books, painted in hieroglyphs, dealing with all these arts [and these books] were used for teaching. There were also native books of law and theology for didactic purposes. [The boys] did not leave this [house of learning] until they were men, wise and skillful, when their vocation had been perceived [and] they were married and directed toward their lifework. When [a young man] departed from [this school], he was charged to remain faithful to the things they had learned there: fidelity and religion [and] to be satisfied with the woman who had been destined for him, so that the gods would protect and favor him (Durán, 1971, p. 293).

The dances of the people of the valley of Mexico were at times described as lewd, elegant, or joyful. Duran (cited by Stevenson) recounts that:

Since the young men were intensely eager to learn how to dance and sing well, and always wished to be leaders in the dancing and singing, they spent much time and effort mastering the particular types of body movement required. It was the custom of the dancers to dance and sing at the same
time. Their dance movements were regulated not only by the
beat of the music, but also by the pitch of their singing. . . .
Their poets gave each song and dance a different tune, just
as we employ a different tune when we are singing different
types of poetry such as the sonnet or the octava rima or the
terceto. Typical of the pronounced differences encountered
in their dance music was the contrast between the solemn
and majestic songs and dances performed by the nobility,
and the lighter love songs danced by the youths. And still
more different in type was another dance they performed
which might have been derived from that lascivious
sarabande which our own people dance with such indecent
contortions of the body and such lewd grimaces (Stevenson,
1952, p. 29).

This distinction was probably due to the different forms of dance that the friars
were witnessing; the formal ritual ballet of the state sponsored ceremonies, versus the
more informal and loosely organized dances of the common people. Either way, their
aesthetics and cultural understanding were colored by their late medieval Spanish
Catholic or early Catholic counter-reformation ontology.

Even today, when outsiders see the dancers using their entire bodies in kinetic
prayer, they laugh and make fun of the dancer’s movements. For example, there is a
dance variously known as “la Guadalajara,” “el cojito rapido,” (the little fast lame one) or
“la Polvora” (the gunpowder) dance. But outsiders have given it the name of “la borracha” (the drunken one), because in this dance the dancers use their feathered headdresses to mimic the movement of the wind through grass, and their bodies to mimic the movement of water through the Earth (Mares, 2003; P. Rodriguez, 1988). The etic visual reading gives a false meaning to the emic meaning of the Danzantes.

The iconographic sources deciphered since 1900

With the luxury of having four hundred years of analysis, new ontology, Hermeneutics, and the assistance of computers, we can look at indigenous cultural survival not as a possibility, but as fact. For example, Taube discusses the modern Maya concept of space, using newly deciphered Mayan texts and imagery of the Classic period:

Based on modern ethnographic accounts and Classic period writing and art, Andrea Stone (1995) and I (Taube 2003a) have argued that the pre-Hispanic Maya had two opposite conceptions of space, the ordered human environments of the house, community, and fields, and the primordial world of the forest and bush. Whereas the house, town, and milpa are socially constructed spaces of straight lines and right angles, the forest is a chaotic realm of twisted paths and tangled growth (Taube, 2004, p. 6).

Such analytical exercises can give us a much more measured understanding of Mesoamerican cultural survival; without the pious bombast of the colonial European
writers, and without the neo-nativist extremism of today’s Neo-Azteca writers (de la
Peña, 2008; Flores, 2007; González, 2007; Marín Ruiz 2008). Since the turn of the 20th
century, iconographic analysis of the surviving codices and mural paintings of
Mesoamerica, have given us new findings that connect the pre-columbian cosmological
tradition to modern indigenous cosmology.

From the Popol Vuh (Graulich et al., 1983; Taube, 2004; Tedlock, 1996), we learn
of the Maya and how they use flowers in ritual (Booth, 1966; Correa, 2000; Taube, 2004,
2008). We have learned of the meaning of roads and crossroads (Blanton & Feinman,
1984; Correa, 2000; Galinier, 2004). Now we have a better understanding of the
symbolism of spiders, butterflies, bees, and hummingbirds throughout Mesoamerican and
the southwestern U.S. (Headrick, 2007; Pasztory, 1976; Sugiyama, 2005). These new
interpretations and understanding of the complex system of meaning used by
Mesoamerican cultures has given us a new lens to analyze La Danza Azteca.

What at first sight appears to be an overtly Catholic dance system, La Danza
Azteca, in fact, carries within it a vast assemblage of pre-columbian cosmological traits.
Many young people, both in Mexico and in the U.S., do not understand the deep
meanings and symbols of La Danza Azteca. Erroneously, they assume it a colonizing
institution, so they re-create or more correctly said they invent what they consider being
the “true Mesoamerican heritage,” that which was presumably lost due to the Spanish
invasion; but in reality, that worldview is very far from the facts, as we shall see.
The History of La Danza Azteca-Conchera from 1521-2008

Before the history of La Danza Azteca can be recounted, it is important to review the precolumbian foundations of this cultural system known as “La Danza Azteca/Conchera/Chichimeca.”

The indigenous cultures of Mexico have over four thousand years of cultural, artistic, and religious evolution. This evolution continues to this day.

The indigenous people practiced genetic engineering of corn, amaranth, chilies, and other staple crops. They created this base of their civilization without the help of outside influences.

They understood the cyclical nature of the seasons and created three calendar rounds: the Olmeca/Maya Long count; The 365 day solar calendar; and the 260-day lunar/Venus calendar. They encoded this knowledge into their ritual dances, songs, codices, and mural paintings throughout Mesoamerica.

The cycles of rain, cold, dryness, and wind were very important for the agricultural base of all Mesoamerican civilizations. These fundamental forces are the ones that form the basis of modern indigenous ritual.

The Mesoamerican people, like all other people in the world, tried to control nature and its forces through ritual, prayer, and sacrifice. This attempt at control was violently altered with the arrival of the Spanish conquest. The indigenous people soon began to include Christian and African animistic traditions into their rituals and belief systems.

After the arrival of the Spanish invaders, there was a strong two-way discourse as each culture took and gave of its value systems to create the modern mestizo foundations
of Mexico. This discourse continues today with the powerful cultural forces of the U.S. displacing the role of colonial Spain.

Although the Roman Catholic doctrines of Spain took hold in the indigenous worldview, there was strong resistance to the total destruction of precolumbian ritual. Christian and indigenous rituals that were similar were fused into a third space, where Mexican Catholicism is neither fully Roman nor indigenous.

Modern epistemological studies have shown that there are in fact strong precolumbian currents in the modern Danza Conchera/Azteca, which unless a person has studied at length can be overlooked in the search for authenticity.

After the conquest

After 1519, there began a unique process of acculturation when the indigenous nations of Mesoamerica began to struggle and suffer under the domination of Spanish authorities. Although the “negotiation” of the cultural dialogue was slanted greatly towards the Spanish, the indigenous people who survived the conquest, the enslavement of the encomienda, and the effects of the various plagues that ravaged Mexico in the XV, XVI, and XVII centuries were able to negotiate power. Using the ancestral crops that had fed past civilizations, the indigenous people negotiated power and space:

…in spite of moral judgments against Spaniards for “eating like an Indian,” some colonizers ate with Indians and incorporated indigenous food and pottery to negotiate social relationships with indigenous elites. These relationships
provided the Spaniards with material rewards and served to negotiate power. This model challenges the common assumption that the Spaniards generally used cultural separatism as a strategy for obtaining power and demonstrates the roles of material culture in the negotiation of power between Spaniards and Indians (Rodríguez-Alegría, 2005, p. 551).

In everything that the Spanish tried to do to make New Spain a reflection of Old Spain, they had to accept that the indigenous presence had to be negotiated and appeased. When Cortes undertook to resettle Tenochtitlan in 1522, his first project was a fortress or fortified dock, known as the “atarazanas” (Kubler, 1944). There were no European architects to help out, so one wonders if an indigenous architect, under the tutelage of the Spanish conquistador, designed the first Spanish colonial building. The land was so vast and the needs so great that even the most virulent anti-Indigenist had to accept the influence of the precolumbian past.

Music, dance, song, and theatre became fecund areas of creativity. Music especially, was fertile ground for innovation:

The almost simultaneous impact of a new music upon the diverse cultures in the vast extent of America established a common cultural background that has been characterized ever since by a continued inter-action of indigenous elements with European and African musical traditions. This
imposition of a foreign musical practice began with the opening of a school in Texcoco, Mexico, by Fray Pedro de Gante in 1524. Shortly afterwards a new school for Indians, San Jose de los Naturales ... “where we teach five or six hundred boys every day,” was founded in Mexico City. These and subsequent schools followed the Franciscan model that as a rule included the teaching of music and instrument making in addition to doctrinal and grammatical instruction. The experience of other orders, mainly Augustinian, Dominican, and Jesuit, had already demonstrated that music was a very valuable medium for religious conversion. Special emphasis was placed on the artistic quality of the liturgy. The type of musical training given by the convent schools was mainly orientated towards enhancing the liturgy. They taught “reading and writing, both plain-song and polyphony ... and the art of playing and making diverse musical instruments” Fray Geronimo de Mendieta, amazed by the profusion of musical instruments in New Spain commented that nowhere else in the world had he seen such an abundance of flutes, sackbuts, crumhorns, trumpets and drums.
“Such other instruments as are played to give pleasure to the laity, the Indians make and play them all: small fiddles, guitars in two sizes, vihuelas, harps, and stringed keyboard instruments [rabeles, discantes, vihuelas, harpas y monocordios]. The conclusion is that there is nothing they cannot learn to do. What is more, only a few years after they learnt singing, they themselves began independently to compose polyphonic villancicos in four parts, and masses and other works, the which, when shown to accomplished Spanish singers, were taken to be by cultivated experts and not possibly by Indians” (Guzman-Bravo, 1978, p. 350)

So too was dance. A seventeenth century painting now in a private collection shows easily recognizable dancers that are dancing with harps, guitars and feathered rattles. If not for their unusual uniforms, the painting could have been a painting of twentieth century Conchero dancers (Katzew, 2004a). Another painting, this one from 1709, shows a panoramic view of the Basilica of Guadalupe. Here one can see depicted the original chapel of the 16th century, as well as the newer basilica of the late 17th century. Here, in an image that could have been painted in 2008, we see circles of dancers of different types. Each has a feathered crown, and is painted in an animate stance (Katzew, 2004b).

In a print created for Clavijero’s Stoiria Antica del Messico, (1780-81), one can see that in his time, the log drum, or teponaztli and the tall drum or huehuetl were still being used for the dances of central Mexico. A dancer is shown in the same print dancing with
a gourd rattle (Katzew, 2004a). There is then visual as well as written documentation that shows that the pre-columbian dance and music tradition of central Mexico not only survived the conquest, but also evolved to create what some would call the Indocristiano mestizo dance of La Danza Azteca.

*Early Colonial evolution of La Danza*

“Never forget that you are not to disturb any traditional belief that can be harmonized with Christianity” (Pope Gregory the Great as cited in Weckmann, 1992, p. 185)

The open-minded acceptance of pagan traditions of the early Catholic Church had been a guiding light of the early mendicant missionaries, who had come to the new world with millenarian hopes of mass conversions. The Franciscans, especially, saw these millions of new converts as an answer to the loss of believers to the Lutherans in northern Europe (Pardo, 2004; West, 1989). However, after 1550, the regular clergy began to take over the churches in cities and towns. They slowly did away with the schools for neophyte indigenous nobles. The post-Moorish Iberian zeal for exorcising “satanic” or “heathen” traditions and the ongoing counter-reformation, began to infect the Spanish authorities at mid-century. Coupled with the recurrent epidemics that wiped out almost 90% of the indigenous people of Mesoamerica, the great experiment of bicultural discourse was coming to an end. At least it seemed so in the eyes of the Spanish and Creole authorities.
However, for the common indigenous people, the mestizos, and afro-mestizos that worked in the countryside, in the mines, factories, and markets of New Spain, the evolution of bicultural significance and identity never stopped. In the realm of dance, this period of time 1525 – 1750 was a time of the greatest innovation:

Not only did the Mexica have an approximate idea of the Supreme Being — notes Munoz Camargo — but they even had their own version of the fallen angels: the tzizimime or "monsters who came down from above," who had been expelled from heaven for their bad conduct….

But although the idols were exiled, the Church had to accept the dances with which the natives honored their gods in secular fashion the areitos or mitotes — by allowing the faithful to perform them in homage to the Virgin or the saints, wearing pagan masks and adornments. The purpose of those expressions eventually changed, and others even arose in which the participants represented Christian saints and other personages: the Catholic Church used them as a form of catechesis, but not always with the desired results. For example, Cervantes de Salazar observes that sometimes the dancers danced "around a cross and had idols buried under it." Is there an equally pagan intent on the part of the Huehuenches [another name for the Danza Conchera] who
so often dance in the atrium of the basilica of Tepeyac, a manifestation which according to Henriquez Uretia is one of the chief survivals of the colonial period? The welcome extended by the missionaries to these mitotes, fundamentally liturgical hymns that were acted out and danced, is also partly explained by the existence of a medieval tradition of dance inside churches. This custom, we are told by Comper, was very popular in Montserrat in 1321. Moreover, at the time when the first missionaries were preaching Christianity in New Spain, dances were still being performed before the Holy Sacrament in the churches of Seville, Toledo, Jerez, and Valencia. (Weckmann, 1992, p. 191)

The roots of what would someday be known as La Danza Azteca had taken root in Tlaxcallan, among the faithful allies of the Spanish and in the religious constructions of the new colonial city of Mexico. As early as 1525 (González Torres, 2005), hundreds of indigenous dancers performed at the new church of San José de los naturals, “Saint Joseph of the Naturals” (indigenous), the open–aired church built especially for the indigenous residents of Mexico City (Black, 2006). González-Torres describes the spectacle:

Allí se habían llevado a cabo ceremonias de gran espectacularidad en 1525 con motivo de la instalación del
Santísimo Sacramento en la capilla de San José (Arroniz:41): "se buscaron todas las maneras posibles de fiesta, así en ayuntamiento de gentes, sacerdotes, españoles, seglares e indios principales de toda la tierra comarcana, como de atavíos, ornamentos, músicas, invenciones, arcos triunfales y danzas, que fue de grande edificación a los naturales de la tierra..." (Mendieta:223 cited in González Torres, 2005, p. 34).

There had taken place with great spectacle in 1525 with the motive of the installation of the Holy Sacrament in the chapel of Saint Joseph (Arroniz:41): "all manner of festival was sought out, thus in the council of people, priests, Spaniards, Indian commoners and principles, from every land neighboring, with finery, ornaments, music, inventions, triumphant arches, and dances, which were of great edification to the naturals of the land...” (my translation).

Throughout the late 1500s, Tlaxcallan was the center of indigenous dance innovation and of the process of creating bicultural significance through the syncretism of Catholic theology and indigenous semiotics. Motolinia (cited in González Torres) describes how in 1539 Tlaxcallan, the dancers were organized to represent the battle between the Spanish, their allies, and the Mexi’ca:
El ejército de la Nueva España repartido en diez capitanías, cada una vestida según el traje que ellos usan en la guerra; [...] Sacaron sobre sí lo mejor que todos tenían de plumajes ricos, divisas y rodelas, porque todos cuantos en este auto entraron, todos eran señores y principales, que entre ellos se nombran tecutlis y piles. Iba en la vanguardia Tlaxcala (y) México: estos iban muy lucidos y fueron muy mirados; llevaban el estandarte de las armas reales y el de su capitán general, que era don Antonio de Mendoza, Virrey de la nueva España. En la batalla iban los huastecas Zempoaltecas, Mixtecas, culiaques… (González Torres, 2005, p. 35)

The army of New Spain was divided into ten captainships each one dressed according to the uniform that they used in war; [...] They took out amongst themselves the best that they all had of rich feathers, headbands and shields, because all that entered this event were lords and princes that among them were called tecutlis (tecutli–lord) and piles (pilli–princes). [The warriors of] Tlaxcala (and) México were at the vanguard: these went very splendidous and they were very much watched; they carried the banner of the royal coat of arms and that of their captain general, who was don
Antonio de Mendoza, the viceroy of New Spain. In the
[mock battle] were the Huastecas Zempoaltecas, Mixtecas,
culiaques [Culhuaca]… (my translation).

Here one can already see the hierarchy of La Danza Azteca beginning to coalesce. Even today, “Capitanes” or “jefes” head traditional Danza groups. Each dancer uses the “the best that they have of rich feathers, headbands, and shields,” because then as now the dancers “that entered this event were lords and princes,” that is the dancers are not in the circle as individuals, but as living representatives of the glory that was precolumbian Mexico.

The birth of La Danza Azteca-Conchera in Queretaro: 1531

There are several sources that recount the battle that converted the Chichimeca and Otomi tribes to Catholicism; the one that has most of the various details complete in one cohesive narrative is the one from Frances Toors’ book, “Mexican Folkways:”

The conchero dances and the devotion of the cross or the four winds seem to have originated in connection with one of those early miracles that were so instrumental in subduing the natives. During the last bloody battle fought between the Christians and the pagan Chichimecas, on the hill near the present City of Queretaro, July 25, 1531, both sides agreed in advance not to use arms. But they used fists, feet, and teeth. When the fighting was at its worst, there appeared a
shining cross, suspended in the air above the field of battle, and at its side the image of St. James, whose day it was. The Christians had invoked his aid to detain the sun, as night was coming on and the fighting was bitter. Upon beholding this marvel, the pagans calmed down. They wept and promised to accept the light of the Gospel. Afterwards they asked that a cross be erected as a landmark on the battlefield that should last "forever and ever," and that the place be called "Sangremal," in memory of the blood spilled there by both sides. The following day the Catholics set up a pine cross on the hill, at which a Mass was said. But the newly converted Chichimecas were not satisfied with the cross; they hid it and insisted on being given one of permanent materials. The Catholics gave them one of stone but that did not please them either because it was small and unattractive.

So Don Nicolas de San Luis, the Cacique in charge of the Spanish forces, ordered Don Juan de la Cruz to go out to find better stones for a larger cross and to bring it back at once, for he feared the discontented Chichimecas....[they sent someone to look for stone to make a cross]....After walking half a league, praying all the time to the Lord and the Holy Virgin for help in his hard task, Juan de la Cruz
came upon a quarry of beautiful shining stones of three colors—red, white, and purple. Delighted, he set to work at once, and within twenty-four hours he finished carving a handsome cross, ten feet high. He immediately sent word to the Caciques [indigenous rulers] and meanwhile sought a shady spot for the cross, which he found under a "rose, called a calalosuchil," probably the reason for the suchitls of the Concheros. Don Nicolas was overjoyed at the good news. He ordered the drummers and buglers to call the Catholic soldiers and officers, who together with some of the milder Chichimecas set out to bring the cross. When they saw the cross, they were amazed at its beauty. As they knelt in prayer around it, a fragrant odor filled the air, and a beautiful white cloud, held by four angels, hovered over it to furnish shade. Afterwards they picked up the cross to carry it back, which although large and of stone, was as light as straw on their backs. And a fragrant odor followed the cross. The Chichimecas received the cross with great rejoicing, dancing, skirmishing, yelling, and shooting arrows into the air as it was set upon its foundation. (Toor, 1947, pp. 329-330)
In this story, one that is told (and retold with minor differences), in La Danza Conchera/Azteca (Cipactli, 2007; González Torres, 2005; Stone, 1975; Vento, 1994; Wilson, 1970), the appearance of flowers, heavenly scents (symbols of sacred warrior spirits), and a cloud (symbol of rain, and celestial approval) give two separate bicultural significances. To the friars, the holy cross of “el cerro de Sangremal” (the “hill of the bad blood,” where this cross now stands), was a symbol of the martyrdom of Christ and the forgiveness of sin. At the same time to the Chichimeca, Otomi, and Nahua, it was a symbol of Quetzalcoatl, the sun, and the symbol of the tree of life itself: maize.

For the Spanish missionaries, the cross of el Cerro de Sangremal shows the miraculous intervention of the hand of the Christian God and the heathen’s overwhelming desire to convert to Christianity. For the indigenous neophyte, it shows the overwhelming desire to keep the preconquest schema of reality unaltered, except for the surface veneer of Catholic iconography. Weckmann states: “although the idols were exiled, the Church had to accept the dances with which the natives honored their gods in secular fashion.” (Weckmann, 1992, p. 201)

The Evolution of La Danza 1700 -1910

By the middle of the 18th century, La Danza Azteca (in its traditional model of La Danza Conchera) had spread from Queretaro and Guanajuato to all parts of central Mexico, including the City of Mexico itself (Cipactli, 2007; González Torres, 2005; Hernández Ramos, 2007; Hernández, 2002). The way that La Danza Azteca spread led to several major lineages of Danza. A typical lineage would start when a dancer from
Queretaro, would immigrate to Mexico City to look for work. Having settled down, the dancer would try to assist the traditional ceremonies back home, as well as the ceremonies of his neighborhood, and the general ceremonies of the capital city (like the Villa on December 12th).

Eventually the cost and hardship of travel, plus the dancer's family and work commitments might make it so difficult to travel back home every year, that soon the dancer would start a neighborhood group to carry out his or her Danza obligations. After a few generations, the origins of the original lineage bearer would be forgotten by the dancers that later spread out from the original group to create new groups. That is why many groups in Mexico City, claim that their dance circle has been there for “hundreds of years” (Cipactli, 2007; González Torres, 2005; Hernández Ramos, 2007; Hernández, 2002; Maldonado Aguilar, 2005).

In the years just before the Mexican revolution of 1910, one of the most important lineages arrived in Mexico City. According to Florencio Yescas and Rosita Hernández, a Capitana of a Mexico City group that goes back to the late 1890s, the man who brought his Danza to the capital was from one of the oldest lineages in Queretaro. His Danza was the root of many of today’s oldest dance circles.

Today his estandarte or standard is but a few shredded sections hanging on a flagpole. Nevertheless, it is so revered that it is called “la reliquia general,” the general relic of the dances of Mexico City. Although there is consensus on the antiquity of the reliquia general, there is controversy on where it stands in the lineages of Mexico City. It
is no wonder that in Aztlan today, the Mexcoehuani newcomers to La Danza Azteca have conflicts and divisions in their efforts to conquer new Danzantes.

González Torres explains the various family legends on how La Danza Azteca came to Mexico City and how they each see their own lineage as being important:

Ya mencionamos que según varias versiones, la danza de la conquista fue introducida a la Ciudad de México desde el Bajío. Moedano (1972:607) dice al respecto: De acuerdo con los informes proporcionados por Don Ignacio Gutiérrez, General de la Danza Chichimeca de la Gran Tenochtitlán, ya fallecido, la "Hermandad de la Santa Cuenta" fue introducida en la Ciudad de México el año de 1876, por su padre, Don Jesús Gutiérrez, originario de San Miguel Allende, con un estandarte otorgado por Don Jesús Morales, en aquel entonces General de la citada población. Ahí existen restos de dicho estandarte y se le conoce entre los grupos de la Ciudad de México como el de la "reliquia general". Se dice que originalmente todos reconocían como jefe al heredero de "la reliquia" pero poco a poco, conforme fue aumentando el número de miembros, el faccionalismo (que ya existía en el Bajío) hizo su aparición en la ciudad de México. Florencio Gutiérrez, nieto del general Ignacio Gutiérrez, relata (Galovic:547) que en 1876 su abuelo era el
gran alférez de las marchas de Nuestra Señora de Guanajuato. "Anteriormente Jesús Gutiérrez, se traslado de Guanajuato a México para conquistar, pero no porque aquí no hubiera danzas, sino porque existía una gran división y el los unió y renovó todos los métodos. Quince arios permaneció en México y después regreso al santuario del Llanito" (Ibid.:550), su lugar de origen, que se encuentra cerca de la ciudad de Dolores Hidalgo. Ahí, en 1891 "coloco la luz de aceite que iba a arder eternamente para todos los grupos de danza" (Ibid.:550). En dicho santuario del Señor del Llanito hay una placa que conmemora este hecho. Félix Hernandez ratifica que fue Jesús Gutiérrez "quien logró la concordia en las danzas de la conquista" (Ibid.:512) y que después de su muerte hubo mucha división, discordia, egoísmo y falta de conformidad.

Aunque la mayoría de los jefes, sobre todo los tradicionales consideran que la "reliquia general" es la de los Gutiérrez, puede apreciarse que no todos piensan así. Ya hemos mencionado la opinión del general Luna, aunque también el general Luis Solís de la mesa guadalupana de la Gran Tenochtitlán, heredero del general Rafael Sánchez dice que "La famosa reliquia general que se fundó en San Miguel de
Allende en 1876 no es la más antigua ni la más importante" (Ibid.:519) y el Capitán Ignacio Cortes, de la mexicanidad dice que...

...había tres [reliquias:] una de Felipe Aranda, otra de Manuel Pineda y la general, de los chichimecas, con la cual pretendían someter a los de México. A cada grupo lo protege su bandera y su estandarte, porque se ha luchado por él y la reliquia no puede proteger a todos, sino solo al grupo al que pertenece. Veneración y respeto son inherentes a cada estandarte por parte de su grupo, pero no existe ninguna reliquia ni estandarte con influencia sobre otros (Ibid.:543) (González Torres, 2005, pp. 133-135).

For his part Manuel Luna says that his standard was raised in 1883, On Mina street in the City of Mexico by Maximino Téllez, his wife’s grandfather which he inherited from his father, but since there were no male sons at his death, he left him the captainship (Stone:208).

According to the same Manuel Luna, the introduction into the City of Mexico of jefe Jesús Gutiérrez’ standard caused a problem between the groups he commanded and some groups in Mexico city because he does not appear in the lineages of Querétaro; according to jefe Luna, the jefe Jesús
Gutiérrez broke the rules of the Danzante’s borders when he came to “conquer” the federal district without previous permission, which has had the effect that one no longer asks for permission to make conquests. (ibid.:208-209).

We have already mentioned that according to various versions La Danza de La Conquista was introduced to Mexico City from el Bajío. Moedano (1972:607) says that “According to the information given by Don Ignacio Gutierrez, General de la Danza Chichimeca de la Gran Tenochtitlan, deceased, the “Brotherhood of the Holy Count” was introduced to the city of Mexico in the year 1876, by his father, Don Jesus Gutierrez, originally from San Miguel Allende, with a standard awarded by Don Jesus Morales, who at that time was General of the aforementioned city.” There still exists some remains of that said standard and it is known as the “general relic” amongst the groups of Mexico City. It is said that originally, everyone recognized as the chief the heir to "la reliquia" but little by little, as the number of Danza members grew, the factionalism (that already existed el Bajío) made its appearance in Mexico City.
Florencio Gutierrez, grandson of General Ignacio Gutierrez, relates (Galovic:547) that in 1876, his grandfather was the grand standard bearer (ensign) of the processions of Our Lady of Guanajuato. “Earlier Jesus Gutierrez, travelled from Guanajuato to Mexico to conquer, but not because there was not Danza there already, but because there existed a great division and he united them and renovated all of the rules. He stayed in Mexico for fifteen years and then he returned to the Sanctuary of el Llanito" (Ibid.:550), his place of origin, which is close to the city of Dolores Hidalgo. There in 1891 “he placed an oil lamp that was to burn for eternity for all the Danza groups” (Ibid.:550). In that, stated sanctuary of Our Lord of el Llanito there is a plaque that commemorates this event. Félix Hernandez ratified that it was Jesús Gutiérrez "who was able to create a concordance in the Danza de la conquista" (Ibid.:512), and after his death there was much division, discord, egoism, and lack of conformity. Although the majority of the jefes, above all the traditional ones, consider that, the "reliquia general" belongs to the Gutiérrez,

One can tell that not everyone sees it that way.

We have already seen the opinion of General Luna,
General Luis Solís of the Mesa Gaudalupana of Gran Tenochtitlán, heir to General Rafael Sánchez also says that “the famous *reliquia general* that was founded in San Miguel de Allende in 1876 is neither the oldest nor the most important. And (Ibid.:519) Capitán Ignacio of the Mexicanidad says that there are three [relics] one of Felipe Aranda, another one of Manuel Pineda and the general one, of the Chichimecas, which they try to subjugate those of Mexico [City].

Each group is protected by their flag and standard, because they have fought for it and the reliquia cannot protect everyone, only the group that it belongs to. Veneration and respect on the part of each group are inherent to each standard, but there does not exist any relic nor standard with influence over others (Ibid.:543) (González Torres, 2005, pp. 133-135) (my translation).

General Felipe Aranda claimed his standard was raised in 1731. How much of these actual history, and how much is macho one-upmanship is open to debate (González Torres, 2005; Hernández Ramos, 2007).
The Revolution of 1910

The Mexican Revolution of 1910 gave great impetus to change La Danza Azteca from one of devotion to the ancestors and prayer to the multi-layered deities of Mexican Catholicism to nationalistic bellicose “warriorhood “and its emphasis on the battle glories of the Azteca emperors. (Krauze, 1998; for an in-depth look at the Mexican Revolution see: M. C. Meyer & Beezley, 2000; Ruiz, 1992).

During the period of 1920 to 1940, the governments of Mexican Presidents Obregón, Calles, Rodriguez, and Cardenas, pushed a more nationalistic ideology that brought Mexico’s indigenous past to the forefront once again. In the early 1920’s, Jose Vasconcellos became Minister of Education. His early work in defining the “cosmic race” gave impetus to the great mural works of Rivera, Siqueiros, and Orozco throughout Mexican government buildings, and the rehabilitation of everything pre-Hispanic (Silva E, 1965).

The Cristero movement

Mexican history is full or ironies, frauds and myths. One of the greatest ironies is that four hundred years after the Catholic Church tried to wipe out the indigenous religious systems of Mesoamerica, the Concheros, the ones that stubbornly struggled to keep alive the traditions of the precolumbian past, were some of the most ardent defenders of the Catholic faith during the years of the War of the Cristeros.

Near the end of the 1910 Mexican revolution, the constitution of 1917 delineated strict measures against the power and land holdings of the Catholic Church.
In 1926, President Calles put into place a law that finally put the anti-clerical sections of the constitution into effect. On August 1, 1926, the Mexican bishops suspended all church services throughout the country as a protest of the new law. Through various Catholic organizations, they called for a boycott of all schools, businesses, and newspapers. At the end of 1926, the hostilities started to escalate between armed Catholics and federal troops. On January 1, 1927 the formal rebellion began (J. A. Meyer, 1997).

The War of the Cristeros or the Cristiada War, as the movement was known took place in the years 1926-1929. The name of the struggle came from their war cry: “¡Viva Cristo Rey y Santa María de Guadalupe!” (Long live Christ and Saint Mary of Guadalupe!). Over 90,000 Mexicans perished in the war (Ramon, 1985).

Most of the Danzantes Concheros were devout Catholics and when the churches were seized and closed by the Mexican government. Many joined the popular uprising. Because of the new anti-church laws, they could not carry out their centuries old rituals. Many of the dance circle’s oratorios were destroyed. Many of the elders of the oldest lineages perished due to famine, war, or illness (Stone, 1975). Many Conchero groups went underground to carry out their obligations where the federal troops could not find them: in caves, forests, and on mountain tops. These were the very same places that the Concheros’ ancestors hid from the Spanish priests. They were now being used to carry out the Indocristiano rituals of La Danza.
On June 27, 1929, the church bells rang in Mexico for the first time in almost three years, and the Concheros could once again carry out their rituals in public (J. A. Meyer, 1997).

1945 – 1970 The change from Conchero to Azteca

González Torres states that between the years 1930 and 1950, there were about 40 mesas or organized groups in Mexico City with a total of about 4,000 dancers (González Torres, 2005). At this time, due to improving education, diet, and political stabilization, La Danza grew at a quick rate, especially in the urban working class neighborhoods of the larger Mexican cities. The Mexican government continued to push the indigenous aspects of Mexican culture as a tool for national identity and for the sake of the growing tourism industry.

All of this interest in re-awakening the indigenous spirit of Mexico was a political ploy by the ruling party the “Partido de la Revolución Mexicana” later known as the “PRI” to help mobilize the workers, the intelligentsia, and the army against the international oligarchy that had run Mexico since the 1900s.

Even as new archeological discoveries (Palenque, Tula, etc) were acclaimed, the indigenous populations of Mexico suffered from indifference, disease, and forced assimilation policies. Danzantes, of all traditions, were paraded in government and business endeavors. Many Mexicans began to see La Danza as a cultural spectacle, and not a religious system.
The Concheros dancers, as visible links to the indigenous past, were singled out for inclusion into the new “ballet folklóricos” that were a dynamic expression of the “new and modern Mexico.” Gabriel Moedano, in his book “Los hermanos de la santa cuenta” states that the new nationalistic ideology exalted the Aztecs as the apex of indigenous virtues and symbol of Mexicaness (as cited in González Torres, 2005).

Using the cinematographic monopoly of “Estudios Churubusco,” The Mexican government pushed nationalistic themes into the nation’s movie houses. In the case of the evolution of La Danza, several films were of major importance: “Cruz del Sur,” “el Rincón de las Virgenes,” “Flor y Canto,” “México Insurgente,” ”El Peñón de las Ánimas” (González Torres, 2005; Hernández, 2002; Yescas, 1977) among others. These low budget films featured traditional Conchero Danzantes doing their dances as background players.

This opportunity to be “famous” in their roles as Danzantes Aztecas, gave the younger generation a taste of what could be done with their tradition: long maligned by the “upper classes” of mestizo Mexicans, they could now be seen as stars. Famous jefes such as Natividad Reyna, Manuel Luna, and Manuel Pineda all had their moments of glory. They also were able to use the money they earned to buy new feathers and materials for fancier uniforms.

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s impoverished Danzantes could find work performing at the tourist hotels in Acapulco, on cruise ships bound from Veracruz to Havana, and government sponsored ballet folklórico competitions (Yescas, 1977). This
began to create a crisis in the ideology and identity of the Danza; a crisis that to this day informs the dialog of what it means to be a traditional Danzante.

Some elders began to question the legitimacy of those Danzantes that danced wherever they could get paid. The said that these dancers “*no son Danzantes, son bailarines*” (they are not religious dancers, they are ballerinas). Others questioned the Conchero groups’ adherence to the Catholic Church at a time when the church seemed more and more irrelevant to Mexican society.

*The new Danzante uniform: New Identity and Space*

In 1940, the general Manuel Pineda and his dancers (among them Florencio Yescas) scandalized the older jefes, such as Manuel Luna, when they appeared at a ceremony shirtless. Later, Pineda, with the backing of generals Natividad Reyna of the Bajío, and Felipe Aranda of Mexico City, presented a new type of dance uniform, inspired by the codices of the Aztecs and the Mixtecs. At first there was a great outcry from the older, traditional dance elders The dancers that used the new form of uniform were called “*los encuerados,*” (the naked ones); but, little by little, the younger dancers, both male and female, began to change to this new uniform (González Torres, 2005).

At this time, Pineda also introduced the usage of the term “Danza Azteca” on his standard, replacing the term “Danza Conchera.” Pineda’s group also re- introduced the use of the precolumbian conch shell trumpets, and the huehuetl and teponaztli drums. Now the musical base of La Danza Azteca was complete: precolumbian instruments used
in tandem with the Spanish inspired guitar and mandolin (González Torres, 2005; Hernández, 2002).

It is of special note that some of the most influential Danzantes that came to the U.S. were part of Pineda’s original group of *encuerados* including Florencio Yescas, Manuel Gonzalez Barrios, and Mario Andres Pineda.

*The First Carriers of the Aztec Dance Tradition*

**Andrés Segura Granados**

Pablo Poveda, in his 1981 article for the *Latin American Music Review / Revista de Música Latinoamericana* published these facts about Capitán Segura:

Nombre: Andrés Segura Granados; domicilio: en la colonia obrera cerca del primer cuadro de la ciudad de México; nació: el 10 de noviembre de 1931; estado civil: soltero; educación: la elemental y posteriormente la universitaria en la facultad profesional hasta el tercer año de medicina; religión: la universal; ocupación: la danza, y, para más o menos sobrevivir, a veces también el comercio (Poveda, 1981, p. 282).

(Name: Andrés Segura Granados; domicile: in the working class neighborhood near the first section of Mexico City; born 10 of November, 1931; civil status: unmarried; education: elementary and afterwards university education
in the professional school up to the third year of medicine; religion: the universal: occupation: La Danza and more or less to survive, sometimes commerce [my translation].

Andres Segura’s family had a small store or stall at the famous market place of la Lagunilla in Mexico City, where they sold Mexican arts and crafts. Although he became a traditional Danza elder, he also had some experience in Mexico City’s modern dance community (Armstrong, 1985, pp. 38-40; Segura, 1981; Warman, 1967). Armstrong, citing Bishop states: “Andrés circulated in two worlds, one of the poor humble Concheros, the other a circle of artists and intellectuals (Armstrong, 1985). Segura first traveled to the U.S. in 1973 as part of the White Roots of Peace, a pan-Indian group that visited various universities and reservations:

In the 1970s, a traditional Indian educational caravan traveled across the Indian communities and major colleges and universities in North America. The traveling group was called the White Roots of Peace, a name that referred to an ancient tradition of the longhouses among the Haudenosaunee. The group was comprised of elders from Akwesasne and other communities, and editors and other helpers at the newspaper Akwesasne Notes. Their message was to remind Indian people to value their traditional language, ceremonies, and knowledge, and to remind young people to care for the knowledge of the elders and for the
needs of the elders. It was a message that came straight from the old men peace chiefs and the clan mothers of the various clans at the Akwesasne Mohawk Nation, and that anyone could tell, was a constant from the generations. The message of the old-timers was about self-sufficiency and about trusting the production of the land and the woods as a dependable source of nutrients for family and nation (Indian Country Today, 2003)

Segura gave workshops, for the most part one-time events at colleges and cultural centers, of philosophical or cosmological focus. His style of teaching the Danza Azteca was to keep it as an esoteric art. He created dance circles in San Juan Bautista, California (connected to Teatro Campesino); In Austin Texas, and other places mostly in Texas. Segura felt that the knowledge of La Danza Azteca had to be earned. He kept a tight control over his various groups and did not often give them permission to dance at ceremonies that did not occur at churches or sacred indigenous sites (Pedro Rodriguez, personal communication, Chula Vista, CA. 1986).

On October 7, 1997, Capitán Andrés Segura passed away. He left a tradition of an esoteric, gentle, and deeply spiritual dance tradition that still goes on in Mexico and the United States.
Florencio Yescas

Florencio Yescas arrived in the United States one year after Andrés Segura, in 1974 (Aguilar, 1980). He had worked and traveled extensively in the U.S. in the 1950s, teaching ballet folklórico. However, when he returned to the U.S. in 1974, it was exclusively to teach the Aztec dance tradition. Yescas had the greatest and most profound impact on the spread of La Danza Azteca. Unlike Segura, that liked to teach La Danza as an esoteric science, and then only at selected cultural centers and universities, Yescas taught Danza Azteca wherever there were Mexcoehuani that were interested in learning. He also made an effort to bring other traditional dancers from Mexico to teach from their own experiences and local traditions. This was something that Segura did not do very often.

Yescas was born in 1920 in San Juan Tezompa, Mexico (Hernández, 2002). According to my discussions with Florencio, he learned Danza from his grandparents and his mother. According to Rosita Hernandez, Yescas learned Danza at the age of 16, at which time he had a job in a joyería (jewelry store) across from the cathedral in Mexico City, and heard the drums (See figure one).
This is how he started with the group of Gabriel Osorio, of the palabra (group) of the Santo Niño de Atocha (The Holy Child Jesus of Atocha, Spain) (Aguilar, 1980; Hernández, 2002).

After a few years, he went to dance with Manuel Pineda and the palabra of el Príncipe Señor San Miguel (Prince Lord Archangel Saint Michael). Yescas told Armstrong that both his grandparents were dancers (Armstrong, 1985). In his teens, Yescas began to study Mexican Ballet Folklórico under the renown Mexican Dance Maestro Marcelo Torreblanca (Armstrong). Yescas was one of the original four dancers in the world famous Ballet Folklórico de Mexico of Amalia Hernandez (Hernández, 2002; Yescas, 1977).

All the while Yescas danced throughout Mexico, Latin America, and Europe, he always made time to dance at the traditional Danza Azteca ceremonies (Aguilar, 1980). In 1956, Yescas married an American woman and settled in Los Angeles and later in Chicago teaching ballet Folklórico to community groups and families (Armstrong).

In 1972, Yescas’ mother passed away and he returned to Mexico City. He soon began drinking heavily, and his family urged him to return to the U.S. to continue
teaching. In May of 1974, he gathered a group of 12 young men from his home barrio of Tacuba, (one of the ancient capitals of the “Aztec” triple alliance) in Mexico City and they headed north, finally crossing into Chula Vista, California on Dec. 12, 1974 (Aguilar, 1980, p. 25; Hernández, 2002).

In January of 1975, Yescas began teaching Danza Azteca at the Centro Cultural de la Raza in San Diego’s Balboa Park. I began practicing with his dancers and soon began to travel with Yescas and his group to perform in Texas, New Mexico, and Minnesota (Aguilar, 1980; Hernández, 2002; Yescas, 1977).

Everywhere that Florencio traveled, he left the dance traditions with eager young Mexcoehuani who were literally dying to learn their indigenous heritage. At the time Yescas brought the Aztec dance to the United States, many young Mexcoehuani were engaged in gang warfare, drugs, and the beginning of the prison-industrial complex (Davis & Dent, 2001; Jacobs, 1979).

As much as Florencio influenced Mexcoehuani Danzantes, he also had a deep influence on Mexican Danzantes. He would take large quantities of feathers and flashy cloth to give away to poorer dancers in the small towns of Mexico. When he did sell materials or feathers, he always sold things at a modest price so that the dancers in central Mexico could have access to the beautiful feathers and materials.

Florencio Yescas passed away in July of 1985. His legacy of freely teaching La Danza Azteca had a significant impact on the art of muralists, musicians, dancers, and poets. Like Segura, Yescas taught the traditional concepts of Central Mexican identity, which are deeply rooted in the cultures of the Aztecs, Toltecs, Teotihuacanos and
Olmecs. More than anyone before or since, Florencio Yescas brought the base of the Chicano community access to, and appreciation for, the complex indigenous/mestizo meanings of Mexican identity, membership, and sacred space. He was the most instrumental in taking the Chicano/a identity to the next level of understanding: the Mexcoehuani.

1970-2000: The Mexicanidad movement in Mexico and the Chicano Struggle

Andrés Segura and Florencio Yescas arrived in the U.S. at a critical time. The decade of the 1960s had brought great cultural and societal struggles throughout the world. The massacre of over 400 students, residents, and children in Mexico City on the eve of the Olympic Games in 1968, brought about a radicalization of Mexico’s youth. Suddenly, the indigenous identity of La Danza Azteca became a lightning rod for nationalistic fervor against all things European and North American.

By the time both elders had passed away, a new, more militant ideology had emerged in the Mexcoehuani communities, including some Danza groups. Some of the new radical participants of La Danza banished the Indocristiano roots of La Danza Azteca. In its place, a new convergence and syncretism began to immerge.

More and more middle class, educated young people sought out an altogether identifiable Mexican version of the “new age” phenomena that began with the European and American interest in Hindu and Tibetan traditions (Armstrong, 1985; González Torres, 2005; P. Rodriguez, 1988; Yescas, 1977). These new disaffected dancers had no stake in the previous 500 years of Indocristiano identity negotiation, resiliency, and
evolution. Many wanted to recreate an alternative to the technologically complex world of the last part of the twentieth century. Strident belligerence came to dominate their ideological framework for what they now called “Mexi’ca Danza” (using English grammatical rules with Spanish/Nahuatl words).

The new “political” Danzantes had no understanding or knowledge of the ancient ritual system of kindness that evolved through the syncretic negotiation and innovation of La Danza’s ancestral lineages. They only knew of a world formed by social, political, and class warfare against those that practice racism and oppression. They saw the world in two distinct time periods: Before 1492 when the American continent was an Eden, and post-1492, when the Europeans destroyed everything indigenous. They were not aware (and most still are not aware) of the assertive and successful cultural, spiritual, and technological negotiations carried out by the surviving indigenous peoples after 1492.

What they wanted, and needed to create, was a complete system of ideology that ignored and rejected the past 500 years of Mexican cultural development (Hernández Ramos, 2007; Mares, 2003; Monica, 1991). This view of La Danza was meant to be a new raison d’être for La Danza Azteca. First, it was to be a system of political and ideological identity; secondly, it was to be a form of a pan-Indian “identity card” that would open doors to other political struggles and activism. Finally, the new Mexcoehuani Danza Azteca was to be a purified Mexican indigenous identity that could be shared, compared, and exalted, free from any European and Christian corruption.

This new movement took the Nahuatl name of Mexi’cayotl : “la Mexicanidad” in Spanish, “Mexicaness” in English (Karttunen, 1983). As more and more persons without
any prior knowledge of La Danza Azteca and its roots became involved, less interest has been shown in the dance steps, the non-dance rituals, and in the day-to-day code of conduct of the traditional Conchero dancer groups. These self-described “Mexi’ca warriors” are defined by their utopian revision of indigenous history, and their intent on making La Danza Azteca a politically based movement, instead of a religious tradition. This renegotiation of Danzante identity has allowed the Mexi’ca movement groups to form alliances with indigenous political organizations through the American continent.

As La Danza Azteca began to take root in the U.S., parallels between the Movimiento Mexicanidad of Mexico and the Chicano movement of the U.S. were strengthened. The Chicano proclivity to conglomerate indigenous traditions and rituals from disparate tribes and call the new identity “ancient Aztec/Mexi’ca” mirrored the Mexican inclination to find the hand of Mesoamerican cultures in the foundation of all of the other cultures of the world (de la Peña, 2008).

Some of the most ardent “new age” Mexi’cas, or “strident Mexi’cas” or better yet, “Mexi’ca Nazis” (as I have called them in my “discussions” with some of their more “energetic” members), advocate total elimination of all non-Native American people from the American continent and the “return” of all Native Americans to the “Aztec” way of life (Mexika.org, 2008; Muniz-Tezcatlipoca; Tezcatlipoca, 2008).

This frightening use of Mesoamerican cultural tradition for dreams of organized ethnic cleansing of this continent, is most worrisome and tragic, since it mirrors the ethnic cleansing of indigenous people on this continent by the European powers of the sixteenth through nineteenth centuries. Yet, not all is lost.
From the first tenuous dance steps of the newly converted 16th century indigenous dancers, to the latest apocalyptic prophecies of the 21st century new age Mexi’ca dancers, La Danza in its various incarnations as Danza Conchera, Danza Chichimeca, and Danza Azteca, has fulfilled its role as a vehicle of cultural resiliency, remembrance, and sacred space. Whether the grounding element of La Danza is to remember the ancestors, pay homage to the gods and saints of Mexico, or to define a political identity, the semaphores and memes of La Danza speak as loud as the drums that at the heart of the dance circle.

The Semiotic System of La Danza

The schema

Memes:
Examples of memes are tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes fashions, ways of making pots, or of building arches. Just as genes propagate themselves in the gene pool by leaping from body to body via sperms or eggs, so memes propagate themselves in the meme pool by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation (Introduction to Chapter 11; Dawkins, 1989, p. 156).

Semaphore:
One. An apparatus for conveying information by means of visual signals, as a light whose position may be changed.

Two. Any of various devices for signaling by changing the position of a light, flag.

Three. A system of signaling, esp. a system by which a special flag is held in each hand and various positions of the arms indicate specific letters, numbers.

("semaphore.," n.d.).

If tunes, ideas, and clothes fashions are memes that change with “imitation,” and semaphores are symbols that need to be unambiguous to the viewer (like the letters of an alphabet), then the rituals of kindness of La Danza Azteca are a system of semaphores; a structured system of meaning (rituals, language) with memes that evolve within the needs of the community that practices it and imbues it with meaning (uniforms, headdresses, hymns, musical instruments).

Based on my experience as a practitioner of La Danza for the past 35 years, and based on the literature available on the Danza Azteca, here is presented a three part system of the semiotics of La Danza Azteca:

One. The tools of the conquista: memes that change

Two. The memes of the rituals of kindness

Three. The ritual space of the La Danza: timeless semaphores

The meanings of a cultural system are negotiated as Sandra L Barnes describes:
Swidler (1986) defines culture as "symbolic vehicles of meaning, including beliefs, ritual practices, art forms, and ceremonies, as well as informal cultural practices such as language, gossip, stories and rituals of daily life." (p. 273) Her definition is a departure from an understanding of culture that emphasizes how ideas shape group worldviews and behavior (Weber 1930, 1946) or one in which a collective consciousness helps establish group dynamics (Durkheim 1964). The previous, more rudimentary definition of culture as a "shared way of life," has also been supplanted by conceptualizations that position culture as the mediator between social symbols, meaning, and experience. According to Swidler (1986), culture consists of socially-constructed symbols and activities that provide meaning and establish and reinforce expected behavior among group members. Based on cultural theory, a cultural repertoire or "tool kit" reflects rituals, stories, symbols, and beliefs used to negotiate a place in society. Swidler (1986) posits that the components of culture are not the mechanisms by which we explain end results, but more appropriately are the means to processes that bring about desired results.(Barnes, 2005, p. 968)
The Tools of “La Conquista”

When non-practitioners of La Danza hear the word “conquista” (conquest), they immediately identify it with the Spanish conquest. Indeed, in the 16th century, the conquest described by the dancers themselves was about their being converted and conquered by the sacred powers of Christianity. However, over the course of the next four centuries, the memetic evolution of “conquista” took on a new, more resilient and nationalistic meaning. The idea of conquest became one of conquering darkness and the continuation of the reverence for the ancestors.

At the middle of the 20th century, la conquista grew to mean a conquest (or re-conquest) of Mexican souls and their participation in the rituals of the Danza Azteca. When La Danza arrived in the U.S., conquista took on a political aspect: to re-conquer the spiritual, economic, and political self-determination of the Mexcoehuani. The range of faith in this nativist revival, ranged from pure indigenous isolationists that want all non-indigenous people removed from the American continent, to spiritual indigenousness that completely participates in the modern global society, and accepts the reality of this continent’s racial, cultural and linguistic reality.

The tools of the memetic tools of la conquista” are as follows:

**Huehuetl.** The standing drum, or “tambor,” is a symbol of the world tree that grows at the center of the universe. Each time a dance circle asks for permission from the eight directions and from the ancestors to start a dance ceremony, the center of that circle (replete with incense, the elders, and the young children), becomes the center of that
group’s universe. This world tree is, in fact, a representation of the young corn stalk, whose flesh is the sustenance of the indigenous people of this continent.

**Teponaztli.** The log drum or “tepo,” is a horizontal drum with two tongues cut out of the top. This three-toned instrument highlights the heartbeat of the dances. According to Mesoamerican belief, the teponaztli, and the huehuetl were once two gods who saw how hard and dreary humanity’s life was without music. Therefore, they sacrificed themselves and came down to earth to provide humanity with song, dance, and happiness.

**Las Conchas.** When the colonial authorities prohibited the indigenous dancers from making any European instruments, they began to create their beloved guitars and mandolins out of gourd shells and later armadillo shells. These “conchas” or shells, carapaces, gave the dancers’ their name “Los Concheros” (The shell people). The gourd or armadillo carapace, with their round shape are taken as symbols of the indigenous people’s connection to the Earth, and its diverse life forms. The guitar has five or six sets of double strings, and the mandolin as four sets of double strings. In traditional Conchero and Azteca groups, great respect and honor is given to the dancers who can dance while playing intricate melodies on their mandolins or guitars. These melodies enrich the percussive voices of the drums.

**Copalli.** “copal, incienso.” This is the incense that must burn at the center of every dance circle, every altar, and every pilgrimage of La Danza Azteca. It symbolizes the spirit world, and the communication between the living and their ancestors. Mayan carvings from the classic period show Mayan kings conversing with their ancestors (who
appear as feathered serpents) that rise up from censers that contain copal and their own blood offered as sacrifice.

**Ihuitl.** “Plumas.” The feathers of La Danza are not just personal adornment for the dancers. They represent the petals of the scented flowers that are the favorites of the ancestral spirits that return to Earth. Each dancer, as a part of the larger circle, is part of a large flower that twists and turns to the beat of the musical instruments and the shell pod leggings that each dancer wears. The feathers represent the delicacy and brevity of human existence on Earth. Originally, heron, eagle, hawk, macaw, and turkey feathers were used. Then, in the late 18th century, as Spanish luxury, goods became more plentiful and affordable, imported ostrich feathers gained acceptance. Once the Azteca style of uniform became popular, European, and Asian pheasant feathers, rooster tails, and macaw feathers became popular. As the commercial interchange between Mexican and Mexcoehuani Danzantes grew, the use of Chinese Reeve’s pheasant feathers grew tremendously both in Mexico and the U.S.

**Copilli.** “El penacho, la corona, la diadema.” The headdress of the dancers started off as a simple dove shaped one piece headdress. Later, the young Mexican dancers of the 20th century became more economically mobile, and they had access to copies of the precolumbian codices that survived. Most dancers copied the Aztec royal diadem as their headdresses. But, soon others began to create larger and heavier headdresses and put animal heads, snakes and even skulls on them. The concept of the headdress as a form of spiritual offering became lost as the young dancers, especially the men, launched a battle of bigger, gaudier, and more expensive expressions of Aztec pride.
Chachayotl or ayoyotl. Known in Spanish as “huesos de fraile, codo de fraile, chachayotes, or ayoyotes.” It wasn’t until the 1940s when the Danza Azteca form of dance uniform became popular, that these seed pod leggings became popular. Before this, if the dancers used any leggings, they were made up metal bells sewn onto leather.

Atecocolli. “Los caracoles.” The conch shells symbolize the wind, water, caves (which are the navels of the Earth, and the entrance to the land of the dead), and “ihiyotl” the spiritual aspect of living breath. When the conch shells call out to the eight directions, they are invoking the past, present, and future of the indigenous people’s spirit.

Pamitl. “El estandarte.” The standard, or Flag of each dance group or “mesa,” represents the living breath of the lineage. As long as someone is dancing with the group’s estandarte, honoring it at the velaciones (vigils), and taking it to greet and interact with the other estandartes, then the founder of that lineage is considered to still be alive and present. Traditional Conchero and Azteca groups inscribe the story of how their lineage came to be, who recognized it as being legitimate and traditional, and the year the lineage was founded.

The Bicultural significance of the semaphores of La Danza

A semaphore is a system of signaling that indicates specific letters, numbers, or concepts. Examples would be a red light in a street signal; a picture of a male silhouette for a men’s rest room, or skull and cross bones for a poisonous chemical.

In order for this system to convey meaning, the observers must share a set of agreed upon meanings that should not change over time, lest the meaning of the semaphore no
longer symbolize the object (an example would be that the skull and crossbones suddenly meant “women’s restroom”).

In the case of two cultures that are trying to negotiate bicultural significance, convergence and syncretism, semaphores can acquire two or more meanings that are dependent on the world view and the space the observer occupies. I call this “the bicultural significance of semaphores.” A prime example of this is the cross.

The cross is probably the most ancient spiritual symbol in the world, appearing in religious art from the dawn of history. The equal-armed cross represents the solar calendar; the movements of the sun, marked by the solstices and equinox. It became the symbol of Jesus Christ, who in early Christian iconography was shown wearing a halo made up of a solar cross; composed of an equal armed cross within a circle. By the time the Spanish missionaries arrived in Mesoamerica, the cross was entirely saturated in European thought with Christian symbolism and orthodoxy.

However, to the neophyte indigenous flock, the cross had meanings that were deeply etched by Mesoamerican religions and traditions; the cross had terrestrial connotations. It represented the four world trees that held up the sky; it represented the world tree that stood at the center of the universe; and it represented the tree of life, maize.

In an ironic twist of history, the cross was made, once again, a symbol of the solar Christ by the inclusion of sacred obsidian mirrors in the earliest post-conquest crosses. These stone crosses were raised up in the plazas that surrounded the new churches (Lara, 2004; McAndrew, 1965). A list of bicultural semaphores of La Danza Azteca (based on:
Armstrong, 1985; Bierhorst, 1985, 1992b; Blanton & Feinman, 1984; Correa, 2000; Evans, 2002) are provided in table seven:

**Table 7: Bicultural semaphores**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Semaphore</th>
<th>Christian Meaning</th>
<th>Mesoamerican meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cross</td>
<td>Crucifixion of Christ,</td>
<td>World trees; maize as the tree of life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Christian faith</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sacred Heart</td>
<td>Christ’s love of humanity and his self-sacrifice for the sins of the world</td>
<td>Self-sacrifice and the ritual for the universe’s survival.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bread and wine</td>
<td>Catholic transubstantiation of the bread and wine into the actual body and blood of Christ</td>
<td>Mesoamerican use of amaranth paste to create a statue of a god that was seen as the actual body and blood of that deity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Flowers</td>
<td>Flowers as symbols of prayers in Catholic tradition.</td>
<td>Flowers as symbols of living beings that offer their sustenance to the ancestor spirits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Incense</td>
<td>Fragrances that are used during the Mass to bless and cleanse the church and believers</td>
<td>Fragrance that calls the spirits of the ancestors down to join the living and give them wisdom and strength</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>trees</td>
<td>Symbol of the tree of life, symbol of the cross</td>
<td>World trees, and the tree of life: maize</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Semaphore Christian Meaning Mesoamerican meaning

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feathers</th>
<th>Symbols of the holy spirit, truth, and piety</th>
<th>Symbols of air, vegetation, and the souls of the ancestors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mirrors</td>
<td>Truth, light and faith</td>
<td>Solar deities, hidden knowledge, fire</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Butterflies</td>
<td>Heaven and the garden of Eden: The butterfly represents the spirits of warriors who have died in battle or the resurrection into a new life have been sacrificed; also women who died in childbirth</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Bicultural semaphores of La Danza Azteca unite the various meanings that La Danza has had over the past 400 years. Toor mentions the metamorphosis that the Danzantes go through when they dance their traditions:

Today, it is difficult to know what the Concheros actually believe, even though their ceremonies and dances are predominantly pagan. They undoubtedly make sacrifices to keep the dances alive as much from a desire to escape briefly from a sorry existence as because of any beliefs.

The same must be true of all the thousands of Concheros outside of the Federal District. For all of them, when they change from their overalls into their beautiful dance costumes, are transformed into personages. They move in an aura of glory, absolutely absorbed in their parts, yet
conscious of the respect and admiration of the multitudes

(Toor, 1947, p. 330).

The change from profane uniforms of quotidian labor (their overalls) into their beautiful dance uniforms, transforms them into personages; actors in a sacred cosmic ritual that transcends time and place. They are no longer corruptible transitory beings; they are hummingbirds, butterflies and honeybees that descend from the heavens of Tlaloc and Jesus Christ to give solace and wisdom to the living (Bierhorst, 1985; Chávez, 2007; González Torres, 2005; Martí & Kurath, 1964; Vargas, 2007).

The Bicultural semaphores that do not easily change meaning, and the Danza Azteca memes which change frequently according to the survival needs of the Danzantes, create a system of resiliency and self-determination.

**Danza Azteca as a revitalization movement**

From its beginnings as a system of convergence and syncretism, La Danza Azteca has been a vehicle for renegotiation and revitalization of membership and identity for its indigenous practitioners. La Danza took the echoes of the state sponsored ritual ballet festivals, (as best remembered by the common agricultural and urban people), and interwoven with their daily experiences. These included their old agricultural dances, social dances, and the new ritual dances (such as the Spanish and Italian Mattacino dances) brought by the Spanish friars to the new world (Rodríguez, 1996).

In the decades after the Mexican revolution of 1910, La Danza became a revitalization movement of the Cristero revolt (Ramon, 1985). In the years 1950s to 2000,
La Danza began is long evolution into the three groups of dance practitioners: The traditional Concheros that maintain their lineage to the past; the Danza Azteca groups that still follow the Indocristiano tradition of the Concheros; and the Mexi’ca movement or *mexicanistas* movement dancers that try to return to an idealized and mythic past.

Within the Mexcoehuani communities, practitioners of the traditional Danza Azteca, as well as the Mexi’ca movement adherents, try to be involved within the pan-Indian movement of the U.S. This movement brings several conflicting ideologies and worldview to the fore in the Mexcoehuani community.

*La Danza Azteca as part of the pan-Indian movement*

During the early years of the Chicano movement, young people with a need to discover their indigenous roots, had very little to go on. The obstacles to understanding their Mexican indigenous roots included a lack of understanding of Spanish, especially academic Spanish. In those pre-internet days, it was difficult to have access to the original sources of post conquest history. Most important sources of Mexican history written in Mexico, or were unavailable, or incomprehensible to Mexcoehuani. Most of the available sources of Mexican indigenous history and culture were restricted to university libraries and other academic institutions that were beyond the reach of most Mexcoehuani community members.

Adding to this vacuum of sources for the building of an indigenous identity was the problem that there has always been cultural elitism in Mexico against “Chicano,” “pocho,” and “pachuco,” residents of the U.S. They have been seen as ignorant because
they do not speak, read, or write, “Correct Spanish.” It is what I call the “pocho syndrome.” Carlos Gonzalez Gutierrez writes:

> Until recently, Mexico did not cultivate the consciousness of a “dispersed people” amongst its emigrants… Some Mexican authors have said that in Mexico, ‘for decades as a country and as a government, we forgot our emigrants, with the shameful attitude of a mother who abandoned her children and does not want to know about them.’ That attitude caused resentment against Mexico in the children and grandchildren of the immigrants who felt they were victims not only of discrimination by Anglo-Saxon society in the United States but also of the disdain of their parent’s compatriots…Mexican national culture dominate by collective guilt feelings made assimilation or multiculturalism synonymous for disloyalty and treason…

> The term pocho symbolized the disdain felt for emigrants…in Mexico “it applies to Hispanic Americans who imitate Americans”(C. G. Gutierrez, 1999, p. 551)

The irony is that Mexican culture has always had a love/hate relationship with U.S. culture. While demeaning the Mexcoehuani for not being “Mexican enough” Mexican society for the most part tries to emulate European-American and African-
American U.S. culture with the same fervor it tried to emulate Spanish, French, and Italian culture during the Diaz dictatorship.

For many Mexcoehuani seekers of an indigenous identity, it appeared that the road to their indigenous roots was closed off at the southern border. It was easier to search out Native American traditions amongst the English speaking tribes of the U.S. (Brown et al., 1974; Carpintero & Carpintero, 1977; Ceseña, 2004; Movement, 2007; Tezcatlipoca, 2008). The sad part of these “orphan’s search for a mother culture” was that even though many Mexcoehuani went with innocent hearts to participate in these northern traditions, many persons in these northern tribes, looked down on the Mexcoehuani as “Spaniards” and “mezzkins.” Even to this day when Danza Azteca groups are invited to participate in Pow Wows, they are asked to dance during the “dinner break:” that is, as entertainment for the others dancers that are resting and getting ready for the prize money competitions that start after the grand entry.

At times, the Mexcoehuani Danzantes, (who were much darker-skinned than some of the BIA card-carrying “Cherokee” dancers) were made to feel as they were “not good enough “or “real” American-Indian. It was that concept that “English language is good, Spanish is foreign,” that hurt our efforts to find unity with some tribes.

We, Mexcoehuani, must also take into consideration that for many decades, Mexican origin people tried to pass themselves as “Spanish,” all the while treating the indigenous people no better than the Anglo-Americans did.

This is why some American-Indian elders ask us “why don’t you young people look for their traditions in Mexico, instead of trying to copy and change ours?”
It also brought to the forefront a development in the American Indian cultural movement that had troubled some elders: Pan-Indianism versus Pan-Tetonism. The Pan Indian is a movement to unite the sometimes disparate American Indian nations of the United States into an organized cultural, economic, and political group (Hertzberg, 1971). Yet throughout the 20th century, pan-Indianism has been largely a Plains Indian dominated movement:

Robert K. Thomas writes: It is on the Plains that we find the historic roots of modern Pan-Indianism… More significant for the later development of Pan-Indianism, the Plains style of life was extremely attractive to the tribes… completely outside the Plains area. This is one of the historic sources and caused of what I am suggesting now is in some degree an extension of the Plains cultural area (1965:77). (as cited in Powers, 1968, p. 352)

It is this focus on the Northern Plains tribes (such as the Lakota), that has given a strong impetus to Mexcoehuani who cannot identify with the Indocristiano heritage of La Danza to join the sun dance, the Native American Church, or other U.S. tribal organizations. In doing so, they align themselves with organizations and ideologies outside the traditions of most American Indian groups that are not Plains Indians, such as the California Indian nations (Yoseif, 2008).

A development that has occurred since the arrival of La Danza Azteca is that some participants in the pan-Indian movement now see La Danza as a Pan-American
indigenous movement. As the fear of the Spanish language, and of Indocristianismo has lessened, more and more Mexcoehuani political and spiritual activists have made connections with indigenous organizations throughout the Americas (Enrique, 1995).

_{La Danza Azteca as part of the world wide indigenous and neo-pagan movement}_

La Danza Azteca does not exist in a vacuum. It is influenced by currents within the Mexican and Mexcoehuani communities, as well as by global trends. One trend that has had a pervasive (and some would argue perverse) influence on the traditions of La Danza is “New Age” paradigm:

New Age thinking in general is characterized by a pervasive pattern of implicit or explicit culture criticism. Within a New Age context one may encounter a very wide variety of ideas and convictions, but underneath there is a general dissatisfaction with certain aspects of western thought such as one may encounter in contemporary culture. Those who are attracted by New Age thinking do not necessarily have very explicit ideas about the coming of a "new era," but they all agree that our society could and should be different.

(Hanegraaff, 2000, p. 291)

With the rise of globalization, the internet, and the “always on” multinational media, many people throughout the world have sought out refuge within traditional religious or spiritual beliefs. Movements such as the current new age search towards
finding and re-negotiating spiritual foundations, has been a part of human history. Yves Lambert writes:

Several historians and philosophers have stressed the key role that certain periods in history have played in developing techniques, political structures, or worldviews, which were to dominate the foreground of the next centuries or millennia before being, in turn, questioned, then replaced, or altered and inserted into new systems. "Man seems to have started again from scratch four times," Karl Jaspers wrote (1954: 37-38): with the Neolithic age, with the earliest civilizations, with the emergence of the great empires, and with modernity. Each of these axial turns produced a general reshaping of the "symbolic field," to use Pierre Bourdieu's term, and a great religious commotion, which led to disappearances, redefinitions, and emergences. Each period finally led to new religious configurations, respectively: oral agrarian religions, religions of antiquity, religions of salvation (Universalist religions), and modern changes.

(Lambert, 1999, p. 304)

Mexcoehuani who have been searching for an intimate, fulfilling, and grounding ethical and spiritual path also” agree that our society could and should be different.” La Danza Azteca, with its built in semaphores of identity, artistic expression, and kinetic
prayer has been a strong magnet for persons who seek a “replaced, altered, and new system of life.”

With the advent of the internet, new websites, organizations, and leaders have appeared that try to connect disparate world religious traditions to one universal “truth” (Dodd, 2008; Rosenthal, 2005; Warmerdam, 2008). These “spiritual movements seek to create a one size fits all bundle of spirituality that uses cultures that are either no longer extant, or so remote that the common person cannot get factual information regarding the new age “truths” being disseminated (Lambert, 1999; Rosenthal, 2005).

One of the great new age phenomena to come out at the beginning of the 21st century is the so-called “Mayan end of the world” prophecy. The Mayan long count states that the long count of the current era will end on December 21, 2012. However, the real Mayan calendar does not say the world will end on that date. The tradition just says that a new calendar round will begin, as it has for time immemorial.

However, new age practitioners, with a mix of Nostradamus, biblical “prophecy,” P.T. Barnum hucksterism, and blatant marketing, (History.com, 2008; Network, 2008; Weinland, 2008) claim that the end is nigh. I believe that this phenomenon is closely tied to the evangelical millennialism of U.S. Euro-American Protestantism that has reoccurred over several eras in the past two centuries. The “Mayan end of time” phenomenon is just a culturally diverse, exotic permutation of the past “end of times” panic.

For Mexcoehuani who want to believe in something other than the established religions and ideologies of a Eurocentric global village, these “end of time” promises are
exciting and motivating. Here, at last, the world is looking at (what is purported to be) indigenous beliefs that will have a worldwide impact.

Without even realizing it, many Mexcoehuani who are vehemently anti-Christian in outlook, are participating in the very Christian tradition of “waiting for the Apocalypse.” One will have to wait until December 22, 2012 to see.

The Construction of Identity

* A Cultural approach to identity

Personal Identity has been described as “…the knowledge of ourselves- the identifying of ourselves with our self-existence.” (Quimby, 1864). For Mexcoehuani, we are very aware of our self-existence in a no-man’s land, caught between the Classic cultures of Mexico and the dynamic, always changing cultures of the United States (Hames-Garcia, 2000).

Ethnic identity has been described by Tajfel as a “concept of self” that “includes a sense of connection in a social group or ethnic group (Tajfel, 1981). Keefe and Padilla define ethnic identification as self identification among group members, as well as their attitude toward and affiliation with one ethnic group and culture, as opposed to another ethnic group and culture (Keefe & Padilla, 1987). Regan calls this as the “search for membership” (Regan, 2007).

Ethnic identification is separate, in the theory of Keefe and Padilla (1987), from cultural awareness and ethnic loyalty. Cultural awareness is measured by an individual’s
knowledge of a culture’s linguistic, historical, and cultural semiotics. Ethnic loyalty is the preference of one cultural orientation and ethnic group over another. Thus, a person can claim Mexcoehuani ethnic identity, but still be very unaware of Mexcoehuani (or Mexican) history. Further, although a person may have strong feelings about being Mexcoehuani (ethnic loyalty), they can choose to live a lifestyle that is more appropriately called “Euro-American,” or “African-American.” Examples would be a Mexcoehuani living a Hip Hop or Punk Rock lifestyle.

In this cultural approach to identity, it is the “outer” connection with people’s culture that defines a person’s identity. Identity “frames” the linguistic aspects of culture. The language a person speaks, the way a person uses their body, and the intonation they use to show emotion are all based on the cultural and ethnic identity that they have either inherited or chosen. This semiotic repertoire creates who WE are as Mexcoehuani. Social identity in the theories of Tajfel is not just a face to face relationship between people. Social categorization creates groups, and, thus, social identity represents a “system of orientation which helps to create and define a person’s place [and membership] in society” (Tajfel (as sighted in Vasovič, 1981)

Vasovič’s writing about social identity in post-communist Eastern Europe in general, and Yugoslavia in particular, states that “The turbulent social and political context of post-communist societies- which blurs the diversity of existing social groups…produces not some new models of identity, but rather social identities that are adapted, but not adopted” (Vasovič, 2006). Vasovič’s principle of “adapted identities”
can also be applied to the Mexcoehuani social identity process and creation of membership within the constraints of U.S. dominant society.

Mexcoehuani are labeled “Hispanic” or “Latino” by the government, by corporations, media, and academe. Mexcoehuani are assumed to be salsa dancing, reggaeton loving, Corona© beer drinking consumers of everything on the Univision©, a national Latino television network. Some individuals, who have low cultural awareness but high ethnic identification, will easily accept this homogeneous “top down” inspired identity. Others, who have high cultural awareness and high ethnic identification, will not.

Although the cultural approach to identity, can certainly offer an effective lens for understanding Mexcoehuani identity and ethnicity, a sociolinguistic approach to identity and interaction can also offer a metaview of what it is to be a Mexcoehuani.

Sociolinguistic approach to identity

Bucholtz and Hall have proposed a sociocultural linguistic approach to identity (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005). They posit that personal identity is not a creation of how a person identifies themselves. Rather, it is a mechanism of how persons position themselves within one) local, ethnographically specific cultural positions; two) temporary and interlocutorally specific stances and participant roles. Bucholtz and Hall look at identity from five principles:

The emergence principle

The positionality principle
The indexicality principle
The relational principle
The partialness principle

Bucholtz and Hall’s first principle, the emergence principle, counters the traditional concept of self: that identity is housed within the individual’s mind, or as Quimby states above: “…the knowledge of ourselves-the identifying of ourselves with our self-existence.” Bucholtz and Hall argue that based on emergent linguistic anthropology and interactional linguistics, identity is “the emergent product rather than the pre-existing source of linguistic and other semiotic practices and therefore is fundamentally a social and cultural phenomenon” (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005). In the case of Mexcoehuani identity, this would mean that our essence emerges from how and with whom we communicate. For example, we can code-switch at will amongst ourselves; yet our “Spanglish” or “pochismo” meets with derision from both the dominant U.S. and Mexican elites. Thus, our identity is a product of our interactions.

Bucholtz and Hall’s second principle, the positionality principle, argues that “Identities encompass (a) macro-level demographic categories; (b) local, ethnographically specific cultural positions; and (c) temporary and interactionally specific stances and participant roles” (Bucholtz & Hall) We are Chicano or Chicana according to our gender; we are Tejano, Nuevo Mexicano, Californio, and when appropriate, Mexicano , depending on what “stage” (macro or micro level) our interaction is on. How small we parse our identity, depends on who we are interacting with. How
small we parse our identity, depends on how inclusive the “membership” is we want to create and be a participant in.

The positionality principle explains why Mexcoehuani individuals with high cultural awareness and high ethnic identification can feel agency, self-determination, empowerment, and ownership of their scared space. Persons with low cultural awareness and ethnic identification, can still position themselves with other Mexcoehuani in their interactions because even though their social capital may be limited, it is still enough to create a sense of belonging.

When Mexcoehuani interact with dominant culture members, our positionality is lowered by implicit or explicit racism, low-expectations, and xenophobia. Mexcoehuani with low cultural awareness and ethnic identification are often left with a sense of alienation, disenfranchisement, and self-hatred. Mexcoehuani individuals with high cultural awareness and high ethnic identification may feel the same sociological pressures, but due to their strong affirmation and connection to their Mexcoehuani semiotic system, they can better confront racism and overcome racism, low-expectations, and xenophobia.

This leads to Bucholtz and Hall’s third principle of indexicality. By virtue of being “strangers in their own lands,” Mexcoehuani, like other oppressed ethnic minorities worldwide, have to deal with implied interactions and identity positions. Both high/low cultural awareness and high/low ethnic identification Mexcoehuani individuals use their linguistic and cultural semiotics to create distance from the negative “other” of the dominant society.
The indexicality principle states that:

Identity relations emerge in interaction through several related indexical processes, including: (a) overt mention of identity categories and labels; (b) implicatures and presuppositions regarding one’s own or others’ identity position; (c) displayed evaluative and epistemic orientations to ongoing talk, as well as interactional footings and participant roles; and (d) the use of linguistic structures and systems that are ideologically associated with specific personas and groups (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005, p. 18).

Using Bucholtz and Hall’s third principle and its concept of sociocultural linguistic identity, one can analyze Mexcoehuani identity thus: When Mexcoehuani communicate with other Mexcoehuani, we emerge from our shared ethnic semiotic systems and we position ourselves as equals with other Mexcoehuani; we speak to our mirrored self. We do this because our interaction is socially and culturally re-affirming. Our membership in our support system is socially and culturally empowering, as well as exclusive to our meta-domain.

As Octavio Paz states: “The pachuco [or his/her descendant, the Mexcoehuani] does not want to become a Mexican again; at the same time he does not want to blend into the life of North America” (Paz, 1961). In the case of the Pachuco (and his grandchild the Mexcoehuani), there can no longer be membership in Mexican society, because of its rejection of the “English speaking dark skinned gringo” (Paz, 1961), as
there cannot be membership in U.S. society because of its rejection of the “Spanish speaking dark skinned immigrant”. Thus, he or she has to create a new space where his or her right to membership in a community cannot be questioned nor denied.

The fourth principle of Bucholtz and Hall, the relational principle states that: “Identities are intersubjectively constructed through several, often overlapping, complementary relations, including similarity/difference, genuineness/artifice, and authority/delegitimacy” (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005). For the Mexican this means that our identities are socio-culturally constructed by whether we interact with Mexican versus non-Mexican; intimate “familia” conversations with Raza versus ”outsider” conversations with non-Raza; interactions with Mexican elders, and other holders of ethnic memory; and religious figures, law-enforcement, academic, business or other dominant culture authority figures.

Bucholtz and Hall’s fifth principle that of partialness is that:

Any given construction of identity may be in part deliberate and intentional, in part habitual and hence often less than fully conscious, in part an outcome of interactional negotiation and contestation, in part an outcome of others’ perceptions and representations, and in part an effect of larger ideological processes and material structures that may become relevant to interaction. It is therefore constantly shifting both as interaction unfolds and across discourse contexts (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005, p. 38).
Thus, for a Mexcoehuani identity interaction, there were times when our constructs of our self identity are deliberate (perhaps on Cinco de Mayo, or at a pro-immigration rally). There are times that they are habitual (as when we interact with family or close friends). These interactions are outcomes of the “other’s” perception of us (Mexcoehuani or non-Mexcoehuani co-interlocutor). Most of the time however, our socio-cultural identity as Mexcoehuani and our constant interaction with other human beings, is a partiality of deliberate, habitual, and material structures that are relevant to our interaction. By parsing our semiotic repertoire into mirrors that reflect our individual and collective identity, the Mexcoehuani can navigate the sometimes-turbulent course of ethnicity, cultural pride, and survival within a dominant culture that seeks to assimilate Mexcoehuani into extinction at worst, or as cultural relic and nostalgia at best.

**Space and Spatialization**

In European Euclidean geometry, space is established by mathematical axioms ("Euclidean geometry," 2009). However, in the post-modern world of Bhabha (Bhabha, 1994), Anzaldúa (Anzaldúa, 1987), Foucault (Foucault, 1972, 1983), and of course Lefebvre (Lefebvre, 1991), space becomes negotiated. As Soja states:

> The central argument I refer to has already been mentioned: the ontological, epistemological, and theoretical rebalancing of spatiality, historicality, and sociality as all-embracing dimensions of human life. This "meta-philosophy," to use Lefebvre's preferred description of his work, builds
upon a method that I present as a critical "thirding-as-Othering," with Other capitalized to retain the meaning of Lefebvre's insistent, anti-reductionist phrase *it y a toujours l'Autre*. And for the result of this critical thirding, I have used another term, "trialectics," to describe not just a triple dialectic but also a mode of dialectical reasoning that is more inherently spatial than the conventional temporally-defined dialectics of Hegel or Marx. I then use this method to re-describe and help clarify what I think Lefebvre was writing about in the thematic "Plan" of *The Production of Space* fugue: a trialectics of spatiality, of spatial thinking, of the spatial imagination that echoes from Lefebvre's interweaving incantation of three different kinds of spaces: the *perceived* space of materialized Spatial Practice; the *conceived* space he defined as Representations of Space; and the *lived* Spaces of Representation (translated into English as "Representational Spaces")…

Briefly told, the spatial story opens with the recognition that the mainstream spatial or geographical imagination has, for at least the past century, revolved primarily around a dual mode of thinking about space; one, which I have described as a Firstspace perspective and epistemology, fixed mainly on the
concrete materiality of spatial forms, on things that can be empirically mapped; and the second, as *Secondspace*, conceived in ideas about space, in thoughtful re-presentations of human spatiality in mental or cognitive forms. (Soja, 1996, p. 10).

For the Mexcoehuani, the “third space,” of their lived-in reality, is a place that is in the eye of a hurricane: the political, economic, social, cultural, and spiritual vortex of the U.S./Mexico border: a border that is both permeable and rigid; one that is five meters in thickness, yet measures hundreds of miles in width. As David G. Gutiérrez describes:

> [Mexican Americans] Faced with an intensifying territorial encroachment by white Americans on one hand, and the perceived atmosphere of racial and cultural hostility [of Mexico] on the other ethnic Mexicans were increasingly forced to devise defensive strategies of adaptation and survival in an intermediate “third” social space that was located in the interstices between the dominant national and cultural systems of both the United States and Mexico… (D. G. Gutierrez, 1999, p. 486).

This vision of the Mexcoehuani third space is simplistic however. It does not take into account the multiplicity of Chicano, Mexicano, Mexican-American, Latino, Hispanic, and indigenous world views that co-exist on both sides of the *frontera* “frontier.” Nor does it take into consideration of the gender, religious, and political subsets that make up Mexcoehuani reality.
The Spatialization of Chicano Identity through Danza Azteca

The vision of Mexcoehuani third space, as expressed through La Danza is one that is defined by two overarching concepts. One concept is that of sacred space versus profane space. The other is the concept that reality is not defined by four dimensions (height, length and depth, to which we add time), but by eight dimensions.

Sacred versus profane space

Mircea Eliade sets out his polar view of space as extremes of sacred and profane space (Eliade, 1961). This ontology is based on the past work of Rudolf Otto and Immanuel Kant. Eliade defines a hierophany as a manifestation of the Sacred. Sacred space is the space of past humanity where the traditional man, or homo religious, found structure, orientation, and sacred order. For the spiritual human, this sacred space represents the absolute truth about primordial time and history.

Eliade, is the symbolism of the Center. Whether village or city, grove or mountain, house or sanctuary, any place consecrated by the hierophany may come to be honored as the navel of the cosmos, the junction of heaven, earth and underworld' In Eliade's interpretation then, the principal characteristics of sacred space are that it (1) marks a break in the homogeneity and amorphousness of hitherto undifferentiated space, (2) these breaks provide a spatial orientation especially when they bear the symbolism of the
Center as almost all major breaks do, (3) the Center is also an axis mundi, a break in plane which creates an opening between cosmic levels, (4) by consecrating both a horizontal point of reference and a vertical axis of communication a world is founded, (5) this foundation is seen as a repetition of the primordial act of creation by the gods. (Shiner, 1972, p. 426)

Profane space, on the other hand, is modern, involved mundane daily concerns; homogenous and neutral, without structure or consistency. Profane space is a space of nonreligious experience and can only be divided up geometrically. It has no qualitative differentiation and hence, no orientation: profane space is chaos. Shiner adds to the equation human space. He defines human space as:

…the variegated phenomena of territoriality in men and animals, the spatial explorations of architecture and painting, the differences in social distance and urban organization from society to society, the temporalized space of relativity theory—all these suggest that within Western culture there is more to space than meets the measuring eye. ....

In the first place, the normative Western view of space does not reflect the environing character of our experiences of space; it misses the way we live spatially. We do not
natively experience space as a kind of container in which we find ourselves along with a collection of objects. If we step back from our conventional pre-suppositions, we will begin to see that space is a populated environment we inhabit. We are not "in" space as shoes are in a box. Our situation is rather more like that of a deer in a clearing, alert, totally aware of her surroundings, instinctually sensible of the critical distance she must maintain from possible predators. Through our bodies, we are intimately intermingled with our surroundings. Far from appearing as an abstract continuum, human space is perceived as a horizon peopled with familiar beings whose distances and directions are impregnated with meanings. Rather than an empty receptacle in which objects are located, space begins to appear as something which is given by the relation of the trees and houses, of the highways, mountains and rivers which define our possibilities of vision and movement (Shiner, 1972, pp. 426-428).

As is typical of European thought, the sacred-profane paradigm is two dimensional and allows for no overlap of realms. It is in keeping with the Christian/pagan, Marxist/Capitalist, heterosexual/homosexual Eurocentric division of human existence.
The eight directions of Mesoamerican indigenous space

When the Spanish missionaries arrived in Mesoamerica, they were able to distinguish the three dimensional world they knew within the cosmology of the indigenous people. Scholars through the past 400 years have also recognized this three dimensional explanation of indigenous reality which can be defined as either the four cardinal directions or as the mathematical x, y, z axis.

But within the past 100 years, as new ways of looking at reality appeared: Einstein’s theory of relativity; quantum physics string theory and parallel universes, scholars and indigenous people themselves have taken a closer look at what is a more complex notion of reality and space (Ibarra García, 1999). It is interesting to see that the archeological studies of the past ten years validate the oral traditions that have been passed on from Danza elders to new generations.

The Three Dimensions vs. Eight Directions

The four cardinal directions were of great value to the Mesoamerican philosophers and scientists. The order of our modern directionals is:

North
South
East
West
The Mesoamerican order for the directionals is different:

East. This is where the sun is “born.”

West. This is where the sun “dies.”

South. This is the region of fertility, jade and chocolate.

North. This is the land of the dead, winter ice, and storms.

The four other directionals are:

Above. This is the realm of the gods, deified warriors, and ancestors.

Below. This is the realm of the dead and of rebirth.

Center. This is the central focus point of all humanity: “the I place.”

Time. Time is the shell that all contains all spatial experience in human reality.

It is the ability to view human existence as a place in time that is moveable that sets indigenous time apart from European time. Time travel is possible when a culture looks are chronographic epochs as coexistent: that is the past is going on this instant of the present, as is the future (Benjamin, 2000; Boglioli, 2004; Evon, 1977; Ibarra García, 1999). The rituals of La Danza Azteca are perfect examples of this “time travel.” When the ceremonies begin, the participants invoke the ancestors and the descendants to join the living to carry out a set of rituals that are not bound by the limits of any directionals or dimensions.

*Faith: Chicano Political space versus cultural space*

The last spaces I sought to look at were the two spatial quadrants of Mexcohuani faith: political faith and spiritual faith. Mexcohuani, since the days of the Crusade for
Justice, the United Farm workers, and MEChA, have sought to find a balance between political ideology and identity, and spiritual or religious identity.

For the most part, the Mexcoehuani who did not follow a Marxist path, were able to find some form of negotiation between the two. In the case of the Mexcoehuani Danzantes, this complex negotiation has been at the heart of the divisions between groups and communities (Ceseña, 2004).

Traditional groups that started in the early years of La Danza in the U.S. (1974-1990) have, for the most part, sought to maintain the spiritual/religious focus of La Danza. Other groups, especially those groups led by young college students, or that started after the late 1990s, have taken, for a large part, a political identity to their dance circles. As Ceseña notes:

For example, the student group was quite vocal about their politics. During an interview with their leader, Rafael Navar, he stated: “We’ll support the Zapatistas. We’ll support all sorts of movements. If anything, that’s what we see as our principal job #1. We’ll go to a community protest before we go to anything else.” (Rafael Navar. Personal Interview. 26 February 2003)

In contrast to the student group, Danza Mexicayotl maintains that danza should be used solely for cultural and spiritual fulfillment. During an interview with their leader, Mario Aguilar, he noted: “It isn’t about being politically free
or empowered through danza, cuz it’s not that at all. It’s spiritual. Now, [if] that gives you the spiritual power and gives you the spiritual peace in terms of peace to go on a political quest, [or an] economic quest, academic quest…those are the spiritual bases of danza and everything else piles on like icing. (Mario Aguilar. Personal Interview. 20 January 2003)

Regardless of their differences, both groups found within danza a sense of community and pride, and a way to assert themselves as culturally and racially indigenous. This paper aims to reveal a glimpse of the agency created by claiming indigeneity through danza (Ceseña, 2004, p. 3). Mario’s statement that his group does not “go out of [its] way to recreate or rescue pre-Columbian ceremonies,” demonstrates that they negotiate between what the past has to offer and their contemporary contexts as Chicanos, actively producing the group’s identity, rather than simply rediscovering “that which the colonial experience buried” (Hall, “Cultural Identity” 69). Though he may not have started out wanting to be a “danzante for life,” Aguilar eventually accepted the obligations of a Capitán and began learning danza with the intention of spreading its traditions
through La Conquista, which closely paralleled the Chicano notion of Aztlán (Ceseña, 2004, p. 11).

The ability of La Dana Azteca, for the past 400 years, to allow for complex convergence and syncretism, makes it a living and vibrant vehicle in the indigenous and mestizo struggle for identity, space, agency and self-determination.

Mexcoehuani Danza Azteca and México: Negotiating Tensions between the Motherland and Aztlan

_The Negation of the Other: Conflicts with the Catholic Cultural Heritage of Mexico_

While a great many politically and culturally active Mexcoehuani find it easy to reject the Christian heritage of Mexico as a relic of imperialist European colonization, African American activists have found within their own Christian heritage and church organization a tool for political, economic, and cultural resiliency, and progress. Rather than rejecting outright the past 400 years of their cultural epic, most African-Americans take great pride in their membership within the Christian community. Barnes notes that:

Black Church members have been shown to develop symbols such as rituals, songs, sayings, sacred meetings and biblical stories to help them interpret events, focus efforts, and provide organizational vision (Felder 1991; Lincoln and Mamiya 1990; Marx 1971: Wilmore 1995). However, according to Bolman and Deal (1991), in many cases,
expressive rather than instrumental results enable such organizations to understand and organize their experiences and efforts. Using symbolic framing, culture is both process and product that is especially important for sustaining organizations and members who face uncertainty, circumstances beyond their control and paradoxes. For Black Church congregants, such symbols would help provide meaning and clarity for historical events such as slavery and present day discrimination and poverty as well as possible avenues for collective redress. And even when traditional channels are engaged to bring about change, the cultural motivation behind the action is often imbued with drama, metaphors and inspirationally-derived potency. (Barnes, 2005, p. 969).

Mexcoehuani who reject the Christian experience of Mexico, on the other hand, expend much energy replacing this source of Mexican communal identity and cohesiveness with what they describe as the “true” indigenous history of Mexico that has been hidden in secret, and is only now allowed to be known by the larger world. Rather than creating cohesiveness, I suggest it drives a wedge between Mexcoehuani communities, as well as between many Mexcoehuani and many Mexican Danzantes (de la Peña, 2008; González Torres, 2005; Hernández Ramos, 2007; Writer, 2006).
The Negotiation with the Other

A part of the tension between some Mexcoehuani Danzantes and the Mexican reality of La Danza Azteca, is their lack of understanding of Mexican mestizo culture (as opposed to Mexican-American, Puerto Rican or “Latino” culture as exemplified by the mass media), or their lack of experience with modern Mexican indigenous cultures. Indeed, many Mexcoehuani have a frozen or “museum” idealization of what Mexican indigenous reality is like. When that reality is not met, they reject the Mexican as bastardized, and illegitimate. Such issues as the following create this tension of unmet expectations:

1. Some Mexcoehuani have a fear of Mexican nationals, Mexican culture, and traditions because they have grown up isolated from these experiences. Many who have this subconscious fear of Mexicanness do not speak Spanish, or grew up away from the Mexcoehuani barrios. They fear rejection (due to the pocho syndrome) by both Anglo and Mexican society. They feel that they cannot, in the terminology of Bucholtz and Hall’s third principle (indexicality) communicate with other Mexcoehuani, and thus emerge from the same, shared ethnic semiotic systems and positions; in essence, they cannot speak to their mirrored self. The Mexcoehuani who do not have indexical self-determination, seek out other memberships in identities that are more in line with their U.S. experience (Lakota
rituals, Pow Wows, evangelical churches) (González Torres, 2005; P. Rodriguez, 1988)

2. Some Mexcoehuani, feeling that sense of loss of their “mother culture” and needing the empowerment it gives them, go overboard and try to be “hyper-Mexican.” They try to make up for lost time and opportunities by trying to take on every conceivable visible aspect of modern traditional Mexican indigenous communities (de la Peña, 2008).

3. The tension between Mexicans and Mexcoehuani is a two way discourse, full of multiplicities of meaning. For the Mexicans, who are dealing with the realities of a third world nation that abuts a first world super power, the nostalgia for indigenous roots and traditions can sometime seem ludicrous, farcical, cynical, and lavish: Many Mexicans, especially those that are middle class and have vested interests in the “development” of Mexico as a global power, cannot understand the thirst for traditional Mexican identity by Mexcoehuani, who long to capture what their ancestors lost in their economic pilgrimage to the U.S. They see this Mexcoehuani pilgrimage as quaint and odd.

4. Some Mexicans, especially those that have continued to practice their traditions (mestizo or indigenous), look at the Mexcoehuani as a semi-foreign “gringos.” They see those that seek out the past as potential business opportunities. Some Mexicans seek out naïve Mexcoehuani who have the material resources that Mexicans want, but cannot easily attain. They try to turn the Mexcoehuani search for identity into a business enterprise.
In the final analysis, both the Mexican fear, loathing, or hatred of the Mexcoehuani, and the Mexcoehuani fear, loathing or hatred of the Mexicans are tragically nourishing a repeat of the self-destructive disunity that helped the Spanish overcome the precolumbian nations of 16th century Mexico.

A Reflection on the Review of the Literature

I conducted an analysis of the review of the literature using the seven sub-questions of the study with the literature sources:

1. How is Chicano identity defined?
2. What is “La Danza Azteca?” What are its historical roots in central Mexico?
3. How and when did La Danza arrive in the U.S.?
4. What are the reasons individuals seek out membership in La Danza Azteca?
5. What, if any, are the differences between Mexcoehuani Danzantes who were part of the first wave of La Danza, compared to the ones that started later?
6. What, if any, are the differences between Mexcoehuani Danzantes who were born into La Danza, and those that learned it later in life?
7. What is the concept of the Mexcoehuani identity as a unifying force for Mexican origin communities?

The process of answering the study sub-questions through the review of the literature consisted of triangulating the two overarching sources:

The first source is the academic literature, which has been written mostly by Eurocentric anthropologists, linguists, historians, ethnologists, from the U.S. and Mexico.
These range from the 16th century missionary Fray Bernardino de Sahagún (who has been called the world’s first ethnographer) to 20th century writers such as Peterson, León Portilla, and Nicholson.

The benefit of their research is that they are etic documenters. They are not studying cultures that they have an emotionally intrinsic investment in (Mesoamerican, Mexican or Mexcoehuani cultures for the most part are not of their family roots); instead, these researchers have dedicated their academic careers to this field from an inquisitiveness due to professional interest, social consciousness, or to make trans-cultural connections, dialogues, or conversions. These outside researchers give good “photographic” descriptions of Mesoamerican, Mexican or Mexcoehuani cultures. They rigorously document “who did what, how it was done, and where it happened.”

The drawbacks of the academic literatures are the duality of the benefits: The writers come from an outside reality that has been dominant in global society for several hundred years. This can be a hindrance to better understanding “why it happened.”

This Eurocentric reality frames Lefebvre’s (Lefebvre, 1991); “the other” (in this case the Mesoamerican, Mexican or Mexcoehuani cultures are the other) through various eras of “noble savages,” “pagans,” “heathens,” “naïve and child-like,” and of course “blood-thirsty” descriptors (Prescott, 1998; Sahagún et al., 1950). The problem with their “photographic” descriptions of Mesoamerican cultures and its modern descendants, is that they analyze these “photographs” in relation to epistemology and paradigms of western thought; whether it be Christian doctrine, Marxist ideology, Eliadian, Lévi-

All of these sources, while offering provocative and insightful observations, nevertheless, leave out an important part of culture: the emotional, spiritual, and psychological membership of the emic perspective and participation in communal space. This is where the triangulation with the other two sources becomes critical for understanding living cultures and their ancient roots.

The second sources are what I call the “oral codices.” These are written documentations of discussions, lectures, dialogues, and personal communications given by traditional elders of La Danza Azteca. These elders include Florencio Yescas, Andrés Segura, and the other Danza maestros that first brought La Danza to the U.S. These newspaper interviews, lectures, ceremonial discourses, and conversations were later written down by of the participants in these events. I consider myself as a member of this second group of sources.

The benefit of these types of sources is that we can see the emotional, spiritual, and psychological framework that gives the participants their membership in a communal identity and shared space. The drawbacks to these sources is that most of the witnesses do not have a strong background in history or narrative, and many times folk history, local mythology, misinterpretations of the discourses, or personal biases can color our recollections.
Nevertheless, I think it is very significant when an oral discourse, (from someone who has never had access to academic, historical or archeological “empirical” facts) strongly agrees with what the standard academic research suggests.

An example of this is when Florencio Yescas stated that the Conchero altar usually has three levels to represent the three sacred mountains (Aguilar, 1980; Armstrong, 1985). Then in 2005, Sugiyama discussed the three sacred mountains of Teotihuacan sacred space (Sugiyama, 2005). Later, John Sullivan, in a lecture to my “Introduction to Nahuatl” class, gave an overview of the latest research that connects the three sacred mountains to the three stones that make up the indigenous fire pit, “tlenamactli” (Sullivan, 2008).

Another example of this convergence, are the gatherings where Rosita Hernández and Moisés González discussed the meanings of flowers in la Danza Azteca rituals in the early 1990s (Zamora, 1994; Zamora & Aguilar, 1990). Hill and Taube in their groundbreaking works describe similar concepts of flowers that existed in the classic period of Mesoamerica; 100-800 A.D. (Hill, 1992; Taube, 2004, 2008).

To me, these parallel documentations of similar beliefs, distanced by time, give strong evidence for the continuity of indigenous precolumbian cultures, and the modern Indocristiano Mestizo culture of La Danza Azteca.
How is Chicano identity defined?

The literature shows that Mexcoehuani agree on several characterizations on what it means to be a Chicano. To paraphrase what are Chicano/as: People of Mexican roots who live in the U.S. and are proud of their Mexican heritage. They do not care if they cannot speak Spanish, because it is their Mexican roots that define them (Maciel & Sávedra Arredondo, 1988; McWilliams & Meier, 1990). Zapata, Villa, Che, and Kahlo were the saints of the movement.

To this original characterization, was soon added: a Chicano/a is someone who is politically aware of the oppression of Mexican origin communities, and who takes an activist approach to solving society’s injustices ("El plan de Santa Barbara," 1998; Garcia, 1989; Hayes-Bautista, 1973; Martinez, 1991; Rendón, 1971; J. A. Rodríguez, 1998; Sanchez, 1993). César Chávez, Corky González, Tijerina, Magón and others were added to the hagiography of Aztlan.

After the arrival of La Danza Azteca in the mid 1970s, the embryonic concept of the indigenous roots of Chicano identity soon took on greater importance (Alurista, 1972; Anaya & Lomelí, 1991; Dash, 1994; Goldman, 1997; Hebebrand, 2004; Menchaca, 1993; Morton, 1974; Ochoa & Ochoa, 2005; Shank, 1974). At this time, Cuauhtémoc and Quetzalcoatl took on the robe of Mexcoehuani sacredness in Aztlan. La Malinche, as had been true throughout Mexican history was an ambivalent entity that Chicanos could not decipher. Traitor, whore, or liberated woman, her essence in Mexican history depended on which point of the nationalist, Marxist or feminist continuum one stood. Later Sor
Juana Inés de la Cruz took on the mantle of the colonial feminist stalwart and La Malinche could stand on her own and be understood without so much political baggage.

In the mid 1990s the definition of Chicano/Chicana was: Someone of Mexican roots who lives in the U.S. and who is proud of his or her Mexican heritage. A Chicano/Chicana is someone who is politically aware of the oppression of Mexican origin communities, and who takes an activist approach, always using his or her indigenous roots as their moral compass and spiritual focus.

The tendency among some young Mexcoehuani at the beginning of the 21st century was to ignore, or at least diminish all things European, African, or Asian in Mexican culture, and to see the Chicano paradigm as a bipolar construct. Either Mexican origin people are part of the Spanish imperialistic tradition (as Hispanics,” sell outs,” or colonized fools), or they are part of the indigenous and oppressed people who are nevertheless perfect human beings (Chicanos who follow the “red road”).

For some of the most ardent “indigenists,” the nations of this continent were perfect, all-knowing, peace loving, scientists who were in perfect alignment with the universe ("Consejo Interamericano De Tradición y Cultura Quetzalcoatl," 2009). Sadly, there are Mexcoehuani now who take the indigenous roots of Chicano identity as the only identifier (Rabbit, 2006; Tezcatlipoca, 2008) worth measuring. Anything else is treason to the cause. I believe that this use of indigenous identity is more for personal power and political grandstanding, and it is alien to the real lived reality of the indigenous people that the Mexcoehuani are trying to emulate, or aspire to. Only time will tell if this form of extreme Mexcoehuani ideology becomes a cultural or historical dead end.
I have to go back to my past analysis of these groups of “Chicano-Indigenismo” as a form of personality cult, similar to the evangelical fundamentalist preachers and their followers that exist on television and the internet. These two types of charismatic groups have a lot in common. Both seek out end-of-world solutions to complex, painful, and eternal human problems (war, injustice, famine, hatred, fear, disease, xenophobia, etc). Both react with extremism based on their culturally specific paradigms. Moreover, both share revulsion to individual thinking and questioning of the group leader’s ideology.

I believe that like all movements based on anger, hatred, and fear, the extremist version of Chicano-Mexcoehuani identity will collapse under its own weight of hatred (for “the Other” as well as the internalized self-hatred they carry within, yet so ardently decry). One thing that the “oral codices” agree on is that an individual must accept the fact that La Danza is much, much bigger than the individual, and will outlast us all into the future.

This is why I put forward the concept of the Mexcoehuani: an Indocristiano reformulation that syncretized and evolved a new cultural paradigm. This paradigm continues to create resiliency, self-determination, and ownership of sacred space; regardless of what physical space the Mexcoehuani happen to fill. Aztlan is not a place on the map. It is a place in the heart. Moreover, based on the teachings of the Danza Azteca oral codices, the future belongs to the rituals of kindness not to the circles of hatred.

My analysis of the various forms and shades of Hispano/Latino/Mexicano/Mexican-American/Chicano/Strident Mexi’ca (Mexi’ca Nazi), had lead me to create the Aguilar
Chicano Identity Continuum where the most salient membership markers of each identity are identified (see Chapter seven, figure five).

**What Is “La Danza Azteca? What Are Its Historical Roots in Central Mexico?**

The review of the literature gives the most complete answers to this sub-question of the study. Using a multi-disciplinary approach the literature shows the historical, artistic, religious, and linguistic continuity between Mesoamerican traditions and the modern practices of La Danza Azteca.

I have shown a connected trail from the deepest beginnings of Olmec civilization, through the Teotihuacan, Toltec, and finally Tlaxcalteca, Otomi, Chichimeca, and Mexi’ca traditions. I argue that the literature shows that through almost five centuries of European cultural domination in Mexican and Mexcoehuani cultures, the reformulation and syncretism of the past centuries by the indigenous and mestizo Indocristiano Mexicans and Mexcoehuani has allowed the two thousand year-old indigenous traditions of Mexico to survive and evolve. The literature shows that the low-income, rural, urban, and uneducated communities of central Mexico were supremely efficient at maintaining the oral traditions of La Danza Azteca for hundreds of years. Now the modern Mexicans and Mexcoehuani have the educational, economic, and political freedom to seek out academic grounding in written sources, we begin to see how oral tradition, does indeed, show strong vestiges of precolumbian culture, spirituality, and spatial paradigms.
How And When Did La Danza Azteca Arrive In The U.S.?

In this sub-question we begin to see how there is a dearth of academic literature regarding the history, identity, and space of the phenomena of Mexcoehuani Danza Azteca. I divide the written documentation that narrates the arrival of La Danza into the U.S. into three categories of documentation of Mexcoehuani Danza.

The first category is the literature available from newspaper articles of general interest where La Danza is seen as a folkloric flourish or as entertainment for a community event (David, 2005; Griffin, 2004; Haydeé, 2006; Kane & Crowell, 2006; McMahon, 2005; Poveda, 1981; Steele, 2008; Thomas, 2005).

The second category of literature includes the academic writings of persons who are not looking at Mexcoehuani Danza Azteca specifically (Chávez, 2007; Cipactli, 2007; de la Peña, 2008; Gossen, 1994; Kurath, 1946; Rostas, 1991). This includes analysis of Mexican Danza (specifically Mexican Azteca groups), gender critiques, and political deconstructions of Mexican or Mexcoehuani culture.

Finally, the last category of writings consists of sources written by Mexcoehuani practitioners of La Danza (Aguilar, 1980, 1992, 2006, 2008a, 2008b; Armstrong, 1985; Ceseña, 2004; Zamora, 1994; Zamora & Aguilar, 1990). This category of writings by Mexcoehuani dancers can give the most emotional, spiritual, and psychological insight to understanding the Mexcoehuani Danza phenomenon. However, traditional academic elites can see these sources as being “tainted” by personal, political, and cultural biases, and lacking in “empirical” academic rigor. Sadly, due to the extremist writings of persons who are not part of the traditional Danza Azteca ("Consejo Interamericano De Tradición
y Cultura Quetzalcoatl," 2009; Mexika.org, 2008; Tezcatlipoca, 2008), the suspicions of academic scholars have to be conceded at times.

Another concern that traditional academia can have with these emic historiographies and writings is that as more and more Mexcoehuani Danzantes write down their opinions and recollections of their experience in La Danza, their lack of historical grounding might lead to new erroneous folk histories and mythologies. These new mythological lenses could ignore or negate the real historical richness of Mesoamerica and its descendant cultures.

There are two cases, which show how once a “historical myth” becomes “historical fact” one can never go back to the factual data. Both are deeply ingrained in the modern Danza Azteca epistemology and ontology.

The first is the story of the alleged apparition of the Virgin of Guadalupe (Brading, 2001; Lafaye, 1987; Moffitt, 2006; Parish, 1955; Poole, 1995, 2006). The other one is the alleged discovery of the burial of Cuauhtémoc in Ixcateopan (Gillingham, 2005; Moreno Toscano, 1980; Muniz-Tezcatlipoca; Olivera de Bonfil, 1980).

The category of written sources written by Mexcoehuani practitioners of La Danza offers a view into the emotional, spiritual and spatial ontology of La Danza in the U.S. It can also offer a personal voice that sheds new light into the centrality of membership and reciprocity of identity. However, they can also contain personal memory that taints the lenses we can use to understand Mexcoehuani Danza Azteca institutional memory.
What are the reasons individuals seek out membership in La Danza Azteca?

Once again, the academic literature has little to offer specifically on why Mexcoehuani seek out membership in La Danza. The written material by Mexcoehuani Danzante writers strongly parallels the reasons cited by the online respondents and the auto-historia narrators included in this study. These include a creation of a mythic continuity of culture and spirituality as a tool of resiliency and self-determination. Ceseña writes:

However, for some Chicanos, their introduction to Danza Azteca was like an archaeological discovery because danza was a practice unfamiliar to them before the 1970s. Just as material culture uncovered by archaeology must then be interpreted and analyzed, Chicano danzantes took what they were given by danza as clues about how their ancestors might have been, and more importantly, who they as Chicanos wanted to be. The “identity… grounded in [a] re-telling of the past” which Hall speaks of, applies to the struggle of Chicanos who through danza, reclaimed their indigenous roots and began telling the story of Chicano Danza; for many Chicano danzantes, danza became a tool that they used and continue to use to fight for the power to represent themselves, rather than be represented (Ceseña, 2004, p. 4).
Reclaiming indigenous roots also implies renegotiating Mexcoehuani mestizo paradigms. A web page from Mexico City that is cited frequently by Mexcoehuani college activists states:


We need to learn day by day, about the pre-columbian cultures of Mexico so that we can have cultural weapons and we can better confront colonialism that endures since 1492. Our mission: to decolonize. (My translation)

Whether this “decolonization includes cultural, political, or genetic “ethnic cleansing” varies according to which activist group one speaks to.

Another reason Mexcoehuani seek out identity within LA Danza Azteca is the feeling of alienation brought on by being marginalized by U.S. and Mexican society. Economic, educational, and political marginalization takes a heavy emotional and spiritual toll. Since the Mexcoehuani are caught in a third space between Mexican and U.S. cultural paradigms, a sense of alienation can pervade the community’s sense of self (D. G. Gutierrez, 1999). Mexcoehuani (especially young adults) seek out culturally relevant paths towards spiritual peace, self-acceptance, and community membership. This path must respect their history, language, and worldviews.
La Danza offers a system of membership that can run the gamut from strong allegiances to Catholic traditions to totally nativist neopagan traditions. This is the strength of La Danza; it does not require dogmatic orthodoxy. Instead, it offers a “federal system of membership.” As long as groups accept each other’s “unión, conformidad y conquista,” (unity conformity and conquest) there is room for coexistence within the various interpretations of the mythic past and modern spiritual practice.

What, if any are the differences between Mexcoehuani Danzantes who were part of the first wave of La Danza compared to the ones that started later?

What, if any are the differences between Mexcoehuani Danzantes who were born into La Danza, and those that learned it later in life?

What is the concept of the Mexcoehuani identity as a unifying force for Mexican origin communities?

These last three questions also show that the academic literature has little to offer in answers. I argue that this validates with greater urgency the need for studies such as mine that document important sociological, cultural, and political similarities (or differences) between the originators of La Danza Azteca in central Mexico and the Mexcoehuani practitioners of the U.S.
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

The Research Tools and How They Answered the Main Question

The research question of this paper was, “what have been the influences of La Danza Azteca on Chicano identity and sacred space?” In order to answer this question, the study was guided by the following seven sub-questions:

1. How is Chicano identity defined? This question was looked at through various approaches. First, a review of the literature looked at a historical outline of Mexican, Mexican-American, Chicano, and Latino identities. Then through the online survey, Mexcoehuani who self-identified as Danzantes gave their definition of what it meant to them to be a Chicano/Chicana. Finally, in the auto-historias, the narrations were analyzed to better understand the layers of space, and forms of identity the Danzantes took for themselves (resiliency, self-determination, empowerment, and spiritual practices). What is the concept of the Mexcoehuani as a unifying identity for Mexican origin communities? This was answered through the use of the Auto-ethnography and the micro-historias. Through data analysis of the online surveys, I sought to see if there were gender differences, age differences, and time frame differences.

2. What is “La Danza Azteca?” What are its historical roots in central Mexico? See question three.

3. How and when did it arrive in the U.S.? Questions two and three where answered by the review of the literature, as well as with the auto-historias of the Danzantes who were part of the first wave of La Danza in the mid 1970s.
4. What are the reasons individuals seek out membership in La Danza Azteca? This was answered through the review of the literature, the online survey, the use of the Auto-ethnography, and the micro-historias.

5. What, if any, are the differences between Mexcoehuani Danzantes who were part of the first wave of La Danza compared to the ones that started later? This was answered through the use of the Auto-ethnography, and the micro-historias.

6. What, if any, are the differences between Mexcoehuani Danzantes who were born into La Danza, and those that learned it later in life? This was answered through the review of the literature, the online survey, the use of the Auto-ethnography and the micro-historias.

7. What is the concept of the Mexcoehuani identity as a unifying force for Mexican origin communities? This last question is answered by the reflections from the auto-ethnography, the micro-historias, and the online survey results.
The Four Tools for Research

The methodology used for this study was of a mixed methods nature. The approach of this research used:

1. **An Auto-ethnography.** This documents me as a historical personage and reservoir of the Mexcoehuani Danza Azteca Experience from its beginnings in the middle of the 1970s.

2. **Fifteen Micro-historias as narratives.** These created intimate and personal pictures of the experiences of Mexcoehuani Danzantes in general. They gave presence and spirit to the written sources of Danza Azteca and its practitioners.

3. **An online survey.** This tool was used to gather a model of Mexcoehuani Danzante understanding of La Danza and to create a knowledge base from which to seek out questions for the auto-ethnography and micro-historias.

4. A DVD disk of various videos of Danza Azteca ceremonies to contextualize the information gathered from the participants.

I believe that the use of four different tools from four different media (internet, oral narration, auto-ethnography, and video) can give a richer understanding of the central question: At the beginning of the twenty-first century, what have been the influences of La Danza Azteca on Mexcoehuani identity and sacred space?
This chapter looks at the documentation of me as a historical personage and
reservoir of the Mexcoehuani Danza Azteca Experience. This section records my
participation in the early and formative decade of 1970, when the Danza Azteca tradition
first entered Mexcoehuani consciousness. It is a reflection on my participation and
research on la Danza Azteca, first as a practitioner, then as a group leader, a “street
scholar,” and finally as a university lecturer and a doctoral student. By documenting my
personal journey and experiences in La Danza Azteca, I propose to place into the
academic literature a unique narrative that has not been thoroughly captured by other
researchers of Mexcoehuani studies. I hope that the recollections gathered here will be of
some use to future researchers, as well as practitioners of La Danza Azteca, who may
want to understand the ontology of young Chicanos in the early 1970s and how La Danza
changed our lives.

Timothy Mark Robinson, a writer with the Encyclopedia of Slavery and Freedom
in American Literature, has a good, concise definition of autoethnography. To paraphrase
him: Autoethnography is an analytical insider’s account concerning the self/writer as part
of a group or culture. Often it is a description of a conflict of cultures, an analysis of
being different or being an outsider in a dominant cultural experience (the etic
experience). An autoethnography is usually written by the writer for an audience not a
part of the writer’s own group (the emic experience).

The autoethnography provides an opportunity for a writer to explain differences
between cultures and communities, from an outside space. The autoethnography is not
about writing a traditional personal narrative. Instead, it is written to give an audience a narrative grounded in a culture’s or community’s ontology. (Robinson, 2007). There is concern by some, however, that an autoethnography can devolve into narcissism.

**Micro-historias as narratives**

The stories that we tell about our own and others' lives are a pervasive form of text through which we construct, interpret, and share experience: "we dream in narrative, daydream in narrative, remember, anticipate, hope, despair, believe, doubt, plan, revise, criticize, gossip, learn, hate and love by narrative" (Hardy 1968:5).(Schiffrin, 1996, p. 167).

Narration as a discursive display of self is believed by some to be one part of a process where the “self” or “identity” is constructed (Schiffrin, 1996). A person’s identity is a product of an all encompassing internal narrative process; a creation from emotional interaction within the self’s experience. Others believe that:

… As with performance, culture, and grammar itself, we maintain that identity emerges from the specific conditions of linguistic interaction. Identity is best viewed as the emergent product rather than the pre-existing source of linguistic and other semiotic practices and therefore as fundamentally a social and cultural phenomenon (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005, p. 4).
For me, narrative is an emotional, internal processing of an experience that through linguistic and socio-cultural context is transmitted to a listener. This is why the oral transmission of a community’s history, values, and dreams is so powerful. Intonation, body language, the senses (touch, smell, temperature, vision), and the listener’s natural sense of anticipation, all combine to create a narrative process that defies conventional schemas of discourse.

Sociolinguistic studies have focused largely on oral narratives that recount personal experience. Labov (1972b, Labov & Waletzky 1967) has described such narratives as discourse units which have a fairly regular textual structure. After being prefaced by an abstract (a statement of the general theme or point of the story), a narrative is continued with an orientation: a background description of where, when, and by whom the events were performed. The events themselves ("what happened") are recounted in temporal order (in the complicating action); and evaluation of those events, i.e. their significance to the speaker and for the point of the story, is linguistically embedded within narrative clauses, as well as stated in separate clauses. An optional coda provides a temporal and topical transition from the world of the story to the interaction in which it was told (Schiffrin, 1996, pp. 167-168).
I argue that the emotionality, the sensual texturing, and physical presence of memory and narrative frequently break up this “fairly regular textual structure.” Storytelling takes place in, and is remembered by, a community; not just in a three dimensional space of textual structure, but in but in the eight dimensional spaces of above, below, east, west, south, north, the center and time. I believe that narration is the root of the indigenous concept of the eight directions. Community memory can be analyzed as social history. Jürgen Kocha defines social history as:

By social history I mean, on the one hand, a sub-field of historical studies which mainly deals with social structures, processes and experiences, for example, with classes and strata, ethnic and religious groups, migrations and families, business structures and entrepreneurship, mobility, gender relations, urbanization, or patterns of rural life...On the other hand, social history means an approach to general history from a social-historical point of view. Social history in this sense deals with all domains of historical reality, by relating them to social structures, processes and experiences in different ways (Jürgen Kocka as cited in: Magnússon, 2003, p. 701).

If we look at the micro-historia narratives of La Danza, we see the parallels with Kocka’s categorical approach to a social-historical point of view:
Table 8: Kocka’s categories and Danza’s structures

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Danza Azteca Structures</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Classes and strata</td>
<td>Hierarchy of Dance group leadership; full participant, novice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Monolingual, Bilingual, and multilingual speakers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnic and religious groups</td>
<td>Traditional Catholic, cultural Catholic, neo-precolumbian spiritual standpoints;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mexcoehuani and non-Mexcoehuani Danza participants</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I look at the Danzante narratives included in this study as textual spaces that inhabit eight directions; we can see how narrative becomes sacred space. This space, like the elastic strings that make up the particles in “String Theory” (Greene, 1999), adapt to the needs of an individual’s “state of energy” or as Bucholtz & Hall would say, how “identities may be linguistically indexed through labels, implicatures, stances, styles, or linguistic structures and systems” (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005).

This chapter of the study was meant to give voice to Mexcoehuani Danzantes who have various levels of experience in the tradition, have entered the Danza Azteca tradition at various times in the historical periods of its evolution in the United States, and have differing levels of authority or responsibility in the dance groups in which they participate.
In this study, each narrative defines a separate space for the Danzante to give voice to each unique experience within the larger flow of Mexcoehuani history. I frame the auto-historia narratives of each dancer as continuations of the age-old oral indigenous tradition of discourse as empowerment, memory as a tool of self-determination, and voice as a lyrical tool of sacred space. Each narrative, intact within is sacred space, then become “a codex” for future generations of Danzantes to search out their history.

In order to examine in depth their varied experiences in La Danza, I devised a schema to give each participant’s narration voice and color. I localize each narrator’s micro-historia within the temporal realm of Mexcoehuani Danza Azteca experience.

This section consists of fifteen micro-histories of Mexcoehuani Azteca dancers.

I have known nine of the fourteen persons who narrated their experiences as Aztec dancers anywhere from two to 33 years. The other five participants self-selected to participate as participants in the online survey. I completed the out the fifteenth micro-history myself to give further insight and analysis into my personal beliefs on the research question.

The micro-historias consist of narrative answers to a questionnaire, as well as the recollections of the participant’s lives as Azteca dancers. The questionnaire questions were selected from questions I have received through my dance circle’s web site over the past 10 years, as well as from questions that some of the online participants asked me at the end of their surveys.

I collected some of the narratives in face-to-face interviews at locations of the participants choosing. Others were collected in telephone conversations. Some of the
narrators were persons who were born into the Danza Azteca. Others were persons who entered into the tradition as adults in the U.S. I then assigned the participants to a typology that reflected their experience in La Danza and their role in their dance group.

After sifting through the online participants who were willing to participate and who also fit the criteria for the micro-historia narrations, the population of participants in the micro-historia narrations ended up being different from the proposed participants. This was due, in part, to the fact that either many of the online participants had less than two years of experience in La Danza, or some online participants, (even though they had 5-12 years of Danza participation) did not finish the survey. The sections that they left blank indicated to me that they had little understanding of the history of La Danza. Perhaps they also did not know how it functions beyond the choreographic context of a performance. Table nine shows the results:

**Table 9: Proposed Versus actual participants**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Targeted Narrator population</th>
<th>Final Narrator Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Two Chicana-females born into La Danza Azteca</td>
<td>One Chicana female born into La Danza Azteca</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two Chicano-males born into La Danza Azteca</td>
<td>Four Chicano males born into La Danza Azteca</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two Chicana-females who entered La Danza Azteca as adults</td>
<td>Five Chicana females who entered La Danza Azteca as adults</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two Chicano-males who entered La Danza Azteca as adults</td>
<td>Five Chicano males who entered La Danza Azteca as adults</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Online Survey

An anonymous survey was placed on the surveymonkey.com website (www.surveymonlye.com). Persons, who identify as participants in La Danza Azteca tradition, were asked to answer questions regarding their participation in the dance. Their anonymous answers were gleaned for overarching themes.

The online survey questions were selected from questions I have received through my dance circle’s web site (www.mexicayotl.org) over the past 10 years, many from new Danzantes, others from students who were writing reports, papers. These questions reflect the diverse understanding of La Danza; and the wide range of political and religious ideologies that I have found; the different levels of understanding of what La Danza is (for some it is another type of ballet folklórico, for others a form of kinetic prayer, aerobic exercise, or political theater, etc).

I have also found that the questions included in the online survey have been frequent topics of discussion in face-to-face gatherings (like our group’s three Danza Azteca International symposiums), e-mails, and phone conversations. The answers that the respondents gave to these themes were used as part of the questionnaire that was the starting point for the micro-historia narrative interviews.

The respondents to the online survey were asked about their demographic information, and only those that wanted to be entered into the raffle for two prizes, divulged their names and mailing addresses. The participants could respond at their leisure, save the survey, and return to it later. Some never finished the survey; their
responses were used only for the analysis of individual questions and not as part of the analysis of the four waves of La Danza.

I used the themes of the online survey to answer the statement of the problem sub-questions Table 3 shows the themes:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Online Theme</th>
<th>Research sub-question</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Where do internet savvy Danzantes live?</td>
<td>The concept of the Mexcoehuani as a unifying identity for Mexican origin communities; Mexcoehuani identity and sacred space is unrelated to geographic location.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What are the ages of the respondents</td>
<td>What, if any, are the differences between Mexcoehuani Danzantes who were part of the first wave of La Danza compared to the ones that started later?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How long the Danzantes have danced?</td>
<td>What, if any are the differences between Mexcoehuani Danzantes who were born into La Danza, and those that learned it later in life?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How deep is their understanding of La Danza?</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>What has been their participation in Danza ceremonies?</td>
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The methodologies of narrative, such as gathering responses to open-ended questions, enable the researcher to understand and capture the points of view of other
people, thereby elucidating their understanding of the world. This is of great importance when a person seeks to cross cultural boundaries.

I define cultural boundaries as the permeable walls of culture that allow new attributes to enter, when they enhance a culture’s ability to survive. At the same time, these walls allow attributes that a culture has sustained and nourished, to filter out to other cultures, thereby helping those cultures survive. An example of this is the use of maize, amaranth, vanilla, chocolate in Mesoamerica. The indigenous farmers exchanged it with the Europeans, and in return, they accepted and cultivated wheat, barley, rosemary, and sugar.

Qualitative inquiry then, provides depth, detail, and individual meaning for studying a limited number of cases (Bernheimer, 2000; Patton, 2002). It empowers the narrators to see their lives not as a series of events beyond their control. Rather, it grounds their “story” within multiple historical contexts: their family’s context, their community’s context, and their nation’s.

I believe that the combined use of autoethnography and multiple auto-historias creates a powerful time capsule for Mexcoehuani studies. I believe that this study is the first to look at La Danza Azteca as a tool for Mexcoehuani self-determination, empowerment, and the creation of a third, sacred space. In this space, where spirituality, resiliency, and identity reside, the Mexcoehuani give kinetic, visual, and artistic “flesh” to the ancestral spirits of their indigenous, European, African, and Asian ancestors.
DVD

As part of my documentation of the impact that La Danza Azteca has had on Mexcoehuani search for sacred, I have created a DVD as part of the data collection. Through collaboration with a student applying to graduate schools in film and video, I was able to create a short DVD that shows my dance group’s annual ceremony held July 19-20, 2008. The DVD demonstrates three of the “rituals of kindness” of the Danza Azteca:

Scene one shows a scene from our group’s “ensayo real” or dress rehearsal. Individual dancers from lineages that were invited to our dance circle’s ceremony, gather to dance as a social gathering. Here, the context of La Danza is friendship, community building, and making family connections as part of our rituals of kindness.

Scene two shows our “velación” (a candle vigil) to receive the guest dance groups, as well as the spirits of the ancestral elders. In this ritual, the receiving dance circle (in this case our dance circle, “Danza Mexi’cayotl”) received the guest participants, their standards, and their offerings for the altar. The ceremony includes remembering and honoring the founders of the Danza groups present, as well as those family members who have passed on. Then, after a precolumbian flower ceremony, the participants in the next day’s dance ritual are “cleansed” and prepared for their sacrifice of time, energy, and meditation while they dance.

Scene three shows a part of our 28th annual Danza Mexi’cayotl dance ceremony held on July 20, 2008 at Chicano Park, San Diego. This ceremony commemorates the arrival of La Danza Azteca to Chicano Park in April, 1975. Chicano Park became the
“door to Aztlan” for many Danzantes from Mexico. It has also become a multi-layered space of Mexcoehuani identity; it honors our maestro Florencio Yescas who opened the doors to La Danza to many Mexcoehuani; the ceremony honors the family as a sacred circle; and it honors our “Señor de los Danzantes” a wood crucifix that I brought back from Chalma in 1982. This scene shows the ritualization of sacred space from profane space. It shows the creation of a shared sociocultural linguistic identity. Here the shared language is that of the musical instruments, the choreography of the dances, and the shared system of semiotic notations expressed by the headdresses and feathers. The dance ritual also shows how the concept of “Mexcoehuani” (those who have come out of Mexican indigenous culture) is a unifying identity for Mexican origin communities regardless of language, political ideology, gender, educational status, sexual orientation, residency status, or socio-economic level.
CHAPTER FOUR: THE AUTO-ETHNOGRAPHY

The auto-ethnography is meant to document my life and participation in the early evolution of the Mexcoehuani version of La Danza Azteca. I have found that of the original six dancers that started in December, 1974, there are four still alive and participating in La Danza Azteca in the U.S. However, I am the only one that has had an interest in documenting the history and meaning of the Danza Azteca ritual complex in its beginnings in Mexico, and its development in the U.S.

Because I am a Mexcoehuani male, that is, a Mexican born male, raised in the U.S. as a Chicano, the reader may find unconscious lapses into androcentric writing and thought processes. For this, I deeply apologize “Antemano” (before hand).

My roots

I was born on September 25, 1954 in Mexico City, the capital of the United Mexican States. The place of my birth has been a critical fact that has colored my identity and given me a sense of history. Mexico City, the ancient Mexi’co-Tenochtitlan, capital of the Mexi’ca (Aztec) “empire”; one of the greatest cities of all time, and the largest indigenous metropolis at the time of the Spanish invasion, was where I first gazed upon this world.

My mother tells me that I was born feet first,” an auspicious birth for a dancer,” she says. It may have been an auspicious birth for a dancer, but at the time, my uncle, the doctor who delivered me in his clinic, was worried about my being a footling breech. I came out feet first, and I was being strangled by my own umbilical cord. Because my
uncle was able to save my life, my parents named me after him: Mario Eduardo Aguilar Lopez. I was to carry this name until 1966 when the U.S. Naturalization Service arbitrarily changed my name to Mario Edward Aguilar. I did not realize this change until the time came for me to get married and I looked at my naturalization paper. It was quite a shock to see that I been living one life, but the government saw another.

My father, Leonel Eladio Aguilar Garcia, was born in the cold highlands of the Mexican state of Hidalgo. His pueblo, Singuilucan, has been inhabited since the classic period of Teotihuacan (100 – 700 A.D.). The pueblo sits at about 8,500 feet above sea level, and even in the summer, after dark, it gets very cold.

My father’s family is Nahuatl and Otomi Indian, with a bit of French allegedly thrown in. The family story is that one of Maximilian’s (the unlucky Hapsburg prince who was placed on the emperor’s throne of Mexico by Napoleon III of France) soldiers decided to go AWOL when Maximilian was executed by President Benito Juarez’s army. He fled into the high pine forests of Hidalgo where he set up a log mill. He married a local indigenous woman, and that is where my father’s family has inherited the tendency towards blue-green eyes every generation or so.

My great-grandparents spoke Nahuatl or Otomi, but in keeping with the times, they did not teach my grandparents, or my father and his 17 siblings their languages. They were embarrassed of it and did not want anyone to humiliate their grandchildren calling them “Indian.” Unfortunately, this shame of being an indigenous person was rampant in Mexican culture. To be a “persona de razón,” or a “person of reason,” (an
intelligent human being) meant that you were both white or at least mixed, and Catholic; not a practitioner of superstitious precolumbian pagan traditions.

My father left his village at the age of 14 to go work in the restaurants of Mexico City. He had never owned a pair of shoes until then, and his first pair were “huaraches” Indian sandals. He worked as a bus-boy and waiter until he married my mother.

My mother, Melly Gloria Esperanza Lopez Fernandez de Lara, was born in Mexico City. Her family would be what we call today the “working lower middle class.” Her father owned a small fruit stand in one of Mexico City’s many markets. Although he had bourgeois tendencies, he was nevertheless proud of his P’urhépecha (Tarascan) blood. He was born and raised in Morelia, Michoacán, a beautiful colonial city.

My maternal grandmother was from a small indigenous town called Amozoc, near the colonial city of Puebla. She had Nahuatl roots and was orphaned at an early age.

My father and mother married in 1952 and came to San Diego on their honeymoon. They decided to stay and my father worked as a “Bracero” a farmworker picking oranges, lemons, and grapefruits in huge, seemingly endless orchards in Corona and Riverside. My brother was born San Diego in 1953. Six months later, he died of pneumonia and my parents, grief-stricken, returned to Mexico City. That is where I was born a year later.

When I was a year and a half old, my parents once again came to San Diego to try to have a better life. My father worked at the U.S. Grant Hotel as a dishwasher, bus-boy and then as a storekeeper. Twice the Border Patrol caught him and returned him to Tijuana. My mother and I were left in a rundown tenement on Front Street, not knowing
what had happened. My father was able to cross back into the U.S., and with the help of some of his Anglo work buddies, in 1956 we all received our legal status.

When I started kindergarten, I spoke no English. By the time I graduate from High school, I had a difficult time speaking Spanish. At home, our life was a miniature Mexico City. However, once I stepped out of the front door, a different world existed for me. It was a world of English language, strange customs, and quite frankly, racism. As a small child, I did not understand what the teachers meant by “Mary-o you are a good Mexican.” Early on, I got used to having people call me “Mary-o,” “Mano,” and “Migwel.” I wished my name was Andy!

When I was about six years old, in 1960, my parents bought a small pre-World War I home in East San Diego. Most of our neighbors were WW II veterans who had bought their homes in the 1940s and 1950s. They had raised their children there and now they waited for death to come for them. Either, one by one, they died or, they rented out their homes to low-income navy families. This was during the 1960s, the Viet Nam war was heating up, and most of my neighborhood friends were white children of sailors and marines.

One of the great pains of my youth was that these Navy kids never stayed for very long in one home. Every six months or maybe even after a year, the Navy parent was transferred to another base, and the family was uprooted. Many a time my Anglo friends and I cried as we hugged each other and said good bye, knowing full well we would never see each other again. The sense of longing and mourning for an older brother that I
never met, and for friendships that would last a lifetime, have deeply influenced my relationship with my friends.

One neighbor behind our house was a large woman from Mississippi. She was very racist and narrow-minded. However, for some reason, she took a liking to my mom and our family. She asked us to call her “Nana.” She would always warn me about playing with those “white trash, Navy kids” and the “colored kid” that lived up the street from us. She gave my sister piano lessons, and would give me fifty cents to go to the neighborhood market to buy her favorite cigarettes. She would let me keep the change, and I would always buy candy.

Whenever I closed the gate at the foot of our stairs, I entered the world of Mexico City. My parents watched the “novelas,” those histrionic and poorly acted, television soap operas that every Mexican family watched religiously. My sister and I would want to watch “The Ed Sullivan Show” or “Laugh-in.” My mother would not let us because the priest said that “Laugh – In” was the work of the devil. Somehow, we would sneak and watch those shows and others anyway. I remember watching the Beatles on the Ed Sullivan Show. They were electrifying and my sister tried not to scream and jump up and down. I wanted to be John Lennon. I wanted to have long hair and play guitar in a band. I wanted to be famous, be admired, and to belong.

Each morning, as soon as I closed that magic gate at the foot of our stairs, I was suddenly in the epic world of 1960s American society, with all of its social upheavals and experimentation. In this world, as a “short fat dark and poor Mexican” kid, I did not belong. I was an outsider and I was treated as such. When I was about 9 or 10 years old, I
was brutally sexually abused by a group of young Mexican men and that scar of fear and
shame has haunted me for all my life. I believe that the horror of that event, and the
subtle but continual racism I faced everyday as a youth contributed to my lifelong battle
with depression.

When I entered fourth grade, I began to play in my elementary school’s beginning
orchestra. I had actually wanted to learn the piano. However, my parents could not pay
for one, so one day my dad took me to a pawn shop. We looked for the cheapest orchestra
instrument available, and he bought it for me. That is how I began to play the violin.
Even though I did not really want to learn to play the violin, that instrument (which I still
have and play on occasion) opened the doors to many parallel universes for me.

I was an extremely shy, fat, Mexican kid, and I had a few Anglo friends. One day
when I was in fourth grade, some junior high school kids came by my school and seeing
me, decided to beat me up. A couple of my Navy family friends came to defend me and I
ended up with two black eyes. My parents took me to the doctor and that is when they
discovered that I had severe astigmatism. So did my dad: so now, I was an extremely shy,
fat, Mexican kid with thick glasses.

I spent a lot of time daydreaming and drawing. I loved classical music, and I
loved our school orchestra. My dad worked with many truck drivers who delivered
liquor, groceries, and paper goods to the U.S. Grant hotel where he worked. They would
give him free tickets to see the Chargers, the Padres, and best of all for me— to the
symphony, the theater, and art exhibits. I was a low-income, first generation Mexican kid
who had an upper class education in the arts because my dad got freebies from the
delivery truck drivers.

My dad learned to speak English from an older African American man from New
Orleans. He was a kind and gentle man who always asked me to call him “Uncle Paul.”
That is why to this day my dad speaks English with a heavy New Orleans African-
American/Mexican accent.

In 1968, my family drove the 2,000 miles from San Diego to Mexico City to
witness the 1968 Olympic Games. When we arrived at the outskirts of Mexico City, the
army had all the roads closed and the whole Federal District was under curfew. We did
not know it at the time, but we were watching the events of the “Massacre of Tlatelolco”
unfold. No one knew at the time, but years later, it became known that the Mexican
government had massacred over 600 college students, workers, their families, and
children, because they had dared to protest the exorbitant amount of money the Mexican
government had spent on trying to show the world it was a great, progressive nation. Not
once did any newspaper, magazine, or television station report on the carnage. There
were rumors, and college students who had lost friends told their families and others, but
the government just said that these were false rumors spread by “communist”
subversives.

We visited the massive and ancient pyramids of Teotihuacan, just north of
Mexico City. Although I had first visited the site four years earlier, this time I was really
impressed by the austere greatness and mystery of this sacred, indigenous place. The visit
to Teotihuacan in 1968 was to have profound impact on the path my life was to take just six years later.

My Journey Begins

When I returned to San Diego, I entered ninth grade at Wilson Junior High in East San Diego. When I was in elementary school, the socio-economic differences between me and the other kids were small. Whether I was low income Mexican, or they were low-income White Navy kids, we all bought our clothes at the Salvation Army, Good-Will, or Saint Vincent DePaul. However, when I entered junior high school, now there were new social classes present.

Some of the kids came from the Tallmadge and Kensington areas of East San Diego. These were “old money” families and their children had lots of spending money, as well as the latest new clothes. Those of us from the “west” end of East San Diego were at the fringe of school society. Early on, the clash between my home’s traditional Mexican values, and the new “Height Asbury” world of teenage America was causing great strife in my life. Like any young man, I wanted to fit in with the majority of my peer group. However, unlike most of the other kids, I was a poor, extremely shy fat Mexican kid with thick glasses, and no money to spend.

Fortunately, for me, I nurtured a sarcastic sense of humor, and an ease of storytelling. These were my only weapons of survival in a school world where money, brute strength, and good looks were valued more than intellect. Tragically for me I was fantastic in the intellect part, and very weak in all the other parts. I began to hang out with
the other “marginal” students who for whatever reason were not part of the mainstream of our schools social networks. These friends were artists, musicians, and mostly druggies. Most were Anglo, some were Mexican like me, and a few were Black. Some were gay; some were what today I would definitely classify as clinically depressed. All were looking to belong to something special, to have a space where we were welcome and at peace.

We would get together and smoke marijuana at someone’s house and listen to the Beatles, Led Zeppelin, Santana, and Marvin Gaye. Now that my own children have grown and left our home, I marvel at the fact that as a 13 year-old in eighth grade I was smoking pot and taking barbiturates, speed, and whatever else came along on a regular basis. My Anglo friends always had money for drugs. They told me that their parents would give them money to make up for the fact that they did not spend much time with their kids. Especially the divorced fathers; they would give their sons lots of money. Therefore, we always had pot, cheap wine, or beer.

By the time I left junior high, I had begun to see that the life I was leading was no ordinary life. I was not at peace at home, with my domineering, moody, father and over-protective mother, and I was not at home in the drug-influenced world of school. I felt alone and lost. The only solace I had was my music, (rock and roll, my own creations, and classical music) and my art. I had begun to incorporate the precolumbian images and symbols I had seen at Teotihuacan into my art, and I began to see myself as an inheritor of these ancient traditions.
A New Road Opens

In 1969, I started high school. All of the high school angst that boys go through was amplified by my sense of isolation and constant fear of people knowing what had happened to me as a child. I was an awkward youth, and I felt like I did not belong. I had started working at the age of 12, cutting people’s lawns, and delivering newspapers. I used that money to buy “new” clothes that did not come from the various second hand stores that were my usual sources for “new” clothes. Even so, I was always poorly dressed and that cut deep into my self esteem.

My Mexican friends all tried their best to drop out of school. I was called a “school boy” and a “wannabe Gabacho” (white) by my Mexican friends. They could not understand why I would want to excel in school, since “we were going to end up in woodshop or auto shop anyway.” My Anglo friends made racist remarks all the time to me but always said “But that doesn’t include you… I like you; you’re one of the ‘good’ Mexicans.” I was lost and felt like I did not belong in any society. I deeply wanted to have long hair and be like the other boys, but my dad always forcibly cut my hair and called me a fag and a queer for wanting long hair. He told me I must doubt my sexuality because I wanted long hair; but I just wanted to fit in with the other long haired cool guys in high school. I sank further and further into depression, and into abusing pot and alcohol. I had no lived space of my own.

In 1972, I entered my senior year at Hoover High; I began to work on the weekends at North Island Naval Air Station, in the data processing department of the
Navy’s accounting department. Here, amongst the whirling tape drives and primitive hard drives began my love affair with computers and high tech gadgets.

I began to hang out with two new social groups. One was a multi-cultural group of guys who loved to play guitars. This group was made up of guys who played Beatles’ tunes, wrote their own songs, and basically enjoyed music. The other was a mostly white group that put out the high school’s newspaper. I was the editorial cartoonist for the paper and the feature editor. It was here that the differences between us low income kids and the wealthier kids stood out. I did not know what “white privilege” was, but I could see it in the things the “rich” kids took for granted.

One day, all of us seniors were given an “aptitude” test to see what kind of job we were best suited for. The questions were easy enough:

Do you like working outdoors or indoors?
Do you like working with people or machines?
Do you like to plants or animals?

I remember vaguely that there were about 100 questions in this test. A couple of weeks later my high school counselor called me in. He was an older man, with pale pink skin and very white hair. He always wore a coat and tie, even when we had the hot Santa Ana winds blowing in from the desert. He showed me the results of my test. To paraphrase our “dialogue:”

“Well Mary- o, based on the aptitude test, you would be a great farmer or a librarian. However, let us be realistic. Here in San Diego all of the farms are dying out. You know that they are being replaced with houses and big, big buildings. Moreover,
frankly, a library is no place for a young man to work. That is a place for old ladies who
like quiet and order. So I am going to put here that we agreed that your job goal is to be a
landscaper’s assistant.” What did I, a poor, short, fat, Mexican kid with thick glasses
know? The “computer figured out” what was best for me. Although I loved (and still
love) gardening and reading, I could not understand why I should be a landscaper’s
assistant.

Fortunately, for me, soon afterwards, Alex Martinez, a young Chicano from San
Diego State University, came to my high school and helped us set up a “Chicano” club.
How he ever got permission to come to our school and set up this club, I will never know,
but thank God, he did. He got all of us Mexican students excited about our identity and
our history. A last, I felt I had “permission” to live, take up space in the universe, and be
proud of my existence. We quickly organized ourselves and because Mr. Martinez was
from the organization C.O.P.A. (Chicanos Organizados Por Aztlan), that is what we
called ourselves. After I graduated from Hoover, the group became part of the nationwide
organization called MEChA (Movimiento Estudiantil Chicano en Aztlan).

Now, when I look back at our photo in my yearbook, I laugh at the photo of the
assembled kids. There were two guys in the whole group and about thirty girls.
Moreover, as befits a traditional, un-liberated, Mexican teen social group, I was the
president, and the other guy was the vice-president. I remember one of my friends,
Rachel Cardoso telling me “You need to be the president because people don’t respect us
girls, and you are the smartest Chicano in school.”
We held fundraisers and had political speakers for Cinco de Mayo at our school, but we were brand new at the art of organizing.

Every week end I would go with three other “minority” high school students and work at North Island in the computer room. The pay was good and soon after I graduated from high school, they offered me a full time, permanent civil service job. Everyone told me that I had hit the gold mine because if I worked there for twenty years, I could retire at 38, and get a pension, and then work somewhere else…. Double pay! The concept was mind-boggling, but there was something else that was pulling me away to a new life I never imagined—college.

Monty Montezuma and the Aztecs

When I told Alex Martinez about my “landscaper’s assistant” job assessment, he blew up. He told me that that is what always happens to Chicanos, we can be smart as anybody else, but we are always sent to blue collar, hard jobs, with low pay. He asked me to bring a copy of my high school transcript and after studying it, he looked me in the eyes and said “You should be going to college vato!”

I had never thought about college, and quite frankly, I was content with being the first one in my entire family to graduate from high school. Mr. Martinez talked to me about different colleges, and finally I applied to three: MIT, UCLA, (and because Mr. Martinez was a student there) SDSU. Suddenly my parents realized that after graduation I wanted to get out of town as quickly as possible. My dad stopped harassing me about my hair, and my mother stopped harassing me about where I was going.
Then, one by one, the college offers came to my house. I was accepted by MIT, UCLA, and San Diego State. I really wanted to go to UCLA, but after my family went to “preview” day, my father said he could not afford it. We did not know anything about financial aid and by the time I applied for it, all I was offered were loans. They offered me $2,000 a year of loans (which at that time covered everything!). However, my father said “we paid $5,000 for our house, and when you graduate, we will owe almost as much for your education. We can’t send you there.” I was deeply saddened, but I chose to attend San Diego State.

Our elders always tell us that everything happens for a reason. I see now that by attending SDSU, I was at the right place at the right time to become one of the founding organizers of the Chicano Azteca dance movement. The fact that the San Diego State team name was the “Aztecs” and the university mascot was “Monty Montezuma,” also figured prominently in my intellectual development as a political Chicano. Very strange indeed…

I joined MEChA at San Diego State, changed my majors several times, and soon I began to hang out at the Centro Cultural de la Raza in Balboa Park.

One day in the spring of 1974, I went to our weekly MEChA meeting and there was the usual rabid argument between the nationalist Chicanos and the Marxist Latinos. The meeting was interrupted by the arrival of a group of “Indian messengers.” The group was called the “White Roots of Peace.” They included emissaries from the Iroquois, Hopi, and Mexican indigenous nations. They told us that as Mexicans, we had the indigenous nations of this continent as our roots. They told us that we should not look at European “-
isms” such as Marxism and Capitalism as our guiding principles. Instead, we should look at our indigenous spirituality as our paths to daily life. Then, the nationalist Chicanos and the Marxist Latinos returned to their rabid disagreements.

The concept of being an indigenous person was powerful and intriguing to me, knowing my direct indigenous heritage. However, being that I had no way of learning my indigenous traditions in the reality I lived in at that time, I put it in the back of my mind. Little did I know that three of the members of this group would later play an important part in my life as a Chicano Danzante.

Serving the Tree of Life

As well as being a student at San Diego State University, I began hanging out at the Centro Cultural de la Raza in Balboa Park (El Centro) in 1973. Life was tough for me because I was working full time at North Island from 4 p.m. to 12:30 a.m., and then taking a full load of classes at State from 8 a.m. to 2 p.m. Even though I was making a lot more money than I had ever dreamed of, I felt lonely and isolated as I constantly missed parties, rallies, protest marches, and cultural events. I continued to suffer from deep bouts of depression. Therefore, in the summer of 1973, I resigned my job at the Navy base citing that “this job is interfering with my social life.” Only a young man, ignorant of the consequences of not having a steady job, could have quit a well-paying, guaranteed government job with such disdain and bravado! Nevertheless, at last I was free to become a cultural warrior. Or so I thought at the time.
In 1973, the Centro was full of energy and life. You could feel the electricity in the air as Chicano and Chicana artists, musicians, dancers, poets, and artisans taught free classes to anyone who wanted to learn. It was there, at the El Centro Cultural that I met three men that would have a great impact on my life.

The first one was Ramon “Chunky” Sanchez. He heard I played guitar and began to teach me the songs of the Mexican revolution. He helped me become comfortable and proud of myself, regardless of my weight, looks, or poverty. The second man who had a great impact on me was Guillermo Aranda, a noted muralist. He gave me the courage to experiment with painting and helped me explore a new world of indigenous spirituality I did not know existed. The third man to influence me greatly was the Chicano poet Alurista. He heard I played the violin and asked me to join his seminal Chicano music group, “Los Servidores de Árbol de la Vida” (The Servants of the Tree Of Life).

His group played what I later came to realize were traditional hymns from the Aztec dance tradition, with new words that reflected the reality of Chicanos. For the first time since I was in elementary school, I felt proud of the fact that I played the violin, and my friends thought I was cool! The Servidores were comprised of Alurista and fellow poet Juan Felipe Herrera. Together our group performed throughout California, and then in 1974 we performed in Mexico.

TENAZ and Inter-continental Theater Gathering of 1974

In the summer of 1974, the national Chicano theater organization called TENAZ (Teatros Chicanos en Aztlan) held a historic gathering of Chicano theater groups. Each
year, the venue for this event changed and that year TENAZ had joined forces with the Centro Libre de Experimentación Teatral y Artística (CLETA) (Center for Free Theatrical and Artistic Experimentation) at the Universidad Autónoma de México (UNAM), and the Partido de Trabajadores de México (The Worker’s Party of Mexico) both leftist organizations. TENAZ was able to reserve two trains for the Chicano theater and music performers to travel to Mexico City and perform for an inter-continental gathering of theatres. I was 19 years old at the time and I went with the Servidores on that historic trip (See figure two).

I drove my trusty 1966 Mustang fastback to Mexicali, parked it and joined the crew from El Centro Cultural as we boarded the train to Mexico City. The three day trip was a once in a lifetime journey of singing, dancing, drinking, and hanging out between the railroad cars, absorbing the hot moist tropical air as the sun set.

When we arrived in Mexico City, we met with theater, music, and performing art groups from all over Latin America. Most were highly politicized with Marxist ideology. The Chicano groups for the most part were nationalistic, and some were used to using Catholic imagery in their work, due to the strong influence of the United Farm Workers Union and its resident theater group “Teatro Campesino.” The very first event that took

Figure 2: The author at 20 years of age, circa 1974
place in the festival was a mass that occurred at Popotla, the place where a large bald cypress had grown for over 500 years. Legend states that here was the place where Hernán Cortez wept for his fallen comrades as they tried to escape from the Aztec capital at night. The Catholic mass was unlike anything I had ever seen. A Zapotec Indian priest recited the mass in the Zapotec language, and it included about 20 dancers of a style I had never seen. I was told that they were “Aztec” dancers, and thus I was ushered into a world that has now been an integral part of my reality and identity.

After the mass, several hundred of us climbed into dozens of buses and we proceeded to the ancient pyramids of Teotihuacan. It was a “cosmic,” once in a lifetime experience. In front of the “Pyramid of the Moon”, we performed for hundreds of Mexicans and international tourists that happened to be there that day. In the audience were my maternal grandmother and several dozen of my cousins and their spouses. I thought about how we were offering our music, in a place where a thousand years ago my ancestors carried out ceremonies and sacrifices. I was profoundly moved.

We performed at various venues in Mexico City, and then the closing events were held at Tajin, Veracruz. Because the Worker’s Party had put up the money for our trains and our performances, we performed at various “ejidos” (communal farms) where the indigenous people grew tobacco and citrus products. We slept in tobacco drying sheds and smoked freshly rolled leaf “cigars.” We offered our last performance at the Temple of the Niches at Tajin. As we performed at the top of a pyramid, the same Aztec dancers dances we had seen at Popotla, and the Totonaca “voladores” dancers (five men dance atop a 100 foot tall pole, and then four of the men throw themselves off the pole and
hanging from their legs, they revolve around the pole 13 times, before landing), danced their beautiful rituals. The mass of young Chicano and indigenous peoples, the hot tropical wind, and the exuberant vegetation, stopped the passage of time. At that instant, there was no past, no present, or future. We were participating in something that transcended generations and history.

After the festival, as we all dispersed, I met my parents and youngest sister at my aunt’s home in Mexico City. From there I acted a tour guide to my family as we went to Palenque, Monte Alban, and Mitla. The images, scents, and sounds of the TENAZ adventure, were powerful memories that still inspire breathlessness in my life.

When I returned to San Diego, I was deeply affected by my participation in the festival and what I had seen afterwards. I was excited that I had participated in an event that was deeply permeated with the living indigenous heritage of Mexico. I now saw my personal, genetic, and spiritual essence as being firmly grounded in my indigenous roots. At the same time however, as I returned to the daily grind of my student life, I felt a deep sense of loss. I realized that this very real and living part of my heritage was thousands of miles away.

Close But No Cigar

In November of 1974, one of my high school friends asked me if I would go with him and his wife to Tijuana so that they could do some early Christmas shopping. I agreed to take them and on the Saturday after Thanksgiving, we went to the famous “Avenida Revolución” (Revolution Avenue). Here the best of Mexico’s arts and crafts sit
side by side with the most tawdry and dehumanizing establishments that cater to a man’s sexual and alcoholic lusts. We walked around and I bartered and finagled with the vendors in Spanish for my friends.

I had just bought some Cuban cigars and I was daydreaming, listlessly walking down the street when suddenly, like lightening bolting through the sky and through by heart, I heard the rhythmic beating of drums! I could not believe the sound that pierced the traffic noise and loud conversations of the tourists. It instantly transported me to the ruins of Teotihuacan and Tajin.

I ran up and down the boulevard like a mad man trying to find from where the drumming was emanating. The longer it took to find the sources of the drumming, the more panic entered my head. I had to find that drum! Finally, after what seemed hours, I found an unfinished four story parking lot. There, on the first floor, next to the empty cement bags and trash was a group of 12 young men dancing in a circle. They had on the Aztec dance regalia I had seen in Mexico City. At the back of the circle, almost hidden by the shadows of the parking lot, a man played the drum. One of the dancers explained to the audience that they were Azteca dancers and they were seeking donations. I pulled out what little money I had left from shopping and excitedly handed it over to the young man. When I left I felt many complex emotions. Here in Tijuana, just 12 miles from my home were Azteca Dancers! Yet, I thought, it might as well be 12,000 miles from home because I knew I would never see them again, nor would I have any way to make contact with them. I left Tijuana with my friends and my cigars, feeling lost and glum.
December Rain and Florencio

The weeks went by and the fall turned into a cold dark winter season in San Diego. By this time, my friend Alurista was living in Texas and Juan Felipe Herrera was living in Alurista’s home. One December evening, shortly after the 12 of December (a date that would take on profound meaning for the rest of my life in a short time), Juan Felipe called me. He asked me to come over because he had “something important to show me.” I was in a deep depression due to the short daylight hours, and the cold rain did not entice to leave my parent’s home to see “something important.” Nevertheless, I got in my trusty Mustang and drove over to Alurista’s home.

When I arrived, I found the house dark, and when I entered through the kitchen, Juan Felipe greeted me with a mischievous look and said: “Do you want to meet some REAL Aztec dancers?” I was angry because I felt he was making fun of my morose mood, and he knew how much the Aztec dancing in Mexico City had affected me. I cursed at him and he said again “Do you want to meet some REAL Aztec dancers?” This time I was intrigued and followed along with what I thought was a joke. “Sure, let me meet them and maybe they can teach me to speak Nahuatl” I replied.

I entered the darkened living room. I remember the coldness of the air and the solid sound of the rain outside. Slowly, as my eyes became accustomed to the low light, I saw what appeared to be the silhouetted shapes of six men. They were literally cramped onto the sofa like sardines.

“Maestro, este es el muchacho de cual yo le había hablado antes. Este es Mario Aguilar.” (Maestro, I told you about this young man earlier. This is Mario Aguilar). The
man in the center stood up and reached out with his hand. “Yo soy Florencio Yescas.” (I am Florencio Yescas) he said.

He told me that he had left Mexico City with twelve young men, with the goal of making it to Los Angeles where he had taught ballet folklórico in the sixties. The young men that came with him ranged in age from 17 to 25. They would dance at a town, asking for donations and then, when they had enough money for travel, they would ride the bus to the next northern town and start all over again. He said they slept in parks, on cardboard, and behind soccer fields. Several times the firefighters in small towns were kind to them and they slept in the firehouse. When they came to Tijuana, they danced on Avenida Revolución, for donations. Incredibly, they were the dancers I had seen and given money to back in November!

A woman, only known to me as “Doña Mona” from Our Lady of Guadalupe Church in Chula Vista, had seen them dancing on Avenida Revolución. She invited them to come to Chula Vista, and then to San Diego to dance for the Our Lady of Guadalupe fiestas that occurred every December 12.

Incredibly, she was able to talk the immigration officers into allowing all 13 dancers to cross the border so that they could dance in the church processions. After they danced, seven of the dancers, the oldest men and the married young men decided to return to Mexico City. Florencio was left with the five youngest bachelors, ages 17 to 19 years of age.

Florencio told me that he wanted to teach Mexican-American youth all about their indigenous heritage, so that they could have something to be proud of and to keep alive
their ancient indigenous traditions. Juan Felipe said that when school started in January, he was going to help Florencio get performances at the schools, so that they could make money and leave for Los Angeles.

Thus, on that cold December evening, at the age of 20 my life was changed, never to be the same again. I did not realize that night as I drove home that Florencio would become like my grandfather, a guide, a confidant, and most of all, my teacher of the beautiful traditions of La Danza Azteca. I did not understand what would transpire in the next 10 years. I did not know how I was to be part of the first flowering of La Danza Azteca in the United States. I could never imagine that in five short years I would be given the title of Capitán at the very feet of the patroness of Mexico by Florencio’s very own elders and maestros. I did not even dream that I would someday have a wife and children that would be as much a part of La Danza Azteca as I was to be. All I knew was that it was very cold, very wet, and I was finally very happy.

January Rain and Folded Boxer Shorts

After the Christmas and New Year’s break, we returned to the Centro Cultural. Florencio began performing at local elementary schools. Since he had no transportation, Juan Felipe and I would transport Florencio and his five young dancers to each school. The guys, all from Tacuba, a gritty barrio in Mexico City and one of the three capitals of the “Aztec Empire (Davies, 1977a), all wanted to sit in my 1966 Mustang fastback. They called it “el Caballo Blanco” (the white horse). They were rowdy, crude, disrespectful, and incredibly fun to be with.
Juan Felipe and I would drive the guys from one performance to another, sometimes three performances in one day. One milestone in my Danza life occurred at Smyth Elementary school in San Ysidro near the very beginning of January, 1975. The rain was cold, misty, yet for some reason, it had a mystical quality to it.

Juan Felipe and I took the guys as usual to the performance. This time however, Florencio asked us if we wanted to dress in the Danza uniforms. We had been practicing a little bit with Florencio, but we were still scared. The Tacuba guys taunted and teased us that we were too scared to take off our clothes and put on the Danza uniforms. Of course, I could not let that taunting dare go unanswered. I took the uniform that Florencio offered me and with great embarrassment, and fear, I began to undress. I was wearing boxers, and having the cloth of the shorts hang below the uniform looked ridiculous. So I had to roll up my boxers and use safety pins to keep them under the uniform. I was sweating frozen drops of sweat as we dressed.

Once Juan Felipe and I were dressed as dancers, Florencio gave me an elaborate clay pot called a “pebetero” (an incense vessel) and with a seriousness that scared me told me: “Take this vessel, and when I tell you to, light the liquid inside. Then walk with extreme solemnity towards me and then had the vessel to me.” The guys began to perform and Juan Felipe and I stood in the back trying to look fierce, spiritual, and nonchalant (even though both of us were nervous of our near-nakedness).

Then at the appointed time, Florencio announced the “New Fire Ceremony.” He looked over at me and gave me a stare, that I took to mean “get the fire started.” I lit the fire, and as the drums counted out a slow, ponderous, and suitably mysterious beat, I
walked towards Florencio carrying the now blazing vessel of the new fire ceremony. I solemnly handed the fire to Florencio, and then suddenly, with sheer horror and fright, I suddenly realized I did not know what to do next. I looked at Florencio with fear and asked him in a low, weak voice, “Now what do I do!?” He turned slowly from me towards the astonished elementary school audience, and with a devilish smile said “Dance!”

I tried to join the circle of young men dancing, but whenever they turned left, I was going right, and when they turned right, I was barely turning left. They cursed at me as I crashed into them on each side of me. They laughed at me as I flailed around in utter horror, shame, and embarrassment. After the whole horrible ordeal was over, I went up to Florencio, angry and deeply hurt. “How could you do that to me, I don’t know how to do your dances, and everyone was looking at me!”

Florencio laughed, and then smiled at me and said, “I’m sorry I did that but you did look really funny out there!” This did nothing for my honor and pride. “Listen Mario, now you know that if you continue practicing with us, you can never be as embarrassed and humiliated as you were this very first time you performed, right?”

Although my pride was still in tatters, I laughed at the image of me dancing around like a headless chicken. He did have a point. I had dreamed and prayed for a chance to learn this beautiful tradition ever since I saw the dancers at Popotla. I knew that if I was going to be a part of this beautiful tradition, I had to take the plunge and risk it all. “So when do we practice again? I asked Florencio. “Soon,” he said. “Soon....”
The first weeks of January, Florencio began to give classes in Danza Azteca at the Centro Cultural. There were several of us. Juan Felipe Herrera, Guillermo Rosette, and I were the most consistent participants. However, I was the only one who consistently had a one track mind for La Danza. I was always there for practice. Guillermo Rosette was a muralist and was on and off in his commitment. Juan Felipe, as director of El Centro Cultural, was also busy. I was there always to drive Florencio and the guys, to practice and take them to the mountains for hikes in the snow.

At the end of February 1975, the Centro’s in-house photographer Manuel Cavada took a photograph of us in order to make some post cards that the Centro and Florencio could sell. In it, Florencio stands in the middle. Of the six young men in that photo, I was the only Chicano (see figure two). The other five guys were the young men from Tacuba that had stayed behind. The farthest on the left was Jose Noyolla, the oldest. When Florencio and the guys went to Chicago, he stayed, married, and never returned to California. Next, was Andrés García Pacheco, AKA, “el Piolín” (Tweedy Bird), later returned to Mexico, married, and died of alcoholism. Next to him was “El Pato,” was another Danzante. I never did learn his real name. Lázaro Arvizu, who would later become my compadre and lifelong friend, was 2 years younger than me. I was next in the photograph. Last, furthest on the right, there was Gerardo Salinas who is still also known as “El cerillo” (the match). He would always have an antagonistic relationship with Lázaro, and me.

This to my knowledge was the first photograph of Florencio’s group “Esplendor Azteca” in the U.S. Although others would claim that they had been the first Chicanos to
dance Danza Azteca with Florencio, the photograph shows that I was the first. Over thirty-four years later, it is incredible to realize that in that one photograph, on that day in February 1975, the entire population of La Danza Azteca that grew out of Florencio’s palabra in the United States was gathered at the Centro Cultural de la Raza for the photograph placed on our post card.

Figure 3: Esplendor Azteca, post card printed in March, 1975

Esplendor Azteca, 1975 at the Centro Cultural de la Raza, Balboa Park
Florencio Yescas holds incense burner, author is highlighted, second from far right.
In March 1975, Juan Felipe and I accompanied Florencio and his guys to Austin, Texas. Juan Felipe drove his rickety old American Motors car, and I drove my famous “Caballo Blanco” (white horse) as the Tacuba guys called my 1966 Mustang Fastback. We went to Texas for a Chicano poetry festival where we held a reunion of the Servidores del Árbol de La Vida. The Servidores as a group, and each one of us as individuals, performed our poetry and songs.

Florencio’s Esplendor Azteca performed for the grand opening of the event and caused a great sensation amongst the crowd. No one had ever seen such a spectacle of power, color, and rhythm before in Texas. There were actual gasps of surprise, shouts, and cheers as we performed. Florencio was able to sell about 100 small trinkets he had been creating on our journey to Texas; mostly old chachayotes strung onto strings; small cloth cut-outs of glyphs. The people in the audience were like sharks going after fishmeal
in the ocean. They were literally throwing their money at him and grabbing anything they could get their hands on. Florencio looked at Juan Felipe and me with the look of a scared kid and asked us to help him. We gathered the money as he passed out his trinkets to the appreciative crowd.

The Aztec mythological power of identity had created a nuclear explosion of pride, joy, and even tears. One older woman asked Florencio when he would return to Texas. With that irrepressible gnome’s look and humor, he told her with a bored straight face “Regresaremos el 31 de febrero” (we will be returning the 31 of February). The woman looked ecstatic as she walked away stroking her small piece of Azteca culture on a string. “¡Aquí lo esperaremos! (we will be waiting here for you!).

From the poetry festival in Austin, we were asked to perform in New Mexico; at a Church in Dixon; at Taos High School (where the “Hispanic” students laughed at us and jeered us. The Native American students watched and sat in silence); and at a Taos Indian Reservation school.

One of the greatest memories of all my life was when, after dancing at the Taos Indian school, we danced in front of the Taos mission church of San Geronimo. It was a cold frosty March afternoon; there were still large patches of snow on the cold hard ground. We danced in a circle in front of the mission. Slowly, groups of older community members gathered around us in silence.

Suddenly, I felt someone press something made out of paper into my hand as I danced. I looked down and saw it was a well-worn one-dollar bill. I looked up to see an elderly Taos women smile at me. I felt embarrassed and I told her I could not possibly
accept her money; we were dancing for the church and all of the ancestors that the Taos people and we Mexican people shared. She told me it was OK. It was their custom to honor guests with small gifts.

Even though my feet had previously felt painfully frozen, just moments earlier, I now felt a warm glow of the location’s spirit fill me with incredible happiness and joy.

After we had danced for some time outside the mission church, Florencio asked permission for us to enter the church to give thanks for our successful and peaceful journey to this land of the Blue Lake. We entered the church as the last light of the day grew darker. We sang alabanzas (hymns) of the Azteca Dance tradition. We left the altar of the church, walking backwards so as not to give our backs to the spirits present at the altar.

We met many kind and beautiful people who saw Florencio as an elder. He spoke to many older persons and they commented on how our traditions reflected, paralleled, and echoed their own ancient ways. At the time, I did not know that this trip to northern New Mexico would be repeated for decades and become a part of my life as a Danzante.

The Roots take hold

When we returned to San Diego, Guillermo Aranda, Guillermo Rosette, Jaime Enrique (later he changed his name to Tupac Enrique) began dancing. Juan Felipe Herrera dance only for a short time. Later Leon Magallan (he changed his name to Aztleca at this time) joined the group. We danced at schools, churches, and recreation centers.
The reaction of the Chicano and Mexicano communities to the Danza was very strong at first. At the churches, the women who organized the annual Our Lady of Guadalupe Day festivities were outraged and horrified at our “nakedness.” I remember entering a church in Los Angeles during a mass, and hearing women exclaim “My dear God, they are entering the house of the lord naked!”

My friends at the Centro Cultural de la Raza could also be unkind and cruel. I remember the first time we performed at the Centro in our borrowed dance regalia that friends I had drank and partied with, ridiculed us and yelled out: “You guys are a bunch of queers, and faggots!” “You are not a real Indian, I know you Mario, you grew up in East San Diego, and you are Mexican, not Indian!” Their identity was still firmly planted in the tequila and mariachi world view of what it meant to a Mexican man.

On April 22, 1975, at the Fifth Annual Chicano Park Celebration, Florencio presented La Danza Azteca, in its entirety, for the first time in the U.S. Other groups had performed in the U.S. before (such as the Anaya family at the Gallup Inter-tribal Ceremonial in New Mexico, among others). Andrés Segura had traveled and performed as part of the White Roots of Peace group at various colleges and reservations. However, no one had presented La Danza Azteca as a holistic ceremony of asking for permission, dancing, and then giving thanks in front of the general Chicano/Mexicano community.

I was not present at that historic event because my parents had asked me to go with them to my uncle’s birthday party in Corona, California. Because my participation in La Danza Azteca had alienated me from the Catholic Church and my parents were very involved in the Cursillo movement, I decided to go with them in order to mend our
family ties. While I sat bored to tears in the hot dusty air of my uncle’s “ranch” in Corona, in Chicano Park, history, both positive and negative was being made.

Chunky and others who were there that fateful day recalled that the drums and the spectacle of the dances mesmerized the crowd. The youth were overcome with cultural pride and community solidarity.

Tragically, at the same time the dance circle began dancing, there was a serious fight between rival Chicano gangs in the audience. The police intervened with tear gas, and batons. The crowd responded with bottles and stones. Florencio later told me that he could not see where the smoke from the copal incense ended and the clouds of tear gas began. Thus, La Danza Azteca was suitably welcome to Aztlan with smoke, blood sacrifice, and tears. Chicano Park and the Chicano Park Day Celebrations would never be the same.

The Feathered Serpent Leaves for the East

At the end of April 1975, Florencio told us he was taking his guys to Chicago to perform at various venues he had once worked at with his Ballet Folklórico groups. We wanted to take advantage of the Cinco de Mayo fiestas in Chicago, Wisconsin, and St. Paul, Minnesota.

Cinco de Mayo, although a minor national holiday in Mexico, had become a big celebration wherever Chicano/Mexicano college students attended college. This was because the Mexican Day of Independence, September 16, always arrived at the start of
the academic year. Students in MEChA could not organize and request money in time for this date.

Cinco de Mayo on the other hand, arrived at the end of the academic year, when the Mechistas had already requested funds from the associated student governments and could contract performers and speakers for their schools.

Florencio left us with a vast emptiness in our hearts and daily life. For the past five months we had breathed, eaten, slept and dreamt La Danza Azteca. My school work at San Diego State University had taken a precipitous drop in quality and course grades. However, for me, the opportunity to learn firsthand what no university on Earth could teach me about my indigenous heritage and spiritual odyssey, was more important than my Euro-centric dominant society academic journey. At this point, I fell into another deep depression.

Danza Toltecas en Aztlan is born

I cannot remember what day it was, but I remember that it was in the early summer of 1975. We were at the home of Guillermo Aranda. Guillermo and his wife Sue (who later changed her name to Ana-i) lived in one house of a two house parcel. In the other House lived Tupac Enrique and his wife Debbie (who later changed her name to Momai). We were having an evening gathering, and Tupac’s mother and father were there. Tupac’s sisters Veronica, Viviana, and Claudia, who had started dancing with us, were also present. Guillermo Rosette and Aztleca were also there.
Memo Cavada, the Centro’s photographer was there, as were “Chunky” Ramon Sanchez, and his wife Isabel, also a sister of Tupac. We sat around a small fire and talked about the murals at Chicano Park and the conflicts between “La Liga” (a Marxist organization) and the Mexican Nationalists that were occurring within the MEChA group at San Diego State University- and indeed, throughout the MEChA’s of most colleges.

As the sky darkened, and the fire grew brighter, the talk soon turned to La Danza Azteca. We grieved at the fact that Florencio had left us, and how much we had learned; but there was so much more to learn! We had only gathered a thimble full of ocean water, and now we were left on our own.

Tupac’ mom, Señora Enrique, suddenly asked me why I did not start teaching what I knew at the Centro. Chunky, Memo, and Guillermo Aranda also encouraged me to take what little I knew and teach it to others. Guillermo Rosette, Aztleca, and the other dancers who had eventually danced with Florencio’s Esplendor Azteca group, began to talk passionately about starting our own group at the Centro Cultural de la Raza.

I remember that the consensus was that between all of us, we could piece together the dance steps and movements of La Danza Azteca. We became intoxicated with the thought of actually creating our own dance circle, with the knowledge that Florencio had left us. We dramatically began dancing around the camp fire as Memo Cavada took photographs of the fire’s flames.

Since the corporate organization that ran the Centro Cultural de la Raza in Balboa Park was called “Toltecas En Aztlan, Inc.,” we decided to call our dance circle “Toltecas en Aztlan.”
Throughout the summer, we practiced every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday at the Centro. Even though we all remembered something of the dances, it eventually became apparent that I was the one who had the most time and ability to teach the new dancers. The two Guillermo’s were deeply involved in the various mural projects of the Centro. The others also had various projects and responsibilities. I had decided to take a semester off from San Diego State so I could dance and work on some of the murals at Chicano Park.

Several community members saw us dance and asked to join our circle. One evening as we practiced at the Chicano Federation building at Chicano Park, a young man came in after working with Corky’s Pest Control. He stared at us for a long time, and eventually, he joined our dance circle. His name was Felipe Esparza. He became like the older brother I had never known and always missed. At one point, we had about fifteen men and women dancing in our circle. What little we knew, we shared with open hearts and deep love of our indigenous traditions. Ricardo Medina and Ricardo Gomez became part of fledging “Esplendor Azteca” substitute group.

The Feathered Serpent Returns

Sometime near December 12, 1975, Florencio returned to San Diego from the Midwest. He came to dance at the procession for Our Lady of Guadalupe, where just a year earlier he and his young men had begun their extraordinary journey throughout the U.S. Florencio was happy to see that we had continued our dancing. After we had danced
in the procession, he announced that he and his boys were going to move to Los Angeles and set up their headquarters there.

Those of us who had been patiently waiting for Florencio to return and continue our apprenticeship in La Danza were suddenly caught in a conundrum. If we wanted to continue our learning, we would have to go to live in Los Angeles. However, if we did, especially those of us that had jobs, or were enrolled in school, we would have to make a great sacrifice our routine, our homes and our lives.

Felipe Esparza was the first to say he was going to go to L.A.; Aztleca and Ricardo Medina were next. I was deeply torn between going north to continue my Danza learning, and continuing my education at San Diego State University. The thought that my best friend and brother, Felipe was going north, made me decide to leave San Diego and go with Florencio to Los Angeles. Although I would pay a steep physical and mental price for this decision, I would do it over again without a moment’s hesitation. I told my parents a lie; I told them that I was transferring to “the university” in Los Angeles. Instead, I took a semester leave from San Diego State University. I packed my clothes and did not look back.

Plaza De La Raza, and the Gigolos of Olvera Street

When we followed Florencio to Los Angeles in January of 1976, we did not know what to expect. We ended up staying in the converted garage of a long time friend of Florencio. There, where a pool table had stood, twelve of us slept in space no larger than a single car garage. It had for some odd reason a downstairs pseudo-basement, where
sometimes some of us would go hang out to escape the constant noise and confusion of our “home away from home.”

Since I was the only one who possessed a car, Florencio had me driving him up and down the Los Angeles area. I took him to meet old friends who had worked with him in the fifties and sixties. We met former ballet folklórico students that now had their own children and were excited to see Florencio once again. I took him to several stores in Hollywood that catered to the film studios where he bought beautiful, exotic (at least to my mind at that time) materials, feathers and rhinestones.

Florencio was a great storyteller and a great raconteur. His friends would take us to lunch and I would sit in silence hearing all the tales of long past events, shows, performances, and people. I could see that people loved Florencio not just because of his talent, but because of his kindness and humor.

I wish I could recall the older woman we visited. Her home was an adobe style home and it had many stone “precolumbian” style statues on the portico of her house. Inside as Florencio and she talked of old times, I saw many incredible musical instruments that appeared to be from Mexico. Florencio told me that her husband had been a great ethnomusicologist and traveled throughout Latin America. I wish I could have gotten my hands on some of those teponaztls!

One of the first contacts Florencio made when he returned to Los Angeles was with the person I believe was the manager of Olvera Street. I remember sitting next to Florencio in that crowded office and the man asked how many dancers he had brought.
“Twelve” said Florencio. “How many girls?” asked the man in what I thought was a lascivious tone. “Ningunas, puros huevos.” (None, nothing but testicles) replied Florencio. I still remember that matter of fact tone Florencio used. Florencio received what he had come for: permission for us to dance in Olvera Street for donations. He later got the owners of the old historic “La Golondrina” restaurant on Olvera Street to let us perform twice nightly in the restaurant.

The second contact Florencio made was with the director of “Plaza de La Raza,” a community Chicano Arts center, much like the Centro Cultural de la Raza of San Diego, but with much greater funding and organization. Apparently, Florencio had taught ballet folklórico here in the early seventies, and the staff was eager for him to teach again. However, he told them that although he would teach ballet folklórico, his main emphasis this time was to teach the Danza Azteca traditions to the Mexican community.

The winter of 1975-76 seemed especially cold and hard for us because we slept on the hard floor of the unheated, un-insulated, converted garage. Sometimes, there were up to 20 of us crammed in the room. This was true when we had to go perform very early in the morning somewhere far inside Los Angeles County. This included the original five young men from Tacuba, in Mexico City; the six Chicanos from San Diego, three or four dancers from la plaza de la Raza, some of whom were young women and various hangers on that wanted to learn about our indigenous traditions and heritage. It was not a pretty place to live.

We did not work regular jobs. We danced daily at Olvera Street in front of “La Golondrina” restaurant. We lived on what donations we could get dancing there every
day. The Tacuba guys would get to dance in the “big” shows at night in the La Golondrina. The rest of us would dress and make up the “chorus line” of proto-Danzantes that would play our rattles, and flutes.

Once we got a “gig” to dance nightly at a cool bar, located at the corner of the Million Dollar Theater building on Broadway. One had to walk down some stairs to get to the bar. It was painted with beautiful Fluorescent paint murals that echoed Teotihuacan, Tula, and Mexi’co-Tenochtitlan. I remember that one of the waitresses said we could order drinks. That was a bad mistake. In between performances, we would order whatever we desired. I first drank a “Singapore Sling,” a “Mai Tai,” a “Zombie” and a “Whiskey Sour” at this fine establishment.

One of the nights, I pleaded with Florencio to let me perform. He agreed and let me drum. Tragically for the performance, when it came time for me to drum “Aguila Blanca” my mind went blank. I began to sweat, and my hands and feet turned ice cold. One of the Tacuba guys had to come up and drum. My friend Felipe laughed at me and ordered a beer for me and soon all was well. Except that the next day when Florencio went to pick up our money for the performances, the manager told him that we had drank all but twelve dollars of the performance fees! We did not eat for three days after this inglorious end of our performances at this illustrious venue.

I remember that there were times when we divided up “la Dona” (La donación – the donation) and we each received five dollars for the week. For several weeks, I remember eating one mixed burrito for lunch and one soda per day so I would not end up without money at the end of the week. These were the times when Florencio would ask
me to take him to some exotic store, studio, or home of a friend. He would give me money for gas and I would save this money as if my life depended on it. Which in retrospect, it did.

One memory that has always made me laugh was the old lady incident at Olvera Street. We had been dancing for several hours, and I was unusually tired. I sat down on one of the brick planters and watched as the rest of the guys performed. Suddenly, I felt a hand go up my thigh and reach my crotch. I was shocked and dumbfounded. I was even more shocked when I realized that the perpetrator sexually assaulting me in public was an elderly lady. She had all white hair and looked like she spent most of her life praying the rosary at church; but not that day. She turned around and gave me the most lascivious grin and wink of an eye I had ever seen. When I told the rest of the gang what had happened we all rolled around in laughter.

Early on the guys, especially the young men from Mexico City began to realize that our young men’s bodies were attracting young girls, married women, old ladies, and even gay men. First out of macho ego, and eventually out of desperation, we began to use our “Aztec” love charm,” as Piolín would say to meet and quite frankly use the women for our sustenance and survival.

I remember that there were always young blond women who would buy some of the Mexico City guys some food, cigarettes and beer. Soon some of us from San Diego also began hooking up with young women. I felt bad that some of the guys blatantly used and abused the women they “cultivated.” Most of these were young immigrant Mexicans who were lonely, who had no education, and wanted to connect with someone like them.
I remember one such young lady that I shall call Carmen. She was a beautiful young kid who worked in a factory stapling TV guides together for a living. I don’t recall where or how I met her, but soon she was buying me shirts, food, taking me to dances, and buying me tickets for the movies. She was a beautiful young woman in heart and body. As time went on my damn Catholic upbringing made me feel guilty and I broke off our friendship. She needed a young man who wanted to settle down, have a family, and treat her like the princess she really was.

Instead, I hooked up with crazy Chicanas, who loved pot, alcohol, and partying as much as I did. Although they too provided me with a cushion of comfort, we were always in agreement that ours was an arrangement of sexual pleasure, political and cultural exploration. Nothing was promised and nothing was asked for. Chicano Teatro actresses, and Chicana painters, filled my time when I was not begging on Olvera Street, dancing in performances, or driving Florencio around.

One night, Florencio asked me to drop him off at an unusual building. I asked what he was doing there and if I was going to go with him. He said no. “I will see you later” he said. I did not see him for three days. Months later, when he had finally rented an apartment for himself and the dancers that were with him, he told me about his visit to this place. He told me it was a bath house where men went to meet other men. In my naiveté, I did not know what he meant.

He showed me some pictures of when he and the Tacuba guys had gone to Chicago. He showed me one and said “En esta foto parece lo que soy (In this picture I appear as what I am).” He was wearing rather tight pants, an Afro wig, and what appeared to be
lipstick. He laughed and said that they had dressed up for a party and that in this picture he was able to show who he was inside. I then understood that he was telling me that he was gay.

At that time, I felt that Florencio was Quetzalcoatl, the returning feathered serpent of ancient Mesoamerican lore. He told me that his indigenous name was “Texoxoqui,” which meant “brujo” (warlock or wizard). Years later when I began to study Nahuatl, I looked up the word, and sure enough, that is what it meant!

Florencio was a wise teacher of his people. He was the counselor that everyone sought out, and the inspiration that we all needed. He was like the grandfather I had never known. As he told me about his life, I sat in silence, and I could see the great pain he had suffered hiding his life and sexuality from the world.

He told me that in the mid 1950s he had married an Anglo woman who had fallen in love with him. Here had married her because she said she could help him get his green card. Even though he told her of his sexuality, she did not change her mind. They married. He received his green card, and several years later, they divorced. The funny thing about Florencio was that he had great sexual magnetism that attracted all types of women to him.

One such a woman was Señora Magro. He had been a good friend of Señora Magro and her husband when he lived in Chicago decades earlier. When her husband passed away, they had kept in touch. When she found out that Florencio was back, she sold off everything she had, except for her brand new Cadillac, and moved to Los Angeles, along with her son, Rainer. Señora Magro would follow Florencio doggedly
until he passed away in 1985. Between taking Florencio to performances, and taking his dancers to and fro, her Cadillac was destroyed. Nevertheless, she did not care; her love for Florencio was deep, and committed. One time Florencio got mad at Señora Magro and told her off. He was upset. He told me that the greatest sadness was to love someone and not have them love you back – unrequited love he emphasized. Señora Magro was with Florencio when he passed away.

The struggle to survive, while at the same time enjoy the bohemian life we lead was hard on my body. We smoked constantly, drank whenever we could get free alcohol, and ate infrequently. I lost about twenty pounds of weight. I was very happy about this because I have always been overweight. Nevertheless, the costs were great. Every day we would go to Olvera Street to dance for donations. Most days we had performances at a school, a church, or a recreation center. Florencio would ask me to drive him to some other office, house, or store.

The greatest learning experiences I had were when I was chauffeuring Florencio around Los Angeles. I had an opportunity to ask a million questions about La Danza, its history, how it survived, and what it meant. Florencio was a keen observer of life. He told me of his many travels to isolated towns and villages where traditional elders still carried out La Danza as it had been for hundreds of years. He told me how “Los Concheros” (the people of the armadillo shell instruments) had encoded the precolumbian dances, rituals and symbols into what was on the surface devote Roman Catholic tradition. Florencio had traveled to many different indigenous communities as one of the four original
members of Amalia Hernandez’s world renowned Ballet Folklórico de Mexico. He had been her original dance partner.

Once he showed me an old photograph of him and Amalia, and another couple dressed in the *Jarocho* dance regalia of Veracruz. Florencio was an extremely handsome young man in that faded photo, with that ever impish, yet elegant smile. He had learned many dances from these isolated towns and villages. Later he would choreograph the original indigenous dances into the ballet folklórico repertoire. Dances such as “Los Matachines,” “Los Negritos,” “Los Quetzales,” and many others were brought to Mexico City by Florencio. He also knew and learned from several famous Danza elders including Natividad Reyna, Manuel Pineda, and others. I believe that Florencio saw in me a deep desire to learn not just, how we dance La Danza, but why. He made sure that all of my questions were answered, even if at that time, I could not possibly understand the profound nature of the answers.

There were a couple of times when things were rough; the guys would be fighting for Florencio’s attention or against each other; the ever-growing crowd of Chicano college students who wanted to learn about their indigenous heritage were always asking questions; there were always a small corps of “groupies” hanging around the guys; and the money situation was always touch and go. Sometimes at these crisis points, Florencio would ask me to drive him to a “place,” any place. Once we were on the road, I would ask him where he wanted me to take him. He would smile and say “Wherever you want to go, just make sure it’s far.” We would talk, laugh, and talk some more. Florencio was extremely interested in the Chicano search for identity and spirituality. He asked me
complex questions about Chicano politics, the role of the Marxist contingent in MEChA, and about the Chicano’s relationship to the Catholic Church.

Once when we were going to a store that I vaguely remember being called something like “Hollywood Silks,” Florencio told me about a dream he carried in his heart. He told me that someday he would like to see that like in many parts of central Mexico, every barrio in Aztlan would someday have its own Danza Azteca group. He also said that some day he would like to prepare a performance of Conchero style Danza Azteca, so that all the Chicano/Mexicano communities of Aztlan could see how our central Mexican traditions had survived, flourished, and grown throughout the past four hundred years. The year after Florencio passed away, our dance circle carried out his dream. We performed for one year only in the traditional Conchero uniforms that he loved so much.

As March turned to April, I began to feel that my weight loss was more than me losing a few pound of fat. I was constantly tired, sleepy, and felt as if I had a fever every day. Yet, I felt I had to soldier on, lest the other men feel I was not up to the challenge of conquering new communities for La Danza.

Soon I felt so bad I could not get out of bed. Sadly, I told Florencio I had to go home because I was sick. Although he was sad to see me leave, he was I think, a bit grateful that I was leaving. One less possible calamity he would have to take care of. I knew he would miss my car as much as he would miss me, but by this time, he had begun to make contact with other young Chicanos who could transport him and the guys to performances and meetings. Felipe Esparza begged me not to return to San Diego;
Ricardo Medina was ready to go home; Aztleca and Guillermo Rosette were eager to stay in Los Angeles. They had nothing to return to in San Diego, and the life of an Aztec Bohemian Gigolo suited them well.

Felipe and I returned to San Diego. I came home and my mother was horrified at my state of health. I vaguely remember crawling to bed. I do not remember the rest of the time, but Felipe went to stay with his brother Marco in Tijuana, and I slept for an entire week. Finally, my frightened parents took me to the hospital, where I was diagnosed with a bad case of mononucleosis. It took me about a month to regain my energy. Even though I went to visit, practice, and perform with Florencio scores of times in the next 10 years, I never returned to the life of the carefree professional Danzante.

Soon after Felipe and I had returned to San Diego, Ricardo Medina returned to San Diego and I never saw him again. Years later, I saw his brother at a school I worked with and he told me that his brother was “really sick with a terrible disease.” He never told me what it was and a couple of years later, I saw the brother again. He told me Ricardo had passed away.

It is a double edged sword to be able to live long enough to look back at the past through the aged and cloudy lens of memory. One remembers the fun, glory, and adventure. Yet just below the surface lies nostalgia for the times of youth, the disappointments of failed goals, and the longing for dear friends that have gone ahead of us.

Although the living arrangements in Los Angeles had been difficult, when a man is young and the excitement powerful, everything becomes an epic, cosmic journey of
manhood, conquest, and arrival. Each one of us found our battle ground where we either
overcame our fears, or we collapsed into the darkness of self-destruction. Overcoming
our fears did not occur overnight. It has been a journey of decades to realize the changes
and the victories of my life. Likewise, collapsing into the darkness of self-destruction
occurred slowly for some, who at long last found solace. For some of the others,
tragically, the darkness of self-destruction ended in death; some sooner than others.

The legacy of this first learning experience for me in La Danza Azteca (1974-76)
was that I swore that I would never, ever again dance for donations. I believe that the
creator has given me intelligence, a sound body, and strong hands. Therefore I could not
in good consciousness demean and degrade what I constantly call out as my spiritual
heritage, and cultural legacy by begging for donations while dressed in my Danza
uniform. While there may be recent immigrants who have no choice but to dance for
money to live from, we Chicanos should be ashamed of living off of our traditional
Danza, when we have two languages, our intelligence, and our community there to help
us live meaningful and gainful lives.

La Danza Azteca can sustain itself through dance and workshop performance fees,
but those should be meant for the evolution of the dance circle, not to pay the rent, cell
phones, or car payments of the dancers.

Perhaps it was this lesson, and my adherence to it, that opened the door for me to
eventually receive Florencio’s command to go to Mexico City to be recognized as a
“Capitán” or traditional group leader of Toltecas en Aztlan.
The White Eagle and the Feathered Serpent

After returning to San Diego at the end of April, 1976, I rested and tried to return to a “normal” life. However, the halcyon days of Esplendor Azteca, and the Bohemian life of an artist, were hard to forget. By the summer of that year, Felipe and I had returned to practicing with the Toltecas en Aztlan members who had stayed in San Diego. They were Tupac Enrique, his sisters Veronica and Viviana, Ricardo Gomez, Rafael Sanchez, and a young woman whose name I cannot recall her name anymore (Christina maybe?). She was studying to be a nurse, I believe. We practiced every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday at the Centro Cultural de la Raza in Balboa Park. There my friends, who at first jeered and mocked us, began to give us the hard earned respect we deserved. One of them, the leader of Teatro Mestizo (and self-proclaimed Marxist) Marcos Contreras, would joke and call me “El Dios Quetzalcoatl” (the god Quetzalcoatl). He would walk into the Centro and when he would see me, he would say, “What do I see? A feathered serpent! Quetzalcoatl has returned from the sea!” I would then retort with “Pinché Hernán Cortes, regrésate a Europa!” (Fucking Hernán Cortes, go back to Europe!) I remember I told Florencio about this ritual greeting, and he told me “You should be honored because the community has given you your birth name. Your birth in la Danza has been marked by the respect you have earned. You are now Quetzalcoatl.”

At first, I was nervous and concerned about accepting such a name. It carries a lot of historical baggage, expectations, presumptions, and possibilities. At that point, in my life, I had taken the name “Iztac Cuauhtli,” the white eagle, since that was my favorite Danza.
Over the years, some of my dearest friends gave me other “indigenous names” that I carry with honor. One of these names was “El Gran Toch.” Ramon “Chunky” Sanchez, my guitar teacher at the Centro (and future band mate in Los Alacranes Mojados) would see us practice. He would make fun of Guillermo Rosette, who loved to dance in an energetic, but somewhat anarchic manner. One night Chunky saw us practicing and commented “You guys look like a bunch of rabbits on mescaline!” Several years later when Chunky asked me to join the Alacranes, we were sitting as we frequently did, drinking after a show. He asked me “How do you say rabbit in Nahuatl?” I replied “Tochtli.” Then a few moments later, when one of the audience members came up to us to ask for a card, Chunky introduced the band members to him. When he got to me, he said “And this is Mario E. Aguilar, El Gran Toch.” He laughed and said that since I “was the head rabbit” of Toltecas en Aztlan, I deserved the moniker of “Gran” or great. To this day, whenever our paths cross, Chunky always greets me with a shout of “El Gran Toch!”

From the years 1977 until 1980, the routine of La Danza became, well, routine. We practiced every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. We performed at local schools, churches, and we would go to Los Angeles to practice and continue learning from Florencio. Florencio’s practices at La Plaza de la Raza were always packed with Ballet Folklórico dancers, newly inspired Danzantes Aztecas, and musicians who were awed at the dances Florencio taught.

During the years 1976 and 1977, Florencio and his Esplendor Azteca, would return to the Chicano Park Day celebration and dance. By 1978, the newly reconstituted
Toltecas were ready to take on more responsibility for the welcoming of the outside
dancers that came from Los Angeles. Guillermo Rosette and Aztleca had returned to San
Diego. However, the two of them were still involved in the transient life of the Danzante star. Especially Guillermo Rosette; he would be gone for months at a time, and then
suddenly return and expect to tell the rest of us what to do, and how to do it. While
different people came in and out of Toltecas en Aztlan, I was left to teach the workshops.
With the help of Felipe, we would go to practice in my now famous Mustang, “el Caballo Blanco.”

At this point in the history of the Toltecas en Aztlan dance group, there were five
males in the group, and each one was a “Capitán” or group leader. We each had a
“command” for the group, but realistically it was a case of all chiefs and no Indians.
Every young man wants to strut his stuff, but when there is no one to follow him, he
struts alone. Most of the time however, the other Capitanes were busy traveling for one
cause or another, and Felipe Esparza was the only one that was there to help with the
nitty-gritty day to day running of the dance group.

The stress of being the “unofficial” leader, teacher, fundraiser, and spokesperson
for our group was hard. On top of this stress, was the pressure to finish my Bachelor’s
degree at San Diego State University, which I finally did in June of 1978.

By the spring of 1978, my bouts with depression had become deep. That year, I
began using heroin on and off to kill the pain of eternal sadness. I know that to admit to
using drugs will surprise and sadden some people. Nevertheless, I acknowledge this part
of my life because it gave me a deeper understanding of why some people can never get
themselves out of substance abuse. Depression is a heavy and powerful disease that can rob you of the will to live, the joy of youth, and the hope in tomorrow. These terrible times taught me to strive to be a better father than I had, to be a better husband than I saw around me, and to be a person who tries to overcome his faults on a daily basis.

Some of the friends I had at this time, young men that I admired and loved as my *carnales*, passed on from overdoses and alcohol abuse. I truly believe that the spirits of La Dana Azteca saved my life, first with the arrival of my first children, the Perez kids.

One day in the summer of 1978, my car broke down in front of the Chicano Federation building next to Chicano Park. I opened the hood of the Mustang and tried to figure out why it would not start. From across the street several small kids came out of a tiny house and walked over to me. The oldest, about nine years old asked me if I was a Danzante Azteca. I said yes, and he asked if he could help me. I did not know what was wrong with my car, but I didn’t want this little boy to feel like I did not appreciate his help.

“Here, take this wrench and hold it right here. Don’t let it move or the engine will fall out.” I told him. I put wrench on a bolt that was safely out of the way. He took the task very seriously and while his younger sisters and brother looked on, I finally figured out that the points in the distributor were old and had to be adjusted closer together in order to make the car run. Then I sat down with the little tribe of beautiful children and started to talk.

He told me that his name was Rolando Perez and was nine years old. His sisters and he had started practicing with Aztleca and his children’s Danza practice. They had
seen the “grown-up’s” practice and they liked what they saw. They were bored with the kid’s class and wanted to dance with the “real Danzantes,” the adults. I told him they could dance with whomever they wanted, but they said Aztleca would get mad. I told him I would talk to Aztleca and there would be no problem.

That is how my love affair with the Perez family started. In Rolando, I saw myself, an intelligent, low income boy with lots of potential, lots of pain, yet full of laughter. He had such a noble bearing for such a small child. He was basically raising his younger siblings. His mother had a total of 13 children. His father was a man who loved his children, but suffered deeply from alcoholism. Most of the time he was never home.

Gloria, the next oldest, had an energy that was both athletic and petite. The twins Ruth and Gabby were full of character and bravado. The tiniest sibling was two year old Letty, who was sweet and shy. Rolando became for me like my oldest son, my little brother, and when he became a young man, my best friend. When he was 12, he nervously asked me to be his godfather for his first communion. It was an honor that still brings tears to my eyes, and I remember what a gentle and kind boy he always was. He took his responsibility of protecting his siblings seriously. Many years later he would become my compadre as both his sons asked me to be their first communion godfather.

Other people whose names have faded from my memory would enter and then eventually leave Toltecas en Aztlan, but even if they never danced again, they took the spirit that Florencio had brought from Mexico to Aztlan.

One day Aztleca, Rolando, and I went door to door at various grocery stores looking for donated food for the upcoming Chicano Park celebration. We were excited
because we calculated that “over 40” dancers would be coming down from L.A.!” The possibility of such a massive group, and the need to feed and lodge the Danzantes seemed daunting. We left store after store empty handed and one store told me to write a letter to their headquarters so they could decide what to do. They answered a few weeks later and said that because we were not a non-profit organization, they could not help us. The only store that helped us was “Oty Farms. Pauli, the owner gave us about 30 kilos of tortillas and that was a godsend for us!

“One day” I thought, “we will be a non-profit and we will get food and money donated to help our cause.” It would be almost a decade before my dream came true.

The second time the spirits of La Danza saved me from self-destruction was when I met my wife Beatrice. I was performing with the Alacranes at one of their friend’s wedding. We were on stage and out of the corner of my eye, I saw Chunky’s brother Ralph enter the hall with two women. One was his fiancé, and the other was a beautiful woman I had never seen before. As cliché as it sounds, the room suddenly shrank, all got quiet, and it seemed like I had telescopic vision as I looked at this young woman. She represented a new life, full of love and happiness. Her love was more powerful than any drug or alcohol I had ever tried. A year and a half later, in March, 1980, Bea and I married. Toltecas en Aztlan danced at our wedding, and I don’t know that my new bride knew the profound impact that La Danza Azteca would have in her new life as my wife and in the life of her children.

In July of 1980, Florencio asked me to visit him in L.A. Florencio lived on the corner of Boyle and Broadway in Lincoln Heights. His was an apartment on the second
floor over a grocery store, and next to a dentist’s office. The street below was always noisy and full of pollution. That is what made his home so cosmic. Once you entered his home, you were transported to a quiet, serene, and spiritually rich sacred space.

When we arrived, my wife Bea and I were shocked by what he said to me. He told me that he had been watching me and the work I had been doing in San Diego and that I was now ready to go to Mexico City and be recognized by the Danza Azteca elders for my work and the path I had chosen for Toltecas En Aztlan. I must go to Mexico and become a “Capitán” or dance circle elder of my Danza. I was barely 25, and I was terrified of the prospect of going to Mexico and meeting the elders, let alone having them give me such a title that I really knew nothing about.

However, I trusted and loved Florencio, and so I agreed to go with him to Tepeyac in December to receive the recognition. He told me what I needed to prepare for the ceremony. My wife Bea took the measurements and soon began to create our “estandarte,” our banner that would announce my presence and that of our group at traditional ceremonies. It was red because I wanted to symbolize the sacrifice of blood, sweat, tears, and money that each Danzante has to offer in order to fulfill their obligation to the ancestors. We place a jade green butterfly, like the one that is seen on the chest of the warriors at Tula, Hidalgo, to symbolize our Tolteca heritage. Later I found out it also symbolizes the spirits of our ancestors that return to Earth for sustenance and to give us power.
At the feet of the Little Mother of all Mexico

On December 12, 1980, at La Villa de Guadalupe, at the foot of the mountain Tepeyac, (where for hundreds of years, the Mexican faithful have prayed; first to the Mother Earth, then to the Mother of Christ) I was given the title of “Capitán” or group leader of Toltecas en Aztlan. My wife Bea, Guillermo Rosette, and Felipe Rangel, one of our new dancers, were present. I called to Guillermo to get closer to the ceremony, but he refused. He was either standing holding an estandarte, or was standing next to one. I saw tears in his eyes and a deep sad look on his face, as if he was hurt that it was me, and not him that was being recognized.

He moved further back behind the estandarte as the ceremony continued. Various “jefes” (leaders), Capitanes, and one generala (female general of the dance) took their turn giving me their blessings and advice. Each kissed my estandarte, and I reciprocated with theirs. This ceremony is a show of equality and acceptance between the group leaders. I took the name Iztac Cuauhtli at this ceremony.

As far as my research has shown, I was the first Chicano ever to receive this honor, and at 26 years of age, I was one of the youngest men ever in Mexico to have been given this title. It was all due to Florencio’s support for me, and the great respect the other dancers had for him and what he had done for Danza. Florencio told me later on that trip that it was important for him to show the elders he had learned from that he was carrying on their lineage in the U.S. This is when I began to understand the concept of “linaje, esencia, y raíces” (lineage, essence and roots).
The Tolteca-Mexi’ca War Begins

In January of 1981, when Bea and I returned from Mexico City, we had several surprises awaiting us. The first was that Bea had begun to suffer morning sickness on the train ride back to Mexicali. So our first-born can say without exaggeration that he danced for the Virgin of Guadalupe before he was born.

The second surprise we received was that Guillermo Rosette had come back from Mexico City and told the rest of the “Tolteca” that I had tricked the elders of Mexico into giving me the leadership of our group.

There were many volatile meetings, where even though Florencio had told everyone what would happen in Mexico City on December 12, I was accused of being a traitor and an opportunist. Bea and I were physically threatened (even though she was very pregnant and showing). Finally, there was an incident where I went to visit Felipe Esparza at his worksite at the Villanueva housing site, accompanied by Rolando. I had already decided that if I was seen as the problem for the group, I needed to leave Toltecas en Aztlan and start my own group. I took all of the group’s bank statements, photographs, letters that I had collected from our presentations to the community, and the group’s check book to Felipe.

Felipe became angry when I told him I was leaving the group, and said that I could not leave the group unless they gave me permission. As he talked, he pulled out a 12 inch knife from his desk and shook it about as he spoke. I left off the documentation I had taken care of for the group for the past five years, and Rolando and I left. Rolando
was shaken by the experience and I was angry, sad, and yet, I left feeling proud of what I had just done.

That April 1981, at the Chicano Park celebration, the visiting dancers were caught up between the battles of whether I could leave the group without the other guy’s permission, and who would be in charge of future Chicano Park Day Celebrations.

At that meeting, the Perez kids, Felipe Rangel, his girlfriend Carla Talamantes, Sheryl Sanchez (a new dancer and soon to become a lifelong friend of our family), and Josie Talamantes, all decided to leave Toltecas en Aztlan, and follow me to our new group, as yet unnamed. Some people in the community suggested to me that I should leave our estandarte with the Toltecas. However, Bea and I thought that was an unfair suggestion, because they had done anything to create it, let alone earn it. Others told us that we should give it to Florencio, since he was the one that had given me the recognition in the first place.

In May of 1981, I went to Los Angeles to work with Florencio and his dancers on the new Disneyworld project called the House of Mexico for the Disney EPCOT center in Florida. I worked with Florencio on the music soundtrack of the film that they were shooting for this ride. At this time, I asked Florencio what he thought I should do with the estandarte. He told me, “You earned that honor. Besides, your wife made the estandarte. It belongs to no one but you. When you have decided on what name you will use for your group, you need to remove the Tolteca name. Then you need to take the estandarte back to Mexico to be re-consecrated.” We gave our new group the name of “Danza Mexi’cayotl,” the dance of the Mexican nation.
In May of 1982, I returned to Mexico, this time to the sacred site of Chalma, in the state of Mexico. There the same elders that had given me the title of Capitán reiterated their faith in Florencio’s word, and my activities to spread La Danza Azteca.

Over time, my wife and I raised our son and our daughter within the traditions of La Danza. They had no choice but to attend everything we did: whether it was a community meeting or a Danza ceremony. We felt it was important for them to grow up within our Mexcoehuani environment. Later as adults, if they did not feel La Danza in their hearts, they could always walk away. However, the spirits of our ancestors run strong in their blood. Our children have group up to be part of the new generation of Danza leaders, ready to take on the heavy burden of leadership and of planting new seeds for tomorrow’s Danza.

My wife, who once felt she did not know if La Danza could be a way of life for her, is now one of Aztlan’s most respected woman Danza leaders. She has been able to teach me to balance my love and commitment to La Danza with participation in the daily beauty and joy of life. We have truly become one shared spirit within a duality of human beings.

Now in 2009, twenty-nine years later, the bitterness and sadness of the battle to go our own way, to stand up for what we believed was just, has long given way to a sense of pride of all the things our families have accomplished.

In 1985, Florencio Yescas succumbed to the great plague of AIDS. His age was given as 65, 69, or 74. No one really knew his real age, since he was always doctoring up his age for business and theatrical purposes. When he died, the first great era of Danza
Azteca ended. His last words to Bea and me were: “Al fin de cuentas, todos somos cuates” (at the end, all of us are friends/ brothers). Florencio passed away on July 5, 1985 at the Los Angeles County Hospital.

After his death, all of the various factions of dancers; the moneymakers, the hyper-spiritualists, the nationalists, and the opportunists, suddenly had no one to contain their energy and their special interests. Florencio had a way of balancing his performances for money, his transmission of La Danza’s spiritual path, and the pride of being a Mexican indigenous person. However, without him these complex currents of Mexcoehuani identity spiraled out of control.

Within two years of Florencio’s death, the moneymakers were dancing at bars, weddings, and car dealerships; anywhere there was money to be made. The hyper-spiritualists were holding pseudo-Mayan/Aztec/Inca/Lakota ceremonies for paying customers and gullible innocents. The nationalists went on to create the fanatical Mexi’ca movement that like the German Nazi movement of the last century, idolized their own alleged genetic purity and superior culture, and put down all those who dare disagree with their superiority. Soon there would be the beginnings of the “Conchero traditionalist” versus the “cultural revivalist warrior” ideological division that still haunts La Danza Azteca in Aztlan.

I look back at this period in my life with great awe, fondness, humor, and sentimentality. Although many of the guys did not like each other in the end, (familiarity breeds contempt in some cases; and knowing too many intimate details of other men’s lives can make one seek distance in others) and some have died since then, I would not
exchange this epic era of my life. It was an epic era for Chicano identity, history, and culture. I take great pride in that old photograph at the Centro Cultural.

Now there are Danza Azteca groups in over a dozen states in the United States. That photo we took at the Centro Cultural in 1975 shows how a humble group of five young men, under the leadership of a charismatic and wise older man could conquer a nation; we helped begin the process of creating a new identity, a new spirituality, and a new conceptualization of what sacred space is for the Chicano.

Post-script: December 12, 2009

I had decided that a good place to end my recollection of my involvement in La Danza Azteca was at the end of my maestro Florencio’s life. Many changes, some good, some bad have occurred. However, the feelings of excitement, awe, humility, and faith of La Danza are always there under the surface when I am teaching at a university, working with future college students, or teaching community workshops of La Danza in the barrio.

In December of 2008, my wife Bea and I went to dance at “La Villa” the home of Our Lady of Guadalupe. We danced on the 12th of December, with Capitana Rosita Hernández’ group. We saw, once again, firsthand the hundreds of thousands of pilgrims from all over the world, entering the Basilica. I talked to several women from Haiti. They had just arrived from Miami, and were in tears at the sight of the Virgin.

Later my cousin and his family drove us to the “Centro Ceremonial Otomi” (Otomi Ceremonial Center). We walked around the vast empty site that had once been a
ceremonial center for the Otomi people, but had now become a starkly beautiful, but empty tourism facility.

Afterwards we went to the only food stand that was open. A small woman and her grown daughter were serving delicious food. I had been disappointed at the ceremonial center. As we ate and the woman cooked, my cousin asked her if she spoke Otomi. She shyly said yes and went on with her cooking. I did not want to be rude, but my excitement at the prospect of meeting someone who spoke one of my grandparent’s languages, had my heart racing. As the meal progressed (and we bought more and more food), she shared some words with me that I recorded on a digital recorder.

I am an empirical person, one who teaches “Introduction to Nahuatl” in Chicana/Chicano studies, and teaches “methods of inquiry” in the masters program in education. Therefore, my brain fully understood that hearing Otomi once and recording it was not going to bring me any closer to understanding it and using it as a means of communication. Nevertheless, my HEART fully understood the significance of hearing one of my ancestral languages. I felt the presence of a historical chain of existence, resiliency, and hope that existed long before me, and I know, will outlast me. After everything that the indigenous people of this continent had suffered over the past 500 years, we are still here. Now more than ever I feel that the empirical facts of Mesoamerica, Mexican, and Mexcoehuani history and culture can proudly stand on their own. We need not resort to new age, esoteric, concealed wisdom that is only available from a chosen, hidden few in order that create a sense of empowerment. It has been there all along. We just did not know where to look. La Danza has opened our eyes.
A Reflection on My Auto-Ethnography

After reliving the past (along with its tears of joy, sadness, and laughter), I now find it interesting to reflect on the seven sub-questions of this study and try to answer them through my experience in the early years of La Danza Azteca.

**How is Chicano identity defined?**

As a young man in college, involved in community activism, I identified myself as Chicano by my heritage as a Mexican born in Mexico City. I was a Chicano by the color of my skin and my physiognomy. I was an indigenous being because of my parents’ ethnic heritage. Moreover, I identified as a Chicano artist because I was involved with the Centro Cultural de la Raza. All of these memberships continue to inform my identity—with the addition of my overarching identity as a Mexcoehuani Danzante, father, husband, educator, and alleged elder.

**What is “La Danza Azteca?” What are its historical roots in central Mexico?**

To me La Danza Azteca is a beautiful communion with my ancestors, my peers, and my descendants yet unborn. To be able to carry out the same steps, rhythms, and prayers handed down gently for countless generations is truly a humbling yet elevating experience. La Danza Azteca is to me an experience that sanctifies our daily existence, our daily hopes, and dreams.

La Danza has been for me a path that has opened doors to the lives of countless friends. It has shown me the continuity between the cultures of central Mexico and the American southwest. It is proof that borders, boundaries, and walls cannot keep back spiritual movements no matter how small they start.
How and when did La Danza Azteca arrive in the U.S.?

One of the greatest gifts that I have been given in my life, was to have been there when La Danza Azteca first came to the U.S. as a powerful force of identity and sacred space. I can only add that this entire study has been structured and shaped by my participation in those critical years of La Danza.

I would hope that someday, before they have left us, the other persons who were there in that precious time period will take up the cause and write their own recollection and study of how La Danza came to us, the Mexcoehuani of Aztlan.

What are the reasons individuals seek out membership in La Danza Azteca?

My reason for being drawn to La Danza as a 19 year Chicano parallels many Mexcoehuani’s reasons. We all want some type of culturally relevant spiritual path that brings us towards self-determination, empowerment, and agency. We want some type of system that allows us to find our membership in a society not based on power, money, or aggression. We need some type of space where our essence, our being, is considered sacred and not a potential consumer.

Last, I believe that most of us are not interested in perpetuating hatred, anger, fear, nor elitism. What we find so powerful and inspiring in La Danza, are the rituals of kindness that unite past, present, and future generations in a shared sacred space.

What, if any, are the differences between Mexcoehuani Danzantes who were part of the first wave of La Danza compared to the ones that started later?

I think that the main difference is that the younger dancers, who started after the death of Florencio in 1985, do not quite understand what the Chicano world was like
before La Danza came to us. The Danzantes of the third and fourth waves (1992-present) can never experience the electric charge of a group of Danzantes entering an auditorium for the first time in history and having some Chicanos break out into tears at the significance of the spectacle. All the while, other Chicanos were laughing and sometimes violently heckling the dancers for being “strange,” “gay,” or “apaches.”

The vast majority of young Chicano Danzantes have entered a system of identity and space that is respected and deified by Mexcoehuani communities. La Danza is as much a part of daily Mexcoehuani culture now as “banda” music, “telenovelas,” (TV soap operas) burritos, and “carne asada fries.”

**What, if any, are the differences between Mexcoehuani Danzantes who were born into La Danza, and those that learned it later in life?**

One of most exciting developments in Mexcoehuani Danza Azteca is that now there are two generations of Danzantes who were born into the tradition. Young men and women, who have never known life without Danza, are bringing a level-headedness to counteract the extremism of new Danzantes who have started as adults in La Danza.

The young “herederos” or heirs of their parents dance lineage do not have the need or the urgency to prove their “indigenous index” to anyone. They have lived a reality that is built around a daily observance of the rituals of kindness embodied in La Danza. The heirs to established Danza groups have always had the rituals of kindness in their lives. If they choose to continue honoring these rituals, it will be out of love and respect for them, and not out of novelty, or political ideology.
The second generation of Mexcoehuani Danzantes, born in the 1980s is now having its own children. These grandchildren of the original Mexcoehuani adopters of the late 1970s and 1980s have more in common with the Danzantes of Mexico (with their long generational links to Danza), than they have with the new adult Mexcoehuani who try to create a mythic, politicized identity for themselves.

In the coming decades, more and more generations of Mexcoehuani will be born into La Danza Azteca. They will grow up following their parent’s lineage, and, ideally, make greater contact with the traditional Danza groups of Mexico. As the percentage of Mexcoehuani who can claim generational roots to their participation in La Danza grows, the percentage of Mexcoehuani who need to follow an extremist form of indigenous ideology will get smaller. This is one of the main differences between Mexcoehuani Danzantes who were born into La Danza, and those that learned it later in life.

What is the concept of the Mexcoehuani identity as a unifying force for Mexican origin communities?

I propose the term Mexcoehuani as an identity that can open up a shared space amongst the disparate participants in Chicano, Mexicano, Mexican American, Latino, and Indigenous participants in La Danza Azteca. Many Mexcoehuani do not realize, but some of the elders in Mexico allowed Spanish participants in La Danza Azteca, and who now have their own circle of dance groups, ceremonies and ritual calendar in Spain ("Historia: Mesa general de la cruz espiral del señor Santiago de Hispania ", 2008). To me, it becomes ironic that some of the most ardent Mexcoehuani activists seek out a purified indigenous space, and yet some of the most respected elders in Mexico feel that
membership in La Danza transcends ethnicity, politics, or 500 years of imperialism in the past.

I propose that the Mexcoehuani identity used in this study can help us come to terms with, and ultimately overcome the necessity of continually fighting wars that ended long ago.
CHAPTER FIVE: THE NARRATIVES

This chapter of the study is meant to give voice to Mexcoehuani Danzantes who have various levels of experience in the tradition, have entered the Danza Azteca Tradition at various times in the historical periods of its evolution in the United States, and have differing levels of authority or responsibility in the dance groups in which they participate.

In order to examine in depth his or her varied experiences in La Danza, I devised a schema to give each participant’s narration voice and agency. I localize each narrator’s micro-historia within the experiential realm of Mexcoehuani Danza Azteca history with five temporal typologies.

The Schema

The Narrative schema is composed of one gender typology and four temporal typological categories. They are:

Gender

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Male</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The age at which a narrator entered La Danza Azteca

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Born into La Danza</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Learned as a child 1-18 years old</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult learner under 20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult learner under 30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Adult learner under 40

Adult learner over 40

Number of years they have been dancing or participating in La Danza Azteca

More than 30 years

Between 20-30 years

Between 10 – 20 years

Between 5 -10 years

Between 3 – 5 years

Less than 3 years

The era of Chicano Danza Azteca that the narrator started dancing

First wave (1974-80) these dancers learned directly from the original Danza elders who first came to the U.S. to teach: Florencio Yescas, and Andrés Segura.

Second wave (1980- 92) these dancers learned from the first students of Yescas and Segura, or learned from other Azteca teachers who came after the Danza Azteca had begun to collect new followers.

Third wave (1992- 2000) these dancers learned either as young children or mostly from dance teachers who were not from the first original wave of dancers taught by Yescas and Segura.

Fourth Wave (2001 – 2008) these dancers have never known Chicano culture without La Danza Azteca, and its identity. Some have various learning roots in second or third generation Mexcoehuani Danza teachers, some have
learned from members of the new wave of “new Age” of Mexi’ca warrior society members.

The level of authority or responsibility that the narrator currently holds

Jefe/a; Capitán/a. Jefes and jefas are the group leaders. Some have gone to Mexico to be recognized as traditional elders (Capitán or Capitana). Others have earned that title from traditional leaders in Mexico and the U.S. Still others have taken the tile of Capitán or Capitana on their own.

Heredero/a. The children or other heirs to the group or circle created by the Capitán or Capitana.

Sargento. The title of sergeant is given to a person who helps keep the circle in order.

Malinche. A woman who is in charge of keeping the Copal incense lit and smoking at all Danza Azteca rituals.

Adult member. By Danza Azteca tradition, a person who has danced for at least four years and has taken the vows of membership in a dance circle. They hold no other rank that that earned by the years that they have danced. This can be by choice, or because they have not done enough to earn a higher responsibility in their circle.

Adult novice. A person who has danced less than four years in a circle, and does not know enough about La Danza, the group the person dances with, or has chosen not to take up the vows of membership in a dance circle.
As one can see, the permutations of the typologies are numerous: a person can be a female adult, who started dancing three years ago (and thus is a member of the fourth wave of Danza), and is now a Malinche of her group. Another person could be a female, who has been dancing for between 10-20 years, (and thus began as a member of the third wave of Danza), and is an adult member with no responsibility role. Table eleven shows the typological categories and their subsets:

**Table 11: Typological schema of Danzantes experience**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age started</th>
<th>Number of Years Dancing</th>
<th>Time Frame</th>
<th>Status/responsibility</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Born into La Danza</td>
<td>More than 30</td>
<td>First wave (1974-80)</td>
<td>Jefe/a; Capitán/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Learned as a child</td>
<td>Between 20-30</td>
<td>Second wave (1980-92)</td>
<td>Heredero/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult learner under 30</td>
<td>Between 5 -10</td>
<td>Fourth Wave (2001 – 2008)</td>
<td>Malinche</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult learner under 40</td>
<td>Between 3 – 5</td>
<td>Adult member</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adult learner over 40</td>
<td>Less than 3 years</td>
<td>Adult novice</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The fifteen narrators (fourteen dancers and myself as a narrator), were given pseudonyms of their choice, or when no naming preference was offered by the narrators, I assigned them narrative names for this study. Table 12 shows their demographics:

Table 12: The participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Status</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Time Frame</th>
<th>Years dancing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Metztli</td>
<td>heredera</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>second wave,</td>
<td>Between 20-30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Ehecatl</td>
<td>heredero</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>second wave,</td>
<td>Between 20-30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Xiuhcoatl</td>
<td>Capitán</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>second wave,</td>
<td>Between 20-30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Ocelotl</td>
<td>Jefe</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Fourth Wave</td>
<td>Between 3 - 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Atzacualoyacihuatl</td>
<td>Adult member</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Fourth Wave</td>
<td>Between 3 - 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Yaotachqui</td>
<td>Sargento</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Third wave</td>
<td>Between 10 – 20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Tepetlacal</td>
<td>heredero</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>second wave,</td>
<td>Between 20-30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Tonalli</td>
<td>heredero</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Second wave</td>
<td>Between 20-30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Cuauhtli</td>
<td>heredero</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Second wave</td>
<td>Between 20-30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Yancuic Tochtli</td>
<td>Adult novice</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Fourth Wave</td>
<td>Less than 3 yrs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11. Xipecihuatl</td>
<td>Capitana</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>first wave</td>
<td>More than 30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12. Momachtiquetl</td>
<td>Adult novice</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Fourth Wave</td>
<td>Less than 3 yrs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13. Cihuacoatl</td>
<td>Capitana</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>second wave</td>
<td>Between 20-30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14. Ome Tochtli</td>
<td>Capitán</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>first wave</td>
<td>More than 30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15. Malinalli</td>
<td>Adult member</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>third wave</td>
<td>Between 10-20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Narrators

For me, the possibility of giving voice to 15 traditional Danzante Aztecas in an academic arena, posed some great opportunities and a few risks. The great opportunities included giving voice to the histories of persons who have followed La Danza Azteca in an academic paper that will stand as a marker of Mexcoehuani evolution. Most of the time, when research or history is written down, it covers the leaders, or the most highly visible personages. Yet, it is the anonymous participants of history that give it its power and destiny. Thus, it was important to me to give them their voice in this study.

This collection of micro-historias can be seen as an opportunity for beginning the documentation of the Mexcoehuani search for identity, membership, and sacred space. Each narrator has given their own particular definition of identity, membership, and sacred space based on their life experiences. Each narrator’s micro-historia and their analysis of my questions reflect their values and hopes.

Another opportunity is that the early history of La Danza Azteca was available spoken in the first person, for future researchers to analyze and correlate with other sources. Up to now, the little research that has been done on Danza Azteca-Chicana is based on:

1. Literature about La Danza Azteca in México (some sources are greatly outdated).
2. “Sound bite” interviews at ceremonies and other public performances.
3. Word of mouth narratives that are far removed from the original sources (thus allowing great distortions in the telling or oral history).
While a great amount of data can be recovered by working with informants in the Danza Azteca tradition in central Mexico, this data does not reflect the realities of being a Mexcoehuani Danzante in the U.S. The literature regarding La Danza Azteca dates from the 1940s (Kurath, 1946; Stone, 1975) the 1950s (Mansfield, 1953), or the 1960s (Wilson, 1970). Even the newest literature is based on the central Mexican paradigm (Alarcón, 1999; Cipactli, 2007; Poveda, 1981). One of the newest books on La Danza Azteca, “Danza tu palabra” (González Torres, 2005), includes a section on Chicano Danza, but most of its data comes from my website (Aguilar, 2008b). Another book “Turismo : teoría y praxis,” (Valencia, 2005) is a book on maximizing, sustaining, and developing Mexico’s tourist industry. In it, the “ritual of the new fire ceremony” is discussed in anthropological detail, but with a very different focus; how to maximize this indigenous ritual for touristic business. Thus, although these and other books have new analysis of LA Danza Azteca, they are not helpful in understanding Mexcoehuani Danza Azteca, identity and sacred space.

“Sound bite” interviews at public performances, such as those carried out by TV or newspaper reporters, high school and college students, or community members can have several deficiencies. One deficiency can be that at times, by chance, a Danzante Azteca who is relatively new to the tradition is interviewed, and thus, either gives incomplete or erroneous information (David, 2005; Monica, 1991; Thomas, 2005).

Another deficiency is that sometimes a Danzante, wishing to be helpful at best, or trying to show off, at worst, will give the interviewer what they believe the interviewer wants to hear. This problem is especially true when young interviewers interview young
inexperienced dancers (Bulletin, 2004; Gussie, 2006; Wilma & Plain Dealer Dance/Music, 1992).

I believe that by capturing the life experiences of dancers who are at different levels of understanding, and different levels of participation in La Danza, future researchers from the academic world, as well as from the world of La Danza Azteca, will find some form of data that can help them understand this period in the growth of La Danza in Aztlan.

The main risk involved in documenting these stories is that every story is told through the life experience lens of the narrator. There were some practitioners of La Danza, especially those that are not documented in this research that will take some exception to what the narrators have said. In addition, due to the small and tightly knit communities of traditional Danza Azteca, some long term practitioners of La Danza will know who the narrators are. Nevertheless, each participant, after reading the IRB approved consent form, accepted this small risk. Since the narratives contain no sensitive information, the narrators were very eager to share their micro-historias.

Each of the narrators is identified by a Nahuatl pseudonym. Each narrator was asked to give me a Nahuatl name that they thought reflected their “esencia” or “essence” as Danzantes. Those that could not give the researcher a Nahuatl name were assigned one that matched their experience in La Danza Azteca.

At the beginning of each auto-historia, there is a table that shows where the narrator fits into the Danzante typology devised by me. Special attention should be given to the time frame of when the narrator began dancing, as well as how long they have been
dancing. The analysis section of this chapter looks at the over-arching themes that appear in the narratives.

The questions used to start the auto-historias processing through the minds of the narrators, were taken from the anonymous online survey I created to get input from Danzantes from throughout the United States. An analysis of this online survey was carried out in chapter 6. These questions were the ones that the online respondents had the most to say about. Thus, I took them as starting point for the 15 in depth narratives.

\[ \text{Narrative One: Metztli} \]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Status</th>
<th>Typology</th>
<th>Time Frame</th>
<th>Years dancing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Metztli</td>
<td>heredera</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>second wave</td>
<td>Between 20-30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Date Interviewed: August 6th, 2008

**What is your earliest memory of La Danza?**

My earliest memory of La Danza would probably be falling asleep at the velaciones to the music and everyone being around, and feeling safe, that would be my earliest memory of La Danza. I can remember probably being about five or six; I was definitely running around already. But at that age it seemed that it was really normal, like that’s just the way it is. La Danza seemed like a natural part of family life.

It seems very natural; it seems that that was the norm. It’s not till you get older and start talking about it that you realize that it is not the norm. In fact, my brother and I went through experiences where we thought it was the norm and we would talk about it at
school with other kids and we would get adverse reactions, you know, or funny looks. So we learned to just not talk about it at school and kind of guard it.

**Please tell me how you became involved in Danza?**

Uhmm, I really did not have a choice! (Laughs) I was born into it. So, my parents wanted their kids to be involved in it. And, I know my mom danced while she carried me, while she was pregnant with me, and then uhmm, even being a baby before I could walk, they would put me in the middle (of the dance circle).

So, it’s kind of just being always been something I have been involved in. I never had life without it so I really never had a choice, not that I feel unlucky about it. I feel very lucky but, it wasn’t a choice.

**You did not have a choice but what would it be like if you did have a choice. What would be your reaction?**

I think that… in this family, you mean? If I did not want to do it, it would essentially mean, at a certain level that I did not want to be involved with my family, because it is very much a family thing. That is one of the best things about it. It’s that we’ll be dancing, and I will look over to my left and my right and there’s my mom, my dad, and my brother, the whole family is there. And I think that if I wasn’t involved in La Danza, or it didn’t call to me, and I chose, as an adult, that that is not what I want to do, they would accept it, but I think I would feel left out. It’s such a big part of our lives; so they would go here and there to dance, or they would talk about this or that, and I wouldn’t be a part of that.
**Why do you participate in Danza?**

Ah, there are so many reasons; I mean I have benefited so much from it. You know I always say that when you grow up in La Danza, you’ve always lived in two worlds. You’ve lived in that cultural ethnic world that’s connected to your ancestry. Then you are connected to the “modern world” where you’re in school every day, or you go to work Monday through Friday. And you are a professional in that environment.

Being involved in Danza has made me, I think, made me a better person in the other world. I have learned about discipline; I have learned about having respect for those that have knowledge. I know that in this last job, at the mayor’s office, coming in with that approach, of wanting to learn and being respectful, went a long way in making a lot of important professional connections and relationships. Then you also learn about the discipline, which it definitely relates, you know, to the work that I do, and the way that I do the work.

Aside from that, being connected to your culture, especially being a Chicana living in a border town, is empowering. You know, there are definitely a lot of challenges for our gente, especially in a border town right? We all get branded, stereotyped, they automatically associate immigrant with Mexicano.

And so, to come from a cultural background where you’re sure of yourself and you’re confident, you see it as a positive to be a Mexicano, it is a positive and something strong, I definitely got that from La Danza.
Would you say that there are some people coming into La Danza seeking their identity, seeking empowerment, definition, their roots; something that in your case was there early on, because of Danza?

Yes, very much so.

**What is it about Danza that keeps you involved?**

Uhmm, there are so many things. I mean, from a very superficial point, I love the athleticism and the challenge that the dances present. It’s like an art, so I want to keep mastering it and my mastery over it. I want to keep developing my footwork, and my speed, and the number of turns and jumps I can do; how many instruments I can play. The artistic point of it, I love that part of it a lot. I know that for my brother, he loves making the outfits and the art pieces that go along with the Danza.

On a deeper level, it’s nice to feel connected to a large family; that is not necessarily one that you are related to by blood. I have a friend who the other day was telling me that she felt really close to me.

She said “In fact, you are one of only four people I feel I could call if I had a flat tire in the middle of the night, and you would come get me.” And I said “that’s it!”

Because I feel I can call 15 people, and half, more than half, about 10 are in my dance group. It’s because it is like a very strong family, that’s stronger than blood, you know? And then I also like to see that our dance group is very family oriented. We value education. So that combination… I mean you seeing some of the kids that are coming out of the dance group…

For example, I am going to law school, soon. We have someone who’s at med school at UCSD. We have a lot of educators, people going for their master’s, PhD’s… so
we are very much about education and empowering the community. Those are all important values to me so to be involved in a group that supports those values, and teaches us to be proud of our roots and feel connected to our past are all reasons why I stay involved in La Danza.

I would want to be a part of something like this, but I would need to be ready to commit to the group. I would not want to be one more of those people that come in and say, “That’s pretty cool to be an Aztec dancer” do it for two weeks and then disappear.

Well that’s a very … respectful way to look at it, and a very mature way to look at it. To say “I am not going to commit, unless I can fully commit” is good. And that is something we appreciate! You’re right… we’ve seen…. I can’t even tell you how many…in fact, just yesterday I was out with my mom, we ran into somebody, and my mom said “don’t you remember that person? She used to dance with us.” And I am like “How long ago…for how long… 2 weeks… 2 years?”

In our dance group in fact, you are not really considered in the group, someone we can count on, until you have been there, well about five plus years. Because there are so many people that come in and out of the circle.

For me in terms of the dance, I want to be one of… as best as I can, for several reasons. For one, I am going to be a leader in the group eventually someday. I am already taking on some leadership roles. So I feel in that way I need to know the stuff that I would like to teach next dancers that come along.

And then in addition to that, I think it’s out of respect for the beauty of the whole Danza, that you try to learn it the way it’s supposed to be, you know. Like you said, you
go out to dance and you’ll see people doing 20 jumps, 20 turns, but they are not marking any of the steps. They are not doing any of the “redoubles” (double steps), anything that takes training and practice.

And all of that is important, because we think of all our dances as prayers. So every mark you make is saying something. If you don’t mark it, it’s like saying the “Our Father” and missing half of the words….so that is part of it too, that respect for the steps. In addition, you definitely DO get in a trance (laughs).

The outside world is tough, right? I mean, we have bosses, and we have the bad economy, and [ex-wives] (laughs), and you’ve got kids growing up that are going to be teenagers someday…

You have all this stuff and when you come to Danza, it’s a time that is to yourself. Because you know, when we are dancing, we don’t talk right when we are dancing…. Then, it is also a time to be with other people. At the breaks we talk, we joke, we kind of dance with each other, compete with each other, make fun of each other, see who can out dance who, it’s like a fun, pure time… pure energy. And when you are done, it’s like “Ah!! I feel good!”

**What role does Danza play in your family?**

Ah! What role doesn’t it play!! (laughs) Well you know, Danza has always been another member of our family, I would say. It’s like a glue that keeps us together, but at the same time it’s definitely challenged us. I remember growing up as a kid being torn between wanting to be in Danza, but also wanting to do other things that kids were doing, like go to birthday parties, and soccer games, or whatever and sometimes, a lot of times,
we sacrificed. And being the kids of the leaders, of the Capitanes, often times my brother and I had to sacrifice more than the other kids. And that was just because we were the kids of the leaders and we had to be the example…

So certainly it played a huge roll in all of our lives, it’s changed all of us. It has formed who all of us are. And I think its bittersweet… like we are so thankful that my dad was called to it and brought it to our family, because we have gotten so much out of it, but it definitely… and he’ll even tell you… being a leader and being involved in the Danza that way is a heavy weight too.

**When you say he was called to it, can you add to that?**

Yeah I mean, from what I’ve understood from the stories I have heard over the years, and this is probably going to sound naïve, but, In the time that Danza came, it seems like that the Chicano movement was at its peak and bubbling up with all this *energia*; you had different people getting involved. Chicano Park was being built; you had a lot of the Chicano movement that we know today. And the first generation of real Chicanos that opened the doors for my generation of Chicanos, were getting involved in a lot of cultural roots type of things. Danza Azteca was one of them. You had Brown Berets, and muralists, and artists. And a lot of the people that joined when my dad joined, maybe joined for other motives like you talked about. “Oh it’s really cool to be a Danzante.”

The people that are truly called, I believe, stuck with it. In addition, we have dancers in my group who have been dancing since my dad danced, and groups in L.A. who have been dancing since my dad danced. And those I think are the ones that really
got called to it for deeper reasons. It’s so much work and commitment, and often time it is tears and pain, to be where they are today. So I don’t think they just did it for the glamour and the coolness of it, like many other may have done. They are still doing it today 20, 30 years later. That’s what I mean he was called to it. It’s deeper than just a superficial interest…

**Do you find that your relationship with members of your group, are as strong, stronger, or not as strong as your extended genetic family?**

Uhmm, I kind of answered this earlier, but definitely as strong or stronger.

Because we choose to be here, we choose to be friends and familia, and we choose to be Danzantes, and like you say, it’s something that brings us a lot of happiness when you’re dancing. Your family, you love them because you are related to them, and you have that connection: ancestry and the genetic connection, but they are not… I mean both sides of my familia. I have one side that is very much more anglicized and very much more conservative. And I enjoy them…. for a little while. And I love them you know, but I wouldn’t want to get together and eat pizza with them and like have a wine tasting like we do with our Danza family. Then on my other side of my family, they are more Mexicano, but I don’t really relate to them as much either. So I think I am more connected to my Danza family than to my genetic family.

**Please tell me about some of your favorite memories about your family and Danza**

OK, some of my favorite memories, uhmm, I would have to say going to (The Gallup Inter-Tribal Ceremonial) in Gallup, New Mexico, which was a ceremony that was held in Gallup N.M., in August every year, in fact it’s going on this week end. But we’re not going. But we used to be invited to go and participate, and we would dance in
this big arena. We would stay for three or four days at Gallup, and then we would make a trip out of it. So our whole dance group would go on the trip. We would fundraise for it.

And the experience of being able to… just be a kid, with other kids who where in other native groups, was definitely life-changing. I have people who I consider family who are Comanche, Apache, Hopi, Laguna, Zuni, and Navajo.

So that experience definitely broadened my horizons. Coming back to school as a third or fourth grader… a fifth grader… and learning about Indians in your class, and seeing that it’s not just in a book… It’s not something that’s ancient and past tense… it’s in the present and living. It was something, you know, very dynamic.

Other memories? Every time we have a ceremony, as a kid, you get a chance to interact with other friends and families you only get to see maybe three times a year. So it’s like a family reunion all of the time. So those are definitely some of my favorite memories.

You said you are about to go to law school. How will your absence from here going to impact you in terms of your Danza?

Ah, it’s kind of a tricky situation. I feel a little bit like, uhmm, I have been here consistently for 24 years, and… I’m 24 now, so I never left (laughs). So I have been in the Danza, and in the past five or six years I have taken on more leadership in the group. And that’s just helping my parents in the dance group, running things, and that sort of thing.

I think leaving is going to be definitely challenging, because I have never lived without la Danza, and I think I will still carry it with me. But to not have it so accessible is going to definitely going to be challenging. I think it will help me develop and see
what’s really important to me and to see who I really am, you know? Like when you go on a situation where you are pushed to the limit of your comfort zone. I think you really latch onto what’s important. I’m hoping I will come back and I will love it even more, you know? I mean I love it a lot, but that’s one thing that will be positive that comes out of it.

I know it’s going to be challenging, there’s part of me that’s going “Oh I’m going to get out of shape, I’m not going to be able to come back and dance at the same level of intensity … but I think it is a good thing for me to do is to go away.

**Will you take something with you that is a connection to the dance?**

I’m going to take like, my huesos, and potentially go and just practice on my own,… people have told me “You should go practice on your own and start a dance group.” I’m going to Tennessee, so they say “You should start a group in Tennessee.” But I don’t think that’s… fair for me to over there…. It would be a selfish thing to do. And the reason I say that is because I would enjoy it right? Because I would be connected to the Danza again, right? I would be dancing again, and I would be talking about it.… Then I would leave in 3 years. And who else is going to keep teaching them? And then I would become one of those other people that starts a group and then leaves it without all the information. And the guidance it needs. I don’t want to leave something out there that is going to get lost, and if I go back in five years, it has completely morphed into something I don’t recognize. I don’t think that is the right thing to do.

**Who is involved in your Danza group?**

Families, people who are elders all the way down to newborns and toddlers who just kind of sit there or run around and cause trouble (laughs). We even have divorced
families in our group, which shows you the power of our dance group. Can you imagine you dancing in a circle with your ex-wife across the circle from you (Jacobo laughs and says I definitely could not imagine that!) (all laugh) We actually have more than one couple that’s divorced and dancing in harmony. They may not themselves talk to each other as friends, but they are there in harmony in the group. And then you know, not everyone in our group is Mexican. We have people of different ethnic backgrounds. We have Columbians and whites. That’s the thing about our group, as long as you come in a good way, it does not matter what your age, we are open to everyone.

What brings and keeps people in your group?

I think it’s all the things we have been talking about. People see that we are family oriented, so I think that it also that it’s people searching for their roots, looking for a connection to their ancestry. Also, parents have mentioned to me that it’s nice to see role models in the group, and to have their kids around people who are proud of the cultura, and who are also successful in the “mainstream modern” world; who are getting an education, who are out there educating others; doing outreach, we have teachers, counselors, and someday PhDs, etc. I think it’s those aspects that definitely attract people to our circle. It also can deter people. We also have a certain disciplina (discipline), that we follow, and I think that at times has driven some people away. So it’s a type of give and take; it attracts a certain type of people.

What are the values that your group strives for?

I think I have said five times already, (laughs) …hugely education. I mean we put education at the top of the list. Even over Danza, if you can imagine that, right? We are in Danza, and yet we are telling you that education is more important. So we have kids who
grew up in Danza, and are now doing their MCATS, and LSATS, and I am going away for three years. And we say don’t go to practice, do your homework first, make that your first priority, definitely education.

I think definitely the family; valuing your family and committing to it being responsible; having respect for the past and for your elders, and those that carry knowledge; definitely discipline. I can’t tell you how many times that after a ceremony… that we are so exhausted, and we want to eat and sit down and rest… but we have to stand for another hour while people do *palabras* (orations) and talk; the different captains from different groups are going to give their speeches, which goes on for another hour (laughs)! And you’re so tired, but you have to stay there, because that’s part of the discipline. So that transcends into other things, yeah you have a project at work that you really don’t want to do, but you’ve got to finish it, that sort of thing. So there are different aspects of things that we try to put an emphasis on.

**What is the symbolism of Danza and What does it mean to you?**

I think each person can interpret that themselves. For myself, I’m not that much into the “cosmic” aspect of it. I am a very analytical person, and I find that often times, I have a hard time connecting with the spiritual world in general. So I think that the Danza for me, allows me to do that in a positive way. As for the symbolism, it could mean anything to anyone. To someone it could be their family, for someone else it could be their outlet for their need for the show or the spotlight.

**What is the significance of the circle and how it relates to your family?**

In many cultures the circle…it is the connection, that we are connected to each other. And definitely when we are dancing it is a powerful closeness, a close knit energy,
in fact, I was teaching Wednesday classes at a local elementary school for about a year. We did a performance for their school. And they were really, really nervous. Now these were kids and adults, and just before they went out there to perform, I told them “When you are in the circle, just look at the person across from you, or next to you, look at the drummer. Don’t even worry about who’s watching you, because there’s such an energy you know. And AI said we are all here together working together.”

I think the circle is a very safe place, you know. We place our kids in the center of the circle. We are all connected to each other. In terms of family, like I said at the beginning, to dance with my family, to over and see my dad and mom, and my brother dancing together, and we all smile at each other, is pretty cool, a lot of families don’t even see each other at holidays.

**When you do have children, would you like them to be involved in Danza?**

Yeah, I definitely do. I hope that they really want to do it. There is a part of me that is kind of fearful, that they will grow up and chose not want to be involved, because I have seen it. There are other kids who grew up in Danza just like me in different groups, who have now as adults chosen not to be involved in it. They always felt it never called them. And that’s something that kind of troubles me. I hope that it does (call my children), because of all the wonderful things I have gotten out of it.

I can’t tell you how much it has affected me. It has matured me, it has made me diverse and open to new experiences. I definitely have a lot to learn and always to have that approach, you can never master everything, and you can always learn and try to improve. But I would love my kids to be involved in it.
What does it mean to you to pass on this lineage to your children?

Well you know, there are times that I get very emotional inside about the Danza when I think about all of the thousands of people before me who had Danza and passed it on...And all of the thousands of Danzantes who sacrificed even their lives. You know there was a part of our history where the conquistadores came in and you showed that you were a Danzante and that meant that you lost your life. So to lose that I think is almost disrespectful to our ancestors. They may not have been particularly my lineage, but just that whole ancestry that gave their lives and passed this teaching on… to break that link now would be hard for me because I was born into it. I feel like it is my lineage. For me to be able to pass La Danza on would be powerful. It is something greater than me. It is part of this bigger thing. It is part of the past, part of the present, and part of the future.

Do you find La Danza empowering for yourself, for your community. If so how, if not why not?

It is definitely empowering for me and I have to admit it is still challenging for me. In this job I just finished, working in the mayor’s (of San Diego) office. I can remember one time where I was performing on a Saturday for the Cesar Chavez parade and I ran into co-workers, the fire chief and some other people. They were shocked to see me. And I did for a second kind of get panicked; you know “What are they going to think of me in my Danza outfit? Is it going to change things?” And of course it didn’t…but to overcome those little moments “Like it’s OK to be seen, and admit…. It gives you strength about your people and who you are… that it is OK to be Mexicano. Like I tell everyone at work, “Everyone wishes they were Mexican! It’s the best thing”
In terms of the community, I think it is empowering because we have been at events where the community comes out to events just to see us. They are so proud of what we represent. We danced in the Borrego Springs parade, where it’s mostly Anglo, and we were the only diverse group in the parade (laughs). And all the Mexicanos that live out there and work in the cactus farms and different agricultural things… they came out and were cheering and they felt so proud…. *con mucha alegría* (much happiness). To see us was empowering to them to see that this is OK; it’s OK to be proud of being Mexican.

Even here in the Chicano community, when we danced in the immigration protests a couple years ago, when they came out and saw us, I think it gave people strength. And I think that a lot of people will never want to do Danza because it is “too scary, too out there, it’s too cultural.” But it still empowers them to see it because it is still alive, it is still there.

**Do you consider yourself to be a religious or spiritual person? Is there a difference between the two, and If so, what is the difference?**

No, I’m definitely not religious, and like I said at the beginning, I have a hard time with spirituality. Is there a difference? Yes. I think religious means tied to the Catholic religion and dogma. I think spirituality is more in line with me. It is not so much about the rules, as much as it is the way you live your life and the way you connect with the world around you.

It’s interesting because we (our family) are not a very religious family, I wouldn’t say. We do a lot of things that align with Catholicism, but that is because that is our Danza tradition, a lot of the velaciones we do… we are cultural Catholics. The spiritual
part of it, I definitely have a respect for our ancestry, and that is a type of spirituality. But I don’t necessarily have a good comfort level with it all.

**Would the Danza, going back in time, would it have been perceived as “religious” in its origin?**

I would definitely say yes, because the Danza was connected to “Azteca” gods. Like Huitzilopochtli, and Quetzalcoatl. So I would say that from my understanding I have come to accept La Danza is, is that when the Spanish first came, the Aztecas had their own religion, tied to the dances. So when the Spanish came they intertwined the two traditions. So when we dance for Tonantzin, the mother Earth, we also dance for Guadalupe. It’s like the two branches of Mexican heritage tied together. I would tend to think that the Aztecas were more connected to the spirituality of the Earth.

**What does the term “Sacred Space” mean to you? Would the term sacred space mean anything in terms of La Danza Azteca?**

This is the part of the ‘cosmicness’ that I have a hard time with, I understand what it means and I do live it but…. I think sacred space to my understanding, means an area that deserves respect and deserves people to have conformity. So you conform to the rules that are in place. For example, in our Danza group, our practices (practices) and velaciones (vigils) those are all sacred spaces, so there is a certain level of respect that has to be shown. There is a certain order and a certain way that we do things that has to be maintained.
So at our velaciones we don’t allow drugs or alcohol. We ask that everyone stay focused on the altar and not sitting in the back chit-chatting, text-messaging. And those are all, I think because we consider it “sacred space.”

There is a spiritual connection that we have with each other. My mom will tell of seeing small children dancing and taking over the group’s energy and evolve a sacred space and purify it. Especially for new dancers, there is an apprehension that they feel the power, and they are afraid they might cause a fluctuation in the energy of the circle. We have people who see us for the first time and start crying because they are overwhelmed spiritually. There was a little girl from Otay who say us over several years dancing at the church, and she finally got her mom to bring her to practice. And the minute she walked in to our practice, she was overcome with emotion and she started crying.

Does the Danza have its drawbacks or its negatives?

I would say yes, on a superficial level. Like I intend to be in politics, that is always been something that I have been interested in. And people tell me that someday I could be governor, or senator. And I think that’s always nice that they say that. However, the reality is that it will never happen because I am involved in Danza. Maybe in 20 years our country will have moved beyond (our spirituality)…

Danza could definitely be tied to being “cultish”; that’s tied to “illegal” immigrants. All those types of stereotypes…But that whole aspect of it, if it was really important to me, it would be a problem… the real burden of La Danza is the emotional burden of having dancers come in and out of the group. And some of the negative energy and
backlash we have had from those dancers in the community. That is something definitely something that can weigh heavily on you.

Also the commitment of having to be at every practice; someone from our family, the Aguilar family, is at every event, pretty much. Our group can and has gone on without us, and they can do that and they would be fine and successful without us, but that’s because we feel the obligation that one of us has to be there. So that definitely can be challenging. As in any organization, if you are the leader, there is the time, the energy… But we love it so much and we get so much out of it that we feel lucky to have those “little challenges”

**How do you feel about those Danzantes that mix in other traditions into La Danza?**

I don’t necessarily agree with it… There are a lot of groups in the Southwest, and in northern California… it seems to be that the further you get away you get from the border, the more that happens. I think that what it is really, people are trying to find the roots. I can’t even say that my group knows exactly what that is, because it’s always changing.

Some groups will mix Plains Indian ceremonies, like the Peyote ceremonies before our dances. That’s not our tradition, it’s a Native tradition; but it’s not Danza Azteca. Some groups will have four altars at each corner, one for the elders, one for the children, etc. That’s something that has been modernized, made up here in the United States. A lot of the things are a part of evolution with things that are around…

I think that it definitely a living thing; in 50 years, Danza will look different from what it looks like today. In Mexico, they don’t have practices; they have ceremonies so
often that they… that’s when they go dance. Every weekend there is a different pueblo that has a ceremony that is hosting another fiesta. So they don’t have practices.

Here in the U.S. when La Danza first started there were three groups. I mean, how many ceremonies can three groups hold? (laughs) maybe every year each… that’s three ceremonies a year. So we have practices, so that we can keep teaching each other and stay connected, and stay in shape to do the dances. That’s an evolution, that’s not how it started in Mexico. And that’s just changed in the past 20-30 years…the fact that we have velación the first night, Danza the second night, etc.; that’s not how they do it in Mexico. In Mexico, it’s happening all at the same time. It’s a very fluid thing it’s an intermingled thing. And that’s coming out of the fact that we have work schedules… Monday through Friday and it’s hard to get the time off. So it evolves to the needs of the community. So I would guarantee it’s going to keep changing. It’s going to continue to be fluid. So these changes and intermingling of other Native groups it’s kind of only natural. I don’t necessarily think it’s something what our group wants to do or needs to do, or should do. But, it definitely is a living thing…fluid

How do you feel about those Danzantes that reject the Catholic traditions of Mexican culture in La Danza?

You have what they call the “culturales” (the cultural ones). They are ones that don’t want to be associated… or connected to anything that ties to Spain and European Catholicism. The fact is that Danza has evolved in that way…. It has those aspects.

And I can see their point of view; they want to go back to as much as the tradition as they can, the “real thing” as they can, the precolumbian, but we don’t know what that was. So how are we to …. By pulling out the madolinas (mandolins) and the Catholic
songs and the *cruzes* (crosses), and the *virgenes* (virgins), and the *santos* (saints), you’re stripping away what Danza is now, you’re re-creating it. So you may think you are going back to what was there before, but you are really just evolving it again.

**Do you think these people romanticize to some extent the past?**

I think you are right. I think that people see those images on low riders, and t-shirts of Popocatepetl, looking all glamorous, and everything, there is a romanticism of being an Azteca, of being an *Indígena* (indigenous person). That’s the superficial aspect of it. So when people say “We need to not do the things that are Catholic,” they are kind of creating a fantasy world in which to hide themselves in, you know?

**Mario calls the new Nativist Danzantes “Mexi’ca Nazis.” In your mind is that an appropriate term?**

I think that it is a kind of a satirical term, it’s kind of funny. I don’t think he thinks that they are Nazis and that they are going to put people in concentration camps… but I think what he is saying, and I think its partially true, is that they get so extreme in their views… that they becomes almost like that…like a Nazi organization almost; where you have a dictatorship. Where you have one Capitán that says “do this, do that,” where you “have to wear these colors, you have to wear a certain color bandana, you have to only use black, white and red…those type of things… you can only use *manta* (poplin)… You can only talk to that group; you can only sing these songs…. Those kinds of things are what he is talking about, where it is very controlled. I think it is a kind of a fair assessment, it’s comical.
Is it that they become so far to the left that they become the right? They become very exclusive?

Yes, there you go, that’s it!

Is there a danger from them to La Danza?

Ah, I think that what happens is… that there is a danger to themselves. What I mean by that is that….. I have had experiences with a couple of different Danzantes who come from those groups that kind of fall into that Mexi’ca Nazi category and they say: “You guys don’t have pleitos (fights) with other groups? You guys can talk to anyone?” They are like, shocked ….. “You guys can wear ANY colors you want? You can sing those songs; you can talk to THOSE people?” And I think that it’s almost like they feel that they have woken up from a cult…. Like, they just left a cult sort of thing. So I think the danger is not so much to the other groups, because we are pretty solid and every group is slightly different… and many group has levels of that Mexi’ca Nazism.

From my experience, there was a period time where we went through this… naïve, rosy colored outlook… that we wanted everyone to be harmonious, where we wanted all the groups to get along; to do their own thing but get along in harmony. And that’s just never going to happen… So we have come to accept we are going to things the way our group wants to do things; and be friendly with those people that want to be friendly and respectful to us; and we will share that with them, and those that don’t “pues El es Dios.” So it’s kind of that acceptance of “you can look down on us”, or “you can say that about us, but it’s not going to matter to us because we are going to continue to do the things we believe in… what is right to us.”
But you know, it’s not easy, it can be divisive. It’s hard to hear other groups or people in the community talking about your group about you not fitting in, or saying that your group is a sell-out, or that you are selling the cultura (culture)…and all of that stuff we have gotten over the years. But there comes a point for your survival that you think “Am I going to keep letting that affect me? Am I going to keep striving for the impossible (to please everyone)? Or am I going to do the best that we can and continue?

Is there anything you would like to add?

I just hope that Danza continues to grow in the U.S. and…and to kind of counter what I just said about no one ever really getting along harmoniously, I wish that that does happen, that groups can just be at peace with themselves and other groups. I think that once they are at peace within themselves, and what they interpret Danza to be, I think that the groups will able to be at peace with other groups. I hope that happens.

Narrative Two: Ehecatl

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Date Interviewed: Oct. 28, 2008

What is your earliest memory of La Danza?

I have earlier feelings probably, but my earliest memory, is of being at practice at Central Elementary School And putting my huesos on and sitting on the bleachers and ah just kind of getting ready to dance, so practicing at Central Elementary at Imperial Beach is my first memory of Danza and ah, being excited about dancing probably loving "aguila
blanca” because that's the one that everybody loves. When they’re little or when they first start dancing (laughs) And I always did Aguila Blanca at practice. Then later I moved on to Huitzi(lopochtli) but Danza practice is probably my first memory

**Please tell me the story of how you became involved in La Danza**

Well I didn't really have a choice (laughs). This story is that I was born into it. And ah, whether we wanted to or not, we were involved in Danza. And it ended up being a good thing. So we were born into it, and danced probably, as soon as we started walking, we started bouncing to the music. That's how I became involved in Danza

**Who was your teacher and how do you continue the lineage of his or her teachings?**

Well my teacher is my father, my dad, Mario Aguilar. And ah how do I continue the lineage of his teachings? Well to continue to dance and carry out the traditions my other teach my mom, Beatrice Zamora Aguilar…ah, could also be to continue the teachings and traditions, and all the things that I have learned from them and hopefully teach my children. In addition, to also carry on the dance group, once my parents can no longer carry on the dance group.

**Why do you participate in Danza?**

Well, because I have known this since I was a little kid, it is the only way... it’s been the world that I know.... I couldn't imagine my life without it. So I continue to participate... right now I am not living in San Diego, so I practice with the group here in Los Angeles Uhmm, because I still need that connection and that active involvement with Danza, And whenever I can I try to make it to San Diego, cause it’s not too far away.
What is it about Danza that keeps you involved?

Ah, so many levels, uhmm. One of the things that keeps me involved, first, is my family. It's a way that we all spend time together. We have a type of closeness that families outside of Danza often don't have, and so we have fun traveling together to go dance or, working on trajes (dance uniforms)... just things like that.

Also the friendships you make with other Danzantes in other cities or other people that are involved in Danza in your city or community that you probably would not have known in any other way, because your lives don't cross in any other place... But through Danza at least you have something that brings you together and you get to know different people.

Also there is the spiritual part of it that brings you peace and it is a form of physical, spiritual, and emotional meditation when you are dancing. It's a way of being connected with your ancestors. Even if we don't even know if our direct ancestors did this Danza or other Danzas, it still connects us to our ancestors from Mexico, and keeps us connected to the traditions and culture of Mexico.

How is your family involved in your group?

Well, my mom and dad are the leaders of the dance group. My sister and I are herederos (heirs). My family is the leader of the group we are involved in and so... we are always involved somehow, whether through direct leadership, or supporting my parents and the things that they do.

What role does Danza role in your family?

For me and Argelia, Danza plays a big role (laughs)... we are always... it's one activity that we can both do together. And it's a place where we can both pray together.
and it kind of determines our calendar for the year and what we can do on the other weekends. We always make time to go to practice. And it’s also about planning to make trajes and trips to Mexico, and things like that so. La Danza real has a unifying role, in our small family that we have now we have started and in keeping us together and having an activity that we do together.

**Do you find your relationships with the members of your group are as strong, stronger, or not as strong as with your extended, genetic family?**

I would say that in some ways yes, they are stronger because especially after you have known people for so long and you have gone through a lot of hard things like you know, family crisis or personal crisis, or... just a really hard Danzada (dance ceremony), or a really hard disciplina (rules) at some other circle, or... all these different things that you share common experiences, that you don't have with other people, that in many ways make you closer (to them) than to your extended family... kind of like the old adage that people say that "you chose your friends but not your family (laughs).

And so through Danza, you have chosen all these people that share something with you. But at the same time your extended family is always there when sometimes your Danza family wouldn't necessarily be there... so it’s really beautiful to have both ... to have access to your genetic extended family, and your Danza family that spreads across two countries.

**Please tell me some of your favorite memories about your family and Danza**

I would say my favorite memories are probably going on Danza trips. Waking up early, probably giving my mom and dad a hard time about making me wake up early...
jumping into the van and packing.... and just taking off to some place like San Francisco or Sacramento, or especially our Gallup trips.

We got to see the southwest like probably more than most people that don't live there, or even people that live there. Then there are all the memories of road trips, I mean that was so much fun traveling and all the little adventures that would come along the way and stuff. I think that was probably the best memories I have.

**Who is involved in your Danza group?**

A whole lot of families that... some that used to dance, and now come around for our ceremony, and help us out at that time…others who are still really involved in La Danza and the practices, and then there is a community … a certain extent involvement, but that it’s more event based. But in terms of the involvement in La Danza, it’s my family and other families; it's a lot of families.

**What brings and keeps people in your group?**

I would like to think that what brings and keeps people in the group, first, is the way our circle is run. and that we are.... my parents have always been.... family first and children first.... and so the people that are drawn to our group are families often with children, so then we all have this common goal or mission of raising our kids in a safe and happy environment where they can also learn about their traditions and their culture, and have a sense of identity, a sense of self, and also a sense of the spirituality of the Earth, and other people.

I think that what really keeps people around are the friendships they make and the type of network that people make through the dance group. And like I said before, this happens with people you probably would not have met; people who live in opposite ends
of the city, or work in completely different types of jobs. People that have different paths in life, and they all intersect in our dance group.

And I think that helps people have really meaningful friendships and helps them keep grounded and connect to other people in their lives.

**What are the values that your group strives for?**

Uhmm, well one: family, and supporting one another. I think also one value that we have always stressed is harmony, peace, and being in unity, at least within our dance group: trying to be harmonious with other dance groups and the community. I think that adds to the whole family values, without being the conservative Republican meaning of family values bit, … that idea of a community … in our dance group.

**Tell me about the symbolism of La Danza and what it means to you**

The symbolism of Danza that…. … well there are volumes and volumes of layers and it could go for hours! However, for me it is a spiritual dance tradition that, for at least where it came from, it is a symbol of Mexican history and identity, as well now, Chicano history and identity. …Of being of indigenous roots and traditions that came together through the need to survive our ancestors formed Danza as we know it. And then also the syncretism with Catholicism and probably other traditions, such as Afro-mestizaje …different traditions that were add by the people who became followers of La Danza …but still always having the heart and roots of the indigenous people of Mexico.

To me it's a way to be connected to our indigenous ancestors, traditions, and the heart and spirit of the land. Also it is a way to have a connection to Mexico, to that identity. Since we are here in the United States…. as people like to say "no somos de aquí ni de allá (we are neither from here nor from there). …it’s a way of finding a place
spiritually and physically and emotionally through our friendships, in uh in the United
States... in Aztlan

**What is the significance of the circle and how it relates to family?**

The significance is that there is a continuous circle. It is not a line, a line with a
beginning and an end; it is a circle that continues around and around.... so our families are
like that. From one generation to the next it continues and does not stop even if in one
family it stops it continues on in another family.

So through that process, we have the circle of continuity in our families. ... and in
the Danza, there is also the symbolism of... even though there is a structural hierarchy
and leadership roles in La Danza... there is also that symbolism of the circle reflects a sort
of equality... that we are all followers of the same tradition and therefore we are one
family in the Danza.

**When you do have children, would you like them to be involved in Danza?**

Definitely! My kids won't have a choice, I don't have kids yet, …uhmm but when
we do, if we are lucky enough to have kids, they will definitely be involved in La Danza
they won't have a choice, like we didn't! (Laughs) and then when they are 18 or whatever,
and they are liberated adults, they can choose not to be involved in Danza, but while they
are under my roof (laughs), they won’t have a choice... they will always be involved in
Danza.

They will always have to dance. ... or drum... or do something.... but they won't
have a choice. And if everything goes the way it did for me, they won't want to not
dance... they might go through their middle school years of "I am embarrassed to dance
in front of my friends" or "Why are you going make me dance, I don't want to dance"
"people are going to laugh at me" stage.

But eventually they will mature and move on and they will get over it and they will realize what a beautiful treasure they actually are lucky enough to inherited and to be given the opportunity to know it….in such a way that most people don't get to know it.

What does it mean to you to pass on this lineage to your children?

Well for me it would be really special now because it would be the third generation of our palabra and so it would be a test. My parents started the circle, and they have a certain love for the circle, and a desire for it to continue on. And it would be a test whether their children were able to the same thing for the next generation.

To me it is a critical point for the circle, for our palabra, for our tradition to make sure it goes get passed on this next generation…because after that, at least some one would carry it on…if we are able to make it get passed this generation from one to the next without it being forgotten….or lost...

**Do you find La Danza to be empowering for yourself or for your community? If so how? If not, why not?**

For me, it is definitely empowering. Number one, it gives you sense of who you are. Second, it gives you something that brings you peace no matter what is going on in the rest of your life. Third, it is empowering because through the Danza, through the different type of roles that people have in the Danza, it forces you do things that you are not comfortable with. I myself think of myself as a shy person, but I am often forced to speak in large groups and that's empowering because then I learn for other parts of my life "OK, I can do this. I can talk in front of people." I can talk in front of people which is harder
for me to do. So in that sense it is empowering. Then there is the identity part where you
are ... you have a sense of who you are and where you come from ... you have value that
you are not only one thing ... you have this rich history that goes back a long way.

And even in its humbler parts, it is still beautiful and rich with all this tradition,
knowledge and wisdom. In terms of the community, I think it is empowering in a
different way. For them, for the community that is not involved directly with the Danza,
it’s empowering to see the indigenous side of their culture that it's not just the folklórico
part, the mestizo part, or the part that is European.

For the community... there is value to their indigenous traditions and they see it in
the esplendor (splendor, radiance), that at least in our branch of La Danza we have... the
feathers, and colorful trajes and the richness of the dances that people like Florencio
Yescas and people like "El Principe Azteca" (Fernando Moncada) brought to the Danza. I
think its empowering for them too, also to see that people can be Chicano's and active in
this society, and at least here in the United States, they can also be professionals:
teachers, educators. We can work in all walks of life in the U.S. and yet we are still able
to carry on our traditions from home, our indigenous traditions from Mexico and not be
ashamed of who we are or where they came from...or ...what they might look like.

So I think it is really empowering for our community that way And I think it has
really changed the culture of Chicano culture since La Danza arrived in the 70s ...of
looking at itself as not necessarily just a land of mariachis and being a people of
mariachis and tacos and carne asada, but of deeper spiritual meaning, tradition, and
heritage that is actually a huge part of Mexico and being Mexican. It is our Chicano inheritance as descendants of Mexicanos on both sides of the border.

**Do you consider yourself a religious person?**

I would consider myself more spiritual than religious. I was baptized, I had first communion, I choose to go through confirmation, and I was married in the church. But I don't attend mass every Sunday and ...in terms of religious, I think that religiosity is often times more about rituals, and checking off boxes... For me I think about spirituality as being a more important part of finding peace with your creator, the world around you, with the world around you, the environment, and fellow people.

Just being able to connect with all things around you, including the things we might say are not living. So I consider myself spiritual and not necessarily religious.

**What does the term sacred “space mean” to you? Would the term sacred space mean anything in terms of La Danza Azteca?**

To me sacred space would be.... well this is unfair because I studied anthropology and we read a lot what anthropologist say sacred is, but to me ... the anthropological definition of sacred space is based on a place where people find that is at first not sacred; that is, any space that people through their own activities or symbolism make sacred, like a temple or a church or a specific place; or is temporarily sacred, because of a certain activity that is being performed at a certain time.

And it’s hard for me to accept, yet separate myself from that anthropological definition. I would think that sacred spaced is... well the entire world is sacred space because without the world we can't live but, sacred places become even more sacred
when we choose to make them sacred; whether it is permanent like a temple or a pyramid in Mexico, or a church.

Then places like parks and plazas become sacred space when we start to dance there; because we are now performing something sacred there. In terms of La Danza, sacred space is anytime someone lights the copal incense, or anytime someone starts something by saying "El es Dios" I think that creates sacred space immediately... there is a performativity to that.

That action takes it from being a time where everyone is joking, standing around, to a time where we are in a moment of prayer. And that area that we are in, whether it is inside the circle or at the boundaries of the circle of space, we are now in sacred space. So for us in San Diego, Chicano Park is our sacred space when we dance. But the rest of the time its everyday space, where people sell paletas and winitos hang around at the park and lovers go and make out, whatever.... However, as soon as we blow the caracoles and we make the circle around the kiosk that becomes sacred space for us.

**Would you say that in Danza there is sacred space and profane space?**

Yeah... I would say that even when you are in Danza’s sacred space you are kind of... it’s kind of like a hybrid car that goes back and forth between electric power and gasoline power (laughs)… that you can be in the most serious and sacred part of the ceremony, in the latest part of the velación when everyone is somber, and someone will crack a joke and everyone starts laughing and then suddenly you are switched out of sacred space to uhmm, an everyday ...profane space ... but in a sense that is still a part of the sacredness.
To say that the profane daily part of our life is not sacred is to live a schizophrenic life. It would mean that to be sacred you would have to be serious and not enjoy life, which would be a real tragedy in terms of enjoying life and all the blessings that we are give on a daily basis. So yes, I would say we go back and forth between the more sacred space and the more profane space in Danza.

**Does La Danza have its negatives or drawbacks?**

It depends what you ....how you what to define negatives. On the one hand you can argue that ... at least for Danzantes in Mexico, and also, now starting here in Aztlan, now that there are more Danzantes there are so many fiestas ... and part of the tradition of La Danza is the idea of the “obligación” (obligation), when people come to your ceremony you need to go to their ceremony; and in Mexico, there is a fiesta every week end, and even during the week... You can make the argument that to really follow the tradition in the strictest sense in making sure that you complete all the obligations that your group has it would make it harder for you to amass more material wealth because you wouldn't be able to have a steady job as a lawyer Danzante in Mexico or a doctor Danzante in Mexico.

Most of the time you would need a job that would let you come and go every time you need to not work to attend a ceremony I know some people have made the argument that Danza is a way for the Church to keep the people down in en economic and political sense. That is possible only if you are looking at material wealth as the only positive in life. I believe that are a lot of other things that you can get out of Danza that other people don't get. One is those is spiritual I…. don't want to say "enlightenment" …but there is a
certain spiritual harmony or peace that people have and also those friendships that Danzantes build.

And, I think that here in the U.S., the negatives are now that too many... your weekends are always busy with different Danza things. Whether it is a performance in the community or you are traveling to another ceremony. For a lot of families it gets really hard with travel, trajes, feathers, and all the costs of maintaining a traditional Danza circle. And so those can be seen as a negative or a drawback. It just depends on how you define negative.

**How do you feel about those Danzantes that mix in other traditions into la Danza?**

On the one hand I understand why that happens the Danza itself is a living tradition and people bring to it what they have learned in many aspects of their life. So, in Mexico you have Danzas that are much more Catholic than other Danzas ...there is a history of bringing in traditions. But on the other hand, because here in the U.S. the traditions that are being brought in are not from Mexico....and not to say that the border is so important, but culturally they are so far away from each other… between central Mexico and the plains, or the Great Basin or the California tribes, or the pueblos ...

And add that to the idea, that I think that when people bring in other traditions, they are doing so from an inferiority complex where they feel that their traditions “are not good or indigenous enough" so they replace them with these other traditions from the north that they feel are "more valid" ...So I think that there is a danger of losing the richness and authenticity of the tradition of La Danza Azteca of Mexico here. And because Danza is a dialog between Danzantes all over the world.... in Mexico they may
not necessarily agree with this statement, but there is a dialog between Mexican and Chicano Danzantes, and so there is a danger of those traditions from the north going south and changing the Danza in Mexico. I already see that happening with trajes, and styles of steps, there is a danger of... not to be really conservative... but there is a danger of losing that authenticity or validity, not valid but...those traditions that people fought so hard to keep alive for 400 or 500 years of colonialism, imperialism, revolutions, *Porfiriatos*, and *Cristiadas*.

All those things that La Danza has survived through are now being left at the sidelines by some Chicanos for these other outside traditions that some feel are more valid. There is a real danger that is really saddening, that the traditions of those ancestors that people are always invoking are not being kept alive. They are being replaced for the sake of misguided eclecticism.

On the other hand I can understand that La Danza has this tradition of incorporating new traditions, whether it was Nahuatl, Chichimeca, Otomi, Pame traditions coming together to create this tradition we know as La Danza Azteca. Those cultures were still really close in cultural traditions so that the mixing wasn't so big that La Danza lost its "*esencia*" (essence) as the Danzantes in Guanajuato would talk about the essence of La Danza.

The traditions from the far north, I think do change the esencia of La Danza Azteca. That's the scary part, or the sad part.
How do you feel about the Danzantes that reject the Catholic traditions of Mexican culture?

I would say that I completely understand why they would want to do that based on the history of Mexico. But at the same time, Danza has existed this way for probably 400 and some years and to take away the Catholic traditions, number one it’s really arrogant. To think that Chicanos know what is Catholic and what isn't. Because of the syncretism of Mexican history, we don't know what the Catholic parts are replacing. Or what Catholic parts are standing in for or mirroring precolumbian rituals. For all we know our indigenous ancestors had prayers just like the Catholic prayers, or other elements that were similar to what Christianity brought.

The cross is so important in the Bajio, and that makes sense because of the Ollin and farther south the Virgins are really important, which make sense because of Tonantzin and Mayahuel and other female spirits, entities, or goddesses, however you want to call them, that are the female aspect of god. It all makes sense.

So to leave out the Catholic part is to be arrogant because who knows what you are really leaving out. In addition, it is denying the way our people have prayed for over 400 years. Including most of our ancestors, I mean, any Mexicano or Chicano who thinks their ancestors weren't ... at least in the last 500 years... weren't Catholic at some point... is probably lying to themselves! (laughs) It’s probably the way their mother's prayed, their grandmothers prayed, their great-grandmothers, and great-great-grandmothers prayed.

So even though we have our tragic and sad history of how Catholicism was brought to us, it is still real, part of our people's tradition. It is really easy for us as educated
Chicanos with all our history, to easily cut the ties with any type of Christianity. But I think that it is a false illusion. We should.... I mean, other tribes that people like to look at as "more pure models" for living this idealized indigenous non-westernized way, many of them, have syncretized their forms of religion.

Many of the plains tribes are Baptist on one day, and Pow Wow dancers on another; a lot of the Pueblo tribes are Catholic on one day and then they are kachina dancers on another. So it's not out of the realm of indigenous consciousness to be able to keep some of the traditions that you have had now for a few 3,4,500 years and still be an indigenous people.

Is there anything that you would like to comment on that I have left out?

I am excited for La Danza in the United States. When Danza first came, I wasn't even born…, but I was alive, I was a kid during the early years of what I like to call the ....well before Florencio died, I don't really remember much. But I do remember the "after Florencio's death" world more, because that's when I was a kid and I like to think of them as the "Wild West days of Danza" where anything went; there wasn't uhmm... Danza hadn't matured in the U.S. …It has not matured yet...but now it is maturing.... people that were dancing in the earlier years, it feels that it was more about ego, and a lot more of the show aspect, competitiveness, and conflicts that would happen.

Some people were attracted to La Danza not for the traditions and spirituality that it offered, but to fit their own ideologies, and political agendas. I think that aspect of Danza won't go away, it is still a part of La Danza, especially here in Los Angeles, and there are groups like the Cuauhtémoc branch that turned Danza to fit their own ideologies.
Every group, at some level does that to a small extent (turns Danza to fit their own ideologies), but at least now, you are starting to feel that Chicano Danza Azteca is becoming more like Danza in Mexico where there are conchas, mandolinas and velaciones. A lot of the Chicano groups are having velaciones now, and they ... are...
....doing all the parts of La Danza Azteca, not just the Danza but the velaciones and the alabanzas, and the Recibimiento part of La Danza.... Palabras.... all those things that a lot of times Chicanos would leave out, or not bother to learn, people are now learning them and seeing the value that those parts of our tradition really have in terms of our spirituality.

So I am excited to see what will happen in the future as more and more Danzantes become more like Danzantes in Mexico.... maybe that will stem the tide of adopting northern or eastern U.S. indigenous traditions into La Danza Azteca, because people who are new to La Danza will now see the richness of Mexican traditions that maybe they might not have seen 10 years ago..... People that people that joined ten years ago, when they joined La Danza may not have seen. Now the ones that are joining now are seeing the richness that La Danza actually has.
Narrator three: Xiuhcoatl

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Date Interviewed: Nov. 21, 2008

**What is your earliest memory of La Danza?**

It must have been about 19…1984-85. I saw Gerardo and the guys dancing…

They were opening a show for Santana. There were drummers, like Mongo Santamaria, Armando Peraza, and some other congeros. And the guys opened the show and that was the first time I seen Danza. So it must have been like ‘84 something like that.

**Please tell me the story of how you became involved in La Danza.**

I became involved in the Danza because Irma had started dancing, and we went to a Ceremony at Dolores Park, and Gerardo Salinas asked me to drum and I said “I don't know how to drum.” he said “you play music, don’t you?” So, he explained to me how the beat goes and then I was drumming next to him. Once I started drumming and probably by the second Danza, I got the hang of it, started to feel it, I felt the spirit of the drum and I started shaking and I thought, “Oh my god what is this?” and I felt the spirit come from my feet all the way through my whole body and right through my head and at that moment and I looked up at other Danzantes and I went, “Wow, this is what I was born to be, this is what I came to this earth for, to be involved in Danza!” And that was in 1985-86.

That was my awakening and whole time it was weird how I felt. I felt as if from the time I was born till that day I was asleep, and from that moment on it was a spiritual
awakening of wow this is it, this is what I came to the earth for--it is weird and that is how I got involved in Danza,

**Who was your teacher and how do you continue the lineage of his/her teachings?**

My teacher was Gerardo Salinas and we pretty much try to continue to do the Danzas in the way he taught me and my family. We have added Danzas as we learn from other groups, but the way we continue to teach, we don't change the Danzas from what he has taught us. We try to keep them the same way. We don't change or add anything to them or take anything away from them.

We learned La Paloma from Don Pedro and we did it differently from Gerardo, but then we just left that one alone and we do La Paloma the *esplendor* way and then we do the Don Pedro way. We don't mix them or change them.

**Why do you participate in La Danza?**

My participation in the Danza is to continue the teachings of my elders and also I pray for my family and my relatives. To continue the *tradición* (tradition) so that later on down the line the tradition is still alive--that is my hope, you know, so that when I am gone, my grandkids will still be doing it, my great grand kids will still be dancing. My hope for Danza is to, first of all for myself to pray for myself for healing for my family and my community.

**What is it about La Danza that keeps you involved?**

I think it’s the spirituality aspect of it. For me I see that so much has been lost.

I was talking to my *cuñado* (brother-in-law) this morning about that and I see how other traditions keep their spirituality going and so much of ours has been lost because there is so much *envidia* (envy) and jealousy inside the Danza and I am hoping that by
the way I carry La Danza and try to teach Danza, that I can teach its spirituality to the
new people. At this time we have about six little children from 6 - 10, so I'm trying to
teach them the spirituality aspect of it.

**How is your family involved in the group?**

They are very involved. I have four children and only my oldest son, Junior is
continuing in the Danza tradition. My wife Irma, Junior, and I run the group. So they are
very involved, and my grandson, Oscar, who is 13 years old, just became a Guerrero this
year at Chuy's ceremony. I could say my family is very involved in it.

**What role does La Danza play in your family?**

It plays a big role in my family because it also keeps us together and when we go to
ceremonies together, *como familia*. It plays a big role in my family, even though some of
my children do not dance, they are very aware of how the Danza has helped them and
helped us, the family. Sometimes, Danza conflicts with family obligations. Because some
members of the extended family do not dance, but my immediate family do understand
the importance of us keeping our palabra with the Danza.

**Do you find that your relationships with the members of your group are as strong,
stronger, or not as strong as your relationships with your extended genetic
family?**

In the circle, you have your very, very dedicated Danzantes; you have those that
come once in awhile; and then you have the ones that are always there and you always
count on. My relationship with the core group is very strong. If I can't make it, I know I
can call them and count on them. The core group is very reliable and we have a very
good relationship with them. With the *familia* it is really good too, especially the Irma’s family, is the one I am closest to.

We are very, very close to… all of them, the way the familia is set up we are grandfathers to all the nieces and nephews and all the kids hang out and all the kids have grown up together and my house is the central gathering for the whole family for birthdays, etc. Everyone is always at our home. We have a very good relationship with our family and our dance core.

**Please tell me some of your favorite memories about your family and La Danza.**

My son Junior became a *Guerrero* in a ceremony and it was inspiring to see. I was the first generation of my family in La Danza, and now my son, him in the ceremony and I see the second generation. I actually have two sons, Mazatl, he could drum before he could walk, and he was so involved in Danza that he, well the weekends we were always on the road and when we didn't have Danza, he would get upset! “, Papi what are we going to do today.” For me, seeing my children involved and now seeing my grandchildren, seeing their commitment and involvement is very special. Like I said, at the *ceremonia* there was me, Irma, my son and grandson at the ceremony-- how do you put a price on that?

**Who is involved in your Danza group?**

We have probably 70% women and 30% men and the youngest is six years and the oldest is myself, 53, and then we have youngsters who are teenagers, and we have people who are teachers, lawyers, in the medical field, students, engineering…so it is really open; the different types of people we have in the group. Most of our people are very creative, like one guy who is very good with featherwork and he shows me how to do it,
some who do beadwork, I have taught all of them how to do things and then let them go--
there are people with a lot of skills, I teach them to paint and then they get really creative.
Some who make really nice trajes and I say “wow this is really nice,” and they say “well
you are the one who taught me.”

**What brings and keeps people in your group?**

A lot of people are brought in by someone who is dancing with us and they like the
family atmosphere Irma and I have created, and they know they can talk to me, Irma, or
Junior, because they have different ages in the group. So, I think what keeps them coming
is the family atmosphere, the openness we have created that, “hey if you don't like
something, please do tell us about it.”

Now, some people have said we have too many rules, but my brother-in-law put it
in another way, “it's not that we have rules, we have discipline.” And I think some people
need discipline in their life to keep them kind of straight.

I mean, we just had a young man come in, his uncle brought him in. His uncle is 30-33 years old. He was the guy that grew up in streets, getting into fights, getting into
trouble, and then he straightened his life out so he wanted to do the same thing for his
nephew. And this young man, he just turned 18 about a month ago and he was telling me
how good he really feels about dancing with us and how he knows that Danza will help
him, because he saw the change in his uncle. And he told me I don't want to be like my
dad: I don't want to end up in jail. He has been in trouble; he has been in juvenile hall. He
just got out and he said he wants to change his life ... he told me:
“I can see how Danza changes people and I see how my uncle changed and he is really happy dancing with us. And we are just hoping he can keep going on this good road. At ensayo (practice), I mentioned that I wanted to thank Eric, here, because he turned himself around, and he sees that with Danza he can change and with the energy of all the kids we can make a change and make him feel positive about himself.

**What are the values that your group strives for?**

Family connection, it is so interesting because we have a lot of people who do not get along with their families, and they see how we are and how Irma and myself, how we are and how we treat everyone with respect. So, we strive to have a family unity; that is one of the important things, to be able to count on one another for help, and ser una familia unida, and be a united family. Kind of like the way our family is and so we try to bring that to the group that we are all familia, like someone needs a ride and someone can go pick them up.

**Please tell me about the symbolism of La Danza and what it means to you.**

Well, what I have learned is Unión, Conformidad y Conquista, Unity, conformity, and conquest—those are the three main ones I have learned when I became a Danzante. I try to live by that.

What it means to me is, like when I go to a ceremonia, for example, I try to be in unity with the way that ceremony is being run. I try to conform to how it is being run, whether it is the way I do it myself, I go there with open heart, with open mind, to go with that ceremonia and not change that ceremonia. Because I have been to ceremonies and here is the compadrito from so and so part of the country or Mexico, and he is saying
“and that is not how we do it in Mexico.” He or she is chastising the host of the ceremony.

To me, that is really bad, yes we are not in Mexico, but yes we try to follow the tradition as much as we can. So for me the words unión, conformidad and conquista symbolize the circle. You find the unity and conformity with that group and the conquista is that Capitán, Capitana, who have now called my heart to go back year after year to their ceremony.

I don't go to be noticed, “Oh look at that guy, and how he dances, or look at his feathers.” That's not my reason for being in it. In the beginning, I saw all that because of the people I danced with, I thought Danza was all that glitter and splendor. And you know all the things you can get from it. I wasn't in it for that.

I didn't dance for money. That was never my intention, even though I could see you could make a lot of money in it. But I thought to myself, I have a job and I don't need to live off of it. I see I can live off of it, but I don't. So it symbolizes unity and conformity and conquest.

If I go to your ceremony, it is because I like your family, I like your ceremony, and I am in unity with you guys. I conform to your dances and how you do the Cruz, and you have conquered me to go year after year or as many years as I can go.

And, that is my meaning of being a Danzante. …To go to as many ceremonies as I can possibly do and being in conformity with everybody there. I think that is what it means to me to go with an open heart and mind and when we go to give ourselves to the group that is hosting the ceremonia and help out the best way we can.
What does it mean to you to pass on this lineage to your children?

To me it means that…the cultura will not die and it will continue to go on. I try to keep the memory of my “grandfather,” Florencio Yescas, alive and I pass that on to my children. You know everyone in my group has a picture of Florencio one way or another. I have told them as much as I can about him.

Every time I see a picture of him, I make a copy of it and I keep it. So, to see my children and grandchildren dancing, it means a lot, because what I have learned hasn't died with me and it won't die with me. It will continue.

Then when I saw my grandchildren dancing, I said “wow, that's three generations already,” so there is hope in my mind and in heart that “okay, what I started 20 some years ago, still continues” and when I see my grand kids, well that means a lot.

What Irma and I started, we didn't do in vain, it is still going and we see that generation, wow, that's something else, that means a lot to see my Danza, my kids and grandkids.

Do you find La Danza to be empowering for yourself? For your community? If so how? If not, why not?

That's kind of depends on how you see yourself. I'll give you an example of how that plays out. We do a lot in our neighborhood and I know some Danzantes see it as a show, because they don't understand the role we play in "Carnival,” because carnival is a lot of flesh and all that, but this is my neighborhood. I grew up in this neighborhood.

Someone even said to me, you prefer to do carnival than support ceremonies, and I said, “Yes I do.” They wouldn't even give me the opportunity to explain myself.
A lot of people have died in my neighborhood from gang violence, and so one time a year, I have the opportunity to give back. Of all the Danzantes, we were the first group to come to carnival. There are about three or four other Danza groups, who come to the parade, but we were the first one, and I am really attached to the community. I live here, I have worked with a lot of the schools in the city teaching them Danza, so for me to be able to do the opening prayer and set the tone for carnival I think is beautiful. We go through our neighborhood when we are dancing to end all the violence and for the healing in our community.

When we dance, it is not just for me, it is for our community. I don't see myself as a performer. . . . soy Danzante por amor (I am a dancer out of love). That kind of explains how I feel; I do it for my community and for my family. More now than before, we have become a group that dances for our community.

**Is there a difference between being religious and being spiritual? If so, what is the difference?**

Yes, I think there is a difference. For example, Danza is not really a religion, but a way of life. And, religion . . . they don't really teach you. I was born Catholic, I learned a lot about Catholicism, and I learned as a kid, that they can make you feel bad because, I remember in school, the nuns would tell us “you guys are going to burn in hell because you are a bunch of Indians.” At the same time, they are teaching us that God loves us. . . . I used to think to myself, how can they tell me that? How can they tell me that god and Jesus loves me, but they tell me I am going to burn in hell because I am Indian. That didn't make any sense to me when I was 8 years old. That was a heavy thing to put in my head as a little kid.
I learned the value of spirituality and religion, and I started to form in my mind. Religion is good, it is the people that are bad the priests that sexually abuse and the nuns that are mean…is what makes it bad, not the religion. Being a religious person is totally different than being spiritual.

In spirituality, you learn more about yourself and the spirits that guide you. I didn't really know that when I was a religious person. But being a Danzante, I learn about the spirits and my ancestors that always guide me through ceremonies. Going to a sweat, you learn to survive that, going to a meeting sitting up all night praying, seeing the spirits. So religion and spirituality are totally different I think. Being religious doesn't make me spiritual. There are some very religious people that don't even understand what spirituality means. And there are spiritual people who don't believe in religion.

**Do you consider yourself a religious person? If so how? If not, why not?**

I don't know how to answer that one. Religion is more Catholic, Protestant, Pentecost--and all that. I don't see Danza as a religion, in Mexico, like I said, from what I learned, in Mexico when you go to a ceremonia, you are inside a church and you hear the abuelo, the grandfather there. They come in and do the alabanza “Nuestro Señor Capitán” and then they do the “Ave Maria” and “un Padre Nuestro, one Our Father--so for me that makes them religious or Catholic.

I don't think I'm religious, but I am a spiritual person, I have believe in spirituality, I have learned how to connect with my ancestors, I have connected with them, I always ask them for guidance and their strength and energy when I am feeling low. So, I don't think that is religion as the dictionary defines it. I don't think I am a religious person.
Because of the spirituality in myself and how I see that play out every day, I pray, I don't pray the Our Father and Hail Mary. I pray in a different way I have learned; I pray to the *animas*, to the spirits, the creator, but I don't pray to the saints. I think I am more spiritual than religious.

**What does the term “sacred Space” mean to you? Would the term sacred space mean anything in terms of La Danza Azteca?**

What it means to me is you are able to take a space and make it sacred for the moment you are there and you are able to invoke the spirit of the ancestors. And make contact with them, pray with them; give thanks and give thanks for yourself and those that are allowing you....

And that is how it would mean to me to then make a place sacred and be able to, whether you are there for an hour or longer and have a moment with your animas and when you leave you leave the place as it was. Like in México and Guatemala, we have our sacred sites. I think that because we live here in the U.S., we have to create our own sacred spaces.

We don’t have the luxury of going to the basilica of Tepeyac or to Chalma to say a prayer. We have that ability within ourselves to create any space a sacred space, as long as we do it in a good way. We have to ask first. One of the things we do, when we give a presentation, for example at the Native American Center, a lot of times they look at us like, “who are these people, these so called Indians.” I always begin by giving thanks to the ancestors, I don't know who they are, but I do ask them for permission to do prayers for the moment we are there.
I can do it in my house, at the altar, or my backyard. I have an altar out there. I can also do it in an ensayo in a building; the moment that we are there we can make it a sacred place. We can do it anywhere as long as we do it in the way we have been taught and in a respectful manner.

**Does La Danza have its drawbacks or negatives? If so what are these? If not, why not?**

Yes, you know because you also learned to dance with the compadres from Tacuba, you know I did see what went on. When I first started dancing with them, it was really interesting that the very first presentation we did was in Sacramento, and we happened to run into Mama Cobb, and she told me “what are you doing with these guys?” I thought to myself “I don't even know this lady!” I call her Mama Cobb because she reminds me of my mom. My mom would embarrass me in front of others. So one day I asked her “Can I call you Mama Cobb?” and she said “Of course!”

So from the very beginning, I saw how you can use La Danza; you can get women through Danza, you know, you do a presentation… I kind of felt like a rock star in the beginning: sex drugs, and rock and roll in the Danza.

I saw all the benefits of being a young Danzante you know, but being in a family setting, I thought “Something is not right here.” And it was interesting that years later, I was able to understand what she told me. You know with Danza you can get all these things. But is that what you want to do with your one life? Live hard, fast, and get old, and lonely real quick? It is sad that you see that even today.

I was talking to my cuñado about that this morning. I see these days in California, more Danzantes come here, and they don't want to do the alabanzas because of the
church. I was really upset one day and I told them, “you guys don't get it do you? ...to do an alabanza the way our jefes have taught us is to follow our traditions as Aztecas. You do all this native stuff that is not our tradition.

..le pusieron..., se cambian sus nombres (they put, they changed their names). They call themselves Cuauhtémoc, or Mazatl, or Ocelotl. They call themselves movie star names and they are disrespecting their parents. Danza has given us the opportunity to misuse it. There is so much envy in Danza. I feel it when I go somewhere, they look at you, like “who are you?” I tell them “I am a Danzante, I am not here to prove anything.” but sometimes I feel like I have to.

**How do you feel about those Danzantes that mix in other traditions La Danza?**

Personally, I am really against it. It is not what our abuelos taught us, I don't think they left Danza for us to be perverted. That is one of the things I learned in the beginning, from Jefe Felipe Aranda. I was there with Don Pedro, and there was a guy dressed in skins, looking all proud of his Plains Indian regalia. And the guy approached and said “what do you think jefe?” And Jefe Aranda replied “Hey compadrito, with all due respect, those guys are Aztec dancers over there, you are a Chichimeca or a northerner. A lot of people need to learn what it really means to be in Danza Azteca. The regalia is very important, you know like how Don Pedro has taught me in Danza.

I learned Danza from Gerardo, I learned a lot of things, even for him, he never changes. You don't see him wearing northern Native American gear; he sticks to the Danzante uniform. Whatever he does, he is straight up, a Danzante Azteca.
Danza Azteca has a meaning. “Soy Conchero” means wearing the Conchero traje and dancing with a concha. When I see people dress otherwise, I think “What are you? You call yourself a Danzante Azteca, you do Danza Azteca, yet you dress like something else.” I don't appreciate that. I think that is disrespectful to the old jefes to use other regalia. I don't have a problem with using eagle or hawk feathers we have used them for thousands of years and because it enhances our spirituality. But to be wearing regalia that is not ours, that is not good.

Don Pedro told me in the beginning not to use moccasins, but to use sandals. I see that in a lot of Danzantes in certain groups start to change. ... I remember when jefe Aranda said, “son Chicimecas no son Aztecas.” Gerardo, he told me, “you see Lázaro, you see Mario Aguilar and his family; they wear the trajes that their jefes taught them to wear.” I appreciate that, because I see through the years they haven't gone off and started with all those things that are not Azteca anymore…If you Azteca, stick to your culture.

How do you feel about those Danzantes that reject the Catholic traditions of Mexican culture in La Danza?

Well I feel they have a lot to learn. If it wasn't for the church, we would have lost so much more: lost how the traditions were actually carried. But because of the church and a few of its good missionaries, we still have the traditions. The church came and said no more drums, so we began to use the guitar and mandolin. Our people were ingenious, they said “The hell with you, I will make my own guitars and mandolins out of armadillo shells; they call the concha. They said you cannot say Tonantzin, say Guadalupe. Huitzi, say this... But through this mix, our indigenous hearts survived and evolved.
I feel sad for those people who refuse to acknowledge, they refuse to accept the truth of La Danza Azteca. We pay homage to the Virgen de los Remedios, but she is ALSO Mayahuel. I think the only things people can really relate to is the Virgin of Guadalupe and Tonantzin and that's about it. I tell them to learn, to listen to Guadalupe, the “Ave Maria” and the “Padre Nuestro” and listen to the words and see how you can relate those words to the Danza, and me being Catholic in the past, I can see how to I can relate undisguised. People who say they aren't going to do that. But I have yet to find a 500 year old man to teach me the way it was done then. So I told one guy that until Don Pedro tells me not to sing those songs, I will continue to sing them.

**Is there anything you would like to comment on that I have left out?**

This is my own personal wish as a Danzante, is that people would respect the circles more. What I mean by that is to respect how people do things and that there wouldn’t be so much jealousy. For me, through all these years of dancing, that jealousy is what is really getting to me. I say, “Why do I continue to go to these ceremonies, when I know these people in the circle don't like me and I know that for a fact.”

I wish people would learn to accept you as you are. Personally, my family and I have…we have so many groups in Northern Cal., for me to feel that jealousy—

That is not why I became a Danzante. So, I would like to see unity as Danzantes; to have respect for everyone who comes to the circle. Jealousy and lack of respect would be the main thing there.
I know people sometimes, they smoke and drink, I say, “I don't want to tell you what to do with your life, you are the only one who has to answer to the creator when you dance like that.”

Also, I would like us Chicano Danzantes to keep using *El Es Dios*, instead of other words. These are the words that Don Pedro taught me. They are words that Gerardo taught me, words that Lázaro uses and words Mario Aguilar uses.

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**Narrator four: Ocelotl**

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<td>Male</td>
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Date Interviewed: Nov. 22, 2008

**Where do you live?**

I live in Castroville, California.

**What is your earliest memory of La Danza?**

Uhmm, My earliest memory of La Danza, I was a senior in High school, and an Aztec Dance troupe came to perform at my school. Then it mesmerized me and I went home and I told my mom that when I went to college, I was going to look for a La Danza group, and then she told me that her great uncle used to wear some dance costumes.

**How did you feel about finding out that La Danza was in your family history?**

It felt really good. It gave me an extra push to learn; to learn my history, learn my roots. It gave me an extra incentive to learn because I had it in my roots.

**Please tell me the story of how you became involved in La Danza.**

I was a Mechista at San Diego State University and I started asking around with Mechistas about a Danza group. And that's when they told me that your Danza group was
practicing in Sherman Heights; at the community Center. And then that's the way, when I had a little bit of extra time from work ...Because I was going to school and working, I tried to make it to the practice for beginners.

**Who was your teacher and how do you continue the lineage of his/her teachings?**

Well, my teacher was Mario Aguilar at first, and then I continued by learning ....my minor was in Chicano Studies. I try to read as much as I can and go to workshops as much as I can. Ummm, and then, continuing to model Some of the practices that you have, like being patient, sitting down and trying to give a talk to students about the importance of La Danza; and just uh,… that …

**Why do you participate in La Danza?**

It’s a combination of all three... of being healthy; it helps me physically, stay in shape, and most importantly it helps me with the medicine it gives me. I firmly believe we all carry energy, so, it just helps me stay healthy in the sense of like, sometimes spiritually, and it helps me focus. It helps me pray for the people that I care about and love.

Emotionally, it has been there for me with compañeros and compañeras that I dance with. In the realms of health, it has contributed to me for me being healthy. Since I started La Danza six years ago, my knee hasn't given me any problems. I haven't gotten really, really, sick. It has helped me grow as a person.

**What is it about La Danza that keeps you involved?**

…Uhmm… just the constant knowledge that I don't know a lot about La Danza. I look forward to dancing...for the last six years I have looked forward to every week. But know I think I am in the next phase of the craftsmanship. Of the traje-making so, It's just
a constant we are always learning in Danza. I mean there are times, when time will go, by and we don't go to a ceremony, or go to we don't go to another person's practice, or we don't get a visitor but we are always learning.

For example, just recently, we started to make trajes we are starting to make ayoyotes and we are going to try to make sonajas… just that whole realm of always being a student, there is always something to learn.

That's what keeps me involved in La Danza You can learn to play the flute, you can learn to play the mandolin you can learn some alabanzas, so there is a whole lot more that I have to learn about La Danza…and just the history; the roots of it, like you know, how your calpulli is trying to learn the roots of it. Not just dancing, but where Danzas come from or where the maestros that taught brought it. That's still a whole... it keeps me intrigued and it keeps me interested to keep on going in La Danza.

**How is your family involved in your group?**

My little sister dances in the group…uhmm, my little niece dances... and two of my sister's daughters dance in our group. And then my mom is the Sahumadora for our calpulli. Then my dad is involved by simply driving us everywhere. So it’s kind of neat, they all support La Danza in their way.

**What role does La Danza play in your family?**

It plays a pretty major role because we are in charge of the practice 3 days a week, and then we got to present to an elder or to a baptism, and then we try to…. we are going to start attending more ceremonies. So it plays a pretty big role in our life.

At the same time, my parent’s role with attending church is still a big part of their life.
Do you find that your relationships with the members of your group are as strong, stronger, or not as strong as your relationships with your extended genetic family?

They are not as strong because I'm still close to my genetic family. But I have strong relationships with some Danzantes, like they're really close friends. I would say that my extended family no, but my friendships yes, because I have more friendships with Danzantes than I do with my old high school buddies and stuff.

I think I spend more time with the culture aspects of my community, and the Danzantes.

Please tell me some of your favorite memories about your family and La Danza.

I am going to be a little bias here, Mario, because I think that one of my favorite memories now is probably dancing for Mexi’ca New Year in San Jose two years ago. They had a beautiful sunrise ceremony. They had the community building the altar, with the men building the circle, to prepare for the ceremony. That was very special to me.

Uhmm…at the same rate, the experience I had with Mexi’cayotl this year at their ceremony in San Diego, was a bit more powerful, because I witnessed what a limpia was and what a velación was from beginning to the end. That was very special to me because my mom said that… ah, it had a big impact, especially when she felt the limpia, and when she stepped back that was the most spiritual experience she has ever felt in her entire life, because she has always been a very dedicated Catholic since I was a baby.

So in my 30 years of my life, the experience of the velación was so powerful that she mentioned it to the group because she knows it was really special for her. Now she knew what you know and teach that there is a big peace in the velación….and that we had
not been witness to it before. She really enjoyed it and she wants to put some energy into that side of La Danza.

So I think that those two were really good memories [dance circle] Tonalehque was outside in the community, that was real beautiful to see the elders pray for the entire community. And at the same time over there at the velación; everyone participated in the limpia.

**Who is involved in your Danza group?**

We have a few elders, a lot of children. Our circle is made up of a couple of elderly women, a couple of college students, some high school students, and a lot of elementary school students and their parents. Since the last time you've been here in Castroville, one of the mom's started dancing and another mom started dancing.

**What brings and keeps people in your group?**

I think it’s because we just have a welcoming feeling to our circle there is no pressure to compete in our group to not make a mistake in our group I think that's what people have mentioned to me We are young, and we just have a lot of energy.

**What are the values that your group strives for?**

Our values that we strive are kind of in our name calpulli Oceloyotl we are dancing with the spirit of the jaguar, and then we mention that we strive for community and love. We have social workers in our group, so we try to value love and justice. We try to value patience and respect.
Please tell me about the symbolism of La Danza and what it means to you.

To me personally I think that it’s a part of history that has been ignored in my family, and in the history of Mexico, the symbolism is that "we're here" Let's celebrate our culture.

Please tell me the significance of the circle and how it relates to family.

The Danza circle is strong in the sense that you know what we are learning in Danza, is a big piece in our tradition. We continue to not pressure any of our kids to join. They know it’s there; but Danza is accepted. We want to continue participating but I think for my family’s children, they know and respect La Danza.

How are your children involved in La Danza? If you do not have any children, would you like them to be involved in La Danza?

Uhmm, my daughter is involved in Danza when I have her, because she goes to every practice with me. Uhmm, I would like her to get involved; I’ve never told her that she has to dance. ’Cause in the future I would want them to join naturally; but without wanting to or not, my children will have to come with me because it is a big part of my life. But I would like them to carry the tradition, of course.

Little by little, my daughter has said she wants to dance, and hopefully, as she gets older, she will want to participate voluntarily. I don't think I will force them to dance.

What does it mean to you to pass on this lineage to your children?

It means everything to me, just like you pass down, you know, religion, your values, what's right and wrong. Hopefully my children will carry this tradition and take it to another level, ‘cause I did not get a chance to learn about it when I was growing up. I did not know a lot of my cultural history, so hopefully, my children will know.
Do you find La Danza to be empowering for yourself? For your community?
If so, how? If not, why not?

Yes, in many aspects, for myself and for my community because ah, you know La Danza is a lot to learn and if you stick with Danza, you learn a whole ... There's a lot to it is very empowering for the Chicano community when you are growing up, it’s really hard to find. La Danza gave me that Identity when I found it in San Diego. I found out who I was, when I saw the Santo Niño de Atocha being brought into the velación, I thought about that a shrine in my household and that’s in my extended family’s entire household. So when I saw that I knew that Danza was part of my culture, but also part of my family tradition.

Is there a difference between being religious and being spiritual? If so, what is the difference?

Being religious could mean a couple of things, this is an open ended question, and it’s more of an opinion. In my opinion religion has its rules, has its set order, its forms of how you need to pray, how many prayers you need to perform in order to be OK.

To be spiritual, it can be, as simple as a walk in the beach, burning sage, or practicing some connection to Mother Earth, and praying next to a tree; where it doesn't have any rules and any norms that you have to follow. It’s just what you feel. I think that's being spiritual.

Feeling a connection to a higher being, but not necessarily following the norms that society sets, that is spiritual. To me religion is more a society's set of prayers, in the sense that it could be Christianity, or other religions.
But being religious can be "this is the way it has to be done." And being spiritual is more open minded. I don't have to go to a temple or a church today; I am going to go to the mountain tops, or to the beach. And I think that's what La Danza gives me a chance to believe in both.

**What does the term “sacred Space” mean to you? Would the term sacred space mean anything in terms of La Danza Azteca?**

To me sacred space is to me one where it could be nature; it could be anything that involves mother Earth. Ah, but in a sacred space there's got to be sometimes history where people have gathered for hundreds of years. Or elders are buried there; to me that is a sacred space.

A sacred space could be where some warriors died. It could also mean that there is a story behind it, where something was born. Or something occurred, for example Bethlehem is a sacred space, or Chicomoztoc.... a place that has meaning to a people.

In Danza it is a place where people come together. We are establishing with Danza, sacred spaces: like the ceremonies where we perform, we are starting to do them yearly.... and sometimes we try to go to places.. that are very sacred and special.... I haven't had a chance to go to Mexico yet...

So I guess a sacred space in La Danza is a place we share energy. Every time we dance we are giving thanks. Every time we form a circle, we're sharing energy.

**Does La Danza have its drawbacks or negatives? If so what are these? If not, why not?**

Uhmm, it could have its negatives. Many cultures in the world are a bit racist. The drawback that I see in La Danza is that I've met a few people that don't want to share
Danza with other people. They want to almost own the spirituality, or the cultural aspects of Danza.

So if you are not of a certain race, you are not "in". That's the only negativity I can see. You can kind of get a big head as a new Danzante. You can start learning about our richness of our culture, and then you start saying "well our culture is better than other cultures, because we did this and that, and our sun stone is better it is the most accurate in the world..... Our this, our that… that is the negativity that I see in Danza when we start putting our culture above all others. And putting our La Danza above all others is plain racist too. For example, going to a ceremony and its going to be a multi-cultural display of people, and the Danzantes don't honor performance time limits and take over. They act as if just because they are Danzantes Aztecas they can step all over everyone else. That is not being humble, that is being arrogant.

That's the only negative part I can see right now; when people make assumptions or they put their culture above others they become.... Some Danzantes sometimes take it a little overboard and uhmm, you know, they become racist and become stingy to share our culture with others.

I read a great peace by James Street, called "Native Christian" and in the book, it talks about traditional Native Americans and how they don't want other people or the white man to learn the native ways, because they will manipulate it, or steal it. But, then an elder mentions that "if you want to own spirituality, you become just like the white man." You become greedy.
With some Danzantes, I have overheard some conversations where some people say “I don't want a white person in our calpulli”.... to be exclusive in La Danza is to me a downside. If someone who is white or black wants to dance in the circle, I think it’s great, it shows our open-mindedness.

So I have heard some people say.... I heard my old maestro here in the north say that "we were this, we were that", almost putting us above all other races. That's the danger I think. Superiority over other people.... is a little dangerous in my book.

**How do you feel about those Danzantes that mix in other traditions La Danza?**

I don't feel bad about it 'cause I think that's the way ... I don't look down upon it, I actually have a neutral stance. And my neutral stance is that as a historian ...Nobody can actually say "this is how it happened" And so when Danzantes bring in, like other Native American cultures from, like up here, if they synchronize other cultures, say they want to dress like a Navaho and they want to dance in La Danza, or they want to sing some Navaho song, that's awesome, bring it in to the circle! But as long as they can say "this is a Navaho song, a Navaho dance," it’s great. I guess that as long as they can bring other native cultures into the Danza and they say where it comes from: "I was told, or I learned this La Danza from... I don't know... from Africa, and it comes from the Zulu tribe...” or whatever you know?

But as long as they can educate us as to what the song or dance mean. An example is that I was told that there was a Danzante Azteca at a big conference, and he sang a song, and a Native brother heard it and the native brother was a little upset because the
Azteca was claiming it was an Azteca song. The Native brother went up to him and said "No that is a Native song from this tribe!"

So it’s almost like learning a song from another tribe and then taking it, is a little disrespectful. As long as you bring in other indigenous ways to La Danza, I don't see anything wrong with it. I see it as more of an educational tool for La Danza in general.

As long as they can say this is from the Lakota tribe, from the Kumeeyai, or something. But if they don't know the history or where they got it from, then I don't know, I guess we was just making stuff up, I guess.

So I am a little neutral in the sense that we all learn from other people and I like that aspect catholic tradition... You know... it kind of saddens me in a way. To me it's almost like that Danzante that is almost not too brown, but more white a little bit. It's almost kind of denying who they are.

**How do you feel about those Danzantes that reject the Catholic traditions of Mexican culture in La Danza?**

Uhhmm, I almost see it like being Chicano and we are people of mixed with Spaniards. My father is very dark, and my mother is light skinned and we got that white skin from the Spaniards, so it just... anybody can believe what they want to believe, they have the freedom to do so. But, ah, I have always been a firm believer of "that happened in the past" and like the book says "we are the cosmic race" "somos mestizos" (we are mixed-blood). Many of us more than others; many are lighter than others, many of us are darker than others.

So Catholicism was forced upon us, we know that already, but, it’s kind of like ignoring 500 years of history as well. It’s kind of denying who you are because if you go
into Mexico, I don't know the percentage, but I know its high the majority of our people are Catholic. In the U.S., it drops a little because they get into Protestantism, or evangelical Christianity, but it is still high.

So it’s like, denying the vast majority of your gente. Your grandmother, you ancestors, so I guess, that they are denying a big chapter of their roots. And you can't deny what you are, or who you are. I guess I have a little bias since I was raised Catholic, and I have parents who support Danza and they are Catholic.

For example, I have a friend that has a lot more anger because he continues to tell his parents on how beautiful our culture is and because he hasn't had support from his family, for La Danza, he feels more anger towards the Catholic religion. Like his parents, don't value what he is doing for the community, for the arte, for the La Danza, for the culture. And, since Catholicism has been so much a big part of his family, he rejects the institution of the church and he rejects his blood.

So because of his pain, he follows the philosophy that "well don't have to be Catholic anymore." so we are just going to be "just indigenous, and follow our culture, and that's it.” So it kind of sad then, because those people become exclusive; they exclude many of our gente. When somebody who has an entire family that is Catholic wants to join Danza as well, they will go to a calpulli and whether it’s through a platica, or word of mouth; and when you start excluding completely Catholicism you exclude a major part of our community. That’s what disheartening. We become exclusive.

That's why when we went to your velación, it wasn't like we were promoting Catholicism. We’re just accepting that "hey this is part of our roots, it’s part of our
people, what we have synchronized through the centuries." And now we are here today. And we need to respect that history.

Sometimes, it’s hard because we are not taught any of our history, and when we become college students, we learn about the atrocities that the Spanish did to our people. And, sometimes, those emotions become very high and they consume you.

**Is there anything you would like to comment on that I have left out?**

Uhmm, just my optimism, for La Danza. I just see it blossoming I see Danza continue to grow in a good way. You know, it’s going to continue. Groups are going to continue to grow in Aztlan and México. And, we will have to learn to come to some dialog between La Danza and Catholicism. You know, I guess I feel very good for our future, because learning the history of La Danza from elders like you, gives us a strong base for many communities. I feel very passionate for our future; lo and behold, when I got back from San Diego State, there was already a calpulli formed in my little town of 7,000 people! And feels good to have a calpulli, where sometimes there are 50 people on Monday practice sometimes there are only 20 or 30. But we are a little town and I have seen some of our students go to San Jose State- another one is going to go to Long Beach and they said "I am going to dance."

So the continuing of sharing is going to continue to grow. We want to start going to more ceremonies. I hope that more people will see that La Danza is just not one type of Danza, there is a lot of culture, that opens people’s hearts and it keeps me going and gives me faith that our community will move forward.
Narrator six: Yaotachqui

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Date Interviewed: Nov. 24, 2008

What is your age?
I am 36 years old

Where were you born?
New York City

When did you move to San Diego?
In late 1990.

What is your earliest memory of La Danza?
It was when Danza Mexi'cayotl danced at a gathering at the Manzanita Indian Reservation. I began there, because up to that point I already had friends who were involved in La Danza already. And me coming from New York, I was kind of skeptical of THAT type of group activity, especially when it came to dancing.

So that day, that I saw you guys dance, that uhmm, a little girl pulled me out to…and I did the friendship dance. So right then and there, that was my first taste of it, and then after that I thought I think I will give this a try.

Please tell me the story of how you became involved in La Danza.
After I saw you guys at Manzanita, I went to my first practice, which I think was in Imperial Beach, and then after that, that's it, I have been dancing ever since. The rest is history. I have been dancing a total of 16 years.
Who was your teacher and how do you continue the lineage of his/her teachings?

My teacher is a man named Mario E. Aguilar, and how do I continue his teachings? Right now, I am doing a community dance group for residents in the barrio of Barrio Stockton. We teach them Danza Azteca there... and you know, I'm trying to pass on what I have learned through the Danza to my children....everything that he has taught me as far as morals, values, stuff our people have left behind we've lost through the years, so I try to teach them as well.

Why do you participate in La Danza?

Well... there are many reasons I participate; but most of it is it give me spiritual balance, that some of us lack, and I was one of those individuals. And it teaches you a great deal; how to be with other people. It also teaches family values, core values that some families lack. I get to bring my children where they get to interact with adults; they get to see, uhhh... other adults interacting, so they learn how to be, how to act, discipline you know, it’s a lot of... it revolves around family.

What is it about La Danza that keeps you involved? How is your family involved in the group?

Danza plays a huge role in my family because it gives us a sense of unity when we are dancing together. When we are participating in ceremonies together, it feels so awesome. It's a communal teaching that you can't get in this society that we live in. You know, it's something that many families lack. So, I am grateful to Danza for the time I get to spend with them, and its quality time. It’s always a teaching whenever we practice, whenever we go to a ceremony, we're learning together.
Do you find that your relationships with the members of your group are as strong, stronger, or not as strong as your relationships with your extended genetic family?

I believe they're stronger than with members of my genetic family because we do so many things together that it’s a reaction that has to happen. We do the ceremonies; together; we eat out together, which we tend to do a lot which I quite enjoy; and we spend quality time with all of us. I mean where else can we spend a whole weekend participating in a ceremony and yet, we still want to hang out together for a few more hours. That doesn't happen every day in the "real world." So to have those strong bonds with people is completely great.

Please tell me some of your favorite memories about your family and La Danza.

My favorite memories are..... Every time we get to go ... every time we get to go where we are dancing...I mean the trips have always been special—to go dance ... the dancing part is very nice, but it’s the trip itself, the voyage, the journey, just getting there... We might get lost; we might make a couple of U-turns. But it’s that time that we are traveling together, hanging out together, we're talking ... you get to experience different things, but we get to do it together. Those are the memories that I hold strong. It’s the journey to get wherever we are going.

Who is involved in your Danza group?

Uhmm, in our Danza group it ranges from "older individuals" in their 50s (laughs) to a couple months old. We have babies from a couple months old to people; 20, 30 40 years old, to about 50.
What brings and keeps people in your group?

In my opinion, Danza calls a lot of individuals. I think what brings them here is that they get a ...they are looking for something ... something within themselves. Something they might not have been taught by their families. It could be something cultural that they are looking for. And they come, and it's the individual that really actually determines whether they are going to stay or not; If it's really for them to decide.

But you know, La Danza is open to everybody, but not everybody decides to come into the circle. So I think once people come, dance, and take the time to see what it's truly about and they take it ... the time to look and see what Danza is and how it fulfills other people in their lives, and how it generates so much family and cultural values... then I think that is why they tend to stay.

What are the values that your group strives for?

I think the core value of our group is family values. Everything revolves around our family. I think that's why ... to reiterate, it’s that strong bond that we have with each other. I think that our group revolves around that. The core family values of caring for each other; loving each other and communicating and listening with each other. That's what makes our group so strong.

Please tell me about the symbolism of La Danza and what it means to you.

I think La Danza is an extended part of our spirituality, of our beliefs. It revolves around a lot of things like in Catholicism. We were born Catholic, but as we evolved, Catholicism did not fulfill my need for spirituality, particularly. So, there was a void there. So Danza filled that need for spirituality for me. So, it symbolizes a great deal as far as what we believe in, where we go, and how we act. And… yeah, that's it....
Please tell me the significance of the circle and how it relates to family.

I think the actual physical circle and how it relates to the family is that it, goes back to the value that we are all doing; this a group, and together as a family. We dance in a circle, out of respect as well, since everybody is pretty much equal within our family.

How are your children involved in Danza? If you do not have any children, would you like them to be involved in La Danza?

My two boys are involved in La Danza. Right now, they've evolved. At first, as little kids they were running around, jumping up and down. Now they've become good drummers. Now you are starting to see right now a distinction. My oldest son loves to drum more and my younger is becoming a better dancer. He can drum really well, but he is a better dancer than my oldest.

What does it mean to you to pass on this lineage to your children?

It means a great deal to me. It's a great deal... it means a lot to me because we get to leave them something that is within them. Something that was almost lost, and now we have tried to get back. To pass this on to them …is going to help them in their journey to being a young man; the journey through life, period. It’s going to help center them, balance them, and hopefully balance and steer them in a good direction and a good path. So it means a great deal to me.

Do you find La Danza to be empowering for yourself? For your community?

If so, how? If not, why not?

For me, yes, because it’s totally empowering to me because La Danza is not only a spiritual thing for me where I get to go and pray, but it gives me the strength to clear my mind, and when it comes to certain things that are happening within my life, it gives me the strength to go on day to day and tackle life's challenges when they come on... It's that
balancing that we need. And it’s empowering to our community because our community gets so caught up in just everyday living, that we tend to forget these cultural and spiritual values that we have. We tend to lose them just because we are living in a totally different society where these types of values are not valued.

**Is there a difference between being religious and being spiritual? If so, what is the difference?**

That's a good question....I think being religious is… The difference is that we don't need to go to a particular place or building to be spiritual. I think that for me, that's the difference. Growing up, you know, you had to go to a church or something like that, you had to go, you had to be there and do all these sacraments and stuff.

But La Danza has taught me to be spiritual, I don't to go to a church or anywhere particular, to, you know, talk to my creator, or what I believe in, at my home or wherever I am at. So I don't need.... Religion centers on places and certain individuals. And spirituality just centers on me.

**Do you consider yourself a religious person? If so how? If not, why not?**

Uhmm... I think I am a little bit religious, just because of the Catholicism part that I grew up with and what it embodies in La Danza; it’s mixed into Danza. So I tend to be religious 'cause we put up our crosses to Jesus Christ, and we follow certain sacraments, that we continue to follow.

**What does the term “sacred Space” mean to you? Would the term sacred space mean anything in terms of La Danza Azteca?**

I think the term sacred space means for me, it’s my own space. I could be sitting at a bus stop, at school, at home, anywhere; it is a space within you. Where ever I am at, is
my own sacred space. Would the term sacred space mean anything in terms of La Danza Azteca? Yes, I think sacred space would be when we're dancing with that circle that we talked about earlier.

Once we start dancing, when we are in the circle, we create this space around us, around every dancer; whatever it is that we hold sacred within the middle of the circle, I think that space becomes sacred.

**Does La Danza have its drawbacks or negatives? If so what are these? If not why not?**

Uhmm, the only…I think, the only thing that I could think of as negative drawbacks in Danza… I don't think it has to be negative. It depends on how it's taught. It depends on how people learn Danza. I think that's where some of the negatives come from. I think people's misconceptions of Danza and how they take it can create negative influences.

But I think that if Danza is taught in a good way, And in an open way, with… Right now for me there are no negatives within Danza. I think most of the negatives come from the outside, rather than from the inside.

**How do you feel about those Danzantes that mix in other traditions into la Danza?**

I don't care for it that much 'cause mixing traditions… well because then who are you as an individual? Then you are trying to make yourself, this individual with different traditions from different cultures. What is it that you truly believe in then? Isn’t Danza good enough for you just the way it has been handed down to us by our ancestors?

I think that as Danza, we just believe one thing and we follow that one thing from Mexico and we don't mix anything else in it. You become a collage of different cultures
and traditions, but you are not yourself, you're not that Mexican culture you say you are... who are you then? So I don't care for the mixing of traditions.

**How do you feel about those Danzantes that that reject the Catholic traditions of Mexican culture in La Danza?**

I think that they are missing a great part of La Danza, because Catholicism goes hand in hand now. You can't separate the two. If you do, then you are missing a great deal of what Danza is. And the reason La Danza is the way it is because of this mixture of these two cultural ideals that we follow. So if you cut one out, then you are missing a great part of it. So, you can't cut one and do the other.... you will miss a great part of it. You are not reading the full book; you are only reading half a book. You need to read the full book to understand it

**Is there anything you would like to comment on that I have left out?**

I think the only thing I would like to comment on, and go on the record on as saying is that for my dance group in particular, I am really grateful of the way it has been brought up, has been taught and has been taught and continues to be taught to this day. Our group offers so much to not only to me, but to my family, to our community, to our people as a whole. And I wouldn’t trade it for anything else.

Where we are going with our dance group is strong. It has gone through so many things, where other groups would probably fade away. On the other hand, if they did not fade away they are really a group in name only, with only one or two individuals. This is due to the people who have taken this tradition head on, and have taught it in a good way. It is really a special thing, and I am very grateful for it.
Narrator seven: Tepetlacatl

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Date Interviewed: Nov. 24, 2008

**How old are you?**

I am 26 year old

**Where were you born and where do you live?**

I live in Hesperia, California. I was born in Culver City

**What is your earliest memory of La Danza?**

My Earliest memory of La Danza wasn't Danza Azteca. It was in Zacatecas at a ranchito for a fiesta for la virgen. It was a group of Matachines. I remember how they got in line and how they all danced together… uhmm, and I would be following the drum, I always liked the drum.

**Please tell me the story of how you became involved in La Danza.**

My parents were involved first in a group of people who did yoga and they had like a vegetarianism, and they prayed together; and from there, my dad met a lady who introduced us to Virginia Carmelo and Lázaro Arvizu. We basically met them by going to their practices in Downey Park.

**Who was your teacher and how do you continue the lineage of his/her teachings?**

Well I have had many, many teachers. I would say the Arvizu family, uhmm I would say I learned from my parents. When I first started dancing, I didn't like it, and I really wanted to play. I wanted to go into the playground and stay away from Danza, but as time passed, Uhmm, I got more involved; I started practicing I started learning. I
would travel with my parents and uhmm, I would say my biggest teachers would be my parents because they were learning with me; they would take me where ever Danza was. They made it pretty much available to me.

**Why do you participate in Danza?**

I have learned to love it, to love the culture, the people, the movement, and the harmony. I enjoy dancing and I enjoy teaching it, I enjoy being around it. I feel a different type of energy dancing and uhmm; it’s just something that I feel is a big part of my life.

**How is your family involved in the group?**

Well for about 12 to 15 years, we first started the ceremony in Zacatecas, at the rancho where my mom is from: "La Leona" or "Colonia Modelo." From there, it only lasted two years. We had it, and we had a teacher Moisés Gonzalez, *que en paz descanse* (may he rest in peace), and we met him through the Arvizu family. He took us to Queretaro. He was the one who taught us a lot of what the ceremony was about, the essence of La Danza. He was the one, to help us initiate our ceremony.

After three years, we saw there was not much support from the rancho over there in Zacatecas for the ceremony, so we moved the fiesta to Hesperia; to the Holy Family Church. And at that church, we started doing our ceremony, just as we learned from the teachers that we had were in Queretaro, Miguel Martinez and his family. They were the ones that we went to their ceremony in Queretaro, in September for the Santa Cruz.

And we learned after going so many years, we learned how a ceremony is made, and they could trust us, so they taught us. From that, we brought the ceremony here with the help of Moisés Gonzalez.
Now for over three years we have our own group which has been steadily going to practice, and we have spread the teaching that we have learned; and we just enjoy it, and hope people enjoy it around us.

**What role does La Danza play in your family?**

La Danza is a part our daily way of life. It's part of our everyday world. We live in harmony with other Danza groups. What we learn in Danza we put it into our everyday interactions with people….our relations....

**Do you find that your relationships with the members of your group are as strong, stronger, or not as strong as your relationships with your extended genetic family?**

In some ways, they are stronger because ah, we see the people in our group twice a week. And they pretty much become part of the family, like if they were part of a genetic family. In other ways, our family is stronger.... our blood is our blood. So they are not as close to us as our family is but, for the most part, what we teach and what they give us, uhmm, we have grown together as a group and as a family. So we are and we aren’t a family.

**Please tell me some of your favorite memories about your family and Danza.**

I remember traveling allover Mexico, going to ceremonies, ah, in Queretaro mainly, because every year we try going there. When we were little, the whole family would go on a road trip; and go dance over there for the Santa Cruz, and the people over there welcomed us. Martin's family welcomed us every year, gave us a place to stay and food to eat. The people were beautiful... the culture... We learned about our culture, and we tried to apply it to our life over here. Yeah...
Who is involved in your Danza group?

Primarily my family and then we have teachers, and we mainly have families, kids and their parents, six or so families. Young and old!

What are the values that your group strives for?

Discipline is number one. We try to get our dancers to be on time, to be ready to be organized, to participate. Discipline would be number one because we feel that is the only way we can learn. A lot of people are shy or embarrassed or whatever. We feel that even though you think you don't know what you are doing, the more you participate, the faster you are going to connect with and understand La Danza.

Secondly, after we finish Danza we sing alabanzas. So through that participation in that...singing and prayer...we try to keep the format that we learned: asking for permission, singing our alabanzas...etc.

Please tell me about the symbolism of Danza and what it means to you.

The symbolism of La Danza is...well there is so much about the Danza that we are still learning; I don't understand all of it. What I consider La Danza in my life, is a form of prayer, communication with a higher power my way of connecting to god and our ancestors. La Danza is another outlet for my spirit. Humans are always in search of the unknown..."what is our past?" We want to follow our past, and maybe we don't know where it will take us. And we try to serve the people around us and live a better life.

How are your children involved in Danza? If you do not have any children, would you like them to be involved in la Danza?

Well I do not have children yet, but when I do, I will...La Danza will be a part of their life, as just it has been mine.
Do you find La Danza to be empowering for yourself? For your community?
If so how? If not why not?

I feel that Danza is beside, the spiritual aspects, it is also has a physical form. It is a form of exercise, it keeps you healthy, it keeps me in motion, and gives me discipline. So yes, I would say it is empowering for me. For the community it … yes, for example, in our group, which I would consider a part of our community, whoever wants to learn, can come and learn. So it is empowering in that way.

Is there a difference between being religious and being spiritual? If so, what is the difference?

Yeah, I believe so. My personal belief is that you can be spiritual without being religious. I believe that religion has always been a battle of who is right and who is wrong, and “which story do I follow?” And I believe that spirituality is about not worrying about who is right or wrong; it’s about following what you think is right and uhmm… in a higher power that you believe in. Or whatever you have beliefs in.

Do you consider yourself a religious person? If so how? If not why not?

No I don't. I am not…

What does the term “sacred Space” mean to you?

I don't hear that term often, but I consider my family's altar in our house sacred space. It is a space that deserves respect, a place for prayer... uhmm…It’s a place to come to worship.

Would the term sacred space mean anything in terms of La Danza Azteca?

Yeah, it is the same, our altar. It is part of La Danza Azteca. It's where we come to our velaciones, we sing, and pray. That is what our sacred space is.
Does La Danza have its drawbacks or negatives? If so what are these? If not why not?

Yeah, I think everything has its drawbacks, and Danza is no exception. It ranges from people that use La Danza to influence others in a negative way. Also, and uhmm ...people use La Danza as a form of control and power over people. You can use your power and respect from people to take advantage of others. Some people can take La Danza the wrong way. But with an open and clean heart, La Danza is good.... I don't think that there is anything else that can be seen as drawbacks within La Danza.

How do you feel about those Danzantes that mix in other traditions into La Danza?

Well, I've gone to different places where the mix maybe two different traditions and I feel that everybody has a right to do whatever they want. But, I disagree with them when it conflicts with my beliefs. I think that putting cultures together is a positive thing. But ah, it can be conflicting. One example would be that I have seen Northern Native dancers and...

Here is an example. I have a friend who is a dancer who goes to North Dakota for the sun dance. And he also grew up in Danza Azteca, and I think that is a good thing, because when he dances Danza Azteca, he is an Aztec dancer. When he goes back to his roots, he goes to Pow Wows and to the sun dance and does these things that way.

I see that, and it isn't a bad thing. But I think the problem comes when, ah, during the Azteca ceremonies, they mix two cultures together, and I have seen it and it is confusing to me because it I can't make sense of it. But Like I said, “To each his own.”
How do you feel about those Danzantes that reject the Catholic traditions of Mexican culture in La Danza?

I have never actually talked to anybody about that. Again, to each his own, and I have my beliefs and they have their beliefs. And I don't look at that in a bad way; I just look at them that...that’s why they’re different….uhmm. Two different people have two different beliefs and ideas.

Is there anything you would like to comment on that I have left out?

I'm so nervous, I don't know why! (laughs). Well for me La Danza is meant to be felt with an open heart; with an open understanding of, just of…wanting to learning. Some people see it as entertainment or maybe even laugh at us dancers. I think it’s just that they should open their hearts if they are commenting they should open their hearts and learn more about it. So they could understand.

Narrator eight: Tonalli

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Date Interviewed: Nov. 25, 2008

How old are you?

I am 29 and I was born in Tepetlixca, Mexico, right outside of Cuauhtla.

What is your earliest memory of La Danza?

My earliest memory would be I guess childhood, at a Pow wow

So your first memory of La Danza Azteca is at a Plains Indian Pow Wow?

Yea, I think so.
How old do you think you were when that happened?
   Probably around seven.

Please tell me how you became involved in La Danza.
   Well I came out with Chachayotes and feathers!

So your mom danced while she was pregnant?
   Yeah, I weighed 10 pounds, so they figured out it was because of the Chachayotes.

Who was your teacher and how do you continue the lineage of his/her teachings?
   Dulce Madre Mia, Macuilxochitl Cruz Chavez, AKA Bernardina Venada.... I continue them through my children…. By passing it on to my son and my daughter, and those who want to learn.

Why do you participate in La Danza?
   It’s as important as eating your food and going to work; it just coincides with my life.

What is it about La Danza that keeps you involved?
   The fulfillment that it gives me, whether it's practice or..... Like you said once, it’s usually practice where you get stronger connections… you get.... the chit chat... that you have to continue the week, "la vida cotidiana" como dicen (the daily life as they say).

How is your family involved in the group?
   Right now, I am taking a leave of absence because of my daughter, but other than that, you know all of us, now that there are five of us, we are in La Danza. Our life is La Danza.

What role does La Danza play in your family?
   Well it’s pretty important. It’s our foundation; it’s what we started our family with.
Do you find that your relationships with the members of your group are as strong, stronger, or not as strong as your relationships with your extended genetic family?

If you had asked me probably a few years ago, I would have said no my Danza is stronger.... However now, my family is a little stronger now because I have my new daughter and everyone wants to see here more. In general, my La Danza family is virtually equal. I mean I know my sister and my brother aren't in it much these years, but with my mom, with my dad, that's mainly where I see them. It’s in the ceremonies. So it’s pretty balanced I think.... I don't see my dad if I don't see a ceremony!

Please tell me some of your favorite memories about your family and La Danza.

One of the most, I think beautiful dances that we've done is the... we had to do a show that was showing one generation to the next, passing down their music and their art. And there we did a Danza with Don Pedro, my mother, me, my wife and my son. So there were four generations dancing. This was really, really, beautiful. And I think I had never seen my son dance so strong ever... except when all four generations danced together.

Who is involved in your La Danza group?

Kids, adults, teachers, lawyers, professors, carpenters, uhmm, Young adults, 20s 30s, 40 year olds, it’s, pretty.....varied.

Our group is very family oriented depending on what groups you go to you find it more... MEChA oriented, or younger adult oriented. I think ours is one of the few that are very family oriented, you have people there that it’s not just a person, or a dad, it’s usually, the whole familia that’s actually doing it.
What brings and keeps people in your group?
I would have to say it depends on the person. You have to be strong willed, especially if you are man in our dance group. Our dance group is very women oriented. It has been for many years, my mom being the *jefa*. It’s just the dynamics of it that it’s always been women oriented; the couple of men that we have, have to be very strong men and be able not overtake the woman's energy, but balance it. And not many men can do it. It is something very difficult. It’s very... it’s not who ever can kick it in the group. It takes a certain guy. What keeps them there is I guess the fulfillment that it gives them every day, just... as me, uh it revitalizes and reenergizes you for the week mentally, spiritually, physically...

What are the values that your group strives for?
That would be uhmm, Respect, the family, our traditions, our history, Ah, our culture.

Please tell me about the symbolism of La Danza and what it means to you.
The symbolism of La Danza to me is a way of giving thanks to the different elements that create this universe, this world, this life that we have. It’s a way of becoming one with something that we're very apart from in this society You know we are into nature, we are not very into giving thanks to the wind, or the different deities that we have... ...that I think that if every person was to look into that it would be a much more peaceful, much more... in tune with the world, because of the way society is. It’s a way finding your inner self.
Please tell me the significance of the circle and how it relates to family.

Ah, I guess it begins.... and I can't speak for everyone, but I know that in our dance circle, we try to always welcome the children, and I think we have taken upon everyone to care for the child, if it’s a mom's or dad's turn to lead a dance So the dance circle becomes an extended family, one taking care of another Without one or the other we end up having chaos in the group.

Different people that you would have in your family… your tías (aunts) and your tíos (uncles), they become a part of that, in the circle for your children or even for yourself. Someone in the dance circle out there takes the place of someone that you never had, but now you're called into La Danza, and now you have it. ....Someone that you can speak to or go to with and just hang out with. The La Danza becoming extended families so....

How are your children involved in La Danza? If you do not have any children, would you like them to be involved in La Danza?

Well for my daughter, she has been a dancer since she was in the womb, you know, my wife has been dancing and or at least in the circle drumming. So since my kids became created, they were already inside the circle.

They are born there, and then they are right next to the drums, and when the drum beats, they're sleeping. My son is a great little dancer, he loves dancing, and then I have my step son who loves drumming, so it’s a great balance I think. I have my drummers, I have my dancers..... (laughs).
What does it mean to you to pass on this lineage to your children?

To me, I find it as an obligation Ah, not something que le tienen que doblar el brazo (that they have to bend their arms for them to do it), but it’s an obligation. It’s a part of something that I feel I have to do. It was given to me; it was given to my mother; to fulfill something, a part of my life. And you know, that's why I have my children dancing with me.... it becomes the beginning of passing down that lineage by giving them the option, giving them the La Danza, letting them know it’s there, and it will always be there, but also as an option.

I know every child will grow up to do what he or she pleases and fashion their lives. Also, I am giving that to them... So I can't say I didn't give that to them, but once they grow up, it’s really up to them what they do with it. For now, for the time being, I am giving La Danza as much as I can; it’s my obligation and responsibility, as my mother's son to pass it on to another generation. I think that new people that come into the circle have a lot of questions like "why this, why that" Where as for me, I don't have so many questions as to why. Mine thinking is “It’s done because it’s done." I'll learn the reasons, or I am learning the reasons behind them but for me, it’s more "this is the way it’s done." but uh, it is very interesting to speak to new dancers. They are always, very ....many questions...."why this, why do we have this Malinche, why does the Malinche do that..." And sometimes I can't answer off the fly. And I just know well that is the way we do it… It’s something that is instilled into me. It’s not something that I question. If Tío is doing it, and my mom is teaching us how to do it, then there is no reason to question it.... it is what it is.
Do you find La Danza to be empowering for yourself? For your community?
If so how? If not why not?

You find La Danza to be empowering...? Definitely! Speaking for myself, I can definitely tell you it is empowering, especially.... Putting my Danza aspect into my "regular" life; whether it’s just as simple as waiting at a stop light and... If I wasn't a Danzante, I don't what I would be doing because I'm usually tapping my hands on the steering wheel to one of the many Danzas that we have. So sometimes, I don't even know what people do while they are waiting at stop lights! (laughs)

I know what I'm doing; it’s always something about La Danza. But as far as practice; it is energizing, and not just physically. I know a lot of people that look to La Danza as a physical aspect of it, instead of Tai Chi, or yoga; they will go to Danza, which I guess is a different kind of empowerment, a physical kind... mentally, I think is what helps me a lot. It really relieves stress. It brings you back down to Earth. This society is usually, is kind of keeping you from being grounded. Danza helps you ground yourself a lot more.

Same with many people who come to La Danza, those who stay.... because we have many who come in and many who go back out. It’s those people that stay because they are getting help from the La Danza its helping their family life, with school ...Coming to Thursdays night practice, it relieve the stress, so that they can go Friday to take that exam that they have been studying for two weeks; It’s just one of the different aspects of La Danza.
Is there a difference between being religious or spiritual? If so, what is the difference?

Ah, well it depends if you’re taking it from a dictionary’s point of view, or if you are taking it from a personal stand point of view. Well religion to me is something on a day to day ... that you have your inner thoughts, and inner soul collected into it. Your spirit as well... I think it’s one in the other. I know many people ... I know my mom says that La Danza is a tradition, this is a way of life. I don't hear many people saying that La Danza is a religion. I would take La Danza as "tradición" religion también siendo (also being) more of the velaciones aspect, the more Catholic end of it. When you speak of religion you think of Catholicism or Judaism, or something of that, and you know, La Danza is more of a tradition passed down, as we know, from generation to generation.

Do you consider yourself a religious person? If so how? If not why not?

Uhmm I believe in a God, I believe in our deities. I believe in the faith of our tradiciones, of our songs, of our prayers calling our ancestors at the beginning of the velación and then sending them home at the end of the velación... And I do believe the ancestors come. I have been at a muertos ceremony where after every elder is named, I've seen at different times... I've seen light come in through the altar. So I have seen their presence. So I would have to say I am religious.

What does the term “sacred Space” mean to you? Would the term sacred space mean anything in terms of La Danza Azteca?

Well Dolores Park is sacred space, and it’s not even "Mexi’ca” related. There are a lot of… the Ohlone tribe that has it as their burial grounds. You know from back in the day...That would be a sacred space. But now it’s a dog park.
Our circle, when we are dancing, is sacred space. The reason we have our sergeants is to protect our sacred space. Which is that circle, with the inner circle, and the sahumador, the Malinches and the jefes and jefas. That would be sacred space.

Sacred space is not necessarily a physical place, not at all. My body is sacred space, my family is a sacred space. The steps that we take when we dance are sacred space, you know, marking our steps. Ah, singing too is a type of sacred space, when you are offered an alabanza, and you are doing one…you are sending something sacred or even if it’s just… you would like to sing a song for your grandmother that has passed away, in that moment you are in that sacred space. Between the song, yourself, and whoever you are singing to or wanting to send it to.

**Would the term sacred space mean anything in terms of La Danza Azteca?**

....... Definitely, La Danza Azteca is full of sacred space, ah when we ah… let's take Xilonen for example. We don't close the circle until we do our four directions and everyone is in the circle. Only then, the circle becomes closed. Whether it’s with the maize kernels going with our elders, or and even something as simple as putting in the sticks that create the visual sacred space. Because ah ...and I think more so now, we have to put those little markers to show that we have our sacred space because society has said: "If we don't have these centers and gates then there is nothing personal about your space.

So there is definitely sacred space when you are doing your dance and you are in the center, when you are given the chance to lead a dance you have the center, your mind and your body become that sacred space.
Does La Danza have its drawbacks or negatives? If so what are these? If not why not?

Wow, that's a good question.... Personal story.... I.... growing up in high school, I wanted to be on the basketball team. Ah, the basketball coach wanted me to be on the team. However, because of Danza, every weekend, you know, we were at a Pow Wow, or dancing for this or dancing for that.... I couldn’t. So....that being said, are there drawbacks? Sometimes.... depending.... ah, on my personal matter, I would say yes when I was growing up I did not have the chance to do basketball, play football, those kinds of things, to do what other guys did.

But in the long run, my [Danza] friends that did not have to go dance, aren't dancing anymore. Ah, well, I am still dancing. When I look at it that way, it’s not a drawback. Uhmm, when I look at it in the aspect that I wish I had been able to do the sports, is a drawback. And I know from your children's standpoint... your son being on the swim team many years and different activities it was great for him, but I know every family has a different dynamic. And with my family I wasn't able to do that part of it. So in that aspect, I did resent it, and I probably still do.

But looking at the bigger picture, I am still in La Danza. The ceremonies I know in Mexico what I understand… is the four traditions that are obligations And being my mom's son we have to go to five or six ceremonies that we have to go every year. Ah, so it is difficult to know whether they are on the week or the weekend, so I'd have to ask for the day off…. or half a day..... Knowing that I had to work before going to the ceremonia and I was exhausted for the ceremony. So there are different things like that.
You know, being my mother who she is, there was a drawback that we have talked about; she wasn't there necessarily there for us, all the time, 100% for us as we were growing up. Because she had her group in San Francisco and her family was in Sacramento. So I could see drawbacks if it's not the whole family doing Danza, I do see drawbacks. Those couple of hours that the father or the mother leave the kids alone, I do see the drawbacks if it's not the whole family involved.

So, in terms of the sports I wasn’t able to play, that is why I try to let my son play the sport that he wants to play. And, also whenever we are at practice, he is there with us. I try to balance out what I do, and what I wasn't able to get. As a jefa's son, you do get less of your mother, because she has to either be teaching or running a ceremony, or a dance, or what not.

**How do you feel about those Danzantes that mix in other traditions into la Danza?**

Well, for a couple of years, I was one of those, because of my son's Afro-Cuban part of his mom's family and I never felt it was important to intertwine them. One is one and the other is the other. La Danza has its place; Buddhism has its place etc. I don't necessarily think that they were supposed to be intertwined, if they were, they would have already been. I, you know, believe in evolution, and La Danza will evolve. But it doesn't mean "Let's see what happens if we mix Judaism, or Hinduism in there." That’s more of a kinda grafting, if you will; getting this half of one plant and that part of a plant to engineer something else.

I don't necessarily believe they should be uh, mixing and matching as you please. In our group, we have Buddhists, and they don't bring their chanting into la Danza. They are
Mexicanos, and before they met the La Danza they have been following the Buddhism ways, but then they entered La Danza and it became a part of their blood. And I noticed that one Danzante’s way of meditation is sitting down and chanting with Buddhism. Then he has his physical, other way of meditating; La Danza and movement.

**How do you feel about those Danzantes that reject the Catholic traditions of Mexican culture in la Danza?**

Ummm, I personally think that there are a lot of people that say that Catholicism is a negative towards La Danza. But, I see it as if it wasn't for that Catholicism, a lot of our traditions would have been wiped out. Whether it was through the syncretism that was able to happen, and we were able to put our deities and the saints whether its Tlaloc, or Ehecatl, they were able to become *el Santo Niño de Atocha*, or however it may be. I feel that if the Spaniards had come without Catholicism I don't think we would be dancing right now. So I appreciate the way Catholicism helped save the tradition. I know many don't agree with me. But that's how I feel.

I know that its one within the other but then again, nothing is pure. That's where evolution, change, and time come in.

**Is there anything you would like to comment on that I have left out?**

I am who I am because of La Danza, and I love my family who they are because of La Danza. I don't think I would have such an extended family... you guys in San Diego and those in L.A. and if it wasn't for that..... La Danza helps us unite communities, you know, if we are uniting together as families, also come those communities behind each of us.... And that makes us as a *gente*, that much stronger.
To be able to connect people from San Diego with people from the north especially in this age with the *norteños* and the *sureños*, being as crazy as it is, it’s still beautiful to know that we can our family sureños with our family norteños dancing together we just happen to be in the north and you guys happen to be in the south.

Ah, it is difficult for me to see so many groups popping up just out of nowhere, out of the fact that they want to be "jefes" or leaders you know, a lot of times its financial.... whichever way a group is working the money. That part I don't understand. I know that this society is based on the financial, ah, market, but at the same time, we have to be able to pull ourselves away from that, and I think the more we are closer the better, and you know, it seems that we just .... Many people find it easy to split up... "You know I don't like so and so, so I am going to start my own group." ...."I don't know why I don't get a dance, so I am going to start my own group, then I know I will get a dance!"

The part where the *Mesa* of the dance group is involved, is missed a lot, I don't see that hierarchy, that respect..... It is starting to lack in the U.S. I can't speak too much for Mexico, but I know that here, in the U.S. you go one year to a ceremony and there is one group, and then you go the next year and there's six groups now where once they were just one! The original one fell apart…. I think that one part of me is happy, because they can pull more in of the community, but at the same time, I don't see why we couldn't be just a bigger group.

La Danza has made me who I am; the young, old, middle age man, that I am (laughs). I will always thank my mother for pulling my ears for pulling my ears 'cause there were many times when I didn’t want to dance. At that moment you don't understand
it, but looking back at my age, reflecting, you more than appreciate it. And having an extended family like you guys, is always beautiful, is always something that is needed. Many times, you grow apart from your mother and your father; it’s just your spouse and your children. Because you are, busy working, busy with school…. And I think that La Danza helps bring that family orientation back to the people.

Narrator nine: Cuauhtli

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Date Interviewed: Nov. 25, 2008

**How old are you and where do you live?**

I am 26 years old. I live in Tucson, Arizona

**What is your earliest memory of La Danza?**

My earliest memories of la Danza is when I was about three years old, four years old, and my dad used to carry me when he would be dancing.

**Please tell me the story of how you became involved in La Danza.**

Well both my dad and y mom danced before I was even born, so they brought me up in La Danza Who did they dance with? They danced with Andrés Segura in Mexico both in Mexico and the U.S.

**Who was your teacher and how do you continue the lineage of his/her teachings?**

Since I was little, my first teacher was Andrés Segura, Being that he was our maestro de Danza. Then there were other jefes, like Jose Flores, he was the Capitan of the group in Texas, and just by learning through them and thru my mom and dad.
**How do you continue the lineage of their teachings?**

Uhmm, just by trying to keep the lineage through our dances… keep it intact and that we keep dancing the dances that our elders taught us… and uhmm, through our songs and alabanzas and our prayers.

**Why do you participate in La Danza?**

I love the Danza and it’s in me and I don't feel the same with any other types of religions, if you want to say it that way.

**What is it about La Danza that keeps you involved?**

It's everything, the alabanzas, the dances…it's all just beautiful, that why I like my family involved....

**How is your family involved in the group?**

As far as my mom, my dad, my wife, my sister, my cousin, my children they all dance… just being in the group that I have known since I was little, and I've grown up with people's kids. Children that I knew as little kids are teenagers now.

**And do you or your parents have any authority in your group?**

My mom and my dad are the capitanes of our mesa. And myself, I don't like to say I am a jefe, I’m just a soldado (a soldier), I just keep going, you know. “You're an heredero.” they say I am an heredero (laughs) but I don't know. Just joking!!!! My sister and me... she is the sahumadora for our group, so she takes that role. Primera (first) Malinche of our group, and then I am the heredero of our palabra.

**What role does La Danza play in your family?**

As I was growing up, I was taught by my parents that Danza came first. That's where the Danza is in our life; it’s always been there. We owe so much to the Danza so; I
continue that idea that the Danza comes first. We live for the Danza and you know, we
get from the Danza

**Do you find that your relationships with the members of your group are as strong,
stronger, or not as strong as your relationships with your extended genetic
family?**

I feel that is stronger in the Danza with the people that dance in our group. That we
have a really, really strong connection, compared to my own extended family.

**Please tell me some of your favorite memories about your family and La Danza.**

Well I have been privileged to have gone to a lot of places, and danced, and visited
indigenous communities and Danzas. And it has grounded me as to who I am today. If it
wasn't for that, I don't think I would be here, even on this phone call right now.

**Who is involved in your Danza group?**

We have a lot of families, a lot of young people, kids.... we have a lot of families,
but I would say we don't have a lot of elderly people in their 80s, or nothing like that;
from age 60's down yeah to little three year olds. Most of group is young people and
older family leaders.

**What brings and keeps people in your group?**

I thinks it's people's faith and it's always hard for people to... a lot of people like the
thought of Danza and join it, but once they really find out how much work it is, some
people tend to stray away. Once they see where they are at, they see if Danza is made for
them, because sometimes La Danza is not for everybody. But, I would say that that is the
way our lineage is. ....of our tradition and the way we carry out our obligation.
What are the values that your group strives for?

We have dedication, uhmm, to always be honest and faithful; to have a lot of corazón. That’s the main thing of all.

Please tell me about the symbolism of La Danza and what it means to you.

It’s a way of life, it's uhmm as indigenous people here in the U.S. of tribes from Mexico it symbolizes a way of life. We can pass on to our children. Here in our family and our home we can honor something and be grateful.

Please tell me the significance of the circle and how it relates to family.

In our circle, as we come together, we dance together, we raise our children together, we pray together. In everything, there will always be differences, but as there are times, we always have to learn how to work together. And make sure that we work strong as a family so that we are able to teach our kids our family values.

How are your children involved in La Danza? If you do not have any children, would you like them to be involved in La Danza?

My children are involved in La Danza. I try to get them to put their ayoyotes on, to come in, to dance with us. My children are still little, but they've always been there since they were born, I've had them by the circle since they were babies...I take them to the velaciones and Danzas. Anything that we do as a family, they are always there.

What does it mean to you to pass on this lineage to your children?

Uhmm, it’s an honor that I am able to pass that down to them, and that they are able to continue something that's very historical and so that our traditions don't die, and they will be able to teach other people so that others may have it in their lives too.
Do you find La Danza to be empowering for yourself? For your community? If so how? If not, why not?

La Danza is very empowering, uhmm, it keeps one going, it keeps one alive…It's empowering to the community. We are always asked by the community to dance everywhere we go, when we dance people are ... they feel it in their hearts, you know. You'll get people crying coming up to you. You get people saying that the Danza was so beautiful, that they had never seen anything like that. And it’s always an honor, you know, in the way that they see the Danza and we are a part of that, of that opening the eyes of our community to our own traditions.

Is there a difference between being religious and being spiritual? If so, what is the difference?

For me personally, in La Danza, it’s all the same to me, spirituality, and religion. It's all one faith, one corazón. There are different lineages and the different ways that people keep the tradition; but La Danza is always going to be the same. I don't know how to really answer that question on religion and spirituality. To me it's the same.

Do you consider yourself a religious person? If so how? If not, why not?

Again, I don't want to get lost in the words but I would say no. As far as being a religious person… but I do have a lot of faith and tradition, and I follow. But I follow it as our tradition, not as a religion, or nothing like that.

What does the term “sacred Space” mean to you? Would the term sacred space mean anything in terms of La Danza Azteca?

The term sacred space is just another term… it's uhmm, a holy place, a spiritual place, a place that needs to be respected. Something for La Danza… it's just that something again a place of prayer.
Does La Danza have its drawbacks or negatives?

That is something La Danza always teaches you that in everything in our creation there always a good and a negative. And in La Danza, there is the light side and the dark side, we are always trying to find balance, learn the balance. That's another thing that Danza teaches us.

Well, the kind of drawbacks some Danzantes have talked about is, the time and money that La Danza takes on a daily basis. What we call "el sacrificio" the material sacrifices to being a true Danzante. For example, some dancers have said that while their friends are saving up for wide-screen TV's, they are saving up for feathers and Chachayotes (laughs).

As far as that type of drawback, yeah there are some.... all this week we have a lot of Danza, so it's about always trying to find the time. There is time taken away from resting at home, working on your house. When we go to ceremony, going out of town, you are always making sure you have enough money to get back home. But…uhmm, in terms of negativity, that's all I can think of.

How do you feel about those Danzantes that mix in other traditions La Danza?

I think you have to look at their leadership, you know where they learned from. How much their leaders really know about La Danza. But, I always try to keep an open heart, a good heart when I go and dance and visit with other people, and other Danza circles. So I always try to have good thoughts.

But as far as mixing, that's something we try not to do, we try not to mix and when we see things, there can always be something we can talk about.
How do you feel about those Danzantes that reject the Catholic traditions of Mexican culture in La Danza?

I personally feel that…. I know it’s something good to learn about the codices, and the way our ancestors did things. But, as we go back to the Danza and how it was passed down through Catholicism and uhmm,…that Christianity is what we have intact to this day. And as far as going back in tradition that's what we still have, and that's what was passed on. That’s how Danza survived, and a lot of times I think other people don't remember or accept that. And that's how some things change here and there.

Is there anything you would like to comment on that I have left out?

No, I think we covered it.

Narrator ten: Yancuic Tochtli

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Date Interviewed:  Nov. 20, 2008

How old are you and where do you live?

I am 38 years old; I was born in April of 1970, in Mexicali, Baja California Mexico.

I moved to the U.S. in 1974

What is your earliest memory of La Danza?

My earliest memory of La Danza was when I was about eight years or so….approaching summer, waiting to cross the border…. sitting in the car bored, and watching this older, 50-60 year old man, in the heat, just beating on a drum and dancing for donations.
Please tell me the story of how you became involved in La Danza.

Uhmm, I had seen Danza here and there, and being attached to it I would appreciate it for the moment. And, of course, whatever arts I would run into.

I guess I came into wanting to be with Danza when I was hanging out with a friend. He just kind of did a couple of things that really impressed me and I asked him about it. And he kind of pounded his chest for a little bit, and, after a little bit more questioning he said he did Danza Azteca. And uhmm, I continued the conversation with him and he continued to invite me to go to Danza. So it was through a good friend. This was in April of 2006, at Chicano Park is when I made the decision that I wanted to be participating and committed to the Danza.... It was at Chicano Park.

Who was your teacher and how do you continue the lineage of his/her teachings?

Juan and Aida Flores are the captains that took me in initially. My friend was part of that circle and they accepted me with open arms. There with them was a great place for me to grow, and to develop my commitment to Danza. I biggest thing I picked up from the Flores family is that La Danza is …”trabajo, es un privilegio. Y no es cosa que se le da cualquier persona” (La Danza is work and a privilege, and it is not a thing that you give to just anyone). And part of that lineage that I carry from them is to carry a high energy. Their group has a really high energy and movement.

Why do you participate in La Danza?

I never grew up in with much of an artistic expression where dance, or song, or instruments were a part of my life. And also my young adult life I've had a fear about dancing or being in front of people in any kind of artistic expression. So La Danza allows me to express the movement and thoughts that I have in myself and allows to do it in
something I believe has been missing for a large part of my life. Both academically, spiritually, just all in all I feel that there is a big part of my life that I haven't been in tune with. And I think that Danza is one of the bigger opportunities where I can be connected to our indigenous past.

What is it about La Danza that keeps you involved?

I am involved because of the challenge of maintaining the balance between the real world and what my perception of what the world could be. I am always picking up details about language, philosophy, movement, and I am always finding different things that little by little I can articulate. "OK this applies to math; this applies to the cosmic argument...etc."

How is your family involved in the group?

My family in all…the straight answer would be “no,” though recently my son tends to pick up a sonaja whenever he is a mood… and like any kid, he will come in and out of the circle, which is a really wonderful experience. My girlfriend is also a very spiritual person and I get a lot of support from her. And every now and then she comes out and participates, so... although it’s not within my family tradition, it’s something that I have taken on since 2006, and since then my son has come into it a little bit. So I have been dancing a bit over 2 years.

Please tell me some of your favorite memories about your family and La Danza.

Well being with the circle and not really seeing anyone, but feeling them. And it doesn't happen at every practice, but it happens at most. Whatever space I am in, I feel like I 'm actually a part of something without voice, without negotiation, all these little
things that show up in my daily life. It's like they’re there and yet not there. And for me it’s really special being in that movement.

**Who is involved in your Danza group?**

The familia Flores’ group…. we have a lot of young teenagers, and uhmm, a bunch of little girls that are consistent. Now, I am in a new group and it is really great to have that academic and intellectual, and empirical connection. I am not comparing ... those have been the people that have helped me in La Danza.

**Please tell me about the symbolism of La Danza and what it means to you.**

That is something that is continuously evolving for me because I am a beginner. Where as in the beginning, it was the symbolism of "I am Mexican;" then the symbolism became more spiritual, as I learned more about the philosophy and the language and how that can transcend into my life. Uhhmm... and it has stayed there, where before, it was part of the image that I wanted to project of what it is to be a "good Mexican."

Now it has a spiritual symbolism and much more grounding effect where I can actually be something in the moment. I have a more grounded feeling.

**How are your children involved in La Danza? If you do not have any children, would you like them to be involved in La Danza?**

My son has started to dance now, he is not committed, as any kid would be, but he enjoys it very much. And I would like my grandson to take something like this on if it is in him. I am recently a grandfather, and I would love for him to be a part of this.

**Do you find La Danza to be empowering for yourself? For your community? If so how? If not, why not?**
Yes for myself uhmm, it is very empowering having grown up on the border. “Como Pocho, como Chicano”; like a Mexican American. Whatever it is, it has always been difficult for me to be Mexican. I have always felt incomplete.

So in that sense uhmm, I know that through La Danza, I am in touch with the culture, I am in touch with the language, and now I am getting the opportunity to be more in touch with the tradition.

So, I had been in a mental place where I have never really been able to connect with Mexico, or the U.S. As I continue my spiritual growth, it helps me to be solid, and know that I can be Mexican, and as I grow my academic growth

I know I can be a part of the mainstream U.S. population. So La Danza helps me ground myself. I think it’s empowering to the community because it raises critical awareness whether it’s someone who is putting our culture down, or someone who is acting like a fool, thinking that we are Indians on TV. It causes that critical thought like “Here come the Dancers” And I think it very y important to the community to show them all of the options and not just condense it down into whatever's preferred economically or preferred politically.

**Is there a difference between being religious and being spiritual? If so, what is the difference?**

I suppose that that is a question of semantics. For me yes, there is an absolute difference between being spiritual and religious. What I have found a lot of times is that religion is very structured, and a very narrow path. If you veer from that conversation, from that path, you are out of line and not in compliance. You are not worthy of
blessings, you are out of line ... it’s a very narrow path. It is for a tight and specific community.

Spirituality is more dynamic. It is a more dynamic application, where I can actually be in conversation with someone and ask questions, and it doesn't mean I'm questioning a higher power, or putting it down, it just means I want to know. I don't understand. So whenever I find myself in spiritual conversations, those dynamics are there. And it has been my experience that in religious things, you don't ask, you just accept them as they are, and leave them alone.

Do you consider yourself a religious person? If so how? If not, why not?

No, I have never considered myself a religious person. Early on in my life, I found a lot of contradictions within the religion: Catholic through the first part of my life, and then as a teenager, it was more of a Christian Evangelical setting. Also, I didn't appreciate the linear part of it: "you’re supposed to do this to get to over here, and if you don't there is impending hell."

What does the term “sacred Space” mean to you? Would the term sacred space mean anything in terms of La Danza Azteca?

To me sacred space is any place...that place where ever there is reciprocity of compassion and respect. And it can be with one’s self; it can be with two people, or within a group of people. So long as there is that understanding that there is compassion, respect, and love and you operate from that love, then you have sacred space. And it doesn't have to be a specific space; it can be any space where people decide to be.
In terms of La Danza Azteca, to me they are almost synonymous. There is a symbiotic relationship. To me one cannot exist without the other. In la Danza, the circle that forms is sacred. And you really can't have Danza without that sacred space.

**Does La Danza have its drawbacks or negatives? If so what are these? If not, why not?**

Yeah, although it’s only been 2 years that I have been in the practice, some of the things that I see come up are when Mexicans are trying to out-Mexican each other... I guess this competitiveness comes from Western roots... who can do it better, who can do it more powerful and who can do it more themselves. It really shows up in La Danza.

Uhmm, not in everyone, just every now and then, and I find that disturbing because I tend to have a lot of insecurities in my growth, just naturally as a person...I have these insecurities, and whenever I am confronted with these competitive elements, I find myself holding back questioning "Am I enough?" "Am I worthy?"

Another negative aspect that I see is that within some individuals there is the mentality that La Danza should really be kept private... that only a few chosen people should know Danza.

The last part of that...that I don't like, is it’s automatically related to Azteca, and to sacrifice. The worst thing you can find about civilization... Danza= Azteca= sacrifice. It brings an opportunity for me to engage the person and share with them that it is not all about Aztecas and sacrifice.

We need to tone it down on "Who is more Chicano"... the separatist movement of some Chicanos, I think that this is another way to be racist.

**How do you feel about those Danzantes that mix in other traditions La Danza?**
From the gate... I get angry; I get angry because I run out of words.... and I do a critical analysis of what they do. And while I appreciate where our traditions come from, different tribes were not traditionally together, they were not meant to be mixed. It’s like when people jump onto the wagon, like whoever is in the NFL playoffs. People want to root for that team all of a sudden.

People want to put the new fad part onto La Danza. And it’s something that I have yet learned to accept.

**How do you feel about those Danzantes that reject the Catholic traditions of Mexican culture in La Danza?**

It’s just like denying the other me. And not to quote Corky Gonzalez’ poetry, but to deny any part of my lineage is half ass.... it’s like saying I love my mom but I hate my dad. To me it's absolutely crucial that you embrace both lineages we have. And it’s not just limited to just two, because it’s beyond the European and the Mesoamerican. And, if we start to get tunnel vision in our perspective... to say we are only Mexi'ca, or only Catholics, then we are really doing ourselves and our communities a great disservice.

Within that multiplicity, lays my power as a Danzante. Where I get to be with my indigenous roots; all my Mexican friends, all the white friends, which I have met in my life, and learn and take wisdom from each, and every one of them that can help me to be a better person.

**Is there anything you would like to comment on that I have left out?**

Yea, uhmm, in my short journey as a beginner, I've been picking up books on the philosophy, etc. One of the things I found here in San Diego there tends to be exclusivity,
and even at times animosity between Danzantes; between leaders….which to me is no different that gossiping... which to me that is sadness.

That is a sadness that needs healing. *Falta la unión* (there is a lack of vision). I don't know that the circle will ever be complete. And it is these discoveries that Danzantes are against Danzantes, and captains are against captains, that makes me is sad.

*Narrator eleven: Xipecihuatl*

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Date Interviewed: Dec. 9, 2008

**How old are you and where do you live?**

I live in Anaheim, CA, I am 59 years old.

**What is your earliest memory of La Danza?**

The first time I saw the Danza Azteca was in Placentia, California when my maestro, Florencio Yescas, came to that area, I think the year might have been 1974. The dancers danced in the street in front of the restaurant [Florencio was still in Mexico in 1974. It was in 1976, I danced there at that restaurant].

**Please tell me the story of how you became involved in La Danza.**

Well, for me I was already dancing folklórico, my teacher Javier Galvez, was a traditional Matachine through his father side, and so he started to teach us Matachines, and during that time he was teaching at San Diego at one of the colleges; and through being there he met Florencio Yescas and they made arrangements to bring Florencio and
the dancers to the LA area. And that is how I became introduced. I think it was 1974. When Florencio brought his group, our group and his group established an interaction and we would perform at similar locations.

**Who was your teacher and how do you continue the lineage of his/her teachings?**

Florencio Yescas. Well, I believe his teaching to be through Manuel Pineda of Mexico City who was one of three jefes from the earlier times that brought the “Azteca” trajes to the Concheros. I continue his teachings, I think, by really recognizing that he was the one who brought Danza Azteca here. Even this weekend, at the ceremony that I attended, a lot of people who came from Mexico, they recognized that when they came 22 years ago there was only one house to come to and that was my house and at that time Lázaro's [Arvizu]. They recognize his and mine name and at the same time, they recognize that Florencio established La Danza in the U.S. I think that through that, they give that recognition to jefe Florencio

**Were you and Lázaro recognized formally in Mexico as jefes or was it earned through blood, sweat, and tears?**

There was a twofold type of thing… I believe Florencio was 65 when he died. When Florencio died in 1985, six months later on December 12, Lázaro, and I were called over to a group at La Villa [Tepeyac, in Mexico City]. When we arrived, there were 12 jefes in a circle and they put him in the middle. They gave him some type of recognition (my Spanish wasn't so great at that time). I have been able to confirm since then, that they did recognize him as the *heredero* to Florencio. Which, well they said, because he was like a son to him and he continued his work. All three Placencia brothers were there. [Also] Manuel Pineda, Negro Pineda, the Rosas family; Lázaro knows all the
names. It was difficult for me because I didn't know any of them. Mrs. Cobb was also there.

**Why do you participate in La Danza?**

I started because I like to dance and that is still there. But over the years as the attachment to Danza grew I realize there is a lot of deep significance to everything that is done. At this point, being the leader of the group it is a responsibility, but not just that, it gives me something back - the spiritual aspect of it, so when I know I am going to participate in a ceremony that is what I look forward to taking that time.

So it is also spiritual expression. So for myself, the participation is self-interest, we all need the spiritual aspects, but it has other levels, responsibilities, like I said, there is also the artistic expression of dance and music.

**What is it about La Danza that keeps you involved?**

I really developed a deep sense of responsibility of keeping the traditions going. I can see how other traditions are lost very easily. Also, because it is a family event and my entire family is involved.

**Mario: How is your family involved?**

Well that is interesting because my family has grown and my children are married. My six children are all dancers; five dance often and one dances once in a while; spouses are also supporting in different ways for ceremonies and performances. Also, there are other friends and relatives are also supporting.

**What role does La Danza play in your family?**

It plays a large role and we are involved 2-3 times a week. Different parts of the family have taken on different aspects; they are involved with different aspects. Some
with music, dance, and some travel and some don't. It's at the point where, it is a different situation for me and the way I learned than it is for my children. They don't know a life without Danza; it is just part of them, it just is. So, it's just kind of there all the time.

**Do you find that your relationships with the members of your group are as strong, stronger, or not as strong as your relationships with your extended genetic family?**

One of the things that I always do, is I tell new members that Danza is like a family and that they should establish relationships with dancers as family. I do think my relationships with the core of the group are very strong and very open and I think very similar to those I have with my own children or other relatives.

**Who is involved in your Danza group?**

I always find a lot of students, young people they are students, get involved. Older people run the gamut; people who are working class from Mexico, people from here who have government or city jobs. My group has a lot of people who graduated from college or are going to college. I really encourage my dancers to attend college.

**What ages range in your group?**

I would say from six to 60 now.

**What brings and keeps people in your group?**

I think people that stay for the long haul are the ones who are the *conquista* and their hearts have been won over to the traditions. The really committed ones are not always the strongest dancers.

**What are the values that your group strives for?**
Respect, commitment, emphasis on strong dancing, raising the level... The spirituality is definitely a theme; it is not something that we teach but is brought up consistently. I try to have people understand that the spiritual base is a daily thing.

**Please tell me about the symbolism of La Danza and what it means to you.**

To me the Danza is just a form of expression of true dance. Here and there, it is the music too. For me it is the physical offering of doing the movements and doing that as prayer.

**Please tell the significance of the dance circle and relates to family.**

The circle says unity. Whether you like the other person or not, it is a circle and it unites. Recently my mother lost her husband and she had never come to our Danza practice and so she did. Here she could see all her grand kids at once, and she met a lot of others that now call her grandmother too. It builds family.

**How are your children involved in La Danza?**

They are involved in practice, ceremonies, presentations, creating songs, and regalia.

**What does it mean to you to pass on this lineage to your children?**

To create the knowledge in them that they are indigenous and I think the lineage for them of their father from Mexico; and also the knowledge of their place in the history of Danza. It just didn't pop up over night, but it came from a long line of elders.

**Do you find La Danza to be empowering for yourself? For your community? If so how? If not why not?**

Yes, definitely in a lot of different ways; mainly from the spiritual aspect. It brings us back to those things that are really important. In terms of the community, I think so, but I wish it would be a little bit much more. I just see the needs in the community and
the things that have not changed over the years, and I know if people would take it seriously and take it internally, they would find something that would help them.

**Is there a difference between being religious and being spiritual? If so, what is the difference?**

I think the religion is really just the ceremony of what the spirituality is. I think you can take the spirituality and do different kinds of ceremonies. To me, going to a Catholic mass is very similar to going to a Danza ceremony. I think the religion is like stepping out of the spirituality in human form.

**Do you consider yourself a religious person? If so how? If not, why not?**

Yeah, by the fact that I do ceremony, whether it is a sweat lodge, or Danza, or going to mass, yes I think all of those are religious--they are showing religion.

**What does the term “sacred Space” mean to you? Would the term sacred space mean anything in terms of La Danza Azteca?**

Well, if you are being spiritual any space is sacred. Ceremony--you set aside a space to act out the spirituality. In Danza, it can be the place where the velación or the dance is taking place. It can be any place; it can be a place where you the individual are taking the time to be spiritual.

In terms of La Danza, I think it would be the circle where the dancers gather, or during the velación where people gather to pray. It can even be the place where you are putting your uniform on.

**Does La Danza have its drawbacks or negatives? If so what are these? If not, why not?**

Danza is like everything else, definitely! Negative? the fact that you are dealing with human beings…there are always going to be differences, people are people, people
are involved and conflicts are involved, physical issues and injuries. Also, there are economical drawbacks because it cost money to be a Danzante. So, there are definitely drawbacks in terms of a lot of other things other than the actual Danza.

**How do you feel about those Danzantes that mix in other traditions La Danza?**

Yeah, I would prefer that they didn't, I think early on, there was [mixing]...I don't know the reason. Maybe it is because there was a lack of knowledge of La Danza, so they pulled together what they could.

But at this point in our history, I think the connections to the live traditions are there, and I don't think there is any need to reinvent the wheel. The tradition can continue as it has because the tradition can stand by itself; it’s just the people that change it.

**How do you feel about those Danzantes that reject the Catholic traditions of Mexican culture in La Danza?**

Well, you know, I would feel better about it if they had a stronger justification, but having gone through a time myself where I personally blamed the Catholic Church for oppression, and having come to terms with it...it is historical, and having learned more about the Catholic church, the two are linked together and that’s the way it happened historically. And, had it not happened that way, tradition would have been destroyed. I feel like you have to take the good with the bad. Because of my understanding of Catholic religion, I see the interpretation of the two like “Yeah, exactly, I really hadn't thought it before, but for some reason it was able to survive alongside Catholicism” — I really hadn't thought about that it could have been destroyed.....The traditions are so easily wiped out--it doesn't take long.
Is there anything you would like to comment on that I have left out?

I wish I would have known this question in advance. I am just glad that the tradition is still here and that it is growing. It has a lot of growing up to still go. I don’t think Florencio could have ever imagined what La Danza would have become.

I was with Florencio in his last few days and it was sad. I didn't cry at the hospital when he died. I didn’t cry until I heard the mandolina you were playing at his funeral several weeks later. I thought “This is it! He’s gone!”

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Date Interviewed: Dec. 9, 2008

How old are you and where do you live?

I grew up in the San Luis Obispo area, the Central Coast. I am 27 years old.

What is your earliest memory of La Danza?

My earliest memory of Danza, I guess, from what I can remember pre-teen, I think I had seen some Aztec dancers at a MEChA Conference at Cal Poly San Luis Obispo… probably in the mid-nineties.

Please tell me the story of how you became involved in Danza.

Well, I guess I had always seen Danza around community events, conferences, certain times like Cinco de Mayo, or when the Aztec dancers and the ballet folklórico and whatever else… but I was always attracted to Danza. But I was kind of waiting, I don't
know what I was waiting for; but I ended up doing undergraduate work at UC Santa Barbara and I really liked some of the groups there, but I never felt that welcomed, so I stayed away. And then, uh, eventually, I moved out to Sacramento to teach and I met a woman at Sacramento State and she introduced me to her Danza group, which I think I knew she was a Danzante when we just met as friends at Sac State. The girl out there, her name is Monica and she was also in some type of teaching program at Sac State.

I was kind of asking what's around here, “Do you know of any Danza groups?” I didn't even know she was a Danzante, but she was by chance, and I went to a couple of practices with her, and I don't know, but for some reason I just meshed well there, so I felt more comfortable. I was kind of ready, like I had wanted to do it in Santa Barbara, but I don't know something held me back. Once I found that group in Sacramento, I went to practice three to five times a week and got really involved. I was in Sacramento for about 2 years, so I danced with that group for less than two years.

**Who was the leader?**

The group or the Mesa, because the structure is a little bit different.

**Who was the leader of the group you dancing with?**

The main woman, Titatzin de los Reyes, she was a little bit young, but she was definitely under the guidance of a couple of different elders, a little bit different than what was out there. She was, I think, she was the newest group, and the youngest leader that was out there. They didn't really trust she would do a good job, but she held her ground and they said “Okay you are a pretty good leader.”

**Who was your teacher and how do you continue the lineage of his/her teachings?**
I guess, you know, coming from Sacramento or living over there for a couple years the head people would be Pedro España or Maria Miranda. I mean, I think I learned a lot from going to other groups in the Mesa, like, if practice got cancelled, or someone was sick, Maria Miranda practiced on Tuesday so, she would break down Danzas, or give a history of a step, or something like that, but now that I am in San Diego I guess I am kind of an outsider..., like my life is to move around a lot.

I kind of also saw that as problematic, what is the Danza community? Now that I am over here, I mean, I did a dance wrong, so now finding your group… I don't necessarily… there is no group of Pedro España in San Diego, so I had to leave that place and that circle, I guess, or whatever the different circles there are in Sacramento, and kind of reenter myself here. So, I acknowledge that is where I started, but I'm also realistic that I probably won't go back to Sacramento, and probably won't dance with them again. I guess, you know life happens, so that's kind of hard for me, because I think sometimes Danza… what you are moving, yes, my life is happening, I want to be in this program.

I don't know, I respect that I learned a couple of things there, but I also, firmly believe that this is where I am supposed to be now, and I am happy where I am within Danza, so …

**Why do you participate in La Danza? What is it about Danza that keeps you involved?**

I, at first, interested in Danza I just felt like, I was called in, I felt really connected with some of the practices, or what I feel are some of the purposes of the Danza.

It really is a spiritual click, a connection. I think Danza is like the outward expression of that, but for me there is that connection with honoring the ancestors and our
history, our traditions as mestizo actually are or not... definitely like a spiritual connection that I feel having a purpose outside myself or outside academics, or outside material realities.

It is a spiritual reality for me, and I think for a lot of Chicano communities there is a lot of Catholicism and a lot of those doctrines get imposed on the community, and I remember we weren't hard core strict Catholics, we were more like holiday Catholics.

But with these hard cord undertones, I never identified as indigenous, but like certain sayings in Spanish come from Mexican culture ....really indigenous, so I never felt like the Catholic Church was a place for me, It didn't make sense to me...I never felt connected. I mean I would go with my parents, like first communion, but I didn't like it and it never called to me even before I could articulate it; not consciously, or whatever. When I had to make my first communion, I was crying, I hated it, like I hated going to the church, I ended up talking with the father, I was really little, but I did not like it.

Catechism wasn't a problem because I like to study and learn about things, but when I had to actually perform the first communion and wear a white dress

I guess take the body of Christ, I was like why do I have to do this, and when I got out of the car I was crying. I hated it. I look back now and I think why it was like that, but I definitely feel more connected with a spiritual understanding of ...assumptions of the church, I guess that is why I stay, I would like to honor some of the things that have been denied to the Chicana/Chicano community as far as learning other parts of our history, learning...about Mexico.
I don't know if we have been truly given permission let's say through education, the Catholic Church, our families, you know cause there is definitely that rift to where a lot of other Raza don't understand what Danza is either, “oh what is that little Indians?” “You're not Native American,” “you're not this or that.” It is always what you are not, it is a troublesome space for a lot of people they don't understand what Mexicanos/as Chicanos/as are doing things within Danza, I don't know, I guess you pick your battles and it is definitely something I want to be a part of, like I was thinking earlier, learning about, or seeing Danza at a MEChA conferences almost like a politicized route to see it, where else in our communities are we getting this alternative information. You know I appreciate Danza and participate in Danza

**How is your family involved in the group?**

No, they are not directly involved; my family is pretty Chicano. My dad's from Mexico, Sinaloa, and doesn't speak English, but my mom is definitely more of the matriarch type of household and first language is Spanish even though she was born in Texas. But, she is first generation-like, but I think that's also what I was talking about earlier. Where is this alternative information or the consciousness or the access of our culture Danza…not specifically, but my parents didn't have the luxury to say “Okay I am going to Danza practice, read Chicano studies book or go to the youth conference.”

So, you know they were just always working, we were poor, so I feel like I am in a perfect space to reclaim some of that we did not have; because I had access to information that my mom didn't. So they don't directly participate in Danza, but they are very supportive.
They don't disregard it or talk bad about it. I'm not sure they get it, but I think that they appreciate that I do Danza and they respect it. I have younger brothers and sisters and I don't know but maybe one day they will be interested in Danza for themselves, I am not sure.

**Do you find that your relationships with the members of your group are as strong, stronger, or not as strong as your relationships with your extended genetic family?**

It is a hard question, but I think it is important. I do see Danza as an extended family, and so it has the potential to be as strong as a genetic family. I think that is more about time, we don't choose our families and there are certain people in your family and you think, “Oh man there they are again!” Then there are the people in your family that you thank the creator for giving them life and they are dependable, etc. So I find the same with Danza. I think that is another reason why I do appreciate Danza because I do see it as a family, and it is a greater extension of the Chicano community, where we are trying to forge some type of connection, or alliances, or kind of our own fate in the dominant society. I have really strong relations with Danzantes that I have met in the past and even with those, I am meeting now, in your group and I think that is partially a matter of time. And [you have] got to keep showing that your face is dependable. I think there is definitely that possibility and I have experienced in the past and now…I feel Danza is a very comforting environment, it not an ideal place, but I think there is a lot of possibilities within that space, forging connections, like in family, you’re going to have good times and bumps.
Please tell me some of your favorite memories about your family and Danza.

The first thing that comes to mind is la velación, I don't know, but I like staying up late, sharing energy, singing loud and funky, and I don't know, maybe I am a night person and I am happy when others are falling asleep. I think that is definitely, one or some of the viajes (trips) to go to ceremonies. You get to know one another a little more; the traveling, but I really love all spaces, a lot of the memories have been good, traveling together and being in ceremonies together is nice, and there is something gratifying that you know, hard to say in words like a feeling, a good energy, a good ceremony

Who is involved in your Danza group?

All my experience in Sacramento, were young women, college educated (early 20s) and young elementary age children. Then by extension, it seemed like my generation, mid 20s; are more educated with degrees than let's say the older generation. We had education that is more formal. We were all in our early 20s; women who I danced with had at least a bachelor's degree, or finishing up the bachelors degree. A couple had masters, some are studying to be in a doctor program in Cuba, and I am studying for a PhD. There is a generational and educational difference.

The larger group in Sacramento was family oriented. Chicanos, young adults, elders, and I think here specifically, in your group, it is more a mix and more of a balance between men and women and there is a mix of young kids, young adults and parents, and it seems a lot of people have bachelor's degree, as far as I can tell, but I think that is a trip too. It seems that a lot of Danzantes are formally educated people that are attracted to Danza. That trips me too. I wonder why?
I tend to see the spaces as very family, kids are welcomed. Certain spaces are “don't bring the kids and tell them to shut up,” but I think Danza is very much a place to provide a space welcoming and safe for young children.

**Why do you think the group in Sacramento was mostly women?**

I don't know, but I guess it has to do with where you fit in and what practice fit your schedule. Maria's group were primarily teenagers, I wasn't sure why, more women, but also young teenage boys, some elementary students. And another woman, Reyna, she mainly had elementary age and mainly boys in her circle. I don't know but it seems there are more women in general in Danza,

I kind of scouted around, “Do I fit in here?” “Do I feel comfortable?” With the group of women, I felt we were on the same page, we were organized; we wanted to set a high standard for our group I just gravitated there. It didn't mean the groups didn't co-mingle, we did. I guess it just depended on the group leader. Tatzin was a young woman, Maria had a teenager, and Reyna had a small son. So I don't know if that has anything to do with it.

**What are the values that your group strives for?**

In Sacramento: there was a cultural awareness or education they hoped to produce, not just earning dollars for travels. Once we did an opening for a continuation school because we thought it important to share and to recruit Danzantes; cultural sharing and awareness, and then along with spiritual awareness, there is a big move to understand the tradition more or better.

What does the fire represent, what is the smoke? Sometimes there would be retreats and very specific people would be invited. This is good but also problematic because
some are included and some excluded. Danza is complicated space and very rich to try and understand the idea of Chicano having culture outside of Western imperialism, regardless of articulating that in a political way, it seems a lot of our gente are hungry for culture; to know something about themselves in a positive way…I felt that it was about…the contradiction are that some groups are some less political. There are groups that are inherently political without having to say it, like a MEChA group.

In Sacramento, we got invited to every function. We were at the head of every march at the capitol for immigrant rights, so how you can't divorce other Chicano issues outside of Danza and you know with the group here, I wish I had more time to do all events. It is different too, in Sacramento I had time, but my schedule is rigid here. Your group offers that space of taking the traditions seriously.

I really appreciate your group, because I feel that I am in a place where I can learn instead of being in a Danza group that just popped up out of nowhere and now we are all Aztec warriors and princesses. I feel there is a lot to learn, and it is very educational and very uplifting. I feel connected in that sense and I am not doing Danza because it looks cute and I want to wear feathers. I feel like there is a lot to be learned and to be taught, to listen, and to watch. I guess generally the values are really cultural awareness, and it is a trip, because it is a contradiction to our very American minds and rethinking how we learn, how we listen. There is so much to say, it is a cultural revival movement in some respect. We have to complicate what it is to be Chicano/a.
How are your children involved in Danza? If you do not have any children, would you like them to be involved in la Danza?

Yeah, I would want them to, but I don't want to colonize them like my parents did sending me to church. I would hope they would want to go and participate that's definitely like ....to be a part of that, I think it is very privileged because very few of us have actually grown up with Danza, we find it later on as teenagers, a few people that I do know down here, and in Sacramento that have always had culture or Danza around, I don't know if that is different. Yeah, I would definitely want my kids involved.

Do you find la Danza to be empowering for yourself? For your community? If so how? If not why not?

Yeah, I find it to be empowering for myself as far as spiritual practices or engaging with our Chicano/a families. I think it is very important, by extension, for the wider community to see Danza, to be a part of, to recognize Danza because I guess for me I see Danza to be a form of resistance. To be satisfied with what we are doing and learning in Danza; I think it is an empowering space for me and for our community, I think a lot of positive things that can come from the Danza. I just think it is important.

You know, kind of coming from a Chicano Studies background, what are the connections… some of the things that don't work in academia….and then outside in the community, Danza is about liberating that spirit inside. [It is] A battle for spiritual and mental liberation, the body can be colonized and I think some... proof, like a war, the conquest, or whatever. First, you take possession of the people and the resources the land, but what doesn't get talked about as a violent conquest, is when you conquer the mentality and spirit of the people. That's what I kind of circle through I see a lot of our
gente talking about Jesus Christ. That's fine, and I think there is room for many, many creation stories and ways to be, but understand that a lot of these other imposed ideologies have come with blood and murder for our specific communities.

Maybe that is a little too deconstructionist or academic, but for me it is a spiritual liberation. From a very young age, I never felt peace sitting in church, listening to somebody in a dress; it was weird and boring. It is not that I am trying to externalize, but you know as problematic as Danza can be within itself, that is the battle I choose, the space I choose.

Short of overthrowing the system, and I am not sure if that is a possibility, but as far as how people understand themselves and live their lives, that's how we assert our own agency, or that is how we are our own subjects.

You and Bea make decisions, but they are not imposed on us. I do think it is a mental and spiritual liberation. I'm not sure if some people think, oh, “Danza, soccer, etc,” it is more than recreational, it is deeper.

**Is there a difference between being religious and being spiritual? If so, what is the difference?**

I have really good family, really strong Mexican American family. I don't know my dad's family in Sinaloa as much as my mom's family. On a side note, I have a couple of aunts that are born again Christian—they are open minded, I guess. They see me and they think “Okay, what are you doing?” “What is Danza? All these questions.... I thought we were friends”.... Everybody’s colonized.

Some people say “Mexicanos are not Indians, we are French, were Italians.” I say “Whatever! You’re just a descendant of some cousin somewhere.” There is all this
running away from our indigenous past. I often try to explain religion and spirituality—
religion is to be more ... go to church on Sunday, bring your bible this type of
indoctrination. There is mediation between your spirit and what will happen after you die.
In Christianity, there is a middle man, a secretary that is Jesus. I don't feel my
understanding—I don't need a mediator, a middle man, to negotiate my spiritual identity
or afterlife.

So for me, it isn't institutionalized. What is it? [Is it] A performance of going to
church on Sunday and dressing up and acting like you don't sin, and reading a one
particular book? Spirituality is a direct connection with a higher power, it is whatever I
chose to call it, Jehovah, Allah, whatever.

I feel like spirituality is much more open and secular. My spirituality in Danza may
be different that other Danzantes, and that's okay. Like if, everybody’s relationship with
our creator is so different. Who is to gauge that relationship and understanding of a
higher power? I think I do not need to have a building, or a church, that identifies me as a
spiritual person, churchgoer. Nor do I need someone to advise me. I think spirituality is
much more open. Why I can’t just be nice where ever I go, I don't have to just treat
people nice on Sunday, or confess and then my sins are obliterated. Danza is a spiritual
community for me. I don't believe there is a “how to book” on spirituality.

Do you consider yourself a religious person? If so how? If not why not?

I guess I don't. However, I do consider myself a spiritual person.
What does the term “sacred space” mean to you? Would the term sacred space mean anything in terms of La Danza Azteca?

I guess generically saying, it is definitely a metaphor for a realistic space, something that is honorable, that needed some time and attention. With Danza, when we create our circle when we dance, it is a sacred place. You are not going to walk through it, light some cigarettes in it or show up drunk, right? In that sense, there is that sacred space that is being created.

You are not going to show up with something that doesn't fit in that space. It is hard to define, and examples are easier. It is different for all, like people who meditate on a couch, then that becomes sacred space to them. Is it a metaphor or is it real?

Does La Danza have its drawbacks or negatives? If so what are these? If not why not?

Going back to the concept of the space, I don't think Danza is an exceptional space or a space exempt from problems or negativity. Even when you really do honor something, it is hard to get it. But you need to so it can expand and grow. There are a lot of hierarchies within Danza, not just the structure between people, leaders, and groups. So, there is a lot of intergroup tension, that kind of sucks. Because they do have a common goal and ground. It's sad when you see elders acting like children and then the younger generation inherits some of that. There is definitely regional leadership tension; which has been there for years.

I see a lot of gender drama. I can see now where, maybe it is also nice ...that some of the roles...I see ceremonies where women get reprimanded for what they are wearing something revealing… I understand that, but do they need to call them out publicly?
I had gone to a ceremony, at UC Santa Barbara and they do a ceremony in October, I was sitting and watching with this older Danza guy, he was telling me that women shouldn't hold the *tecocolli* (a conch shell trumpet), I was just listening. Basically, he was saying women shouldn’t be holding a tecocolli because it represents the women's genitals...just stupid stuff.

**How do you feel about those Danzantes that mix in other traditions into La Danza?**

Um, I'm not sure if I have ever been in a space where I have seen someone else’s traditions or such. I think talking with elders; I understand that traditions are not to be mixed. Things have their time and place. I do get that. I think it can be problematic for Chicanos. It can be complicated for someone who has two cultures--what do they do if they cannot mix; it's kind of saying they don't exist.

Unconsciously that is what is being said. I understand it, but I don't think it should cause all this raucous. Trying to reconcile it is really hard. Specifically for the Chicano/a spirit after 1800's and after the borders went up, we lost contact with the elders in Mexico, there was some type of cultural fusion and mixing by marriage with other native groups. In this instance and they are ...instances, what do you do? Like other native communities who their elders are in Baja California and they speak Spanish and the border has divided traditions and groups of people.

I do find that to be interesting. I am not trying to mix peyote--....I think a good example was the ceremony in Arizona where we were in the Yaqui Chapel; and then we were there--there was a negotiation right of the people. We weren't disrupting one
another, but we were co-exiting. We have had these battles with groups that don't recognize Chicanos. It is a trip.

**How do you feel about those Danzantes that reject the Catholic traditions of Mexican culture in La Danza?**

I understand where they are coming from and I am sure they have their own experiences, histories, and stories of trauma with Christian indoctrination or ideology or symbols. Nevertheless, I do think it is part of our history whether we like it or not. I think the key word is negotiation, so if somebody is very adamant about rejecting certain Christian symbols then maybe going to a group that is more aligned in that way is better for them. I don't see it as good or bad; where you fit in, or what your agenda is or what your purpose of Danza.

I know what I am there for. I am not going to grapple with all these other crazy things — I do wonder why there are Christian symbols....

**Is there anything you would like to comment on that I have left out?**

It would be interesting to understand Christian symbols in Danza, but not necessarily imposed, but how they get negotiated and reinvented through a Danza Chicano/a lens like the virgin, most Chicanos identify her as a brown skin woman.

So that right there I would claim as a form of resistance, or the way use the symbols for your own cultural meaning. Generally, the Christians see her as the Virgin Mary, but she also becomes Tonantzin. How do Chicanos re-appropriate the symbols for their own use? You have some choice....Christian symbols and indigenous symbols...
What is your earliest memory of La Danza?

The first time I saw the Danza was when I was a student at Cal State Fullerton. We were having a Chicano Culture day and this group came to dance for us. We didn’t have a microphone, so there was no dialogue or oral communication. I was drawn to the circle. I ran up to get a close spot near the circle and I just remember feeling chills up my spine and an emotional rush watching this surreal-like happening in front of me. Then the dancers left and I didn’t see Danza again until I moved to S.D., about a year later.

Please tell me the story of how you became involved in La Danza.

When I moved to SD, I met my future husband Mario E. Aguilar. He told me he danced, but didn’t really tell me much detail about it. After we married, I used to go with him to watch the dance practices, after a few months of that; I finally got the courage to join the dance practices. I enjoyed it and kept dancing, but I didn’t realize the depth of the Danza at that time. I thought it was a neat cultural expression that felt real for me. I always felt I had a connection with being Indian, since my dad always called me “la India,” and I like this nick name. This dance helped me to begin to explore that part of my cultural lineage.

Who was your teacher and how do you continue the lineage of his/her teachings?

Mario E. Aguilar was my teacher and is my husband. I continue to be involved in the Danza and am considered the Capitana of our dance circle. My children have been
raised in the traditions and it has been a great unifier for our family. I pick up the slack where there are times that the Capitan cannot be available and I help with the organization of the group and many of our activities. My home is considered a second home to many and often social activities and ceremonies take place there.

**Why do you participate in La Danza?**

I started to dance to join my husband in a fun, cultural activity. As time went on, I realized that the Danza was healing on many levels. It was dance, prayer, creating, singing, crafting, sharing, self-challenging, commitment, discipline, connecting to other communities near and far—so in essence it has filled my life with many levels of expression and I believe that is why I continue to be involved in the Danza. Also, life is short, it is fleeting, and through the Danza I am contributing to something that will outlive me and perhaps through that my life’s expression will go on eternally. I also participate because it fills my life with joy on so many levels.

**What is it about La Danza that keeps you involved?**

I believe it is the joy and the community that you become a part of. When I go to a ceremony and come back home tired from not having slept much and driven far, I am on a natural high for a few days. The Danza allows me to walk in this crazy world we live in and deal with all the stressors because I get to be healed when I go to ceremony. I am reminded that all those societal stressors are so temporary and not the real essence of life. The Danza, the physical and spiritual expression, participating in the natural elements, praying and remembering those who have come before and thinking of those who are still to come, conversing and sharing with others at a very deep level… laughing and
singing—are really the essence of a rich life. I feel fortunate to have found this path—this path that really called me to it.

**How is your family involved in the group?**

My family is the core of the group. My husband is the Capitan, I am the Capitana, and my children are the *herederos*. The children have more than earned that role! They show a lot of love towards the Danza and the people in our circle. They have learned the dance, the drum, the music, the songs, and the creating of the trajes. They have also learned much about ceremony. The Danza has been the core strand of our life together as a family.

**What role does La Danza play in your family?**

It is essential. Many of our friends, *comadres*, and *compadres* are also part of the circle—they have become like family. There were years we danced so very much, performing all the time and going to ceremonies. Now, we mostly participate in ceremony. The Danza has helped my children to develop as wonderful, caring human beings. They understand human behavior and nonverbal communication. They have learned to interact with so many different people throughout their lives. For me, the Danza has taught me about patience and about kindness. It has taught me to take joy in small wonders and to appreciate the small children—to see them as jewels. The Danza has enriched our life as a family with meaningful experiences so rich it is difficult to put into words.
Do you find that your relationships with members of your groups are as strong, stronger, or not as strong as your relationship with your extended genetic family?

They are probably as strong, but perhaps not stronger. The difference is that we share a joyous activity that is deeply meaningful with one another—and we choose to be together. For family, well we don’t choose that, but those relationships are also core, meaningful and share a common history. The Danza family, though, allows for a free flowing relationship based on choice, calling, and commitment.

Please tell me some of your favorite memories about your family and Danza.

There are so many—where to start?? I would have to say the annual trips to New Mexico because we had so much fun with our children and our circle. We made lifelong friends with other tribes and people who later became like family too. We experienced new cultures, were able to take great pride in our tradition and we felt special. We also visited Southwestern U.S. sites, camped out, went to museums, and just had fun together in a long caravan. We probably did this trip for about 15 years or more each summer.

I also really enjoy our annual ceremony. It was great fun, so exciting all the many years we organized the ceremony for the Chicano Park anniversary celebrations. Now, it is has changed, but it is still beautiful—perhaps more meaningful to us all. We receive guests from all over the U.S. and Mexico who come to pray and dance with us in unity.

Who is involved in your Danza group?

Anyone who wants to come in a good way and participate can. They can participate at any level they wish. We have women who dance while pregnant; we have babies and those learning to take their first steps, to folks my age, 54. We have had older people, but
they have either passed away or retired—but they still love the Danza and come out to help for our annual ceremony. We have Mexicanos and Chicanos. We have a Columbian and have had an Anglo dancer too. We try not to judge who comes to the circle and try to accept each.

**What brings and keeps people in your group?**

Most people come because they want to learn more about their ancient roots. Some come to connect with the indigenous movement. Some come looking for magnificent healing; people come for all types of reasons. What keeps people is fit. Those that feel comfortable with our discipline, our traditions, our familial mores, stay. The others drift off, sometimes to another group, sometimes off into space.

**What are the values that your group strives for?**

We strive to care for one another, to teach the traditions as true as we can, and to give each person a place in the circle. We believe we are caretakers of our Danza, so we carry it with pride taking care to dance only where we believe we should and in educational, cultural, or ceremonial environments. We like to have social gatherings and to share food, a lot! We try to teach that being a Danzante is just that. It doesn’t make you better than others, you don’t necessarily see visions or learn to walk on water, but you work the Danza and you weave it into your modern life as best you can. We try to keep it very real, and not mysterious. We value the children as well as the elders. Family is a strong value for our circle and as a result, we are all comadres and compadres, share weddings and birthdays and just, generally, like being with one another. We also value the diversity of each one’s quirks and personalities.

**Please tell me about the symbolism of La Danza and what it means to you.**
I may have already covered some of this. Symbolism of the Danza—that it is a spiritual movement that has its roots to ancient, indigenous Mexico and continues to this day on both sides of the border (being Native American spans the continent, not a country). There is an intertwining of the Danza with Catholicism and the faith of the Mexican people. The Danza ceremonies are often based on a saint day that has a double meaning to Danzantes. Like the Virgen de Guadalupe and the mother earth and Tonantzin. There are many others. Many of the designs we use on our trajes also have symbolic messages for us—we learn about life through these symbols. Like the notion of duality and balance in our daily lives (fire and water, etc.) There are many elements that are also signified that bring meaning to our lives, for instance, ceremonies for the various seasons, giving thanks for water and wind, for corn and sustenance, etc. The symbolism is that the Danza is beautiful and enriching, but costly in blood, sweat and tears: that something of value, “Te cuesta!” (It costs you!) There are many vivid symbols within the Danza. It mirrors the life cycle with vivid colors, challenges, and experiences.

**Please tell me the significance of the circle and how it relates to family.**

We always dance in a circle. This allows us to see one another and keep an eye out for everything that is happening within the Danza at any given time—so it allows for greater order and discipline. There is also a circle of energy that we are creating when we dance and when someone walks away from the circle in the middle of a dance, you can actually feel the energy flow disrupted, as if someone just opened the door and the wind swooped up the energy. The energy in the circle is contagious and can lift you up or push you forward, even if you don’t know the steps all that well. When you are dancing next to
someone and they just stop dancing, you almost feel like you are running into a wall, because they have stopped the flow—it’s weird, but true.

The circle also represent the cycle of life and the seasons. It unites the family of the Danza and reminds us that each one is important, from the children to the adults. Not one is more important, but all are important. That is the same for any family; each person holds a strand of that family unit, just as each Danzante does for the circle.

I mostly refer to my dance group as our “circle.” It’s as if we are a band, a ring, one that expands and shrinks at time. The circle is only as strong as its members are and each one brings a spirit and energy to the circle that is unique.

**What does it mean to you to pass on this lineage to your children?**

It is awesome to know that they both love and cherish it. It is wonderful to know that they will carry it on with a great deal of respect and reverence for the tradition. It is nice that when we are not there, they still represent us well. It gives me a feeling of relief that our Danza will continue and that my children will cherish it. Now that they have become young adults, I do feel more relief in knowing that they will continue to dance and that the Danza will take care of them too. They have both become strong leaders in our group and in Danza in general. They are seen by other groups as leaders too!

**Do you find La Danza to be empowering for yourself? For your community?**

Yes to both. For me, it helps me stay balanced; it allows me to actively pray, to create, and to interact at a very profound level with others. For my community it allows them to feel a great deal of pride in their culture. They feel the energy and the loud sound of the drums catches and holds their attention. They respect the Danza and have learned to include the Danza as a spiritual part of many cultural celebrations. I believe that the
Danza has become a revered part of the Chicano Community—one that is worthy of respect and dignity.

Is there a difference between being religious and being spiritual?
Yes for some, no for others. Most people who follow a religion are also practicing a spiritual belief and practice. However, you don’t have to be part of a religion to be a spiritual being. Spirituality is based on faith.

Do you consider yourself a religious person?
Not too much. Although, I do enjoy going to the Catholic Church from time to time.

What does the term “Sacred Space” mean to you? Would the term sacred space mean anything in terms of La Danza Azteca?
To me Sacred Space is not a physical place. It is a state of mind and of heart when a person is in prayer—so it can be on the top of a mountaintop or inside a church. It is a mental and emotional state of “being” when you communicate with your creator. This can be part of the Danza—during velaciones or Danzadas. When we pray, we call the animas to be with us—that is sacred.

When we don our trajes and dance with our ancestors—that feels sacred because we are carrying on their legacy and their faith—we become one with our ancestors.

When I smell the smoke of the copal—I enter sacred space. When I hear the alabanza para pedir permiso (hymn to ask for permission)—I’m entering a sacred space. When I am in the middle of the dance circle and we dance and I am not thinking about the dance or the steps, but finish the dance while my mind is elsewhere—that is sacred space. I know I am not explaining it well—I do believe that sacred space is different for
each, but for me it is a state of mind and heart and I often feel closer to it when I am in the Danza.

**Does Danza have its drawbacks?**

Yes. It can be exhausting and physically challenging—especially the older you get. Some people in the Danza have big egos and jealousy create problems. That’s no fun. The Danza can become political and people are asked to take a side. There are cruel and evil minded people that use the Danza too and they hurt others—but they are not true Danzantes. These are all human weaknesses that become a part of the Danza. But, take all that out, and No, the Danza does not have its drawbacks and I don’t ever think of it as a negative.

**How do you feel about those Danzantes that mix in other traditions into La Danza?**

I think they are doing what they think is best. I don’t like to do that, but many do. I think the Danza has been influenced by other traditions and others have been influenced by the Danza too. I think that the Danza is very complicated and has so many levels that I am just beginning to learn, that I don’t understand why anyone would want to complicate matters by adding other traditions to it. I guess some Chicanos don’t really wholly except the Danza as it is, and so to be a “real Indian” they feel the need to add in Northern ways—but I don’t feel that need.

**How do you feel about those Danzantes that reject the Catholic traditions of Mexican culture in La Danza?**

I think those that reject it, reject the Danza as it is in Mexico. You can’t out and out reject the connections with Catholic traditions if you are going to be a traditional
Danzante. If you are going to be “new age or a cultural type,” well then, you reject Catholic traditions—but then you are not a Danzante of the tradition.

**Is there anything you would like to comment on that I have left out?**

Not really. The Danza has enriched my life and I am pleased that I have walked this path. I have no regrets and along the way, I have made lots of friends, learning much about others and about myself. It has been a good path of discovery.

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**Narrator fourteen: Ome Tochtli**

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Date Interviewed: Dec. 1, 2008

**What is your earliest memory of La Danza?**

I first saw La Danza Azteca in 1974. I had gone to Mexico City to participate in the TENAZ (Teatros Nacionales de Aztlan) inter-continental gathering of theater groups. We were at a church in a section of Mexico City called “Popotla,” “the place of smoke” in Nahuatl. A priest was giving mass in the Zapotec language, and a group of dancers gathered around the altar and danced. I had never seen anything like this before and I was stunned, amazed, and transformed by the whole sensory experience. Later that day the gathering participants boarded a dozen or so buses and we headed to the great ceremonial archeological site of Teotihuacan. There, we performed our music and the theater groups performed their acts. I had been to Teotihuacan ten years earlier, as a ten-
year-old tourist. But here, for the first time the distance between the ancient past and our “modern” present became non-existent.

Then in November of 1974, I saw a group of 12 young men performing in an unfinished parking structure in Tijuana. Later I would find out that this was Florencio and his 12 young dancers from Tacuba, Mexico City.

**Please tell me the story of how you became involved in Danza.**

I met Florencio and the six young men who stayed behind after the married guys returned to Mexico. I met them at Alurista’s home, where at the time Juan Felipe Herrera was living. This was just before Christmas in 1974. After the New Year holiday, we began practicing at the Centro Cultural de La Raza in Balboa Park.

**Who was your teacher and how do you continue the lineage of his/her teachings?**

My teacher was Florencio Yescas. He came to the U.S. to teach us Chicanos about our indigenous heritages. Although he focused on Danza Azteca, he wanted us to also know the *Matachines*, the *Tocotines*, the *Voladores*, and others, but the allure of Danza Azteca quickly overtook the other Danzas. I try to carry on his lineage of teaching by carrying out his beliefs:

Always teach for free. Florencio said that our elders never taught us for pay and we should do likewise. It is OK to get a salary as a teacher, but never to charge each individual for La Danza. This is because, sometimes the persons that need La Danza the most in their lives, are the least able to pay; children, the poor, the lost souls of the urban jungle.

Always try to make the Danza circle as beautiful as you can. It is not about individual ego, but about the community. We are all a petal in a “flower” that dances. So
just like Florencio, we always lend new Danzantes their first uniforms so that they can experience the energy of La Danza. Once they decide to become Danzantes, we help them make their first uniforms.

All the Danzantes have to know how to make their own uniforms. He would say that a true Danzante would only buy his or her regalia, to help out those that need to live by making the uniforms. However, for general use, each dancer must know how to make their uniforms, and most importantly, what they signify.

Danza is a faith-based spiritual system, not a political movement. It has survived for at least 700 years because it is based on the evolution of the teaching of our elders, both from the indigenous roots, as well as the European and African roots. If La Danza was based on a political ideology, then it becomes a pawn of personal agendas and fads. It soon becomes a pawn of the elite who control the ideology in power at the moment. La Danza has survived for hundreds of years because it is based above all on faith, and spirituality.

Why do you participate in La Danza?

La Danza has become a way of life for me. As a Capitán, La Danza is a very heavy burden. It carries a lot of responsibility, and quite frankly, to be a Capitán can be a lonely place to be….yet, when we begin drumming for La Danza, when I see the young children dancing with all their innocent energy, La Danza becomes an electrifying experience. I see our families united as we dance; I see our community respect us, and look to us as guides for a positive future. To know that I am a part of this beautiful spiritual movement that has been kept alive in Mexico by the poorest and most
marginalized levels of society…. Well, it humbles me and I give great thanks to God that he chose me to be there at the very beginning of La Danza in Aztlan. Those of us who first learned from Florencio and Andrés… we were blessed. We started at a time no one here really knew what La Danza was. There were maybe 20 of us in the entire U.S. Now there are young people ranting and raving about La Danza, but they do not understand it, because they came in after La Danza became fashionable.

Some of them now use La Danza as a form of a personality cult… like the evangelical fundamentalist preachers you see on television. These two types of charismatic groups have a lot in common. I am just glad I stared when we all understood that La Danza is much, much bigger than us individually, and will outlast us into the future.

**What is it about La Danza that keeps you involved?**

Well, let’s see… the fact that my whole family dances together…and the fact that our Danza families are like our own genetic *familia*. It’s the spirit of the young kids, with hope and faith, learning and enjoying being together. I like the physical challenge it gives you as an athlete and as an artist. La Danza gives you the space to pray, express yourself artistically, and create communion, all without having the heavy trappings and rules of religious dogma. When we dance, we feel our union with all Danzantes through time and space. It is quite powerful.

**How is your family involved in the group?**

My wife has been dancing with me since we got married 29 years ago. My son and daughter dance, and so does my grand nephew. My son and daughter have thankfully taken on more and more of the leadership of my palabra, so I get to enjoy just dancing! In
addition, most of the kids in our Danza circle are our godchildren, so there is another level of family.

**What role does La Danza play in your family?**

La Danza permeates every single aspect of our life as a family. Where we live, where we work, what we do together as a family… it is inconceivable for me to think of life without La Danza!

**Do you find that your relationships with the members of your group are as strong, stronger, or not as strong as your relationships with your extended genetic family?**

Sometimes our relationships with our Danza family are stronger than our blood relationships. However, my genetic family has welcomed and learned to love our Danza family.

**Please tell me some of your favorite memories about your family and Danza.**

My greatest memories fall into two distinct categories. My life as a single Danzante: 1974-1980. Those adventures as a young man learning about La Danza were incredible.

My Life as a husband and father: 1981-2005. The beautiful experiences of traveling with our kids and watching them explore new places and meet new people. Now that our kids are adults and on their own, my wife and I travel and get to do the things that, we left off when our kids were born. Nevertheless, it will always be the memories of having our two children dancing next to us that were the greatest gifts that God sent to us through La Danza.
Who is involved in your Danza group?

We are an older group. We have been together for over 28 years. The young kids that started with us in 1980 are now in their forties, and have teenage children in our group. The college students that joined us in the 1990s are now parents with kids in elementary school. We have blue collar workers, and educators, and professionals in our circle.

That is what makes Danza so special. If it wasn’t for La Danza most of us would have never crossed paths; we live in separate circles of reality. We would have never had the beauty of our friendship and shared spiritual experiences.

What brings and keeps people in your group?

I think that when people come to our circle, some expect magic, visions, and out of body experiences. When they don’t get that, or when they see that I do not teach ethnocentric mythology as fact, or that I do not subscribe to La Danza as a political movement, well they get disappointed and move on. Others however, quickly realize that the “magic” of La Danza is in its very essence of being…. Well… a day-to-day form of life; no rockets, no sacred warriors coming down from heaven to expel the white man from this land…. just a way of life; that is what La Danza is. The true medicine of La Danza takes generations to work! Most people want an instant solution, instant relief. They are not willing to let go of their personal needs and trust the ancestral medicine to cure future generations. A day after a ceremony, our two godsons were running wild in my son’s house. They were being chased by my son’s goddaughter. I told her father that the crazy chase scene was the true medicine of La Danza, because it showed how Danza creates unity and family. I told him “Anywhere those kids go to as adult Danzantes
someday; they will have brothers and sisters to welcome them.” THAT is the real meaning of La Danza. Not how many scars are on your chest or feet, or how many feathers you have in your headdress. What counts is how many families, in how many towns, love, respect, and need you.

People that somehow recognize the fact that it is the medicine within the sense of family and community that La Danza creates…. they are the ones that realize THAT is the true magic and healing of La Danza….people that find this in their hearts, they tend to stay in our group for life!

**What are the values that your group strives?**

My compadre Lázaro Arvizu said it once: “*Primero la obligación, y luego la devoción.*” (“First the obligation, and then the devotion”). So for our Danza circle, the focus is on our family obligations: protecting our children, making sure they have a safe environment; and are doing the best they can in school.

After that, our focus in Danza Mexi’cayotl is on making sure our children know, appreciate, and love our Mexican heritage… all of it, not just the “politically correct version” of Mexican indigenousness. We want them to love our ceremonies, our Danzas, our songs, everything about being a Danzante. Finally, we want our families to be comfortable with their spirituality and their own self worth. We try to teach that in order to love others, you need to love yourself. No amount of mythological revisionism, hero worship, or ceremonial marathons will make you happy, if you do not have a stable and grounded base for your daily life.

**Please tell me about the symbolism of Danza and what it means to you.**
Well… I could write a dissertation on what La Danza means! … Seriously, though, to me La Danza means:

Tradition

Spirituality

Self-determination

Artistic excellence

Unity with our ancestors and our descendants

Family and community

Basically, the Danza uniform represents our heritage. Once we put it on, we are no longer “Pancho or Jasmine or whoever.” We are now vessels that accept the spirits of our ancestors and of our future descendants. The drums represent our people’s hearts and the annual cycle of life and death. The circle represents, to me, equality, and unity. The music represents our people’s faith, happiness, harmony, and respect.

**Please tell me the significance of the circle and how it relates to family.**

Well our Danza circle is our family, and all of my family is in the Danza circle, so for my personal experience and reality, they are both one and the same.

**How are your children involved in Danza? If you do not have any children, would you like them to be involved in La Danza?**

Both of our kids have been dancing since before they were born. They have shown great love, respect, and appreciation for La Danza. Now as adults, they are taking over some of the responsibilities of running the circle and especially the ceremonies. I am very proud of them!
What does it mean to you to pass on this lineage to your children?

It is an extraordinary blessing to see our children grow up in La Danza to be awesome human beings. I truly believe that our dance circle will continue in their hands. I am proud of the fact that our kids insist on carrying out our traditions as they are in Mexico. They are both grounded in what La Danza means and what I can give.

They look down on the current fad of mixing La Danza Azteca with any Northern Native American tradition that comes around out of nowhere. They are truly proud of their Mexican heritage and blood. The do not need to “super-indigenize” themselves in order to prove they are “true Danzantes, or Chicanos.” They have been true Danzantes, and true Chicanos since they were tiny; and they have been recognized as such by many elders and Danzantes both in Mexico and Aztlan.

Both of our kids can walk amongst other traditional indigenous tribes, and not feel the need to prove their legitimacy. They have had it in our Danza circle since birth.

Do you find La Danza to be empowering for yourself? For your community? If so how? If not why not?

I think La Danza Azteca is extremely empowering for my community and for me. For my community, it has changed the course of our Chicano history. It changed the dynamics of self-identity from a “Hispanic” rooted identity, to one that while not negating our European and African roots, nevertheless, gives prime importance to our indigenous roots, languages, and spiritual beliefs. For me, it has empowered me greatly. I am a quiet, shy, and reserved person. La Danza has given me the strength to speak in public, to take positions on issues that many times do not make me a popular person.
La Danza has also given me a path to come to terms and make peace with the violent and contradictory character of Christianity; how it was forced onto third world peoples. La Danza has given me the power to overcome depression, and self-hatred. It has given me my wife and children. I would not be alive if it was not for La Danza Azteca. I do not feel I am a unusual example. There are many Danzantes out there that are alive because of the love and energy of our ancestors.

La Danza has shown me that while it is important to remember, honor, and respect the past, we need to be thinking always of the future: the future of our people, our families, and our planet. They are all inextricably inter-twined.

Is there a difference between being religious and being spiritual?? If so, what is the difference?

I believe that to being religious means that you buy into a certain religious system. This includes the religion’s creation myths, its dogma, its ecclesiastical system of control, and its rituals. It also means that by extension, you need to buy into that particular religion’s claim to superiority, exclusivity, and the claim that it and only it is the true path to “God.”

Religious followers believe that their religion is the only truth in the universe; they feel that they have the final word on how people should behave. They feel that everything they do is sanctioned and glorified by their god (or gods). This has lead to brutal wars, ethnic-cleansings, and genocide throughout humanity’s history. In order to “save” someone, the religious must oppress them, enslave them, or kill them. Somehow, that does not seem very sacred….
Being spiritual means that you recognize that the creator/God is the giver of all life. You recognize that humans are only a small part of the created universe and therefore, do not deserve a special place “at the right hand of God.” That realization is very scary for many people. It means that they are not the center of the universe, and that they are in fact powerless to control it. I think that the whole reason for religion throughout history, as been man’s eternal dream to control the uncontrollable: the weather, volcanoes, and earthquakes, droughts and floods.

Spiritual people are not so much worried about everlasting life, as they area about living the current life in a just, kind, and honorable manner. Spirituality means that you see the hand of God in everything in the universe. Trees, mountains, clouds; they all have a spirit because they were created by the same love that created us. Spiritual people also see the foolishness of trying to be lords or “gods” over nature. Spiritual people instead kneel in awe of what God, through nature, has created: There is no fear of evolution, because evolution is God’s plan. Spiritual people relish our fleeting and small part of this plan, because it means we are alive!

Spirituality also means that instead of seeing our ancestors as gone, and as mere footnotes in our history books, we actually live with them on a daily basis. Modern medical science has found out what we have already known for thousands of years: Our ancestors are in our blood. We call it the living spirit of our ancestors; modern science calls it DNA. We say our descendants are alive within our spirits; modern science calls it DNA. It is the same tree of life, but with two names.
So to me, Spirituality is much more fluid and encompassing than religion. It is more forgiving and compassionate. You can be spiritual AND religious. However, it is hard to be religious AND spiritual.

**Do you consider yourself a religious person? If so how? If not, why not?**

When I was a kid, I really wanted to be a Catholic priest. I had a tiny altar at the top of my bookcase in my room. I laugh now thinking that I now have an entire room for my altar (the *oratorio*)! Who would have thought!

I even made an appointment with the priest at my church to talk about it; but he never showed up. Therefore, I have always had a religious streak. However, like any Mexican/Chicano, the history of Christianity has been a conflicted hurt for me. Thus, I would have to say that I am a believer in many of the tenets of the Catholic Church, but I reject its dogma, hierarchy, and its claim to moral infallibility.

Christianity without the dogmatic, ethnic, and political flotsam is really a beautiful path. It can be boiled down to just one sentence Jesus said: “Love one another as I have loved you.” You can’t get any more spiritual than that! All people need to do is extend this commandment to ALL living things, and to the world we live in. End of problem……

I do consider myself a spiritual person, in that I believe we can communicate with our God/creator/universal truth, whatever, directly; such as when we are working in our gardens; when we are walking alone; or when we are quietly sitting, listening to the wind. I believe you can be a spiritual person and still have a place for religious traditions; as
long as they do not blind you to your faults, the faults of your religion, and the value of other people’s traditions.

**What does the term “sacred Space” mean to you? Would the term sacred space mean anything in terms of La Danza Azteca?**

To me sacred space is something man-made. The entire universe is sacred, but as humans became urban and “civilized,” we lost contact with the spirit of the Earth as a living organism. We began to revel in our own creativity and intelligence, and forgot to look at the beauty that surrounds us every day.

Thus, we had to create our own “Sacred caves, mountains, groves, and gardens”; to try to mimic what lay just outside the walls of our cities and villages. Humans have created pyramids, churches, temples, mosques, and athletic stadiums to try to recapture the feeling of being part to a greater whole.

So sacred space becomes a place where a membership (a religion, a tribe, a society, a family or a person) decides to invest their spiritual energy and faith. Sacred space can be a place that outlives its creators, thus giving them a sense of immortality; it can be a place that is extremely transitory, where once the ceremony is done, “profane space” returns.

In terms of La Danza, sacred space is experienced at many levels: the circle creates the boundaries of our shared spiritual movement. Our dance choreography creates a space where time is transcended… past, present, and future…becomes one.

Our bodies become receptacles for the energy of our ancestors and our descendants. Our uniforms give visual and auditory expression to the centuries that are united for the moment of the Danza.
Our altars, musical instruments, incense and songs, become sacred space where as in ancient times we invoke the ancestral spirits to come to us and give guidance and to pray for us.

The calling of the spirits of our ancestors; the lighting of the copal incense; and the rhythms of the instruments create a temporary sacred space for us as Danzantes. We can be in a church, a park, a high school gymnasium, or a parking lot. For the time we have formed the “Flower” of “crown” as the Concheros say of the dance circle, we have marked out our sacred space for ritual communication with the spirit world and our creator. Once the copal is put out; once the instruments stop playing; the circle breaks up; profane, daily space is allowed to go back into the physical space we had just recently controlled.

**Does La Danza have its drawbacks or negatives? If so what are these? If not why not?**

1. La Danza Azteca, like all things has its positives and negatives. The negatives include: People who use La Danza for personal gain, cult status or monetary gain.

2. People who use La Danza to promote a racial superiority agenda, which replaces white European, Christian, male dominated manifest destiny with brown, Mexi’ca, “indigenous spirituality” male-centered hero worship and ideology, and manifest destiny of the warrior type.

3. People who make a new age soup of Mexican, Plains Indian, Tibetan, African, folk superstition, Buddhism, and UFO type of gullibility to create “ancient wisdom.” This is then sold to unsuspecting innocent people.
4. People who use La Danza as a tool for collecting sexual conquests, mind altering substances, and easy money.

On a personal level, La Danza has several negatives:

1. The emotional cost of running a Danza circle, and the attendant human stories that come with each dancer.
2. The time spent away from personal interests, like gardening, and creating art (jewelry, paintings, and computer art) for me.
3. Losing your weekends to a continual cycle of ceremonies and out of town travelling.
4. The monetary cost of upkeep of our Danza uniforms, our travel expenses.

When people are first drawn to La Danza, they overlook these costs, because the benefits of circle are so apparent. However, over the past 35 years, what I have seen make or break someone as a Danzante, is their willingness to sacrifice big parts of what society would call their “normal life,” for the benefits and sacrifices of La Danza Azteca. It is when the shine and glory of the dance performance itself wears out, that the true Danzante finally shows through.

Because by that point, you have discovered that the magic and medicine of La Danza lies within is “daily grind” of human experience. La Danza teaches you how to carry what you dance into every aspect of your interaction with all living things. Once you humbly accept the sacrifices and negatives that La Danza Azteca brings to you, you understand and appreciate much more the positives and the blessings that our tradition
brings to our families. Thus, at the end, if you have faith, the positives far out weight the
negatives of La Danza Azteca.

**How do you feel about those Danzantes that mix in other traditions into La Danza?**

I believe in evolution as a tool of the creator to create new life. Human
civilization has been a history of evolution. Conquests, natural disaster, new religions, all
have influenced humanity since pre-recorded history.

Yet I do not believe that anyone has a right to willfully change and re-write the
past, manipulate the present, or deceive the future. All religions, historians, and
politicians are guilty to some extent of doing this. In Mexico, we have the infamous
Tlacalel, who burnt the books of the ancient Teotihuacanos, the Tolteca, and anyone else
who had written down their history. All this destruction was carried out just so that the
Mexi’ca could re-write their own history as the center of the universe and as the
culmination of human history.

Mexican history is full of “pious legends” with suspicious roots (like Our Ladies of
Guadalupe and Los Remedios); or worse, with blatantly politically manipulated lies (like
the so-called discovery of Cuauhtémoc’s burial in Ixcateopan). Once the faithful
innocently accept the manipulations of history as “fact,” it is almost impossible to set the
facts out there as the “real thruth.” Thus, the manipulation of knowledge can be a
dangerous and hurtful tool. The Euro- and Afro-centric society of the U.S. has spent the
last 200 years manipulating history throughout the world.

Now the strident people I call the “Mexi’ca Nazis” want to repeat Tlacalel’s
crime… but this time against the Concheros and the Catholic indigenous people of
Mexico who kept alive our Danza traditions. They want to re-create a past that really has never existed. They are ignorant of the successful struggle of indigenous and mestizo Mexicans over the past 500 years to negotiate, redefine, and take over the imposed cultures of the “old world.” They see the Mexican people as passive victims with no sense of power or agency. Thus, it is to their convenience to put up a “Hollywood” style mythology (complete with clear cut villains, heroic natives, and supernatural allies) out into cyberspace, and college campuses.

Basically, the unsaid message is that being “just a plain old Mexican” who accepts the reality of the past is not good enough. Furthermore, it goes without saying, that if you are a “true” indigenous Chicano, you need to cleanse out those nasty European traits you have inherited, (like speaking Spanish, being Catholic, and not speaking English), and remake yourself in the image of “real” or “pure” indigenous people; the Lakota, Hopi, Apache. In other words, you have to copy those nations that were “untainted” by Mexican ways (even though these nations readily admit their connection to Mesoamerica!).

What fascinates me is how some Chicanos are so hell bent on being sun dancers, peyote medicine men, elders, seers of visions. They sing songs from everywhere but Mexico at Mexican Danza Azteca ceremonies. They go to Danza Azteca ceremonies dressed in regalia of the Plains, of the Great Basin, and even of Peru.

They wear red bandanas, belts, coyote skins, snakeheads, parrot wings. They speak of respecting the Mother Earth, and all living things, but they spend incredible amounts of time and money trying to get eagle feathers, jaguar skins, or the body parts of many
endangered species. It is, as one of my godson’s calls it, “the pet cemetery.” These Danzantes are looking for exterior measures of their “Mexi’ca-ness.” And in reality, all the dea skins of our brother and sister animals just show how much ego is involved…. And how much spirituality is missing. All for what? To make themselves look superior to the next Danzante? These young men and women need to go to Mexico and see the real elders of La Danza. They need to see how in their humility and poverty they wear a few feathers, and many times old and worn trajes. It is their wisdom and knowledge that makes them great Danzantes, not how much their headdress weighs, or how many body parts they have pierced.

If you go to traditional North American indigenous ceremonies, ones where the ceremonial leaders have no need to impress Chicanos or outsiders with their knowledge… and voila! Not one of them is dressed as an Azteca, Maya, or even a Tolteca. People who are totally at peace with their indigenous identity do not need to “dress up” to prove to others who they are. Moreover, guess what? Traditional indigenous people accept you as a Mexican, as a Chicano, as a Danzante Azteca, whatever you want to claim…. just as you are! No need to prove you have been to sun dances, snake dances, peyote ceremonies, or ghost dances. No need to carry pelts of dead relatives, or beaded charms…. The spirit comes through …. in what the traditional people see in your eyes, not what they see hanging around your throat.

In Mexico, at the ceremonies I have attended, both in La Danza Azteca and among the Nahuas of the Huasteca, participants, even the leaders, dress in their street clothes. They are so interwoven within who and what they are that they do not need to
make a salad of traditions to “prove” anything. They have no need for red belts around their heads or waists. What they have a need for is to carry out their traditions in a humble and loving manner. In fact, they wear what they have because they do not have the luxury of having clothes for ceremonies, clothes for jogging, clothes for cruising. They are who they are period.

I have deep faith that within the next 100 years, we Mexcoehuani/Chicanos/Mexicanos will be able to get to that sense of identity, humility, and membership.

**How do you feel about those Danzantes that reject the Catholic traditions of Mexican culture in La Danza?**

I understand their anger and resentment… and over the injustices of the past. Been there myself, done that! However, I strongly feel that too many Chicanos spin their wheels and waste a lot of their life fighting battles that have already ended, — many 400 years or more ago. We need to start waging the real battles of the future: water rights, education, removing the prison-industrial complex, gender genocide, and environmental justice. At the end of the story, Cuauhtémoc will not rise from the grave because we dance for him 25 hours. However, maybe, just maybe, 10 of our youth will avoid the living death penalty of prison, because we understood the relationship between the Mexican Catholic tradition, and our indigenous voices, and we danced at their church.

We Mexicans are who and what we are, so our people need to get over it and stop hating ourselves. The strident extremist Chicanos, or as I call them, the Mexi’ca Nazis are a prime example of this phenomenon. They want to re-write the past and recreate a world that really never existed. The Mexi’ca Nazi’s would carry out an ethnic cleansing
of Mexican culture and genetic material, in order to achieve their indigenous “Garden of Eden:” a garden that never existed. They want to change history to benefit their dreams.

A prime example is the Mexi’ca Nazis fear and fright of our Mesoamerican ancestor’s use of human sacrifice. The Mexi’ca Nazis and others are rabid about its non-existence. Never mind the archeological evidence, and the written and oral traditions that we have. What is amusing to me is how the Mexi’ca Nazi’s fear of human sacrifice is so much based on the puritanical white northern European worldview of the White Anglo-Saxon Protestant.

The Mexi’ca Nazis and others do not want our indigenous heritage to be judged as “savage,” “pagan,” or “bloodthirsty.” Yet, these are value judgments that, outside the puritanical world view of Europe, have no meaning. If one looks at the history of Christianity, Judaism, Islam, and Hinduism, all of these cultural/religious systems practiced human sacrifice. However, they all call it “defending their religion,” or “defending their nation against heathens and unbelievers,” or “converting the pagans.” So the problem of “human sacrifice is one of which lens you want to use.

Today throughout the world, we still practice human sacrifice, and the Mexi’ca Nazis are not losing sleep over it. Where are they to protest the killing of thousands of children throughout the third world due to famine, disease, and totalitarian governments?

What about the people murdered because of their sexual orientation; the people massacred because they speak different languages? What about the women forced to have children because the male religious leaders will not let them have contraception; because
religions do not give women a right to control their own destiny? What about the rape and plunder of the Earth that goes on every second? Are these not human sacrifices?

It is easier to argue about the past because it requires no action greater than calling your enemy a sell-out and a traitor. The Mexi’ca Nazis rant and rave about our “Mother Earth” and our “ancient heritage” but in the end it is all about political control, the cult of the leader, and re-writing history for racial superiority. But like I said, give us, the Mexcoehuani 100 years to catch up to the indigenous people of Mexico, and we will overcome this unscrupulous use of our heritage.

**Is there anything you would like to comment on that I have left out?**

No, not really. Good luck…..

*Narrator five: Atzacualoyacihuatl*

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Date Interviewed:  Nov. 23, 2008

**How old are you?**

I am 24 years old.

**And, where were you born?**

I was born in S.D. California.

**What is your earliest memory of La Danza?**

Uhmm, earliest memory of the Danza… was at the Virgin de Guadalupe Church. It was for the *doce* (12th). *El doce de diciembre* (the 12th of December).
How old were you?

I was eight around, eight. Yeah, ‘cuz I remember it was before I moved into City Heights, and I was still living in Logan.

Please tell me the story of how you became involved in Danza.

I became involved with Danza uh, my freshmen year of college. I had always been really interested in it, I just hadn’t found, uh, I guess a group, or I didn't know of groups, and practices. So I was involved in ballet folklórico and through a good friend of mine, who I met in college. He, … brought the idea of finding a group of and getting to know more about what Danza was or is. We started looking up a Danza group that we thought was at UCSD based on a news article that he saw. So, that day, we went to the stated date of practice and we went to UCSD and it ended that they weren't they going to have practice and we were actually looking for someone named Mario Aguilar, (laugh)... Uhmm, so that day they didn't have practice, so that didn't work out, but we did end up enjoying a great Ozomatli concert (laugh).

So, it was nice but then it was back to looking, you know, searching for a group

Then we found out about another group that was having practice at, I believe it was a recreation center of a mobile home area and, then we found out it was Felipe Rangel, who was leading that group, and, that didn't work out too well. We only went to two practices and, I don't know, it is strange difficult to describe, it didn't feel right. We didn't feel welcomed, so we only went to two practices, and then that was it. Then we finally, found who we were looking for at Sherman Heights!

So at that time I was a freshmen in college and living in the dorms, I didn't have a car, …I was 18 and didn't have a car.
Who was your teacher and how do you continue the lineage of his/her teachings?

Okay, my teachers for Danza are Capitán Mario Aguilar and Beatrice Zamora… and I continue his lineage and his teachings through education and in just keeping those ideas with me and knowing them and many of the values that I have learned. It’s this whole Danza is a family and support group concept, but also a way of preserving what is right. Very much, a respect for the value of La Danza. I've had the chance to… take part in ceremonies that have been an amazing experience. I have noted how Danzantes in other groups have not followed the teachings I have been instilled in being Danzante…, again being noted for that is a good a thing, as following a traditions to a “T.” I guess in a sense, that's really nice to know.

Why do you participate in La Danza?

It's a calling; it's really, um… I know I'm probably not answering a lot, but I really want the drums, they called me…the rhythm, the energy in the circle is just amazing, and I miss it every time I am far away from it. That is why, a… It's crazy and it's like I need to come back to the circle, and now that I've had it and it has been part of my life, I don't see it not ever, not being part of my life.

In the future, I'm going to be a part of Danza and my kids will be part of Danza and we are going to have Capitana Sofia teaching my kids in the future and it is definitely something I don't see as something temporary, or just a hobby.

Is your family involved in the Danza?

My family is not involved in Danza Azteca. They’re involved in other Danzas. I'm from Guerrero, from a village called, Atzacualoyan. My family members belong to the Nahuas of the Montaña de Guerrero. The Danzas that my family has been part of for
generations, is the Remoritas which is an all female Danza, except for two males who are the capitanes and it is a version of the *moros y cristianos* and we also have the *Maromeros*, which my dad was part of for a short time; and until he fell and never got back on the tree.

My grandfather, and his daughters and my cousins were part of the Remoritas, but my grandfather is part of another *moros y cristianos* version, which has about 24 dancers…so, there's lots of Danzantes on my dad's side of the family. Then we have the Maromeros, so that is something my dad's cousin took part in and leads and continues very much. They fall off but are not scared to go back on.

**What role does Danza play in your family?**

My family is in a unique situation where my father left the community as a young age and then went back and married my mother. She fell for his tricks..... She thought she was actually going to be staying in the community and they ended up coming really far away (San Diego), so the contact has been not as much as what my mom would have wanted.

But fortunately, as I got older, I got more and more contact with the community, so uh that Danza of the Remoritas has been a passion of mine and something that sometimes saddens me, because I know the women from my family have always taken part of that Danza and because I don't live the community, I can't commit that one year for the Danza so, with that I think that desire to do that Danza and the meaning of the steps, all that, really drove me to find something where I was going to be able to find a place I
belonged, something that was meaningful, something that was part of my culture and
that's how I got to Danza.

**Maybe, someday you can do the Remoritas here.**

Yeah, I have been thinking about it I would joke with my family, okay, we are
going to start a Danza group; we saw the *Chinelos*… in my parent’s home town, last year,
no this year, for the first time, I actually got to dance with everyone. There was a girl who
was missing, so because it's my dad's cousin who teaches, and before that it was my
uncle, my dad's brother who was in charge of continuing the Danza um, I got to dance!
You know, I have always learned it since I was a little girl so, okay, you're in. It felt
really nice, just to be part of it and getting pictures, and here is your grandfather, your
aunt okay, so are you ready for next year? Yeah.

**What is the symbolism of Danza and what does it mean to you?**

The symbolism of *La Danza*, well specifically to *La Danza* and the way I see it in
our group reality that we cannot deny, this fusion this religious syncretism. something
that I know that is in San Francisco, when I went to conference and I was listening to this
student talk about *La Danza* and the whole *Mexi'ca tiahui* type of groups, and then the
groups like ours.

It was this whole cosmic versus traditional argument… and for the Mexi’ca it
means that to be pure, in their belief of “pure if it is only indigenous.” For me, I know
that growing up, religion was difficult as I got to learn more about the history. But again
it is something that with more contact with my community and just seeing how…and not
being able to deny it and that's what we are, the fusion you know as *Danza Azteca*; for
me that's what it is, this religion and this fusion of beliefs in reality that I can accept and I understand, and brings peace in a sense to me.

**Please tell me the significance of the circle and how it relates to family.**

Wow, the significance of it is, this family bond, knowing that they are there for you and that they share beliefs and thoughts. That is something that was lacking for me, growing up away from my community and I just grew up with my immediate family, a cousin, and an uncle. So, this indigenous part was meeting other people I can relate with, and … have this, I guess, sense of belonging and family and preserving something that is very valuable and meaningful. The circle is a support group and it is a *familia* and coming together for ceremonies, preserving this beautiful tradition and having a respect for it.

**Do you find that your relationships with the members of your group are as strong, stronger, or not as strong as your relationships with your extended genetic family?**

Wow, my relationship with many of the Danza members is actually a lot stronger; I think much of that has to do with this identity… Identity as a Danzante and what it means the traditions and the heritage and the knowledge and respect for it. Many of my family members wouldn't understand it, just because of the way they grew up.

Unfortunately, the discrimination they are still experiencing is strong. When I go back, they look at me and say “What, why do you want to know that? That is not important.” In that sense, it's frustrating, but I understand where it is coming from and why that is happening. So for me, having this support in the Danza circle, from other
individuals who feel the same way, not maybe exactly the same, but sharing the values and beliefs, knowledge and respect for others I think makes this bond very special.

**Do you find La Danza to be empowering for yourself? For your community? If so how? If not why not?**

Most definitely, I think Danza has very much empowered me in several ways. The way I understand my history and accept it because, it happened and you can't do anything about it and, not accepting it would be not accepting myself; that is who I am. I am a fusion of different bloods and I want to uphold the beauty; uphold the traditions and what is my heritage. There is so much in a way glorifying the past, and this false belief that it is dead, and that it no longer exists so, through this Danza tradition, this is our reality and this is who we are. We are here and we are present and through that, we are opening the eyes of many; through the things we do, such as our performances, like Cabrillo monument. It is something very powerful letting them know, “Okay that's history, that's what happened, and we are still here.” that's out beauty.

**Is there a difference between being religious and being spiritual?**

Just with my experiences and going back and forth between the U.S. and Mexico…and seeing this fusion of, you know, religious beliefs, but also spirituality…it's a hard one to answer, because the way I see it, it's this fusion of traditions that I see, or take part in, when I go back to Atzacualoyan; is this belief in this religious system, but also this whole aspect of indigenous supernatural and spirituality. So it is a mixture, yet there is a difference, it is hard to explain

**Do you consider yourself a religious person? If so how? If not why not?**
If you mean a religious person, in the sense of having a strong faith, or a religion, so let's say the Catholic religion I don't consider myself… if we are going strictly, how religion is supposed to be, I don't think so. Again, because, I accept more an understanding when I guess pray to the cross, or the Jesus that is on it, for me it is like this image, but I see another image behind it—a fusion for me and that's the way I understand that I preserve my traditions and what I have been taught of the past and the way things are, this is how things have survived so, I take that.

**What does the term “sacred Space” mean to you? Would the term sacred space mean anything in terms of la Danza Azteca?**

Well the first thing that comes to my mind, is a dangerous space… we need to respect what is supposed to be a dangerous space, or else…you know, I know with my grandparents and uncles they are very much strict on you with respecting their sacred spaces…because so many people have passed away and our… we have to respect who they were and you know... to do that something disrespectful will make bad things happen.

So an example of this is the whole belief of the *sombra*. I wasn't feeling well for a long time, so I finally told my grandmother I was not well, and the first thing she said was “we are taking you to a shaman person.” He told me “good thing you came because you were about to die your sombra is not much left… you failed so many years ago and you do not offer any prayers and anything for people that were there.”

Sacred space is acknowledging this respect for what is sacred, which may be a person that is dead, maybe, uh…an area of prayer, it's this powerful area where many things can come about, but if not handled right it can become a dangerous place
Would the term sacred space mean anything in terms of La Danza?

Yes Definitely. Again, with this making sure, you are respectful, and you know what again, what you're doing in regards to the intent that you have; that you are really true in what you are doing and in your meaning-with, what you are doing in La Danza. Being true to it because even though you may be there just to think”I'm just going to take it as a whatever type of thing” that just doesn't work. I think knowing what belongs and what doesn't belong in La Danza is important.

I remember was it the velación where a fire occurred one of the altars, I thought “Wow the first thing that came to my mind was that it didn't belong there.” So, that's where, just what belongs in a ceremony should be there… there the rules and the respect for what it is supposed to be… and again this whole uhmm…idea that the Danza is very jealous.

That's what I think is sacred space with other things like other areas of ancestors where they are fusing the native American of Mexico and Native American ways of the U.S. I think that's sometimes problematic. So I understand that there are lots of similarities but also understand that everything needs to be in its place.

Does La Danza have its drawbacks or negatives? If so what are these? If not, why not?

Uhmm, in terms of having a group that doesn't know the right history of our true traditions, or the group is not out there doing it for the right purpose; I think that’s where it has its drawbacks. Like here in the U.S., I understand that some groups do have necessity and need to go and dance for the purpose of making money, but then when it is just for means of entertainment, I think that is where it does have its negatives.
Because then it is portraying this image or our spiritual traditions that is totally, just, you know, false, and so it is false and silly. And individuals who may be in it for the right reasons, they get erroneous information because of this false notion of what La Danza is and what should be. So, I think we need to be staying true to La Danza and keep it from being distorted.

**How do you feel about those Danzantes that mix in other traditions into La Danza?**

Uh, well I'm not very comfortable with it. Where, if I found myself being in or trying to get into a group like that, I wouldn't feel comfortable, and I think I would not be in it for too long or become a part of it. Yeah, this whole notion of everything in its place so, I think Danza has beautiful traditions, beautiful history, and that's what we need to preserve. I understand also, there are areas where there was that fusion too, but I am still not comfortable with that.

**How do you feel about those Danzantes that reject the Catholic traditions of Mexican culture in La Danza?**

This is going to be a little biased. Again, growing up I had that phase, “Oh forget the Catholic Church thing, they killed my people, and this, and that…” But it was hard for me [to feel that way], because I saw how my mom was such a strong believer. She was always taking me to church. Growing up I went to church every single Sunday. My mom was part of the prayer group and there was this woman who led the prayer groups, who I was like “Wow, she's going to go to heaven for sure!” I had this notion that “when I grow up I want to be just like her,” but then as I started learning more about Mexican history, then it was hard for me to just be in the church. I thought “I can’t accept this!”
I understand this need to reject the church, but, as I started spending more time in Mexico, I saw a big difference between the Catholic Church and the Virgin de Guadalupe church in Logan versus, the Catholic Church in ...Atzacualoyan. There I saw things being practiced there that would never have been allowed here in the Catholic churches of California here versus churches in Rome.

There I saw this fusion. I saw how it worked and I saw how maybe, now they may not recognize that it is this fusion, but as an outsider I'm coming in as an insider, I saw that, and it helped me understand. It helped me be able to, I guess, accept this reality. There really no way of me being able to reject it; because that's the reality— that is what is.

I go to Mexico; I see this practice that here in the U.S. would be superstition. Nevertheless, it is very important, this mixture of religious, Catholic prayers and something that I know every time I go there ...asking for the water the harvest. When I go to do research...I see something that has been done forever. Now but they are praying for the gods, and then I hear stories from my uncles and great uncles about before, when we did this, and then ... they give me all these Aztec gods’ names. Then my mother told me how her grandfather told her stories about praying in the morning for the moon at night and going up to the sacred mountain for praying to the gods that were there. Now when I go up there I see that there’s no gods that I can see...those who most stories I'm was told of. Now it’s this wooden cross.

Many of the traditions are still kept. People still go on pilgrimages; they still go on a prayer sessions and go up there and pray what is now dios or whatever the cross is now
representing. But, people pray for the same purpose as they did before so, that's how I see fusion and this is how I accept it.

**Is there anything you would like to comment on that I have left out?**

Drawbacks! I think drawbacks in some Danza Azteca groups… maybe in regards to the hierarchy and this whole men and women situation. So, I've seen that in some groups, but I think our group is really good on that and uh, this whole family circle supporting education is something that has definitely made this group such a niche for me…This belonging, and this whole and family as a bond that goes beyond Danza and the ceremonies and…Or just dancing at our events that we do or get-togethers, those are really fun and inviting other families. I know when my mom can come; she asks if she can attend our activities. She asks: “Is it going to happen?” So she’s really eager to participate. And I also see how La Danza has been very powerful in getting my parents more involved and conscious about their culture. For them, seeing this interest, it's kind of like getting an okay from outsiders that your culture is beautiful and it shocks them. We have been told for so many years that it is not so.

In that sense, I think La Danza is making a powerful impact on Chicano identity in situations like the high school conferences we work with. Something that I was told by someone I interviewed two weeks ago was this whole “green eggs” thing… they just don't know, green eggs are our indigenous history, then they try it and they say: “Wow, I want part of this and I want to learn more about this.”

When our Danza group goes out into situations like that and we touch people, and we trigger this notion and this idea that it is okay to look up to our history and what's
going on. And this again, our students are not learning their history (emphasized) in the broader context—we are learning this very narrow history in which we are left out of. Moreover, La Danza teaches so much, just even by them seeing us dance. They think: “Okay what is this?” at the beginning, and I am pretty sure you always make your jokes to make them feel at ease…I think that’s really powerful that when you go up there speak and you explain the dances. Then something that is very special to our entire group is having this beginner class where you teach step by step. I remember when me and Robert first started coming to class, it was so powerful that when we were getting out of an A.S. meeting and we were in the hall, we would start practicing there. We would argue “No, remember this is what it means.” …And then also this whole Nahuatl language project… saves this language by teaching others. And right now, I know you do a few words here and there, and a seminar would be great in that sense, even the numbers when we are doing La Danza…that's great and I think that is something that many people are very grateful for.

I go back to México and I tell my family all about Mario and how he's teaching the classes at the university. And they are in shock and they say you have to come down and get this welcoming from them. You have to go and dance in Atzacualoyan!

They know our Danza as “Apaches.” I showed them a video last time I was there, from our practice and to them it's like “Why do you guys do that? You should be eating hamburgers and playing video games!”

People in Guerrero are interested in those that are providing this knowledge for the people of the U.S. They are honored that someone is giving this acknowledgement to the
fact that our indigenous culture is very much alive and surviving in indigenous communities throughout México. And we should respect and value that. They have such knowledge and such ways, yet unfortunately, many have lost or disregarded their heritage that is why La Danza is very important.

**Narrator fifteen: Malinalli**

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Date Interviewed: Dec. 27, 2008

**What is your earliest memory of La Danza?**

It was about 1975 in Fresno. I was a child; I was about two years old.

**Please tell me the story of how you became involved in La Danza.**

I entered in different places. Well I was having personal problems at home with my husband, so I fled to Sacramento. I went to see the Danza. I started to hear the drum beats and my feet began to dance. And I began to remember the dancing of my youth. I realized I had lost something over the years. And one of the guys, Fidel, came to me and said to me "I see your feet are moving. It is in your blood! And that's when I began to dance. I started to go to the practices. I was 30 years old and that was fourteen years ago.

**Who was your teacher and how do you continue the lineage of his/her teachings?**

When I began to dance my maestra was Irene Adame, under the command of Pedro España of Sacramento, California. I stayed there two years. Then, and ah… I started to have more problems with my husband and I fled up to Salinas.
And there I met Mr. Ruben Lemus. I did not like him at all. La Danza, it was very different with him. I danced with his group but things got worse. So I began to jump from one group to another.

I dance with a woman in Hollister named Monica. And from there I went to dance with Lemus again. At last, I could not stand dancing with Lemus any longer so I went to [dance circle] Tonalehqueh San José. I was with them for a short time, less than a year.

I later, uhm, went to Sacramento for a short time and I danced with the Sacramento White Hawk dancers; then with Chuy Ortiz. I was not happy, jumping from one group to another, but I was learning from different persons. I met a lot of group leaders in this way. Then I visited Güero, Francisco Duran in San Francisco. I visited a lot of people….others in San Jose. Uhmm, and also Gerardo Salinas. I worked with Maribel, I helped her start her group. I have gone to Mexico with Pedro España. I wanted to learn our culture; my father was a dancer, but he did not know much about our indigenous culture. My father danced the Matachines dances. He had been dancing since he was a small child. He danced in Michoacán There he was from a small ranch. He danced in different groups. When he arrived in Fresno, he entered the Matachines and never left.

**Why do you participate in Danza? What is it about La Danza that keeps you involved?**

I dance because it is a tradition that my father did, and I dance because I love La Danza. Second, because I feel I have a responsibility to carry the traditions that I have learned from my father. I try to teach other people; because there are a lot of people that do not know anything about it.
They do not know the culture; they do not know the traditions. They start up groups and they know nothing, so they invent false things and teach them as "tradition."

When I go to see these groups, I try to explain things, they start to get angry, and say things. That is why I am saddened by what goes on now.

I have learned a lot, Thank God from many persons, uhmm, and I appreciate and love our culture. i also know a lot about our religion. It is important to know why our history evolved the way it did. And many people do not like religion. They complain about it and they do not know some things about it.

But I understand the mix of our indigenous culture and our Catholic religion.

**How is your family involved in La Danza?**

Well my godfather and godmother were dancers with my father. He played the violin for the Matachine dancers. They both were involved in the dance, and my mother sewed the uniforms. They would take our banner in the processions. They would go to different places to dance.

**Do you find that your relationships with the members of your group are as strong, stronger, or not as strong as your relationships with your extended genetic family?**

They are not as strong as my relationship with my genetic family, because they do not understand what I try to teach. They are taking a more political path. They think they know what La Danza is, but they don't. They only have a small inkling.

**Please tell me some of your favorite memories about your family and Danza.**

When I was small, I saw my father dancing in a line. They were dancing really hard, and I remember looking up at him, because as a small girl, I looked up to see him.
And he seemed so tall to me. He was a giant. I thought "Wow, look at my dad!" I felt so proud.... to have a father that danced. And I have never forgotten that feeling. In my heart, the Matachines dance in honor of our Holy Mother.

Also when I went to a ceremony with Pedro España. I will never forget that event. There in Mexico We learned a lot more. They made wax flowers and candles. It was a ceremony that was one week long. People would open their homes to us in the village, and we were treated like kings and queens. And the guys were cute too! (laughs)

**How are your children involved in Danza? If you do not have any children, would you like them to be involved in la Danza?**

I have one son, but he does not like La Danza. But all his friends like La Danza!

**Do you find la Danza to be empowering for yourself? For your community? If so how? If not why not?**

It gives me great spiritual strength. It has helped me a lot to understand many things that would happen to me when I was young. I did not understand them then, but thanks to God, when I started to get involved in our culture, I got closer to our culture.

**Is there a difference between being religious and being spiritual?**

To me a religious person ...well I can be a religious person and also be a spiritual person; and I can walk both forms. I think that a person becomes stronger when they understand both traditions. I used to go to church, but not at this time. Here in La Danza, I have received great blessings from praying with the copal incense. And I think that when I want one thing and my heart desires it, god reveals it to me.
Do you consider yourself a religious person? If so how? If not why not?
Yes, I have always been a religious person, since I was a child.

What does the term “sacred Space” mean to you? Would the term sacred space mean anything in terms of la Danza Azteca?
Well a sacred place is different from a sacred location. A place is space where you find yourself; a corner that you have been given. But in a sacred space is one where a person has to watch how one speaks; what one thinks, how one walks, everything. A sacred thing requires one to be alert to everything we do. In that space, we must show total respect day or night.

And sacred space in La Danza?
For me an altar is sacred because it represents God. It can be where they place the copal; because even though there may be nothing but the incense burner, that altar has become the place of God... it is sacred. Because the prayers that are left there they are received by god and our holy mother. And those prayers rise up to heaven with the smoke. For me this is something very sacred; a place where they are burning incense.

At the same time, it could be a ceremony they have the incense, the flowers, banners, symbols, ah, candles... things like that.

Does La Danza have its drawbacks or negatives? If so what are these? If not why not?
Yes, it has a lot of negative things. For me the thing is that when I was young, we never saw people getting money for being a dancer. Uhhh... when we danced, people would give us food and lodging. You did not see people selling their culture; or selling our sacred things. Today in many groups, they make a lot of money selling our sacred
things... rattles, drums, incense... In the old days, people would trade their things... today things are sold to the highest bidder. I get angry.

I know that things have changed and people need money, but, some people don't things as sacred anymore... If they can sell our herbs, they do. Now people will sell you anything for a dollar. Before we would trade, and people would give you food, but no alcohol for exchanges. Those were the rules. Today, many groups act like idiots, they dance for a living, and anywhere they can get good money. These young guys show up to ceremonies with immense feathers. They cost a lot of money. Where do they get it? They don't work... so for me this is bad, that too many "Azteca" groups are little more than show groups.

Our Danza is not a show, it is sacred, and it is prayer; that is the way I was taught. I am in total agreement with Sra. Cobb. She reprimands the young dancers for their lack of spirituality, and their lust for money and fame.

**How do you feel about those Danzantes that mix in other traditions into La Danza?**

I think that they are tremendously in error because they should not mix the traditions, because everything has its way of being. That's how God placed them. And many of these people do not know what they are mixing. Definitely, they are changing La Danza from Its Mexican roots, and that it’s not right. If you are going to be a Matachine, then do Matachine, and don't mix it with Azteca. The same thing goes with the traditions of Mexico and here in the North. They are different.
They say this is the "new way", "the new age"... they are crazy! Tradition is tradition. If you change it then it is no longer tradition. What part of the word "tradition" do they not understand? Tradition must be carried in the way it was given to us.

If they do not like it, they need to leave La Danza Azteca, because the tradition is very jealous. As our grandfathers taught us that is the way, it has to continue.

You cannot mix things for your benefit; that is very bad. Because truthfully they are not teaching our sacred traditions, they are teaching something else... what I don't know!

I like to be very strict to our traditions.

**How do you feel about those Danzantes that reject the Catholic traditions of Mexican culture in La Danza?**

I think those people are mistaken... greatly, because the Concheros are the ones that kept alive our indigenous traditions and the reason that they are Concheros is not like the anti-Christians say that "they were forced to be." The revisionists say we were forced to dress and dance Concheros. That is a lie. OK?

The reason they created their Conchero tradition was because of the miracles that our Holy mother used to help our indigenous people survive and flourish. She taught them in their indigenous languages like Nahuatl. And many of these so-called “Aztec maestros” are teaching our people... and at one point I too believed them like everyone else.... are teaching erroneous myths. They are trying to separate our people into two camps: the religious people and the cultural people.

But why should we be separated in order to fulfill their political agenda? Aren't we one Mexican people? The bottom line is why are they lying to our young, innocent
youth? Why do these so-called "Aztec elders" corrupt what has occurred in Mexico over the past 400 years?

I don't feel comfortable naming these "elders" and "maestros" that lie to our people. They are very powerful. They are various persons, and they have huge followings. But they have fooled people into dividing our religion and our culture into two separate and antagonistic camps. But how can one reject the truth of our history. How can you separate our blood at this point in our time?

That is why the Concheros and the Mexi'ca cannot see eye to eye; because there are always "Mexi'ca teachers" that are talking against the religion of our people; trying to humiliate the Concheros.

Our history, our traditions, and our religion are not theories, they are facts, reality. You cannot change the things that God has created. If god gives you a miracle, you cannot say it was luck; so too with our history. What happened…happened because it was meant to be. And to deny this is to deny God. That is not right, true? A punishment will come to them for trying to negate what god has created in our people.

Is there anything you would like to comment on that I have left out?

I would like to see people respect one another; because there are some people that we cannot force to believe in one form. So we have to understand each other without passing judgment. The Mexi’cas, do not believe in the Catholic religion. They believe they live their lives free. But they need to respect the Concheros because that is where our traditions started and they deserve that respect. Had it not been for the Concheros the Mexi’cas would not exist.
The Concheros, over the centuries, saved a lot of the sacred treasures of our indigenous traditions, and they evolved them into what we have today. There are many Native American groups that do not like the Mexi’ca dancers because they dance so fast and they think they are god's gift to the Earth. And the elders think "What are they doing? Do they even know what the dances mean?" Some Elders complain about the Mexi'ca because they say that the Mexi'cas don't even carry out dance steps in the dances; all they are doing is swinging and jumping around as fast as they can to show off.

But when they see a traditional dancer who dances with Conchero steps, they even cry for joy. Some Yurok people have come up to me with tears in their eyes, and they have told me ....many of the Native Americans in the North.... near Oregon, they say that they like the way I dance because they have been searching for a long time for the real Danza.

Danza Azteca groups that dance with the same love for the dances and traditions as their own groups. They said "Now we can see that you come from our family, because you dance for the sprit, and not for the ego." Many groups dance hard as if it was a show competition. They dance as if it was an aerobic class. Or they try to outdo each other, with steps, feathers, or uniforms. And that is not La Danza.

We need to manage our lives in a sacred manner, not in a liberated manner. What I mean is that we need to follow the paths set down by our ancestors. Because if we live in liberty, we can go to bars, smoke drugs, etc. We start to take great risks; smoking and drinking. We need to accept that our body is a sacred temple. So that is what Ometeotl is: man and woman; Adam and Eve.
A Reflection of the micro-historias

I conducted the analysis of the narratives using the following schema for interlacing the study questions with some of the open-ended questions of the auto-historia questionnaire.

1. How is Chicano identity defined?
   a. Why do you participate in La Danza?
   b. What is it about La Danza that keeps you involved?
   c. What does it mean to you to pass on this lineage to your children?

2. What is “La Danza Azteca”? What are its historical roots in central Mexico?

3. How and when did La Danza Azteca arrive in the U.S.?

4. What are the reasons individuals seek out membership in La Danza Azteca?
   a. How is your family involved in the group?
   b. Who is involved in your Danza group?
   c. What brings and keeps people in your group?
   d. Do you find that your relationship with the members of your group are as strong, stronger, or not as strong as your relationships with your extended genetic family?

5. What, if any are the differences between Mexcoehuani Danzantes who were part of the first wave of La Danza compared to the ones that started later?
   a. What brings and keeps people in your group?
   b. Please tell me about the symbolism of La Danza and what it means to you.
6. What, if any are the differences between Mexcoehuani Danzantes who were born into La Danza, and those that learned it later in life
   a. Do you find La Danza to be empowering for yourself? For your community?
   b. Is there a difference between being religious and being spiritual? If so, what is the difference?
   c. Do you consider yourself a religious person?

7. What is the concept of the Mexcoehuani identity as a unifying force for Mexican origin communities?
   a. What does the term “sacred Space” mean to you?
   b. Would the term sacred space mean anything in terms of La Danza Azteca?
   c. How do you feel about those Danzantes that mix in other traditions La Danza?
   d. How do you feel about those Danzantes that reject the Catholic traditions of Mexican culture in La Danza?

Questions two and three of this study were answered through a review of the literature. These questions: What is “La Danza Azteca; what are its historical roots in central Mexico; and how and when did it arrive in the U.S.?”. Could best be answered by an in-depth analysis of the various sources (archeological, anthropological, linguistic, and art history) cited in the review of the literature.
I believe I can state that most, if not all, of the online respondents, and all of the auto-historia narrators, did not have access to (or even knowledge of) the diverse sources used to create this study’s Mexcoehuani paradigm.

**Question 1: How is Chicano identity defined?**

Ten of the narrators described their discovery of their indigenous roots as the foundation of their Chicano/Mexcoehuani identity. Xiuhcoatl, who started in the second wave as an adult explained:

> This is what I was born to be, this is what I came to this earth for, to be involved in Danza and that was in 1985-86. That was my awakening and whole time it was weird how I felt. I felt as if from the time I was born till that day I was asleep, and from that moment on it was a spiritual awakening of wow “this is it, this is what I came to the earth for!” -it is weird and that is how I got involved in Danza,

Xiuhcoatl is a man of Salvadoran ethnicity. Nevertheless, found in the indigenous space of La Danza, his identity and reason for being. For others, who as Mexcoehuani did not have La Danza as part of their daily life, their first contact with it was powerful.

Ocelotl a fourth wave Danzante who started in the tradition as an adult felt that La Danza “… gave me an extra push to learn; to learn my history, learn my roots. It gave me an extra incentive to learn because I had it in my roots.” Momachtiquetl, an adult learner in the fourth wave states that:
Well, I guess I had always seen Danza around community events, conferences certain times like Cinco de Mayo, or when the Aztec dancers and the ballet folklórico and whatever else… but I was always attracted to Danza….. I think Danza is like the outward expression of that, but for me there is that connection with honoring the ancestors and our history, our traditions as mestizo actually are or not, but definitely like a spiritual connection that I feel having a purpose outside myself or outside academics, or outside material realities.

For Ocelotl and Momachtiquetl, La Danza expanded their source of Chicano Identity within the world that accepted and understood La Danza. Cihuacoatl an adult who started in the second wave explained how she felt seeing La Danza for the first time in her life:

The first time I saw the Danza was when I was a student at Cal State Fullerton. We were having a Chicano Culture day and this group came to dance for us. We didn’t have a microphone, so there was no dialogue or oral communication. I was drawn to the circle. I ran up to get a close spot near the circle and I just remember feeling chills up my spine and an emotional rush watching this surreal like happening in front of me.
For these Danzantes, the discovery of La Danza came through public performances at educational or cultural events. Their understanding of La Danza would have to grow as their participation in the ceremonies began.

The five others described how they had been born into La Danza, and hence into their indigenous Mexcoehuani identity. For them, there was no “before Danza and after Danza” reality. Their ontology has always had its roots within a family focused, all-inclusive paradigm of dance, spirituality, and sacred space. Metztli recalls that:

It seems very natural; it seems that that was the norm. It’s not till you get older and start talking about it that you realize that it is not the norm. In fact, my brother and I went through experiences where we thought it was the norm, we would talk about it at school with other kids, and we would get adverse reactions, you know, or funny looks. So we learned to just not talk about it at school and kind of guard it.

This familiarity with the rituals of kindness and the sacred space it creates is a common theme among the Danzantes born into La Danza. Ehecatl says: “Well because I have known this since I was a little kid, it is the only way... it’s been the world that I know.... I couldn't imagine my life without it.” Tepetlacatl explains how: “La Danza is a part our daily way of life. It's part of our everyday world.”
For the Mexcoehuani Danzantes, for the ones that started with conscious effort in La Danza as Adults, and for the Danzantes who were born into La Danza, Their Chicano identity is based to a large part on their participation in La Danza.

**Why do you participate in La Danza?**

There was agreement among the narrators as to the importance of La Danza in their daily life. Yaotachqui gave one of the best distillations of the reasons for participation in La Danza:

Well... there are many reasons I participate; but most of it is it give me spiritual balance, that some of us lack, and I was one of those individuals. And it teaches you a great deal; how to be with other people. It also teaches family values, core values that some families lack. I get to bring my children where they get to interact with adults; they get to see uhmm... other adults interacting, so they learn how to be, how to act, discipline you know it’s a lot of... it revolves around family.

The feeling that spiritual balance is crucial was echoed by Tonalli who was born into La Danza. His reflection of the symbolism of La Danza includes “…that I think that if every person was to look into that it would be a much more peaceful, much more... in tune with the world, because of the way society is. It’s a way finding your inner self.”

**What is it about La Danza that keeps you involved?**

All of the narrators stated that they continue in La Danza because it brings them a sense of belonging, of family, of being centered, and of being a living link in a long chain
of historical and genetic permanence. Inner balance is the theme of Ehecatl, one of the herederos of a group in San Diego. He explains that for him:

… there is the spiritual part of it that brings you peace and it is a form of physical, spiritual, and emotional meditation when you are dancing it’s a way of being connected with your ancestors… and Even if we don't even know if our direct ancestors did this Danza or other Danzas, it still connects us to our ancestors from Mexico, and keeps us connected to the traditions and culture of Mexico.

Cuauhtli, an heredero from Tucson says: “I love the Danza and it’s in me and I don't feel the same with any other types of religions, if you want to say it that way.”

Metztli brings up another reason for participation in La Danza- empowerment:

I have benefited so much from it. You know I always say that when you grow up in La Danza you’ve always lived in two worlds. You’ve lived in that cultural ethnic world that’s connected to your ancestry. Then you are connected to the “modern world”… Being involved in Danza has made me I think made me a better person in the other world. I have learned about discipline, I have learned about having respect for those that have knowledge….., being connected to your culture, especially being a Chicana living in a border town, is empowering. You know, there are definitely a lot of
challenges for our gente, especially in a border town right? We all get branded, stereotyped… to come from a cultural background where you’re sure of yourself and your confident, you see it as a positive to be a Mexicano, it is a positive and something strong, I definitely got that from La Danza.

Danza is seen by its practitioners as a path for spiritual balance, a sense of love, and a path to empowerment. Malinalli says: “…because I feel I have a responsibility to carry the traditions that I have learned from my father. I try to teach other people; because there are a lot of people that do not know anything about it.

What does it mean to you to pass on this lineage to your children?

For the older generations, those that started in their early twenties thirty years ago, (first wave) they all unanimously stated that being able to live to see their children grow into adulthood in La Danza was “a blessing.” Xiuhcoatl stated that being able to watch three generations of his family dance together gave him “hope in my mind and in heart that ‘okay, what I started 20 some years ago, still continues and when I see my grand kids,’ Well that means a lot.” Cihuacoatl, who has been dancing since 1980, and who has two adult herederos in La Danza states that:

It is awesome to know that they both love and cherish it. It is wonderful to know that they will carry it on with a great deal of respect and reverence for the tradition. It is nice that when we are not there, they still represent us well. It gives
me a feeling of relief that our Danza will continue and that my children will cherish it. Now that they have become young adults, I do feel more relief in knowing that they will continue to dance and that the Danza will take care of them too.

Xipecihuatl a first wave Capitana with six adult children states that:
[to pass on this lineage means] to create the knowledge in them that they are indigenous and I think the lineage for them of their father from Mexico; and also the knowledge of their place in the history of Danza. It just didn't pop up over night, but it came from a long line of elders.

Tonalli, an heredero born into La Danza feels that his obligation to his elders is important:
…but it’s an obligation, it’s a part of something that I feel I have to do. It was given to me; it was given to my mother; to fulfill something, a part of my life. And you know, that's why I have my children dancing with me.... it becomes the beginning of passing down that lineage by giving them the option, giving them the La Danza, letting them know it’s there, and it will always be there, but also as an option.

Cuauhtli is the heredero from the group in Tucson that started out with Andrés Segura. He feels that:
…it’s an honor that I am able to pass that down to them and that they are able to continue something that's very historical and so that our traditions don't die and they will be able to teach other people so that others may have it in their lives too.

For the Danzante Mexcoehuani, the ability to pass on what they have learned about the rituals of kindness is important. Regardless of what wave of Danza they learned in, they all understand the fragility of keeping an indigenous tradition alive in the space between Eurocentric U.S. and Mexican dominant cultures: the third space of Mexcoehuani identity.

Questions two & three: see introduction above.

Question four: What are the reasons individuals seek out membership in La Danza Azteca?

Question five: What, if any are the differences between Mexcoehuani Danzantes who were part of the first wave of La Danza compared to the ones that started later?

At first, I felt that I needed to answer these two questions separately. However, as I analyzed the narratives, I realized that the answers for these two seemingly different questions were answered in the auto-historias by the same concepts: Mexcoehuani who sought out La Danza in the first wave of Danza history, were looking for the same things that the later waves of novices sought. The great difference between them however, was that for the last ten to twenty years, the idea of a Danza family, which would have been foreign, (and perhaps even disturbing in its cult-like image) thirty-five years ago, is now one of its greatest strengths. The later generations of initiates look at the circle as a ready-
made family. Those second-generation herederos that were born into their parent’s dance circles can negotiate the spaces between blood kinship and spiritual kinship without consciously thinking about. For future herederos, that divide between blood family and Danza family will probably be even thinner.

Those of us who were there at the beginning, we had to live, experience, negotiate, process, and finally create, that sense of family that today is taken for granted. The reasons that people joined La Danza Azteca in the U.S. started out as a political or cultural statement of identity and protest. We had no clue as to what was the spiritual component of La Danza, because it was not in our ontology.

For the current and future generations of Mexcoehuani Danzantes, Danza has become a spiritual and familial membership where sacred space is shared, reformulated, and then given to the community in rituals of kindness. These rituals, now fully accepted by the vast majority of Mexcoehuani, empower and define today’s Chicanismo. It took us, the early Mexcoehuani Danzantes, a long time to learn the meanings and values of the non-dance aspects of La Danza (la velación, las alabanzas).

New Danzantes today, walk into an indigenous space readymade, welcoming, and nurturing, with no understanding of the difficulties it took to earn this sacred space in Aztlan. That is why some pseudo-Danzantes abuse, corrupt, or change their version of La Danza, at the slightest whim; because it cost them nothing to create the foundation of their identity.
How is your family involved in the group?

One of the strongest reasons Mexcoehuani stay involved in LA Danza is the creation of a familial space. Metztli explains, “Danza has always been another member of our family, I would say. It’s like glue that keeps us together…” Cuauhtli say that for him “… my mom, my dad, my wife, my sister, my cousin, my children, they all dance… just being in the group that I have known since I was little, and I've grown up with people's kids.”

Yaotachqui sum up the feelings of the auto-historia narrators with his comment that:

Danza plays a huge role in my family because it gives us a sense of unity when we are dancing together. When we are participating in ceremonies together, it feels so awesome. It's a communal teaching that you can't get in this society that we live in. You know, it's something that many families lack. So I am grateful to Danza for the time I get to spend with them, and its quality time. It’s always a teaching whenever we practice, whenever we go to a ceremony, we're learning together.

Who is involved in your Danza group?

All of the narrators gave a similar list of persons called to the dance circle.

Xipecihuatl recalled that:

I always find a lot of students, young people they are students. Older people run the gamut; people who are
working class from Mexico, people from here who have
government or city jobs, and my groups has a lot of people
who graduated from college or are going to college. I really
courage my dancers to attend college.

Ome Tochtli explained that “People…recognize the fact that it is the medicine
within the sense of family and community that La Danza creates…. they realize that is
the true magic and healing of La Danza….people that find this in their hearts, they tend to
stay in our group for life!” Broad spectrums of persons from the Mexcoehuani
community are the norm in most Danza groups. But there are also groups that tend to
attract persons with higher education experience. Momatchiquetl explain that:

All my experience in Sacramento… it seemed like my
generation, mid 20s; are more educated with degrees than
let's say the older generation. We had more formal
education. We were all in our early 20s; women who I
danced with had at least a bachelor's degree, or finishing up
the bachelors degree. A couple had masters, some are
studying to be in a doctor program in Cuba, and I am
studying for a PhD. There is a generational and educational
difference.

Xiuhcoalt’s group in San Francisco on the other hand is more heterogeneous:

We have probably 70% women and 30% men and the
youngest is six years and the oldest is myself, 53, and then
we have youngsters who are teenagers, and we have people who are teachers, lawyers, in the medical field, students, engineering...so it is really open; the different types of people we have in the group.

**What brings and keeps people in your group?**

There were several reasons that the narrators felt brought and kept people in their dance circle. Ocelotl felt that it was “I think it’s because we just have a welcoming feeling to our circle there is no pressure to compete in our group to not make a mistake in our group I think that's what people have mentioned to me We are young, and we just have a lot of energy.” Xiuhcoatl discussed the importance of La Danza in giving discipline and openness:

A lot of people are brought in by someone who is dancing with us and they like the family atmosphere Irma and I have created and they know they can talk to me Irma or Junior, because they have different ages in the group. So I think what keeps them coming is the family atmosphere the openness we have created that, “hey if you don't like something, please do tell us about it.” Now some people have said we have too many rules, but my brother-in-law put it in another way, “it's not that we have rules, we have discipline.” And I think some people need discipline in their life to keep them kind of straight.
Tonalli speaks to the tension between men and woman in his family’s dance circle:

I would have to say it depends on the person. You have to be strong willed, especially if you are man in our dance group. Our dance group is very women oriented. It has been for many years, my mom being the *jefa*. It’s just the dynamics of it that it’s always been women oriented; the few men that we [in our group] have to be very strong men and be able not to overtake the woman's energy but balance it. And not many men can do it.

Each Danza circle has its center of energy. Some it is gender, some it is education, and some it is family. Nevertheless, whatever the center of each circle may be, the people who join La Danza are seeking membership and a sense of belonging. Danza attracts those that seek comfort from the alienation and dehumanization of modern society. Danzantes tend to value family and culture over the individual and material wealth. Ome Tochtli explains that:

I think La Danza Azteca is extremely empowering for my community and for me. For my community, it has changed the course of our Chicano history. It changed the dynamics of self-identity from a “Hispanic” rooted identity, to one that while not negating our European and African roots, nevertheless, gives prime importance to our indigenous roots, languages, and spiritual beliefs. Mexcoehuani who are
called to La Danza and stay with it are person that feel the empowerment and resiliency that LA Danza gives them.

**Do you find that your relationships with the members of your group are as strong, stronger, or not as strong as your relationships with your extended genetic family?**

Ehecatl explains why some relationships between members of La Danza are sometimes more powerful than the relationships with their own families:

I would say that in some ways yes, they are stronger because especially after you have known people for so long and you have gone through a lot of hard things like you know, family crisis or personal crisis, or... just a really hard Danzada (dance ceremony) or a really hard disciplina (rules) at some other circle or... all these different things that you share common experiences, that you don't have with other people, that in many ways make you closer than to your extended family... kind of like the old adage that people say that "you chose your friends but not your family (laughs)…. through Danza, you have chosen all these people that share something with you. But at the same time your extended family is always there when sometimes your Danza family wouldn't necessarily be there... so it’s really beautiful to have both ... to have access to your genetic extended family, and your Danza family that spreads across two countries.
Ehecatl is an heredero that was born into la Danza. For him the members of his dance group have been a part of his life since birth. However, for persons who have entered La Danza as adults, the dynamics can be different. Ocelotl reports that for him:

They are not as strong because I'm still close to my genetic family. But I have strong relationships with some Danzantes, like they're really close friends. I would say that my extended family no, but my friendships yes, because I have more friendships with Danzantes than I do with my old high school buddies and stuff.

Tepetlacatl, also an heredero, explains that the familiarity with his dancers is:

In some ways, they are stronger because ah, we see the people in our group twice a week. And they pretty much become part of the family, like if they were part of a genetic family. In other ways, our family is stronger.... our blood is our blood. So they are not as close to us as our family is but, for the most part what we teach and what they us, uhmm we have grown together as a group and as a family. We are and we aren’t.

Momatchtiquetl the novice dancer from the fourth wave who started as an adult explains that:

It is a hard question, but I think it is important. I do see Danza as an extended family, and so it has the potential to
be as strong as a genetic family. I think that is more about time, we don't choose our families and there are certain people in your family and you think, “Oh man there they are again!” But then there are the people in your family that you thank the creator for giving them life and they are dependable, etc. So I find the same with Danza. I think that is another reason why I do appreciate Danza because I do see it as a family and it is a greater extension of the Chicano community where we are trying to forge some type of connection, or alliances, or kind of our own fate in the dominant society. I have really strong relations with Danzantes that I have met in the past and even with those I am meeting now, in your group…I think there is definitely that possibility and I have experienced in the past and now…I feel Danza is a very comforting environment…

**Question Six: What, if any are the differences between Mexcoehuani Danzantes who were born into La Danza, and those that learned it later in life**

The biggest differences between those Mexcoehuani that were born into La Danza and those that started as adults, was the sense of continuity, and the naturalness of La Danza as part of the life-long dancer’s participation in La Danza. I call the Danzantes that were born into La Danza, “natural born” dancers.” Those that started later in life I call “initiates.” Metztli, an heredera and a natural born, recalls that:
Uhmm, I really did not have a choice! (Laughs) I was born into it. So, my parents wanted their kids to be involved in it. And I know my mom danced while she carried me, while she was pregnant with me, and then uhmm, even being a baby before I could walk they would put me in the middle (of the dance circle). So it’s kind of just being always been something I have been involved in. I never had life without it so I really never had a choice, not that I feel unlucky about it, I feel very lucky but, it wasn’t a choice.

Tonalli, the natural born heredero of a group in San Francisco is amusingly concise as to how La Danza fits into his life: “It’s as important as eating your food and going to work; it just coincides with my life.” Ehecatl, also an heredero and a natural born dancers recalls that:

I have earlier feelings probably, but my earliest memory, is of being at practice at Central Elementary School And putting my huesos (leggings of shell pods) on. And sitting on the bleachers and ah just kind of getting ready to dance, so practicing at Central Elementary at Imperial Beach is my first memory of Danza and ah, being excited about dancing probably loving "Aguila Blanca" because that's the one that everybody loves when they’re little or when they first start dancing (laughs). And I always did Aguila Blanca at
practice. Then later I moved on to Huitzi(lopochtli) but
Danza practice is probably my first memory

Florencio once said that someday here in Aztlan, La Danza would be as common as soccer is in Mexico, or baseball is in the U.S. He had faith that in every barrio, there would be Danza groups keeping our indigenous heritage alive.

The quotidian and ordinary-life feelings of commitment that natural born Mexcoehuani Danzantes have are very close to the feelings of natural born Danzantes in Mexico of “herencia” (inheritance of lineage) (Alarcon, 1996; Chávez, 2007; González Torres, 2005; Hernández Ramos, 2007; Rostas, 1991; Stone, 1975).

Tepetlacatl recalls his life as a young child traveling throughout Mexico and feeling a sense of welcome, even though his family was living in the U.S.:

I remember traveling all over Mexico, going to ceremonies,

ah, in Queretaro mainly, because every year we try going there. When we were little, the whole family would go on a road trip; and go dance over there for the Santa Cruz, and the people over there welcomed us. Martin's family welcomed us every year, gave us a place to stay and food to eat. The people were beautiful... the culture... We learned about our culture, and we tried to apply it to our life over here. Yea,

I believe that one of the important reasons the natural born Danzantes are not prone to the excesses of militancy of young initiates, is because they have nothing to
prove, no “lost time” of being without a link to their indigenous roots to catch up. For the natural born Danzantes, La Danza is about life, family, obligation, and commitment.

Ehecatl recalls:

I would say my favorite memories are probably going on Danza trips. Waking up early, probably giving my mom and dad a hard time about making me wake up early... But jumping into the van and packing.... and just taking off to some place like San Francisco or Sacramento, or especially our Gallup trips.

We got to see the southwest like probably more than most people that don't live there, or even people that live there. And then all the memories of road trips, I mean that was so much fun traveling and all the little adventures that would come along the way and stuff. I think that was probably the best memories I have.

Cuauhtli, the heredero of the Tucson group recalls that:

My earliest memories of la Danza is when I was about three years old, four years old, and my dad used to carry me when he would be dancing.... Well I have been privileged to have gone to a lot of places, and danced, and visited indigenous communities and Danzas. And it has grounded me as to who I am today.... We have dedication, uhmm, to always be
honest and faithful; to have a lot of corazón. That’s the main thing of all… My children are still little but they've always been there since they were born, I've them by the circle. Since they were babies...I take them to the velaciones and Danzas. Anything that we do as a family they are always there.

Cuauhtli reflects the feelings of the native-born Danzantes that once they have their own children, they will also carry out the work of parenting that their own parents used on them. The initiates on the other hand, tend to use cultural awareness, political and social activism as their focus of membership in La Danza. Ocelotl explains that for him:

It’s a combination of all three... of being healthy; it helps me physically, stay in shape, and most importantly it helps me with the medicine it gives me. I firmly believe we all carry energy, so, it just helps me stay healthy in the sense of like, sometimes spiritually, and it helps me focus. It helps me pray for the people that I care about and love.

Emotionally, it has been there for me with compañeros and compañeras that I dance with. In the realms of health, it has contributed to me for me being healthy…. That's what keeps me involved in La Danza You can learn to play the flute, you can learn to play the mandolin you can learn some alabanzas, so there is a whole lot more that I have to learn
about La Danza…and just the history; the roots of it, like you know, how your calpulli is trying to learn the roots of it. Not just dancing, but where Danzas come from or where the maestros that taught brought it. That's still a whole... it keeps me intrigued and it keeps me interested to keep on going in La Danza.

Yancuic Tochlti speaks about the artistic and spiritual needs that Danza fulfills in his life as a Mexcoehunai:

I never grew up with much of an artistic expression where dance, or song, or instruments were a part of my life. Also in my young adult life, I've had a fear about dancing or being in front of people in any kind of artistic expression. So La Danza allows me to express the movement and thoughts that I have in myself and allows to do it in something I believe has been missing for a large part of my life. Both academically, spiritually, just all in all I feel that there is a big part of my life that I haven't been in tune with. And I think that Danza is one of the bigger opportunities where I can be connected to our indigenous past. I am involved because of the challenge of maintaining the balance between the real world and what my perception of what the world could be. I am always picking up details about language
philosophy, movement, I am always finding different things
that little by little I can articulate "OK this applies to math;
this applies to the cosmic argument...etc."

For this initiate dancer, La Danza gives him an outlet for creativity, intellectual
exploration of indigenous traditions, and helps him balance the world of job, obligations
and stress with the inner world of creativity, spirituality, and tradition. This is a classic
example of how La Danza Azteca creates that third space of sacred space between the
two other spaces of modern U.S. and Mexican social anxiety and stress.

Another important space is reflected in how the Danzantes, who learned in the first
two waves, have a different understanding of the La Danza compared to adults who
started in the third or fourth wave. The first wave dancers have evolved their
understanding to include more family oriented spirituality. Their children also reflect this
family base. Those that have entered La Danza as adults in later times still have not gone
through the process of negotiating their political base, with the evolution of a family base
to spirituality. Perhaps having your own children grow up in La Danza is the main
catalyst for this type of change.

Do you find La Danza to be empowering for yourself? For your community?

All of the narrator’s of the micro-historias felt that Danza was extremely
empowering for themselves and their communities. Ocelotl found that the empowerment
of his local Chicano community was reflected by a religious image brought from Mexico.
It reinforced the connection of his family to the empowerment of the community:
Yes in many aspects for myself and for my community because ah, you know La Danza is a lot to learn and if you stick with Danza, you learn a whole ... there's a lot to it is very empowering for the Chicano community when you are growing up, it’s really hard to find. La Danza gave me that Identity when I found it in San Diego. I found out who I was, when I saw the Santo Niño de Atocha being brought into the velación, I thought about that a shrine in my household and that’s in my extended family’s entire household. So when I saw that I knew that Danza was part of my culture, but also part of my family tradition.

Cihuacoatl explained that for her La Danza:

Yes to both. For me, it helps me stay balanced; it allows me to actively pray, to create, and to interact at a very profound level with others. For my community, it allows them to feel a great deal of pride in their culture. They feel the energy and the loud sound of the drums catches and holds their attention. They respect the Danza and have learned to include the Danza as a spiritual part of many cultural celebrations. I believe that the Danza has become a revered part of the Chicano Community—one that is worthy of respect and dignity.
Yaotachqui, one of his group’s sargentos (sergeants), and a native of New York of Columbian extraction, feels that for him and his community:

For me yes, because it’s totally empowering to me because La Danza is not only a spiritual thing for me where I get to go and pray, but it gives me the strength to clear my mind, and when it comes to certain things that are happening within my life, it gives me the strength to go on day to day and tackle life's challenges when they come on... It's that balancing that we need. And it’s empowering to our community because our community gets so caught up in just everyday living that we tend to forget these cultural and spiritual values that we have. We tend to lose them just because we are living in a totally different society where these types of values are not valued.

Atzacualoyacihuatl feels that through La Danza, her community is empowered:

There is so much in a way glorifying the past and this false belief that it is dead and that it no longer exists, so through this Danza tradition, this is our reality and this is who we are. We are here and we are present and through that, we are opening the eyes of many; through the things we do, such as our performances, like Cabrillo monument. It is something
very powerful letting them know, “okay that's history, that's what happened, and we are still here,” that's our beauty.

Is there a difference between being religious and being spiritual? If so, what is the difference?

Several of the narrators definitely had opinions of what it meant to be religious and what it meant to be spiritual. Metztli born into La Danza stated that:

I think religious means tied to the Catholic religion and dogma. I think spirituality is more in line with me. It is not so much about the rules, as much as it is the way you live your life and the way you connect with the world around you. It’s interesting because we (our family) are not a very religious family, I wouldn’t say. We do a lot of things that align with Catholicism, but that is because that is our Danza tradition, a lot of the velaciones we do... we are cultural Catholics. The spiritual part of it, I definitely have a respect for our ancestry, and that is a type of spirituality. But I don’t necessarily have a good comfort level with it all.

Ehecatl replied that:

I think that religiosity is often times more about rituals, and checking off boxes... For me I think about spirituality as being a more important part of finding peace with your creator, with the world around you, the environment, and fellow people. Just being able to connect with all things
around you, including the things we might say are not living. So I consider myself spiritual and not necessarily religious.”

Most of the Danzantes concurred in this difference between religion and spirituality. However, some felt that religion and spirituality were the same thing. Malinalli stated that for her:

To me a religious person ...well I can be a religious person and also be a spiritual person; and I can walk both forms. I think that a person becomes stronger when they understand both traditions. I used to go to church, but not at this time. Here in La Danza, I have received great blessings from praying with the copal incense. And I think that when I want one thing and my heart desires it, god reveals it to me.

Cuauhtli felt that for him:

For me personally, in La Danza, it’s all the same to me, spirituality and religion. It's all one faith one corazón. There are different lineages and the different ways that people keep the tradition; but La Danza is always going to be the same. I don't know how to really answer that question on religion and spirituality. To me it's the same.
Ome Tochtli felt that for him:

I believe that to being religious means that you buy into a certain religious system. This includes the religion’s creation myths, its dogma, its ecclesiastical system of control, and its rituals. Religious followers believe that their religion is the only truth in the universe, they feel that they have the final word on how people should behave; they feel that everything that they do is sanctioned and glorified by their god (or gods)...

Being spiritual means that you recognize that the creator/God is the giver of all life. You recognize that humans are only a small part of the created universe and therefore, do not deserve a special place “at the right hand of God” .... Spirituality also means that instead of seeing our ancestors as gone, and as mere footnotes in our history books, we actually live with them on a daily basis. It is as if modern medical science has found out what we have already known for thousands of years: Our ancestors are in our blood...

So to me Spirituality is much more fluid and encompassing than religion. It is more forgiving and compassionate. You can be spiritual AND religious. However, it is hard to be religious AND spiritual.
Do you consider yourself a religious person?

In this question, we see the complex interpretations and continued reformulation that Danzantes continue to negotiate in their creation of sacred space. Xiuhcoatl replies simply that “Not too much, Although, I do enjoy going to the Catholic Church from time to time.” Yaotachqui states that:

I think I am a little bit religious, just because of the Catholicism part that I grew up with and what it embodies in La Danza; it’s mixed in to Danza. So I tend to be religious ’cause we put up our crosses to Jesus Christ, and we follow certain sacraments, that we continue to follow.”

But Xipecihuatl does not define her religiosity be Christian paradigms: “Yeah, by the fact that I do ceremony, whether it is a sweat lodge, or Danza, or going to mass, yes I think all of those are religious--they are showing religion.”

This relationship with Catholicism is what makes traditional Danza Azteca comforting to some and troubling to others. Momachtiquetl explains that:

I often try to explain religion and spirituality- religion is to be more ... go to church on Sunday, bring your bible this type of indoctrination. There is mediation between your spirit and what will happen after you die. In Christianity, there is a middleman, a secretary that is Jesus. I don't feel my understanding--I don't need a mediator, a middle man, to
negotiate my spiritual identity or afterlife. So for me it isn't institutionalized, what is it the performance of going to church on Sunday and dressing up and acting like you don't sin, and reading a one particular book...Spirituality a direct connection with a higher power, it is whatever I chose to call it, Jehovah, Allah, whatever. I feel like spirituality is much more open and secular. My spirituality in Danza may be different that other Danzantes, and that's okay. Like if everybody’s relationship with our creator is so different, who is to gauge that relationship and understanding to a higher power? [Do you consider yourself a religious person?] I guess I don't. But I do consider myself a spiritual person.

The fine balancing act that indigenous people have been carrying out for five hundred years of reformulating their symbolic system of bicultural significance continues in the Mexcoehuani experience of the sacred and profane. The questions of the past 500 years continue: What is religion? What is spirituality? Can the two coexist in a sacred space that empowers and gives agency to the individual and his or her community? Alternatively, do religion and spirituality create boundaries of meanings and semaphores that generate division and misunderstanding?

This is the power, promise, and the danger of Mexcoehuani reformulation of a Mexican Indocristiano tradition. Where the evolution of Mexcoehuani identity and sacred
space will lead in the next century will be most interesting. Blessed will be those that live to see those days.

**Question seven:** What is the concept of the Mexcoehuani identity as a unifying force for Mexican origin communities?

This question could not be answered by the narrators, since it is a new an unknown concept for everyone but me. I have proposed it as an identity that encompasses while not trying to replace Chicano, Mexicano, Mexican-American identities. However, I posed for them the concept of sacred space, as a symbol of Mexcoehuani essence.

**What does the term “sacred Space” mean to you? Would the term sacred space mean anything in terms of La Danza Azteca?**

All of the narrators formed their definition of sacred space as being built around the dance circle, the instruments of La Danza (incense, drums, altars, etc). However interestingly Atzacualoyacihuatl, a female dancer who is the only one of all the online and auto-historia respondents that can actually claim to be Nahuatl (her mother and father learned to Speak Spanish working in San Diego’s hotel industry), define her perception of sacred space in modern indigenous contexts. She stated that in her home village of Atzacualoyan, Guerrero:

> Well the first thing that comes to my mind, is a dangerous space... we need to respect what is supposed to be a dangerous space, or else...you know, I know with my grandparents and uncles they are very much strict on you with respecting their sacred spaces...because so many people have passed away and our... we have to respect who they
were and you know… to do that something disrespectful will make bad things happen…

Sacred space is acknowledging this respect for what is sacred, which may be a person that is dead, maybe, uh… an area of prayer, it's this powerful area where many things can come about, but if not handled right it can become a dangerous place.

For her, sacred space is one that is rich with ancestral history, energy, and known to all the community for its power. All the other Mexcoehuani narrators, because they had grown up, and lived in U.S. society, saw sacred space as portable, somewhat temporary, and very much within the agency of the dancers to invoke and revoke. Yaotachqui defined sacred space as:

..., it’s my own space. I could be sitting at a bus stop, at school, at home, anywhere; it is a space within you. Where ever I am at, is my own sacred space. Would the term sacred space mean anything in terms of La Danza Azteca? Yes, I think sacred space would be when we're dancing with that circle that we talked about earlier. Once we start dancing, when we are in the circle, we create this space around us, around every dancer; whatever it is that we hold sacred within the middle of the circle, I think that space becomes sacred.
Xipecihuatl felt that: “Well, if you are being spiritual any space is sacred. Ceremony—you set aside a space to act out the spirituality. In Danza, it can be the place where the velación or the dance is taking place. It can be any place; it can be a place where you the individual are taking the time to be spiritual.” For Yancuic Tochtli:

To me sacred space is any place...that place where ever there is reciprocity of compassion and respect. And it can be with one’s self; it can be with two people, or within a group of people. So long as there is that understanding that there is compassion, respect, and love and you operate from that love, then you have sacred space. And it doesn't have to be a specific space; it can be any space where people decide to be.

**How do you feel about those Danzantes that mix in other traditions La Danza?**

I felt that this question was very important because it gives a view into the Mexcoehuani Danzante’s concept of the totality of identity. I posit that the more a Mexcoehuani Danzante understands and appreciates the Mexican roots of his or her identity, the less willing he or she will be to accept mixing in non-Mexican traditions from other Indigenous tribes. My data suggests that the longer a Danzante has been involved, the less willing he or she will be to accept mixing outside traditions. The natural born Danzantes had especially strong feelings about this question. Atzacualoyacihuatl, born in an indigenous village in Guerrero, Mexico, has seen
traditional indigenous dances (although not Danza Azteca) since childhood. She felt that she:

Uh, well I'm not very comfortable with it. Where, if I found myself being in or trying to get into a group like that, I wouldn't feel comfortable and I think I would not be in it for too long or become a part of it. Yeah, this whole notion of everything in its place so, I think Danza has beautiful traditions, beautiful history, and that's what we need to preserve. I understand also, there are areas where there was that fusion so, but I am still not comfortable with that.

Metztli, the heredera from San Diego, talked about the leadership of a group in regards to the mixing of outside traditions in La Danza:

I think you have to look at their leadership, you know where they learned from. How much their leaders really know about La Danza. But I always try to keep an open heart, a good heart when I go and dance and visit with other people, and other Danza circles. So I always try to have good thoughts. But as far as mixing, that's something we try not to do, we try not to mix and when we see things, there can always be something we can talk about.

Ehecatl, the native-born heredero from San Diego discussed the dangers of too much mixing in La Danza Azteca:
On the one hand I understand why that happens. The Danza itself is a living tradition and people bring to it what they have learned in many aspects of their life. So, in Mexico you have Danzas that are much more Catholic than other Danzas ...there is a history of bringing in traditions. But on the other hand, because here in the U.S. the traditions that are being brought in are not from Mexico....and not to say that the border is so important, but culturally they are so far away from each other… between central Mexico and the plains, or the Great Basin or the California tribes, or the pueblos ...

...So I think that there is a danger of losing the richness and authenticity of the tradition of La Danza Azteca of Mexico here [in the U.S]. And because Danza is a dialog between Danzantes all over the world.... in Mexico they may not necessarily agree with this statement, but there is a dialog between Mexican and Chicano Danzantes, and so there is a danger of those traditions from the north going south and changing the Danza in Mexico.

The fear of losing the authenticity of La Danza Azteca here in the U.S. is also expressed by Tepetlacatl. His concern is that each tradition, although shared needs to be offered separately:
Well, I've gone to different places where the mix maybe two different traditions and I feel that everybody has a right to do whatever they want. But I disagree with them when it conflicts with my beliefs. I think that putting cultures together is a positive thing, but ah, it can be conflicting. One example would be that I have seen Northern Native dancers and... Here is an example. I have a friend who is a dancer who goes to North Dakota for the sun dance. And he also grew up in Danza Azteca, and I think that is a good thing because when he dances Danza Azteca, he is an Aztec dancer. When he goes back to his roots, he goes to Pow Wows and to the sun dance and does these things that way. I see that and it isn't a bad thing. But I think the problem comes when, ah, during the Azteca ceremonies, they mix two cultures together, and I have seen it and it is confusing to me because it I can't make sense of it. But Like I said, “To each his own.”

Some of the new initiates, on the other hand see the mixing of identities and ceremonies as a good thing, and a part of Mexcoehuani historical evolution Momachtiquetl explains:

Um, I'm not sure if I have ever been in a space where I have seen someone else’s traditions or such. I think talking with
elders I understand that traditions are not to be mixed. Things have their time and place. I do get that. I think it can be problematic for Chicanos. It can be complicated for someone who has two cultures—what do they do if they cannot mix; it's kind of saying they don't exist. Unconsciously that is what is being said. I understand it, but I don't think it should cause all this raucous. Trying to reconcile it is really hard. Specifically for the Chicano/a spirit after 1800s and after the borders went up, we lost contact with the elders in Mexico, there was some type of cultural fusion and mixing by marriage with other native groups. In this instance and they are ...instances, what do you do? Like other native communities who their elders are in Baja California and they speak Spanish and the border has divided traditions and groups of people. I do find that to be interesting. I am not trying to mix peyote—....I think a good example was the ceremony in Arizona where we were in the Yaqui Chapel; and then we were there--there was a negotiation right of the people. We weren't disrupting one another, but we were co-exiting. We have had these battles with groups that don't recognize Chicanos. It is a trip.
Ocelotl, a man from the central California coast that has taken on his own dance circle obligation after dancing for three or four years of learning, is even more accepting of the mixing of traditions:

I don't feel bad about it 'cause I think that's the way ... I don't look down upon it, I actually have a neutral stance. And my neutral stance is that as a historian ... Nobody can actually "this is how it happened" And so when Danzantes bring in, like other Native American cultures from, like up here, if they synchronize other cultures, say they want to dress like a Navaho and they want to dance in La Danza, or they want to sing some Navaho song, that's awesome, bring it in to the circle! But as long as they can say "this is a Navaho song, a Navaho dance" it's great. I guess that as long as they can bring other native cultures into the Danza and they say where it comes from... So it's almost like learning a song from another tribe and then taking it, is a little disrespectful. As long as you bring in other indigenous ways to La Danza, I don't see anything wrong with it. I see it as more of an educational tool for La Danza in General. As long as they can say this is from the Lakota tribe, from the Kumeeyai, or something. But if they don't know the history or where they got it from, then I don't know, I guess we will be just
making stuff up I guess. So I am a little neutral in the sense that we all learn from other people and I like that aspect catholic tradition... You know... it kind of saddens me in a way. To me it’s almost like that Danzante that is almost not too brown, but more white a little bit. It’s almost kind of denying who they are.

The mixing of non-Mexican traditions into a traditionally Mexican identity and space will continue to be problematic for the newer Mexcoehuani Danzantes. The concept of keeping faithfully to Mexican traditions can only be sustained by having the Mexcoehuani Danzantes participate in the centuries old ceremonies and rituals in central Mexico, where La Danza emerged. Only through continual contact and communication between the Mexcoehuani Danzantes and the Mexican Danzantes, can cultural continuity and shared identity be maintained.

How do you feel about those Danzantes that reject the Catholic traditions of Mexican culture in La Danza?

One of the points where the Mexcoehuani narrators that were interviewed for the auto-historia held a consensus was the acceptance and understanding of the role that the Roman Catholic tradition has had and still holds in La Danza Azteca. There are some Danzantes, mostly initiates, which reject outright any role of Christianity in their interpretation of La Danza.

However, all of the narrators spoke in different levels of acceptance of the Indocristiano reformulations that the Danzantes of the past created. Cihuacoatl, who
started in the second wave of Danza, spoke in the frame of mind that all of the older
Danzantes shared:

I think those that reject it, reject the Danza as it is in
Mexico. You can’t out and out reject the connections with
Catholic traditions if you are going to be a traditional
Danzante. If you are going to be “new age or a cultural
type,” well then, you reject Catholic traditions—but then
you are not a Danzante of the tradition.

Xipecihuatl, was one of the first wave Danzantes. Her feeling of the place of
Christianity reflected the historical process of being a Chicana:

Well, you know, I would feel better about it if they had a
stronger justification, but having gone through a time myself
where I personally blamed the Catholic Church for
oppression, and having come to terms with it…it is
historical, and having learned more about the catholic
church, the two are linked together and that’s the way it
happened historically. And had it not happened that way
tradition would have been destroyed. I feel like you have to
take the good with the bad. Because of my understanding of
Catholic religion, I see the interpretation of the two like
“Yeah, exactly, I really hadn't thought it before, but for
some reason it was able to survive alongside Catholicism” --
I really hadn't thought about that it could have been destroyed.....The traditions are so easily wiped out--it doesn't take long.

The “forgiving” tone of the older Danzantes is contrasted by the feelings of Momachtiquetl who questions:

I understand where they are coming from and I am sure they have their own experiences histories and stories of trauma with Christian indoctrination or ideology or symbols. But, I do think it is part of our history whether we like it or not. I think the key word is negotiation, so if somebody is very adamant about rejecting certain Christian symbols then maybe going through a group that is more aligned in that way is better for them. I don't see it as good or bad; where you fit in, or what your agenda is or what your purpose of Danza. I know what I am there for, I am not going to grapple with all these other crazy things,—I do wonder why there are Christian symbols.... It would be interesting to understand Christian symbols in Danza, but not necessarily imposed, but how they get negotiated and reinvented through a Danza Chicano/a lens like the virgin, most Chicanos identify her as a brown skin woman. So that right there I would claim as a form of resistance, or the way use
the symbols for your own cultural meaning. Generally the
Christians see her as the Virgin Mary and but she also
becomes Tonantzin. How do Chicanos re-appropriate the
symbols for their own use? You have some choice....
Christian symbols and indigenous symbols...

The “grappling” with all the ideological conflicts that are inherent in the creation
of a unified identity and space, is what makes Mexcoehuani Danza different from
Mexican Danza. Mexican Danzantes have had hundreds of years to process this tension
between their precolumbian heritage and the imposition (and eventual reformulation) of
Christianity.

Mexcoehuani Danzantes have had less than four decades. Mexican Danzantes,
though they may come mostly from the marginalized classes of Mexican society
(indigenous communities, rural or urban poor mestizos) nevertheless, have one great
advantage over Mexcoehuani Danzantes: they are Mexicans living in Mexico and they
are part of the Mexican national consciousness. The Mexican Danzantes have an implicit
place and identity within the mythic, cultural, and ethnic currents of Mexican Society.

Mexcoehuani Danzantes on the other hand, are outsiders within the larger space
of Euro-African-American society. They are seen as a minimal part of a larger
homogeneous Hispanic population, thus negating their indigenous voice and identity.
They are also seen either by some as mere exotic artistic performers of “ancient rituals”
(by the arts crowd, the new age movement, etc) or by others as “pagan” devil worshipers
(by the fundamentalist Christian, Moslem, etc). Whether attacked from the “left” or from
the “right of the cultural wars, Mexcoehuani Danzantes have had to re-examination the foundation of their identity.

Some have chosen to go the neo-nativist path where their pan-Indian mythology elevates the precolombian traditions above all other cultures and negates the reformulation and syncretism of Mexican history of the past 500 years. Other Mexcoehuani have sought to follow the most orthodoxical of Catholic traditions in their search for acceptance and to avoid ostracism by the larger Hispanic community, thus negating their ancestor’s reformulation of the bicultural significance of La Danza Azteca. The neo-nativist path and the orthodoxical path are what I argue intermediate steps in the reformulation of Mexcoehuani identity: they are the extreme swings of the cultural, political, and spiritual pendulum of our history.

The auto-historias have shown that there are several paths to membership in the sacred space that is La Danza Azteca. Whichever path has been opened for the Mexcoehuani practitioners of the rituals of kindness, the end result is “unión, conformidad y conquista,” unity, conformity and conquest. La Danza Azteca has given them an identity and sacred place that empower the dancers, give cohesiveness and agency to their families, and build trans-generational links of self-determination.
CHAPTER SIX: THE ONLINE SURVEYS AND THE NARRATORS

The Online Survey

Survey Respondent Demographics

One hundred and fifty Mexcoehuani Azteca dancers filled out the online survey. Of these, 50.7% (n=76), completed the entire survey. I believe that the data suggests the online respondents left out the questions they either did not know the answers to, or felt uncomfortable answering. I think this was due to their relative inexperience in La Danza.

Because maximum participation was the goal of this survey, the respondents were allowed to complete the survey over several sessions, and to skip those questions they chose not to answer. Of the 150 respondents who answered the questions, 51% (n=77) responded they were male and 49% (n=73) responded they were female (see table 13). A total of 168 responses were gathered, as some respondents filled out partial surveys and never finished. Their answers are add to the total when their answers give (statistically invalid, but ethnographically interesting) insight.

Table 13: Gender of online respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>49%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Responses</td>
<td>150</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The online survey shows that in keeping with the assumptions and limitations of this research (this qualitative study can only be generalized to Mexcoehuani Aztec dancers who have internet access and feel comfortable answering questions online), most of the respondents were young (48%, \(n=61\) of the online respondents were under the age of 30).

Table 14: Age of respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage of Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Under 18</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19-25</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26-30</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31-35</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
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<td>36-40</td>
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<td>41-45</td>
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<td>46-50</td>
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<td>5%</td>
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<td>51-55</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6%</td>
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<tr>
<td>56-60</td>
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<tr>
<td>Over 60</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Responses</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

62.1% of the respondents live in California; 9.1% live in Texas; New Mexico and Oregon each have 7.6% (\(n=5\)) of the respondents.
Table 15: State of residency of respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State of residence</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage of Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Arkansas</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arizona</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>California</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>62.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colorado</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minnesota</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Mexico</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oregon</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Texas</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>9.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Washington</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>District of Columbia</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>66*</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*66 of the 150 respondents gave their state of residency, which equals 44% of the 150 respondents.

The history of La Danza in the U.S. suggests that most groups would be centered in either California (the area that received Florencio Yescas, Rosita Hernandez, Pedro Rodríguez, Moisés Gonzales, and others), or Texas, where Andrés Segura pioneered La Danza. However, the number of Danzantes responding from New Mexico, Oregon, Minnesota, Colorado, and other states, reflects the demographic changes that have occurred over the past 30 years. Mexcoehuani are found in such atypical areas as
Tennessee, the Carolinas, New York, Connecticut, Georgia, Arkansas, and even Canada (Aguilar, 2008b).

A total of 69% (n=106) of the online respondents were born in the U.S., while 24% (n=37) were born in Mexico. 7% (n=10) of the respondents selected “other” for their place of birth. The total answers for each question vary because some respondents picked and chose what questions they would answer.

**Table 16: Nation of Birth**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nation of Birth</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage of Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>U.S.</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>69%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mexico</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Responses</strong></td>
<td><strong>150</strong></td>
<td><strong>100%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When asked how long they had lived in the U.S., 58% (n=98) responded “all of my life.” 8% (n=12), responded that they had lived in the U.S. 15 – 10 years. Only 2% (n=4) reported living in the U.S. five years or less. Since most of the online respondents were under 30 years of age, this data suggests that most of those born in the U.S. are part of that “under 30 year old” group. This is in keeping with the overall demographic data of Mexcoehuani demographics.
Table 17: Length of time living in the U.S.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How long have you lived in the U.S.?</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage of Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All of my life</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>58%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Since I was a small child</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Since I was a young adult</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have lived here more than 16 years</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have lived here less than 15 years</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have lived here less than 10 years</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have lived here less than 5 years</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have lived here less than 1 years</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Responses</td>
<td>168</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Language and Tribal Identity

The languages spoken by the online respondents gave an interesting picture. Of the 126 respondents that answered the question, 80% (n=101) said they were bilingual and 20% (n=25) said they were monolingual. A total of 41% (n=96) reported speaking Spanish, and 51% (n=120) reported speaking English. 8% (n=19) reported speaking another language besides English or Spanish. It is important to note that the respondents were able to select more than one language spoken thus there were 235 total responses from 150 participants:
Table 18: What languages do you speak?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What language do you speak:</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage of Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Responses</strong></td>
<td><strong>235</strong></td>
<td><strong>100%</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: respondents were able to select more than one language spoken

When asked if they had any indigenous ancestry that can be traced back at least three generations, 51% (n=67) replied that they could trace their indigenous ancestry back at least three generations. 36% (n=48) replied that they knew that somewhere in their ancestry they had indigenous blood. 13% (n=17) replied that they did not know if they have indigenous blood. This result is interesting given the fact that most Mexcoehuani Danzantes are mestizo, and their indigenous roots are mostly hidden or forgotten. Table 19 shows the results:
Table 19: Indigenous ancestry

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage of Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No I do Not</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No, but I know that somewhere in my ancestry I have indigenous blood</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes, I can trace my indigenous ancestry back at least three generations</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Responses</td>
<td>132</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

One of the most interest responses was to the question “What is your indigenous ancestry? The respondents stated that 21% (n=31) had Nahuatl (or “Aztec”) blood; 3% (n=5) replied they had Ñhañhu (Otomi); 7% (n=11) claimed Puhrepecha (Tarascan) heritage; and 29% (n=43) claimed other indigenous heritage. Interestingly 28% (n=42) claimed no indigenous heritage, and 12% (n=18) skipped the question entirely.
Table 20: Tribal affiliation

If you said yes in the previous question, do you know what your Indigenous ancestry is?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tribal Affiliation</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage of Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nahuatl</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ñhañhu (Otomí)</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mazahua</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purepecha (Tarascan)</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Indigenous</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skipped question</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Responses</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Respondent Identity

La Danza Azteca is strongly identified with the Chicano/a, Mexican and indigenous identities of the Mexcoehuani communities. 48% (n=72) of the respondents identifies themselves as Chicano/Chicana; 59% (n=88) identified as Mexican or Mexican-American; 40% (n=61) chose the indigenous/American-Indian identity; only 14% (n=21) chose a Hispanic form of identity, and 12% (n=18) chose not to answer.
Table 21: What do you consider yourself? Check all that apply

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What do you consider yourself ethnically?</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage of Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chicano/Chicana</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mexican/Mexicana</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mexican-American</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indigenous (no tribal affiliation)</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American-Indian (list tribe below)</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino (please list below which type)</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispano</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spanish-American</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pollo/etc.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skipped question</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Total answers 262 187%
Total Respondents 150

It is important to note that the respondents were able to select more than one identity thus there were a total of 262 answers to this question.
Respondent participation in La Danza Azteca

In keeping with the fact that most of the online respondents were young, most of the 150 respondents had danced five years or less (35%, n= 52). It is interesting to note that among traditional Conchero and Azteca dance groups in Mexico, it normally takes four or five years of active participation in La Danza for a person to be accepted and recognized as a full member of a traditional dance circle (González Torres, 2005; Hernández Ramos, 2007; Yescas, 1977). Only 11% of the respondents reported1 dancing over 20 years or more (n= 17). A total of 36 respondents skipped this question.

I believe that this question shows an interesting point of the evolution of La Danza Azteca in the U.S. Because our time frame here as Danzantes is so short (less than 40 years), practitioners of La Danza compress their experiences of learning of ritual, history and space. This compression is in keeping with the fast paced time frame of U.S. society (Kai J. Jonas, 2008; Norgate, 2006). I believe it is also indicative of the pervasive influence of the mass media and the internet; young people especially, expect results and solutions that are compact, easy, and if the result is not comfortable or agreeable, easily disposable.

Danzante said in a conversation at a ceremony: “It means that Danza is hard work and most people don’t stay with it!”
Table 22: Number of years you have been a Danzante-Online response

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years Dancing</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage of Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Less than 1 year</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-2 years</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-5 years</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6-10 years</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10-15 years</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16-20 years</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21-25 years</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26-30 years</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over 31 years</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skipped question</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Responses</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In light of the time it takes to be considered a true Danzante in Mexico’s traditional Danza groups, it is interesting to note that fully 37% of the respondents stated that the dance circle they participate in is five years old or less. When contrasted to the dozens of groups in Mexico that have been in existence for four or more generations, we see again the compression of Danza time-history in the U.S. In Mexico, a person who has been dancing for over 30 years (as I have done) would be an average dancer of no great esteem. However, here in the U.S., I am considered an “elder.”
Table 23: How long has the group you are in been in existence?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group in Existence</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Less than 1 year</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-2 years</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-5 years</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6-10 years</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11-15 years</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16-20 years</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21-25 years</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26-30 years</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over 31 years</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skipped question</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Responses</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A majority of the online Mexcoehuani respondents, 47% (n=71) reported that they have belonged to only one group in their Danza experience. Table 24 shows the results. This bodes well for the creation of membership, a sense of family, and space.

What to me was disheartening (being that membership, family and unity are the foundation of La Danza as a community) was the large number of Danzantes the reported that they have been a part of two or three dance circles 38% (n=25%). Also, a small number, 3% (n=5) replied that they have never been a part of a Danza group. This is an interest finding since the whole purpose of the rituals of kindness cycle of La Danza
Azteca is to create long-term membership, social capital, and an indexicality and positionality of identity as described by Bucholtz and Hall.

Almost a quarter of the online respondents, 24% (n=36) chose not to answer this question. Once again, I argue that those that did not choose to answer this question did so due to their inexperience in La Danza.

Table 24: Number of groups you have belonged to

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Member of how many groups</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Only one, the same one I started with</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 or 3</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 or 5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 or 7</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8 or 9</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 or more</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have never been part of a group</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skipped question</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Responses</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Online Respondent’s commitment to La Danza Azteca

An expression of the conflict some Mexcoehuani Danzantes find with committing to membership in a group or a discipline is the fact that when asked, “Which ceremonies do you attend?” 13% (n=19) replied, “I go wherever I want to go.” This is what I have called the “solo flyer syndrome,” where young (mostly male) dancers go from group to group and dance for monetary or sexual opportunities; or where ever a dancer is needed to fill out a circle for a Pow Wow, a march, or any other opportunity for a chance at the spotlight (Aguilar, 1992).

Table 25: Which ceremonies do you attend?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Do you attend traditional Danza Azteca ceremonies?</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Only our Dance group’s ceremonies</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Our Dance group’s ceremonies and ceremonies we are invited to</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I go anywhere I want to go</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skipped question</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Responses</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>57%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Another 5% (n=8) replied that they only dance at their own groups ceremonies.

5% (n=8) of the online respondents reported that they only dance at their own groups ceremonies. This data suggests that one of the main concepts of traditional Danza Azteca: where the ritual obligation of a dance group to other dance circles is to support them in their ceremonial cycles, is missing from a significant number of Mexcoehuani’s
sacred space experience. The data suggests to me that this is due to the relative youth and inexperience of the Mexcoehuani online respondents and or their leaders.

On the plus side, a majority of respondents, 43% (n=65) replied that, like the traditional Danza groups of Mexico, they attend all of their dance circle’s ceremonies, as well as the ones that their dance circles are invited to.

**Mexcoehuani Danzantes as Sacred travelers**

While 'Goddess pilgrims' have characteristics in common with other religious pilgrims and with other middle-class tourists, especially those inclined towards ethnic tourism, environmental tourism and historical tourism, they also possess some crucial, distinctive characteristics. Through travelling to sacred sites for explicitly stated spiritual purposes, these women express both their religious identity and their political consciousness. Self-transformation is seen by them as a fundamental component of societal transformation (Rountree, 2002, p. 475).

When Kathryn Rountree speaks about the modern phenomenon of women practitioners of the “mother Earth goddess movement” and the reasons these women travel to goddess sites throughout the world, she brings up salient points that can be applied to the Mexcoehuani search for identity and sacred space. Like Rountree’s women pilgrims, Mexcoehuani Danzantes seek out spiritual identity and political consciousness,
through their travel to “sacred sites.” Rountree reports that she asked a women pilgrim to explain the difference between a being a tourist and a pilgrim. The woman replied…

“…A sacred journey to a sacred place with a sacred purpose.” Morinis has proposed a useful definition broad enough to encompass religious, semi-religious, and secular journeys and to cater for terrestrial, virtual, and metaphorical pilgrimages: "the pilgrimage is a journey undertaken by a person in quest of a place or a state that he or she believes to embody a valued ideal" (1992:4). The valued ideal enshrined at the pilgrimage site may be associated with a deity, saint or prophet (as at Mecca, Lourdes, Jerusalem or Banaras), or the site may embody national, cultural or some other form of collective ideals (Rountree, 2002, p. 482)

Mexcoehuani who travel to Mexico to participate in the traditional Danza ceremonies do so for several reasons. One of these is to learn firsthand what the tradition is like in its ancestral environment. Another is to participate in the shared sense of sacred space, community, and membership that the Danza ceremonies instill in their participants. This is Morinis’ “place [that] embodies a valued ideal.” Added to the space of “valued ideal,” is the Danzantes’ communal sense of transcending time/history (the eight Mesoamerican directions). These collective pilgrimage experiences give the
Mexcoehuani Danzantes a greater sense of self-determination, resiliency, and empowerment. Table 26 shows the results of this question.

It was very disappointing to see that only 28% (n=42) of the online respondents said that they had participated in a traditional Danza Azteca Ceremony in Mexico. 34% (n=51) reported that they had never participated in a Danza ceremony in Mexico, and a large number of the respondents skipped this question (38% n=57).

**Table 26: Participation in Ceremonies in Mexico**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Have you ever participated in a traditional Danza Azteca ceremony in México?</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skipped question</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Responses</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This data suggests that a sizable number of Mexcoehuani Danzantes have not had a deep and traditional Danza experience in the birthplace of La Danza. That may be one reason some Mexcoehuani who are interested in indigenous spirituality are comfortable with mixing disparate tribal traditions into one neo-nativist paradigm they erroneously call “an ancient Azteca tradition.”

Another significant finding is that while 32% (n=48) of the online respondents said that they knew how and where the Danza Azteca tradition began, 26% (n=39) reported they did not know, and a majority of the respondents 42% (n=63) skipped this important question. I propose that this finding shows that many new Danzantes have learned from,
or are learning from, persons who have not taken the time to study the dance tradition fully. Many of these fourth-wave teachers only know the basics of Danza Azteca choreography; they lack competency in the playing of the rhythms of the dances; and they rely on internet websites, itinerant dancers, and self-proclaimed “traditional elders” or “shamans” that regularly visit college campuses, and Mexcoehuani community groups.

It has been my experience that when one confronts ill prepared “elders or teachers” with uncomfortable questions, they create “ancient truths and wisdom” or they give you the standard response of “If you have to ask, you are obviously not ready to learn.”

Table 27: Knowledge of Danza history

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skipped question</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Responses</td>
<td>150</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Analysis of this data suggests that many Mexcoehuani Danzantes do not know the history of their own spiritual tradition. A majority of online respondents, 66% (n=85) correctly chose the answers “La Danza is a mix of indigenous and Spanish Catholic traditions (mestizo)” or “La Danza is a mix of indigenous, Spanish Catholic, African, and Asian traditions (mestizo).” A significant number erroneously believe that it is a
purely indigenous tradition (16%, n=24), 3% (n=5) said that they did not know, and 42% (n=63) chose not to answer the question. The respondents were able to select more than one root to La Danza.

Table 28: the roots of La Danza

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>As best you know select the answers that apply to La Danza</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage of Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>La Danza is purely indigenous</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>La Danza is a mix of indigenous and Spanish Catholic traditions (mestizo)</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>La Danza is a mix of indigenous, Spanish Catholic, African, and Asian traditions (mestizo)</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honestly, I do not know</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skipped question</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Responses</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>117%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total answers</td>
<td>152</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: respondents were able to select more than one membership

When it came time to discuss the history of when La Danza began, a majority of respondents did not know the timeline accepted by both practitioners and scholars. Only 26% (n=40) selected the most correct answers (200-1,000 years, depending on what
starting point you select). The others chose incorrectly (16%, n=25), answered they did not know (15%, n=22), or skipped the question entirely (42%, n=63)

Table 29: Dates of La Danza

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The roots of the tradition we know as La Danza Azteca can be definitely traced back in Mexico:</th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percentage of Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>50 years</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>100 years</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>200-400 years</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>400-1,000</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over 1,000 years</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honestly, I do not know</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skipped question</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Responses</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The next question sought to explore Mexicoehuani knowledge of the three modern lineages of La Danza Azteca. These three groups are: Los Concheros, the groups that has kept the four hundred year old Danza Azteca tradition alive; los guerreros, the Danza Azteca groups that try to follow the old traditions of Los Concheros in everything but the Danza uniform. Last to evolve, los culturales, those groups that reject all Catholic and Spanish influence in the Danza and want to recreate an idealized precolumbian society. 31% (n=67) said they knew who the Concheros were; 23% (n=49) knew who the guerreros were, but only 17% (n=37) said they knew what the culturales were. This is an
interesting finding since there are many Mexcoehuani Danza groups that would be correctly identified as *culturales* and not guerreros, due to their distaste of the Mexican Catholic influence in Danza.

As a check on the validity of the answers to the knowledge of the various traditions of La Danza, a simpler question was asked: “Do you know the difference between a traditional Danza Azteca circle, and an Azteca dance group?”

Most Conchero and Guerrero groups call themselves a “circle.” Most *culturales* groups call themselves a “calpulli” which is Nahuatl for “the big house;” the name of the tribal organization of a clan or barrio, as well as the place where clan meetings and education of the lower class children occurred (Karttunen, 1983). 35% (n=53) said they knew the difference, and 42% (n=63) skipped the question. This data suggests that the majority of the Mexcoehuani online respondents do not know the difference between the two groups. This data suggests that in the general population of Mexcoehuani Danzantes, this may also be true.

**Table 30: Do you know the difference between types of Azteca groups?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Do you know the difference between a traditional Danza Azteca circle and an Azteca dance group?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>skipped question</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Responses</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Part of my fear for La Danza in the U.S. is that, as we get further away from the first wave of La Danza (1975-1980), more and more Danzantes will be ignorant of the historical roots of the Mexcoehuani Danza Azteca tradition. My online survey asked “To the best of your knowledge, when did La Danza Azteca first arrive in Aztlan?” Almost a quarter of the respondents 24% (n=36) correctly identified the decade of the 1970s as the time of the arrival of La Danza Azteca. Some said that it was as early as the 1950s, 16% (n=24).

It is probable that some practitioners of La Danza had immigrated to the U.S. before Yescas and Segura began to teach. However, whoever those early Danzantes may have been, they did not have a significant impact on Mexcoehuani identity or sacred space. Most likely, they came across the border as braceros, or other blue-collar workers. They, like many first generation immigrants, gave up their cultural heritage and spiritual ties to their homeland for the sake of their family’s economic survival and progress. Table 31 shows the spread of answers to this question:
Some early Danzantes may have had some small impact on the Mexican-American ballet folklórico scene. Some Danzantes did have a place in the creation of the U.S. image of Mexican culture, as in the case of the Anaya brothers from Mexico City. The Anaya Aztec dance group performed for many years at the Gallup Inter-Tribal Ceremonial, in New Mexico, as part of that organization’s theme of indigenous unity national borders that did not take into consideration ancient historical ties. The impact of their presence in the U.S. however, was small because they did not teach La Danza to Mexcoehuani communities to try to “conquer” new Danzantes. Instead, the Anaya group danced for a different community: the tourists from around the world that wanted to learn
about, and see American-Indian culture. Very few Mexcoehuani who did not live in the northern New Mexico area could afford to go see the Inter-Tribal Ceremonial.

The online survey brought out several interesting themes. One theme is that the community of Mexcoehuani Danzantes, (a very young community compared to the Danzante communities of old Mexico) is a community that is seeking to create a spiritual-political mythology as a foundation for its identity.

The community of Mexcoehuani Danzantes is a collection of people that like Rountree’s women pagan pilgrims, is trying to create a spiritual identity and political consciousness. They try to accomplish this through their participation in rituals of kindness, travel to sacred sites in Mexico, and through personal daily rituals that keep them grounded (in every sense of the word), and in touch with their indigenous heritage. This search for the divine, for the eternal, and for a spiritual-political mythology defines what ultimately it will mean to be a Mexcoehuani.

The Micro-Historia Narrators

_A contrast with the online respondents_

I wanted to analyze the similarities and or differences between the online respondents and the fifteen narrators of the micro-historias. First, I wanted to see if there was a correlation between the answers given to the question by the online respondents and the micro-historia narrators. Specifically was there a correlation based on the ages of the respondents and narrators? If there were a statistical difference between the two
groups, what would explain this difference? Would the narrator’s age, time in La Danza or their responsibility in their group affect their answers?

First, I show a contrast between the gender percentages of the narrators and the online respondents:

**Table 32: Gender of Narrators**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent of Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Narrators</td>
<td>15</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 15: Gender of online respondents**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage of Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>51%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>49%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Responses</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The narrators are 60% male (n=9), the respondents are 51% male (n=77). From my experience in la Danza, I believe that the percentage of online male respondents is closer to the general population of Mexcoehuani dancers.

The next contrast is between the age of the narrators and the online respondents. First, I grouped the different online age categories to match the categories I designed for the narrators:
Table 34: Online age groups converted to narrator age groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Groups</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage of Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Below age 20</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20-30</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-40</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40-60</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Declined to state</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 35: Micro-historia narrators age groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age Groups</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>20-30</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-40</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50-60</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 36 shows the actual breakdown of the online participants’ ages. The online participants were given a wider selection of age groups because I felt that this would help them identify their place in the Mexcoehuani Danza community in terms of Danza wave, years of Danza experience, and levels of responsibility in their groups.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage of Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Under 18</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19-25</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26-30</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>31-35</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>36-40</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>41-45</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>46-50</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>51-55</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>56-60</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over 60</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Responses</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The comparison of place of birth of the online respondents and the narrators gave similar results. 73% (n=11) of the narrators and 69% (n=106) of the online respondents were born in the U.S. Tables 37 and 38 show the results:
Table 37: Nation of birth: narrators

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nation</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent of Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>USA</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>73%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mexico</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 38: Nation of birth: online respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nation</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage of Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>U.S.</td>
<td>106</td>
<td>69%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mexico</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Responses</td>
<td>153</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

_Danzante Experience and Responsibility_

Table 39 shows that of the 15 narrators, 27% (n=4) had been dancing for 10 years or less. Table 40 shows that 44% of the online respondents (n=65) had been dancing for 10 years or less. The online survey shows that pluralities of Danzantex who have internet access, and who speak English, are relatively new dancers. This is in keeping with the rest of the data which suggests that they do not have a clear understanding of the history, meaning, or roots of the rituals of kindness.
Table 39: Number of years the narrators have been dancing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of years</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent of Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1-5 years</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5-10 years</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10-20 years</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20-30 years</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>53%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over 30 years</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Narrators</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 40: Number of years the online respondents have been dancing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Years Dancing</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percentage of Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Less than 1 year</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-2 years</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-5 years</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6-10 years</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10-15 years</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16-20 years</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21-25 years</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26-30 years</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over 31 years</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skipped question</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Responses</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A Reflection on the Online Survey

When I first started plotting out the scope of this study, I envisioned approximate 20-40 online respondents and no more than eight auto-historias. As the results of the online study became a small flood, I suddenly realized that there was a great interest in the Mexcoehuani Danza community of what I wanted to study. As stated earlier, the majority of the online respondents were young, novice initiates, and most did not know the history of La Danza Azteca or who first brought it to the U.S. As I contrasted the online aggregate data with the auto-historia narratives, I could see a pattern building in Mexcoehuani identity and the conceptualization of Danza Azteca sacred space. This pattern has informed my conclusions and my recommendations for future study.

Whatever the future brings to the Mexcoehuani Danza Azteca movement, it is certain that it will continue to spread wherever Mexcoehuani are present.

What I can state is that La Danza Azteca is very young, very new, and very needy in its search for information. As one of the online respondents said: “I want to learn everything I can, ‘cause I never knew my culture was so beautiful!” Whether it is balanced search for identity and sacred space, or an extremist form of counter-racism, La Danza Azteca provides a space for self-determination, resiliency, and empowerment.

The respondents of the online survey reflect the many varied strands of Mexcoehuani identity. Some of the respondents are ready to overthrow the “real” world in order to create an idealized indigenous ‘paradise.’” Others are happy to stay within the Christian-centered world of the Euro-American “global village.” What is most encouraging about the overall responses of the online Danzantes is that they want to
know, they want to experience, and they want to understand the traditions of Mexico; not as tourist pilgrims, but as emic participants in their own ancestry and future. That in itself is very good news.
CHAPTER SEVEN: SUMMARY OF FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS
AND IMPLICATIONS

Findings

In this study, I have found a deep and profound search for identity and sacred space by “those that have arisen from Mexico.” The Mexcoehuani of the United States, have found within a relatively short time in the Mexican-American historical experience, a system of identity, membership, and communication that reaches far back into the mythic past of Mexico’s Mesoamerican past.

This system, or “rituals of kindness” known as La Danza Azteca, has brought to Aztlan a complex membership that emphasizes unity with the ancestral traditions of Mexico; conformity to the varied expressions of this ancestral heritage; and conquest of new souls who otherwise would be lost to the impersonal and dehumanized reality of the 21st century’s technological paradigms. La Danza Azteca provides its practitioner’s a path on which to walk in various “worlds” of existence: the day to day world of the profane, and its parallel world of the sacred.

As with any cultural, spiritual, or political movement, there are those that take the indigenous roots of La Danza to its illogical extreme. The strident Mexcoehuani indigenists would try to re-create a pre-columbian Eden of mythological purity and sanctity that realistically never existed.

Nevertheless, no matter what extremism evolves out of a peaceful, agriculturally rooted tradition, the Mexcoehuani Danza Azteca will continue to grow and reflect its
Mexican heritage, removed from the strident nationalism and ethnocentrism of those that ignore its true roots and meanings.

Conclusions

*The Roots of the Mexcoehuani Run Deep*

The purpose of this study was to understand the role of La Danza Azteca (and its rituals of kindness) in the evolution of Chicano/Mexicano/Mexican-American identity and sacred space. Early on, the concept of identifying these connected, but ideologically distinct Mexican origin communities led to my conceptualization of a third space of identity: the Mexcoehuani. I conceive this identity construct as a tool for looking at the Danza Azteca amongst Mexicano/Mexican-American/Chicano, and politically aware Latinos of Mexican descent, from a macro and a micro historical view. The macro view of Mexcoehuani Danzantes was reflected in the review of the literature and the aggregate data derived from the anonymous online surveys. The fifteen narrators selected for this study, captured the micro view of La Danza in the auto-historias described in previous chapters.

This study, a panoramic view of Mexican origin identity, starts at the earliest levels of ancient prehistory: The Olmec civilization. Rather than look for diffusionist theories of cultural superiority (Montellano et al., 1997), or extraterrestrial panspermian (Cull, 2007; Däniken, 1971) “culture seeding,” I argue that the indigenous people of Central Mexico created a unique cultural paradigm that still has echoes in today’s barrios and streets of Mexico and the U.S.
We followed a course that winds through the Teotihuacan to the Mexi’ca (Aztec) cultures, until we see the bloody clash and holocaust of the Spanish invasion of the “American” continent. At this point, it is estimated that almost 90% of the 30 million indigenous peoples of this continent died of diseases, slavery, or starvation. The survivors began to create a unique system of resiliency, resistance, and reformulation that is reflected as “the third space.” This new third space consisted of Native American ancestral traditions and the new and seemingly invincible technology and religion of the Spanish invaders.

One of the most provocative and ingenious forms of reformulation and resiliency for the survivors of the Mesoamerican holocaust was the system of prayer, sacrifice, and unification that we call “La Danza Azteca.”

La Danza Chichimeca, de Conquista, Conchera, or Azteca, as it is variously known, started in the indigenous republic of Tlaxcallan, moving first to the Bajío states of Queretaro and Guanajuato and then into Mexico City itself. It provided a militarist organization that echoed both the precolumbian militaristic control of the state, as well as the seemingly invincible organization of the Spanish conquerors. Within this system of membership, extended families and entire communities could maintain their indigenous traditions while at the same time reformulating and negotiating their new Indocristiano identity within Spanish colonial culture: one that provided a system of memes (cultural ideas) and semaphores (cultural signaling) that allowed flexible bicultural significance.
This system, while fluid and permeable to the changes in society, nevertheless has been able to maintain its ancient pre-columbian lineage or “esencia” (essence) for over four centuries.

This historical evolution mirrors the voyage of the Mexcoehuani in the U.S. We have had to survive oppression for over 200 years by the carriers of the “manifest destiny” virus. La Danza Azteca, the Indocristiano culmination of ancient pre-columbian cultural lineage, has been instrumental in giving us a new paradigm of space, identity, and membership. While La Danza has been a part of Mexcoehuani reality for less than forty years in the U.S., its impact has been tremendous. Most Mexcoehuani born after 1990 cannot understand a Chicano world that does not include the use of “Aztec” identity as a tool for empowerment and self-determination.

La Danza Azteca, an elaborate and ritualistic system of dual symbolism, provides the ideal tools for communicating both within the membership of identity (La Danza), and with Lefebvre’s “Other” (white and upper-class mestizo society). This Eurocentric Other was (and still is), continually trying to erode the independence, sovereignty, and agency of the communities that kept alive the ancient kinetic forms of prayer that are integral to La Danza.

Three hundred years after the arrival of Hernán Cortez, Mexican society, with its highly stratified chromo-racial caste system, was finally united enough to claim its political independence from Spain. Although it would take 100 more years to develop fully this independence, the new Mestizo, indigenous, and Afro-mestizo majority would
begin to reformulate the various strands of culture (European, Native American, African, and Asian) into the modern cultures of México and eventually, of the Mexcoehuaní.

The Mexican Revolution of 1910 gave greater impetus to the reformulation of Danza identity. With the government’s carefully orchestrated “discoveries” (Cuauhtémoc’s alleged tomb) and the restoration of Mesoamerican sites (Teotihuacan, Palenque, and others), the common citizen, who usually did not have a good education, could begin to admire, relish, and even recreate the ancient indigenous heritage of Mexico.

Within the Conchero community, young Danzantes like Manuel Pineda, Natividad Reyna, and Florencio Yescas began to recreate what they saw as the princely garb of the elite Mexi’ca rulers of Tenochtitlan. These new dance uniforms caused great uproar amongst the elder Conchero dance leaders. Nevertheless, the young dancers quickly began to copy and create their own versions of the new “Azteca” uniform.

During the 1940s to the 1960s the new economic prosperity of Mexico’s working classes, as well as the trips that Danzantes took outside of Mexico to perform for tourist venues, began to change La Danza. The Dance tradition was becoming more war-like, and more entertainment oriented. Danzantes from old lineages began to perform for Mexico’s movie industry as film extras. This newfound fame elevated the place of the lowly Danzante in Mexican society and more non-lineage dancers began to enter the tradition.

In 1974, the Chicano movement had evolved for over a decade. The struggle for the core concepts of Chicanismo was centered on internationalist Marxism versus mestizo
macho nationalism. The dialogue was ripe for a new epistemology to enter the
discussion. This voice was based on a non-European ontology that created an indigenous
paradigm of identity and space: the third space of Mexcoehuani identity. La Danza Azteca arrived at an auspicious time; it represented the new paradigm of Mexican
identity and sacred space based on the Indocristiano negotiation of bicultural
significance.

Andrés Segura and Florencio Yescas, arriving in 1974-75, each with differing
tactics, but with similar goals, began to proselytize amongst Mexcoehuani. Segura
focused on the college students, art circles, and intellectuals, for the most part. He taught
an esoteric form of La Danza. Although he was adamantly and rigorously dedicated to
the very Catholic practices of the Concheros, he taught a “new age” form of
Mesoamerican mythology that easily captured the minds of college students, and spiritual
wanderers.

Andrés Segura’s teachings were of an intellectual path, which spoke to the
Mexcoehuani mind. Segura stressed strongly regimented rules and ceremonies; He
rewarded unswerving allegiance to him, and punished those that did not stay on his “true”
path of La Danza. Segura’s greatest impact has been on the strident conceptualization of
Mexi’ca ideology and membership. It is ironic that Segura, whose Mexican Catholic
roots were very strong, unwittingly gave strong impetus to the Mexi’ca imperialists that I
call the “Mexi’ca Nazis.”

Yescas focused on the “person on the street”; the Mexcoehuani who had close ties
to Mexico and who carried unconscious echoes of La Danza within his or her life. His
teachings were of an emotional path, which spoke to the Mexcoehuani soul. Yescas taught that la Danza was an open system of membership. He was always letting initiates participate in all aspects of La Danza. He was always open to questions and discussions with young Mexcoehuani — he relished the opportunity to better understand our reality.

La Danza was for Yescas, a constant negotiation between the sacred and profane aspects of human nature. While he taught and performed for money-making endeavors (shows at restaurants, the Disney World projects, among others), he nevertheless taught the obligations of a true Danzante (the velación, the alabanzas, and the annual pilgrimages to the Danza’s sacred sites and ceremonies). Ultimately, the ideological seeds planted by Yescas, and the traditional Danzantes he brought from Mexico, would have a greater impact on Mexcoehuani Danza Azteca because they were more easily accessible to larger numbers of Mexcoehuani. They also allowed for a larger, more open range of mutually memberships within the Aguilar Chicano Identity continuum.

Both of these Danza elders changed the course of Chicano history. Mexcoehuani identity took hold, and to this day continues to reformulate and negotiate what it means to be “someone who has arisen from Mexico.”

Over the past 35 years, La Danza Azteca has taken various paths. Some Mexcoehuani practitioners of La Danza follow what I call the traditional path of La Danza as it has been carried out in Mexico. This would be the path originally set out by Segura and Yescas. These types of practitioners tend to be older and tend to have started during the first two waves of Danza (1974-1992). These practitioners (as well as the
younger dancers that follow their lead), flow freely within the inter-changeable and mutually acceptable ranges of Vasovič’s principle of adapted identities (2006).

The one significant exception to this tendency is the cohort of Mexcoehuani Danzantes who have been born into La Danza during the second wave (1980-1992). Their participation is both from the soul as well as from the intellect.

They appear not to have the strident urgency to prove their indigenousness to other Mexcoehuani. They also appear to be more relaxed in their participation in the trans-generation evolution of La Dance; that is, they do not feel a need to “purify” or “return” La Danza to a mythic, cleansed and somehow more sacred pre-columbian past that excludes the Mexican and Mexican Catholic traditions of La Danza Azteca. Other Mexcoehuani practitioners though, usually young initiates (who have entered La Danza Azteca as young adults, who have five years or less of Danza experience, or have never gone to Mexico to participate in a traditional Danza Ceremony), are more strident in ignoring the negotiated bicultural significance of the Danza Azteca. These initiates then become easy prey for those that I call the “Mexi’ca Nazis:” apolitical, homophobic, “Aztec” cultural imperialists that reject Bucholtz and Hall’s principle of positionality (2005).

In place of the Mexcoehuani multicultural heritage, the data suggests, the young initiates feel comfortable importing and blending in other indigenous traditions, especially those of the American Indian nations of the northern plains (like the sun dance and tee pee ceremonies). I argue that this tendency to emulate non-Mexican traditions is due to the young Mexcoehuani’s lack of experience with Mexican reality; it is also due to
the language barriers that many Mexcoehuani have communicating with Spanish speaking Mexicans.

Added to this is the fact that many times Mexcoehuani are treated with disrespect in Mexico because they come from the north, and have apparent economic success that many times is envied by the poorer Mexican society. I also argue that in a sense, they are following La Danza from an intellectual point of view. That is, they need to comprehend every aspect of La Danza and criticize it from a politically correct position of inferiority and uneasiness because of what has transpired in Mexican history. These Mexcoehuani feel a need to look to the Northern tribes for acceptable identity and validation of the indigenous identity and membership. Added to these problems of identification as Mexicans, are the fact that at times Mexcoehuani are treated as “fake” Indians by northern Native Americans, who by virtue of their BIA identity cards or tribal enrollment numbers, feel superior to the “Mexican wannabe” Aztecs. As Argelia Andrade, C. Phil, (a doctoral candidate at UCLA), succinctly stated in a personal communication, “Mexico looks to Spain, Chicanos look to the Northern tribes for acceptable identity and validation.”

A finding that brings me concern, based on the online surveys, is that the some Mexcoehuani (whether they realize or acknowledge it), are deeply influenced by the protestant apocalyptic cycles of religious fervor and fanaticism that has swept through U.S. society since the early 1800s. This “end of world” millenarianism is readily apparent by how many neo-nativists Mexcoehuani initiates have joined the superficial and histrionic interpretation “the Mayan prophecy, Nostradamus, Revelations, Barack Obama
as the anti-Christ,” movements seen on popular cable television and countless doomsday websites.

I argue that these millenarian trends among Mexcoehuani Danzantes are due in part to the sense of alienation, marginalization, and oppression that many of us Mexcoehuani face on a daily basis. Many times because of the young age of the initiates, they do not understand the long, inter-generational timeline that most traditional systems of resiliency and agency require. Whether it is due to our fast-paced internet driven “global village,” or the narcissistic pressure of our consumer society, the online data suggests that young Mexcoehuani do not yet comprehend the nature of the creation of a sacred space that transcends and overcomes temporal and generational constructs. They appear to want their idealized, worry-free cultural paradigm as fast as they want their text messages. Any messy historical facts, realities, or failings of the ancestral cultures of Mexico are simply denied as the fabrications of the “evil white man,” his religion, or his puppets at the academy.

What the initiate Mexcoehuani Danzantes do not yet understand is that La Danza Azteca, (with its rituals of kindness, its trans-generational communication, and its creation of sacred place) creates what I call the “teoyahualli” the sacred circle that is the reformulation of the family. This teoyahualli was not created in one day, one year, or one century. It has taken over four centuries of negotiation.

The family of La Danza Azteca is not defined by genetic lineage. It is defined by “union, conformidad y conquista.” Unity with a group is a cause more important than the individual; conformity to the traditions and ontology left by the ancestors to the living
practitioners of La Danza; and conquest of future Danzantes. This conquest of new souls creates the continuation of the ancient traditions set down centuries ago by the survivors of the Mesoamerican Holocaust.

This then, is the challenge for future Mexcoehuani Danzantes: How do we reconcile the need for the continual Mexcoehuani negotiation with the dominant U.S. society, while at the same time maintain the tradition or esencia of La Danza as it has been given to us just a few short decades ago? Mexcoehuani society does not (or should not) exist in a vacuum of self-imposed isolation. Yet how do we and our children’s children make sure that the reformulation of La Danza Azteca does not become so reformulated or negotiated that it eventually is no longer Danza Azteca, but some new form of “Danza Chicana/sun dance/peyote/new age” hybrid? How will Mexcoehuani Danzantes who value the traditions of Mexico and the essence of La Danza evolve a paradigm of tradition that can be seen as an equal by the northern U.S. tribes that currently look at it with disdain?

Having lived through the first through fourth waves of La Danza, I am very optimistic. As more and more Mexcoehuani become centered in the full rituals of kindness, and as more and more Mexcoehuani Danzantes are born into La Danza, the esencia of La Danza will call out to them. It will ask them to journey to Mexico, to see for themselves the richness, power, and spiritual space that is created when the copal incense is lit, the guitars, mandolins and drums are played, and the dancers create their sacred circle of meaning.
The Aguilar Mexcoehuani Continuum of Identity

One of the findings that I have found to be significant is what I call the “The Mexcoehuani Continuum of Identity.” I argue that the transformation of Mexcoehuani identity and sacred space follows a path that starts with the acquiescence of the Mexcoehuani immigrant to the imposition of a “Hispanic” identity by the larger dominant society. This identity is deeply rooted in Eurocentric paradigms of racial purity, chromo-racial caste superiority, and strong assimilationist tendencies.

As the Mexcoehuani becomes politically aware, and starts to look culturally inward to define his/her identity, the center of self-identification starts to shift towards the indigenous, African, and Asian components of Mexcoehuani historical roots. It is the indigenous root of Mexcoehuani culture, with its four thousand-year history on the American continent that energizes, coalesces, and redefines Mexcoehuani identity. The indigenous heritage redefines what it is to be “of Mexican descent,” or to have arisen from Mexico.” This identification brings with it as a consequence of the search for identity, a search for culturally relevant spirituality. This is where the journey to understand indigenous spirituality and the Indocristiano bicultural significance becomes important. It also creates the parameters of Mexcoehuani space (sacred as well as profane) that create membership.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Spiritual Continuum</th>
<th>Chicano/a</th>
<th>Strident Mexi'cas: “Mexi'ca Nazis”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mexican-American</td>
<td>Acceptance of indigenous, Christian other world creed rituals</td>
<td>Mish-mash collection of Indigenous traditions; Male dominated warrior cults</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mexicano/a</td>
<td>Moderate to liberal Political identification</td>
<td>Anarchist—Nihilist, apolitical identification; denial of U.S. citizenship while taking advantage of the opportunities it offers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latino/a</td>
<td>Moderate to liberal Political identification</td>
<td>Environmental – Gaia (Tonantzin) mother Earth Principle; acceptance of debt to ancestral and future generations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispano/a</td>
<td>Moderate Religious values</td>
<td>“Aztec” imperialism, cultural re-creation, and revisions to fulfill mythic/political power base; pseudo-Nahuatl is taught to believers as a sign of membership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Euro-centric</td>
<td>Moderate Religious values</td>
<td>Pan Indigenous tribal solidarity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mexican Identity</td>
<td>Moderate religious values</td>
<td>Homophobic, anti-European, African &amp; Asian peoples of America; ethnic cleansing mentality and single minded focus on Mexic’/ca-centered universe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Euro-centric</td>
<td>Cultural Latin-American solidarity with an emphasis on border issues and Mexican communities of U.S.</td>
<td>Anti-Jewish and anti-Catholic ideology; focus on Neo-Nativist Fundamentalist cults based on European puritan values</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indigenous Identity</td>
<td>Cultural Latin-American solidarity, with an emphasis on current events in Mexico</td>
<td>Mexican mestizo, indigenous spirituality; acceptance of U.S. citizenship; emphasis on the border issues of Mexican communities trans-continental indigenous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spanish Identity</td>
<td>Colonial mestizo and Indian identity through Mexican national Identity</td>
<td>Nahuatl language imperialism; Absence of Spanish language communication, and preference for English as language for communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Latin American</td>
<td>Mexican mestizo, indigenous identity with U.S. citizenship</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spanish</td>
<td>English Language primary in language use; “formal” Spanish is a second language used mostly for communication in selected membership/space activities</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>American English primary in language use; Spanish Language in selected membership/space activities</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Language</td>
<td>Varying spectrum of Spanish Language fluency; English Language acquisition for communication outside of membership/space activities</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English/English</td>
<td>Varying spectrum of Spanish/English Bilingualism; “Spanglish,” “Pocho,” etc. dialects in membership/space activities</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spanglish</td>
<td>Varying spectrum of Spanish/English Bilingualism; “Spanglish,” “Pocho,” etc. dialects in membership/space activities</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pocho</td>
<td>Nahuatl language imperialism; Absence of Spanish language communication, and preference for English as language for communication</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pocho</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dominant Christian</td>
<td>Mexican Spanish primacy in language use; “common” American English Language used in selected membership/space Activities.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A. Range of inter-changeable, mutually acceptable memberships based on Vosivič’s principle of “adapted identities”

B. Un-acceptable memberships using Bucholtz and Hall’s second principle, the positionality principle

Figure 6: Chicano Identity Continuum Population Curve
Figure five shows the continuum of identities based on awareness and validation of the Mexcoehuani indigenous heritage. The X (horizontal) axis shows the continuum of increased awareness and pride in Mexico’s indigenous roots. The Y (vertical) axis shows the individual’s acceptance of the indigenous systems of belief of Mesoamerica in particular, and of the world’s indigenous peoples and societies in general.

The construction of this chart was organized to try to show complex memberships in a rather simplified format to illustrate the interrelationship between spirituality, identity, and membership. The membership continuum is further defined by figure six which shows the cohort model of the membership categories.

At the far left of figure five, I begin the continuum with the identification that I believe shows the greatest amount of rejection of Mexico’s indigenous heritage. The Hispanic and Hispano identities are differentiated only by the level of Spanish language primacy of the members. The “Hispanos” call themselves that because as immigrants, Spanish IS their dominant language. Although many individuals may not reject their indigenous identity in total, most are deeply rooted in the strong vestiges of the Spanish colonial chromo-racial caste system of Latin-America.

The “Hispanics” use Spanish as their root of identity and as their secondary language of communication; yet many do not speak Spanish. Nevertheless, they hold on to this linguistic identity marker in order to hold membership in various spaces such as the larger, conservative Euro-American society, and with “Latino” and Hispano membership groups. The Hispanic membership is used to gain access to high level
governmental, academic, and business opportunities. Their conservative religious values make them important constituencies for policy makers and survey statisticians.

As one travels to the right on the continuum, I show that the Mexicano/a identity is the first one to show its roots in Mexican heritage. Most of those that identify with this membership are either recent immigrants, or U.S. born Mexcoehuani who are not comfortable with the more politicized “Chicano/a” membership.

Mexicano/a identity is deeply rooted in Mexico’s colonial mestizo cultural, the Catholic religion, and the Castilian linguistic heritage of Mexico. Although there is some acceptance of the indigenous past and its importance in Mexican culture, there is still an ambivalence with identifying too closely with “los indios” (the Indians).

The racial purity construct of the Spanish colonial chromo-racial caste superiority, is for the Mexicano and Mexican-American membership groups, much diluted by economic, educational, and social factors of discrimination. This creates a unity of identity against the upper middle classes who tend to disparage the low income, classes that by historical fate are usually the darker people of the community.

We begin to make the transition from Mexicano/a to Mexican-American membership where we begin to see an acceptance of U.S. political identity, as well as some indigenous identity. In this membership space, the dual negotiations of identity and political power begin to take center stage. This negotiation is caused by the Mexican-American’s reality of being caught between U.S. and Mexican societies: The third space of being a Mexcoehuani.
When we enter the Mexican-American membership space, we now have even greater cultural and political buy-in by the Mexcoehuani who use this identity marker. Political progressive liberalism, an awareness of Mexican Native American heritage, and a moderation of religious ideologies, all tend to differentiate the Mexican-American Mexcoehuani from the Mexicano Mexcoehuani.

The flow from Mexican-American to Chicano identity begins to emphasize a stronger progressive (leftist) political ideology. Indigenous identity and a greater acceptance of non-traditional spiritual paths, alternative religions (such as Buddhism, Native American spiritual rituals) become the mainstream of Chicano Mexcoehuani spiritual searches. However eclectic the spiritual or cultural journey becomes, the Chicano Mexcoehuani nevertheless has his/her roots deeply and proudly planted in the cultures of Mesoamerica.

Once we reach the far right section of the Aguilar Mexcoehuani Continuum of Identity, we reach the newest and most problematic identity membership of the Mexcoehuani: the strident Mexi’ca followers. They are so far removed from the rest of the Mexcoehuani continuum that I call them the Mexi’ca Nazis, for their fanatical and ethnocentric worldview.

These are mostly young men and women who have a strong need for tight social controlled over their personal and social lives. Some strident Mexi’cas are recovering addicts; others were brought up in fundamentalist Christian sects, where puritanical concepts of good and evil were distinctly bipolar in their choices of salvation or damnation. Sill other strident Mexi’cas were raised in households that either denied their
indigenous roots, or were ashamed of their Mexican heritage. There are also a number of strident Mexi’ca leaders, who seeing an opportunity to gain financial, sexual, or political power over naïve persons. These innocent persons are willing to turn over their lives, families, and wealth to “leaders” that promise idealized pasts, and perfect futures.

Because this continuum is a three dimensional conceptualization presented in a two dimensional format, it does not show that the ironic next step in the identity of Mexcoehuani (that is, if they allow themselves to enter the “Mexi’ca Nazi” membership) is a complete immersion once again into the Hispanic and thus, anti-indigenous identity membership. This happens because as the innocent followers of the strident Mexi’ca militants are used, deceived, or otherwise hurt by the leadership, they look to the Mexcoehuani identity farthest from the indigenous world view they once had. I have seen this in former Mexcoehuani Danzantes who after becoming disillusioned with the radical politics of strident Mexi’ca identity, return to fundamentalist Christian values.

The Aguilar Mexcoehuani Continuum of Identity shows the fluid, intertwined, and deeply philosophical roots of the various Mexcoehuani memberships and how they are influenced by internal ideology, as well as external forces.

Figure six shows the cohort model of the membership categories. I have divided the Aguilar Chicano Identity Continuum into a three part curve. The first section is composed of section one: The Hispano-Hispanic-Latino cohort. These three identity memberships share the closest ideologies, and thus it is easy for their memberships to navigate the mutually acceptable ranges of Vasović’s principle of adapted identities. This does not mean that the Hispano-Hispanic-Latino cohort cannot, or does not “travel” into
the other two cohorts. It just means that it is significantly easier to find acceptance and membership in communities that are closely aligned in ideologies and values.

Section two is that of the Mexicano and Mexican-American cohort. This cohort exhibits shared constructs with the section 1 cohort, but now its members begin to take a politically aware and critical view of life in their third space. This space crystallizes into being wherever Mexicanos and Mexican-Americans live, work, and die. This ideological concept of a third space is shared with the Chicano/a membership; but the Mexicano and Mexican-American do not go as far as to give it the politically charged name of “Aztlan.”

Section three is made up of the Chicano/a and strident Mexi’ca memberships. The greatest difference between these two memberships is that the Chicano/a is firmly rooted in the here and now. Table 41 shows the major differences between the Chicano/a ideologies and those of the strident Mexi’cas (Mexi’ca Nazis):
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chicano/a</th>
<th>Strident Mex’ca Nazis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Search for Native American languages of ancestral nations in Mexico.</td>
<td>Nahuatl language imperialism; pseudo-Nahuatl taught as the one true indigenous language of the American continent.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environmental – Gaia (Tonantzin) Mother Earth Principle; debt to the ancestors and to the descendants.</td>
<td>Mish-mash collection of Indigenous traditions; focus on sacrifice and suffering for the sake of the universe.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Understanding of Mexcoehuani ancient spiritual roots in Mesoamerican, European, and African traditions; Rejection of bipolar religious dogma and value systems.</td>
<td>Anti-Jewish and anti-Catholic ideology; focus on Neo-Nativist Fundamentalist cults based on European puritan values.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Figure six shows that the Strident Mexi’cas are a small but vocal minority of the Mexcoehuani population. They self isolate from the larger Mexcoehuani population (and the general populations of the U.S. and Mexico). Like the fundamentalist Christians, Muslims, and others, the Mexi’ca Nazi communities fear the technological, political, and economic currents of the past fifty years. What started out as a simple Chicano search for something to believe in 35 years ago, has led to a separatist ideology that can lead to isolation, hatred, and self-destruction.

My observations over the past 35 years are that the most vociferous leaders and their easily manipulated followers, usually burn themselves out quickly. Hatred is a costly addiction. Moreover, self-hatred is the most costly addiction of all. People who advocate extreme forms of their own identity usually do so out of fear of their own failings, or of not measuring up to their own cultural expectations.

The manipulators of the Mexcoehuani indigenous traditions usually prey on innocent teens, college students, persons who have been battling obsessive-compulsive behaviors, or persons who have had unhappy life stories. These “vulnerable populations” are easily swayed; they are easily convince that free will and free thought are bad, and that the group leaders are somehow above the level of human reality.

The extremists create a caricature of their identity, and then they place it on an altar for all to worship and believe in. Ultimately, human intelligence, inquisitiveness, and the eternal search for justice eventually tumble the golden idols into the ditch, to be buried by the sands of time and indifference. Such is the cost of blind, arrogant hatred.
Implications

I am one of the earliest practitioners of this dance tradition in the U.S. and my participation in several historical events in the creation of Mexcoehuani identity gave me a special lens to look through in this study.

The Mexcoehuani search for identity and sacred space has been one of the most important aspects of Mexcoehuani self-determination and empowerment. This ability of young Mexcoehuani and Chicana students to have psychological, spiritual, and historical grounding is critical for resiliency, and empowerment. If the Mexcoehuani and Immigrant Mexican communities are to be healthy and active participants in the evolution and growth of U.S. society, they need to have a sense of self-worth, a historic dimension to the daily decisions that they must make for their children, for their elders, and for their descendants.

An understanding of the ancient heritage of Mexico is much more than just an exercise in chauvinistic nationalism. This process of self-identity rooted in historical traditions, allows the many different socioeconomic levels of the Mexcoehuani communities to find common ground in their emotional, historical, and spiritual grounding. The process of self-identity and self-realization leads to empowerment, agency, and self-determination for the communities that have been disenfranchised, oppressed, and marginalized on both sides of the U.S. Mexico border.

Whether a person speaks English or Spanish, the indigenous roots of Mexico offer a common ground for the Mexcoehuani that transcends language, immigration status, and educational level. This grounding is critical as the percentage of Americans who have
Mexcoehuani heritage continues to grow. It has implications for culturally relevant education, cross cultural studies, and inter-group communication.

The Aztec Dance tradition is perhaps the strongest force of the Indigenist process of finding self-identity and sacred space. By giving Mexcoehuani/Mexicanos (and indeed many other non-Mexican Latinos) an empirically verifiable connection to their precolumbian past (linguistic, sociological, psychological, anthropological, archeological, and spiritual), the rituals of kindness that are La Danza Azteca provide an alternative to the Eurocentric male dominated religious traditions of Christianity, Judaism and Islam that have dominated this continent for over 500 years.

**Pedagogic Implications**

To have taken this journey through time, language, spiritual tradition and physical space, is to have seen a parallel reality that lies alongside, and yet within, the larger Euro-Afro-centric society of the United States of America. This is a reality that gains more urgency and potential each day. The urgency is that, as the Mexcoehuani population continues to grow as a percentage of the U.S. population, there will be more and more disconnects between what the U.S. Educational system offers with its western European cultural approach, and what the Mexcoehuani students want and need. I argue that the educational elite need to incorporate rigorous academic curriculum in a system of culturally sensitive best practices that will challenge, respect, and validate the experiences, cultural memories, and spiritual values of immigrant- rooted communities.
Expecting Mexcoehuani students to blindly accept the old “melting pot” educational and cultural paradigm will prove fruitless.

Culturally validating rigorous curriculum should be tailored to the taxpaying communities that are being served by the public school system. This will give fruit to several positive outcomes:

Immigrant-rooted communities will feel that their heritage, experience, and values are of importance to what Milton Gordon called the various levels of assimilation into U.S. society; assimilation can thus be seen not as a loss of cultural heritage, but as an addition to American society and traditions (M. M. Gordon, 1964). Non-immigrant communities can learn about the rich multi-cultural heritage of their fellow residents, and redefine what it is to be “American.”

Racial, economic, and religious intolerance against fellow U.S. citizens and residents can be headed off at the K-6 grade level, a level where children learn their biases and mistrusts, by teaching and exploring parallel historical heritages that have co-existed on this continent for hundreds of years. This must be carried out in a rigorous, inclusive, and democratic multicultural and multilingual educational process. It is also important that any K-12 curriculum, initiated for immigrant-rooted communities, be of the highest academic standards, and that it is also a pedagogy guided by transformative social consciousness.

Many times the failure of Mexcoehuani students (and of immigrant-rooted communities or low-income communities in general), is blamed for the failure in school. However, in many cases, it is the educational institution’s staff that is grossly unprepared
for multi-ethnic reality, and they lack even the most basic cultural competency required to reach across the linguistic, social, and spiritual divide of our pluralistic society.

It is time that institutions of higher education educate tomorrow’s teachers with not just a superficial “awareness” of cultural, linguistic, and social diversity. The pedagogic institutions of learning must teach relevant skills that can transform fear, or outright rejection of “the Other,” into a multi-pathed discourse where the teacher learns from the students (about their cultural assets), and the students learn from the teacher (about the larger society’s cultural capital)

It is also time for the extremist faction of Mexcoehuani community leaders to accept that they will never be able to turn back the clock of history. The Mexi’ca Nazis can rant and rave all they want about the “way it was,” or “the way it should be.” But as long as even one Mexcoehuani youth ends up in prison, dies in a gang fight, dies of substance abuse, or of AIDS, all of the radical posturing of the extremist Mexcoehuani elite, will kill rather than save the Mexcoehuani communities, and all low-income, immigrant-rooted communities for that matter.

Mexcoehuani leaders must focus on the future, not on the past. I believe that the vast majority of socially conscious Mexcoehuani, who take on the traditional foundations of Mesoamerica, will be successful agents of positive change in our communities.

The struggles of the past two thousand years have given the Mexcoehuani communities an incredible source of pride, energy, tradition, and spiritual strength. It is now our generation’s turn to take the best of this heritage, and transform the future.
Recommendations for Future Research

My recommendations for future research are these:

More research needs to be done on how La Danza developed in the critical years of 1521-1649. I use this time period as a starting with the fall of Mexi’co-Tenochtitlan on August 13, 1521. Here is where the great reformulation of indigenous and European traditions began. I end this time period with the year the Nican Mopohua (also known as the Huei tlamahuizoltica) was first published. This is the first time the legend of the apparitions of the Virgin of Guadalupe at the hill of Tepeyac (today La Villa de Tepeyac) were first presented to the faithful. Once this pious legend was in place, the central essence of La Danza was set.

More research is needed for the second most important time period of La Danza Azteca: the period from 1910-1950. This epic era of revolution, death, and cultural manipulation by the Mexican government is a time where many of the traditions that had been zealously guarded by the old families of Conchero lineage were lost. Younger Danzantes with or without Danza lineage began to experiment with a revival of Aztec identity, uniforms, and precolumbian instrumentation.

Young Mexcoehuani researchers need to explore the traditions maintained by elders, and the lives of Florencio Yescas, Andrés Segura, Manuel Pineda, Natividad Reyna, and others that were instrumental in the development of the Azteca style of Danza.

More research needs to be done in the U.S. to document the various stands of Danza that have evolved since the death of Florencio Yescas and Andrés Segura. It is urgent that
this research be carried out before the Danzantes of the first wave of La Danza begin to pass on to the land of their ancestors. With the passing of every one of this pioneering Danzantes, an important part of Mexcoehuani history is lost, perhaps to be replaced by folk history or worse, by manipulated mythology that irrevocably changes the tone and tenor of Mexcoehuani Danza.

More research needs to be carried out on how the identity and membership of Mexcoehuani sacred space is influenced by the Native American tribes and nations of the U.S. Also important to examine, will be how Mexcoehuani Danza Azteca has influenced the political, economic, and cultural evolution of indigenous U.S. gaming nations that just decades ago were dying of alcoholism, malnourishment, and self-destructive behavior.

Has La Danza affected the revitalization of American Indian tradition outside of the northern Plains tradition? How have the “non-Mexican” tribes of the U.S. seen the evolution of La Danza Azteca? What do the traditional elders of these tribes think about the young Mexcoehuani’s need to mix traditions in order to “purify” their “Mexicaness?”

Future research needs to examine how La Danza Azteca will evolve in regards with participation and dialogue with the Mexican practitioners of La Danza? Will the young Mexcoehuani practitioners of La Danza who reject all Mestizo and Christian reformulations of indigenous culture eventually create their own separate mythological ontology that breaks completely from the Mexican roots of La Danza Azteca? Will the Mexcoehuani Danzantes that try to follow the traditions brought to Aztlan continue to participate in the ceremonies of Mexico? How will this participation affect their understanding and practice of the rituals of kindness?
More of this research needs to be carried out by Danzantes from Mexican and Mexcoehuani cultures. The emic voice of La Danza needs to be captured in a form that shows academic rigor and yet still reflects the essence of the teoyalhualli, the sacred circle that La Danza Azteca creates.

Somehow, a personal journey that started for me on a cold rainy December over thirty-five years ago has given fruition to my research that could be broken into four separate and complete dissertations. When I wrote my first history of La Danza Azteca in 1982, my audience was a small and (it appeared at that time) fragile amalgamation of Chicano activists, Mexican immigrants, and “mixed blood” Native Americans who wanted to feel connected to the painfully beautiful ruins of Central Mexico. Painfully beautiful because their silent outlines in the waning light of day served to remind us of what had befallen our indigenous ancestor hundreds of years ago. We felt helpless because we could not change the results of those fateful years of the early 16th century.

Some of us went on other paths. Some became sun dancers following the Lakota tradition. Others followed the traditions of the Chumash, Miwok, or Paiute, nations. Still others sank into drugs, alcohol, or suicide. I married, and I saw my wife and then my children begin their paths into a beautiful tradition that I had only begun to understand in 1982 when I wrote my first history of La Danza. Although it was very bare and lacked the knowledge that I have learned over the past 35 years, it was nevertheless welcomed by the Danza community in the U.S. as “authoritative.” From time to time, I still see badly photocopied and stapled versions of it at Danza events.
When my maestro Florencio passed away in 1985, I felt as though my life raft had been taken away from me. It took years of struggle with my inner demons, my fears of failure, and my search for my own personal *esencia* and lineage to get to the point where I at last felt strong enough to begin a new era of learning. I also had to overcome the struggle with people in my own community who felt that what we were trying to create in our dance circle was arrogant and selfish, because I would not (and still will not) back down or compromise what Florencio and the other elders had taught us. Some of my detractors in the Mexcoehuani community saw my journey in the PhD. program as a sign that I had turned to the “dark side of the white man’s academic system.” However, I feel such talk is the sound of the inner fears and insecurities of those that cannot or will not discipline themselves for the sake of our community’s future.

I have learned the hard truth that it is better to dance alone than to dance with a pack of self-destructive detractors. The creator has given me the glorious privilege of being one of the young men in that first group, standing proudly in that postcard photo taken at the Centro Cultural in 1976. That small group has in a short time, become hundreds of men, women, children in scores of dance circles, dancing as families, in harmony and joy.

This study has given me the agency and permission to look back at what we have accomplished since those early days. This gives me great hope for the future of the rituals of kindness of La Danza Azteca. This treasure will dwell among us, the Mexcoehuani for generations to come.

¡El es Dios!
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APPENDICES

Online questionnaire

Reformatted for hard copy from the SDSU IRB Approved Chicano Danzante Azteca Survey on Survey Monkey website:


**Chicano Danzante Azteca Survey**

My name is Mario E. Aguilar and I am the Capitán of Danza Mexi'cayotl. I have been a Danzante/musico indigena since 1973. I am working on my dissertation in the San Diego State University /Claremont Graduate University Joint doctoral Program, and I need your help.

**Purpose of this study:**

I am trying to understand the many different reasons Chicanos/as become Danzantes, and how it feels to be a Danzante. I am looking at how La Danza has helped up identify yourself within your community. I am asking adults Danzantes to complete an online survey. Part of the results was reported in my dissertation that I will complete as a requirement of my graduate program.

**Confidentiality of this study**

The following survey will ask you to describe a bit about yourself and how long ago you started in the Danza Azteca tradition. I will ask you to tell me how you feel about certain opinions that have been shared with me over the past thirty five years about the La Danza and its practitioners.
The survey also includes questions about your age, sex, resident community and cultural affiliation. It will take about 15 minutes of your time to complete the survey.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. Because of the personal nature of the questions asked, you may reflect on unpleasant memories while responding to a question during the survey. If you feel uncomfortable, you may discontinue participation at any time. You will not be paid to participate in this study, and there is no cost to you for participation.

If you decide to participate, your responses will be anonymous that is, recorded without any identifying information that is linked to you. Confidentiality will be maintained to the extent allowed by law. If you have any questions regarding this survey, please contact me at 619.948.8861 or cuauhtlehccoc@cox.net. You may also contact the Institutional Review Board at SDSU (619-594-6622) to report problems or concerns related to this study.

If you decide to participate, you will be entered into a raffle for two $50 certificates at the Cesar E. Chavez Foundation web site store. You do not have to complete the survey to participate in the drawing.

**Benefits of the study:**

There is very little research available currently that documents the history, development, and growth of La Danza Azteca within the U.S. This study would add to the limited amount of research available on La Danza Azteca tradition in the U.S. for social scientists, educators, artists, writers, and ethnographers. This study will also add data that reflects the cultural and spiritual paradigm that Danza Azteca represents within
the Chicano/Mexicano communities. I cannot guarantee however, that you will receive any benefits from participating in this study. The San Diego State University Institutional Review Board has approved this consent form.

The Questionnaire: Section One - Demographics

Tipehuaceh -Comenzamos -We begin

1. What is your name? The answer to this question is optional if you do not want to participate in the raffle for the two $50 certificates
   a. First
   b. Middle
   c. Last

2. What is your gender?
   a. Female
   b. Male

3. What is your age?
   a. Under 18 years old
   b. 19-25 years old
   c. 26-30 years old
   d. 31-35 years old
   e. 36-40 years old
   f. 41-45 years old
   g. 46-50 years old
   h. 51-55 years old
i. 56-60 years old
j. Over 60 years old
k. Other (please specify)

4. What is your e-mail address?

5. Where do you live?
   a. City
   b. State
   c. U.S.
   d. Mexico
   e. Other (please explain below)

6. Where were you born?
   a. U.S.
   b. Mexico
   c. Other (please explain below)

7. If you live in the U.S., how long have you lived here? Please check all that apply.
   a. All of my life
   b. Since I was a small child
   c. Since I was a young adult
   d. I have lived here more than 16 years
   e. I have lived here less than 15 years
   f. I have lived here less than 10 years
   g. I have lived here less than 15 years
h. I have lived here less than 1 year
i. Other (please specify)

8. Are you:
   a. Monolingual
   b. Bilingual
   c. Multilingual

9. If you speak more than one language, can you tell me which ones and how well you speak them?
   Somewhat proficient: can speak  Slight understanding  I do not speak this language
   a. Spanish
   b. English
   c. Nahuatl
   d. Otomi
   e. Mazahua
   f. Purepecha
   g. Mixteco
   h. Zapoteco
   i. Yoremih
   j. Raramuri
   k. Tenek
   l. Huichol
10. To the best of your knowledge, do you have indigenous ancestry that can be traced back at least three generations?

a. No I do not

b. No, but I know that somewhere in my ancestry I have indigenous blood

c. Yes, I can trace my indigenous ancestry back at least three generations

11. If you said yes in the previous question, do you know what your ancestry is? Please select all that apply:

a. Nahuatl

b. Otomi

c. Mazahua

d. Purepecha

e. Caxcan

f. Tepehuan

g. Cora

h. Mixteco

i. Zapoteco

j. Yoremih

k. Raramuri

l. Tenek

m. Huichol

n. Maya
o. Pima/Papago
p. Central or South American indigenous nations
q. Spanish
r. Other European
s. Other (please specify)
t. 12. What do you consider yourself ethnically? Please pick all that apply*
u. Chicano/a
v. Mexicano/a
w. Mexican-American
x. Indigenous (no tribal affiliation)
y. American Indian (please list tribal affiliation below)
z. Latino (please list below what kind of Latino below)
aa. Hispanic
bb. Hispano
cc. Spanish-American
dd. Pollo/polla
e. Chuntaro/a
ff. White/Euro-American
gg. White/European
hh. White/Middle Eastern
ii. African-American
jj. African (Somali, Nigerian)
kk. Asian (please list affiliation below)

ll. Asian Indian (Hindi, Pakistani)

mm. Pacific Islander (please list affiliation below)

nn. Other (please specify)

Section Two - Identity

13. Do you have an indigenous name you use within la Danza Azteca?

a. Yes

b. No

14. If yes, what is your indigenous name? ________________________

If no, please mark N/A

15. If you have an indigenous Danza Azteca name, please tell me when you received

a. this name:

b. At birth

c. At baptism/naming ceremony

d. As a child, before I started to dance in the Danza Azteca tradition

e. After I started to dance in the Danza Azteca tradition

f. Other

N/A: I do not have an indigenous Danza Azteca name

16. If question 15 does not have the correct answer for you, please write in the answer that best fits your experience. ________________________________
Section Three – The History of La Danza Azteca

17. How long have you been an active Danzante?

a. Less than one year
b. 1-2 years
c. 3-5 years
d. 6-10 years
e. 10-15 years
f. 16-20 years
g. 21-25 years
h. 26-30 years
i. Over 31 years

Comments: ________________________________________________________________

18. Which Danza circle do you belong to right now? Where is this Danza circle located?

If you are not a part of a Danza Azteca circle right now, please enter N/A

19. How long has the Danza Azteca circle you currently belong to been in existence?

a. Less than one year
b. 1-2 years
c. 3-5 years
d. 6-10 years
20. In all the years you have been an active Danzante Azteca, how many Danza circles have you belonged to? This means that you have been an integral part of a circle, and have a jefe or jefa that commands your Danza life, and when you dance at ceremonies, you dance under their palabra (rules).

a. Only one, the same one I started with.
b. 2-3
c. 4-5
d. 6-7
e. 8-9
f. 10 or more
g. I have never been an integral part of a traditional Danza Azteca circle.

Comments: ____________________________________________________________

21. Do you hold the responsibility of a palabra (title or command) in your current Danza circle?

a. Capitán or Capitana
b. Segundo Capitán or Segunda Capitana
22. Have you ever held a palabra (title or command) in any PAST Danza circle?

a. Capitán or Capitana
b. Segundo Capitán or Segunda Capitana
c. Heredero/Heredera de la palabra
d. Alferes
e. Malinche de Altar
f. Malinche de Marcha
g. Malinche de Campo
h. Malinche de Campana
i. Sargento de Marcha
j. Sargento de Instrumentos
k. Conchero/Conchera

l. I have never been responsible for a palabra

m. Other (please specify)

Section four - In Tlatepotzco -Los Niños -The Children

Please let me know if you have any of your family members that also dance in a traditional Danza Azteca circle:

_____________________________________________________

23. Do you have any children that also dance in the same Danza Azteca circle as you do today? ________________________________

24. If you have children, what ages are your children?

a. Less than one year old

b. 1-5 years old

c. 6-10 years old

d. 11-15 years old

e. 16-20 years old

f. 21-25 years old

g. Over 26 years old

h. I do not have any children

i. I have children, but they do not dance

j. I have children and they dance with me in my Danza circle

k. I have children, but they dance in another Danza circle
1. Other (please specify)

Comments: ____________________________________________________________

Please let me know if you have any of your family members that also dance in a traditional Danza Azteca circle:

______________________________________________________________________

Please let me know what your life partner status is.

25. Do you have a spouse/partner/significant other? ____________

a. I have a spouse that is a Danzante in my current Danza Azteca circle

b. I have a spouse that is involved in my current Danza Azteca circle as a non-Danzante

c. I have a spouse that is not a Danzante and is not involved in my current Danza Azteca circle

d. I have a partner/significant other that is a Danzante in my current Danza Azteca circle

e. I have a partner/significant other that is involved in my current Danza Azteca circle as a non-Danzante

f. I have a partner/significant other that is not a Danzante and is not involved in my current Danza Azteca circle

g. Other (please specify)

26. Did you meet before or after you started participating in La Danza Azteca?

a. Before

b. After
c. N/A

d. Not Applicable

Comments: ____________________________________________________

Please let me know what your life partner status is.

a. Danzantes in the same Danza circle than the one I belong to today

b. Danzantes but in another Danza circle than the one I belong to today

c. Non-Danzantes

d. Other (please specify)

Please tell me about the leadership of the traditional Danza Azteca circle you belong to currently

28. Please tell me once again the name of the current traditional Danza Azteca circle you belong to? ________________________________________________

29. Who are the Capitanes or Jefes of your traditional Azteca dance circle?

_______________________________________________

30. What title do they use in the Dance circle?

a. Capitana or Capitán

b. Jefe or Jefa

c. Tlahtoani

d. Maestra or Maestro

e. Segundo Capitán or Segunda Capitana

f. Heredero/Heredera de la palabra

g. Alferes
h. Malinche de Altar
i. Malinche de Marcha
j. Malinche de Campo
k. Malinche de Campana
l. Sargento de Marcha
m. Sargento de Instrumentos
n. Conchero/Conchera
o. None
p. Other (please specify) ___________________________

31. To the best of your knowledge, how did your group leader(s) receive the title they use in your current Danza circle?

32. Please indicate what palabras your Danza circle has active? Check as many as apply.

   a. I do not know
   b. The leader(s) received their Nombramiento (title) from traditional Danza Azteca elders in Mexico.
   c. The leader(s) received their Nombramiento (title) from traditional Danza Azteca elders in the U.S.
   d. The leader(s) received their Nombramiento (title) from someone OTHER than traditional Danza Azteca elders in Mexico or the U.S.
   e. The leader(s) gave themselves their Nombramiento (title)
   f. They have no traditional Nombramiento (title)
33. Please tell me what musical instruments you use as your *Armas De La Luz* (weapons of the light)

34. Do your children or significant other play traditional instruments in your Danza circle?

35. Do you, or have you made your own instruments for your participation in La Danza?
3. I have made my rattles
4. I have made my flutes
5. I have bought my string instruments from other Danzantes
6. I have bought my drums from other Danzantes
7. I have bought my rattles from other Danzantes
8. I have bought my flutes from other Danzantes
9. I buy everything on Ebay
10. Other (please specify): ________________________________

36. Do you attend traditional Danza Azteca ceremonies?
   a. Yes, but only those of my Danza circle
   b. Yes, those of my Danza circle, and those that my Danza circle is invited to attend
   c. I go wherever I want to go
   d. No

37. Have you ever participated in a Traditional Danza Azteca ceremony in Mexico?
   a. Yes
   b. No

38. If yes, please indicate all the ceremonies you have attended
   a. Tonantzin Guadalupe at La Villa del Tepeyac
   b. Señor de Chalma
   c. Mayahuel Los Remedios
   d. Señor del Sacromonte, Amecameca
   e. La Santa Cruz de Culiacan, Queretaro
39. Please indicate all the traditional Danza Azteca ceremonies you have participated in or currently participate in:

   a. None
   b. Templo Mayor
   c. Teotihuacan
   d. Tula
   e. Ixcateopan
   f. Other (please specify)
   g. Velación de Animas
   h. Sacrificio de Danza
   i. Paso de Camino (Procesión/Procession)
   j. Penitentes
   k. Levantamiento de cruz
   l. Nombramineto de palabra
   m. Other (please specify)
Please tell me how much you know about the following topics of La Danza Azteca

40. Please tell me to the best of your knowledge, do you know how, where, and when the tradition we know as La Danza Azteca began?
   a. No, I really do not know
   b. Yes, I believe I do know, and I will answer below.
   c. If yes, please give me your answer here as best as you know:
   d. La Danza is purely indigenous
   e. La Danza is a mix of indigenous and Spanish Catholic traditions (mestizo)
   f. La Danza is a mix of indigenous, Spanish Catholic, African, and Asian traditions (mestizo)
   g. Honestly, I do not know.

42. The roots of the tradition we know as La Danza Azteca can be definitely traced back by scientists and/or Danza practitioners in Mexico:
   a. 50 years
   b. 100 years
   c. 200 - 400 years
   d. 400 - 1,000 years
   e. Over 1,000 years
   f. I honestly do not know
   g. Other (please specify)

43. Do you know the difference between the following traditions within La Danza
Azteca?
Yes  No

a. Concheros
b. Guerreros
c. Culturales

44. To the best of your knowledge, when did La Danza Azteca first arrive in Aztlan

2000's
1990's
1980's
1970's
1960's
Before the 1950's

Honestly, I do not know.

45. To the best of your knowledge, who were the first Danza elders to bring La Danza Azteca to Aztlan, with the intention of teaching La Danza (as opposed to just performing)? Please list the names of the first elders: __________________________

46. To the best of your knowledge, how many traditional Danza elders, who have been recognized by the Danza Azteca circles of Mexico, are teaching today in Aztlan

I do not really know
none
1-3
4-8
More than 13

If you know their names, please list below:

47. Do you know the difference between a traditional Danza Azteca circle, and an Azteca dance group? If yes, please explain to me the difference: 

48. How do you feel about the following comments?

The choices are:

a. I strongly agree with this statement

b. I agree with this statement

c. I am not sure

d. I disagree with this statement

e. I strongly disagree with this statement

The questions

a. La Danza is too associated with Christianity in Mexico

b. La Danza is too commercialized in Aztlan

c. La Danza is too politicized in Aztlan

d. Not very many Danzantes really know what La Danza Azteca really means

e. Too many non-Danzantes see La Danza as a folkloric entertainment

f. 49. How do you feel about the following statements?
g. La Danza Azteca is just a Hollywood style of show that does not have any spirituality in it.

h. La Danza Azteca is not really a pure indigenous tradition as other traditions such as the Sun dance, the sweat lodge, vision quests, peyote ceremonies, or other American Indian ceremonies.

i. Young Chicanos/Mexicanos of today are more willing to learn La Danza Azteca and all of its ceremonies, not just the dance performance part.

j. The young Chicanos/Mexicanos of today are more willing to go to Mexico and participate in the traditional Danza ceremonies that previous generations.

k. The young Chicanos/Mexicanos of today are more willing to look at La Danza a lifelong commitment for themselves and their families than previous generations.

l. The young Chicanos/Mexicanos of today are more realistic about the role of La Danza Azteca in the modern world, and are less apt to be fanatical about their indigenous heritage.

m. Comments: _______________________________________________________

50. Is there anything you would like to add or change in your traditional Danza Azteca circle? Please select all that apply.

a. More focus on us participating in other groups' ceremonies

b. More of an effort by our circle to go to the traditional ceremonies in Mexico

c. More of an effort to teach us the alabanzas that are part of La Danza Azteca tradition

d. More focus on teaching us the meanings of the dances
e. More sharing of my group's leadership with others and less of a personality cult of the group leaders

f. More of an effort to integrate our Danza lives into the mainstream of Chicano/Mexicano society

g. More of an effort to participate in the ceremonies of local indigenous nations

h. More of an effort to teach us the languages that are a direct sources of our Danza Azteca: Nahuatl, Otomi, Purepecha, Mazahua

i. My Danza circle is perfect! I do not want to change anything

j. More transparency within our groups dynamics, and less mystery or "you aren't ready to know" attitudes

k. A greater effort on the part of our jefes to work with other traditional Danza Azteca groups that follow the path of Mexican Danza

l. Other (please specify) ________________________________

51. What do you think would improve your understanding of La Danza? Could this learning be applied to your daily life? ________________________________

55. Is there anything you would like to share with me in regards to your experience, hopes, and dreams in La Danza Azteca?

Thank you for completing this survey!!!! If you would like to participate in a raffle for two $50 gift certificates for gifts at the César E. Chávez Foundation website store (The store is located at: http://www.chavezfoundation.org/zencart/), Please fill out the following information:

a. Name
b. Address

Questionnaire for the Auto-historia narrators

1. What is your earliest memory of La Danza?
2. Please tell me the story of how you became involved in La Danza.
3. Who was your teacher and how do you continue the lineage of his/her teachings?
4. Why do you participate in La Danza?
5. What is it about La Danza that keeps you involved?
6. How is your family involved in the group?
7. What role does La Danza play in your family?
8. Do you find that your relationships with the members of your group are as strong, stronger, or nor as strong as your relationships with your extended genetic family?
9. Please tell me some of your favorite memories about your family and La Danza.
10. Who is involved in your Danza group?
11. What brings and keeps people in your group?
12. What are the values that your group strives for?
13. Please tell me about the symbolism of La Danza and what it means to you.
14. Please tell me the significance of the circle and how it relates to family.
15. How are your children involved in La Danza? If you do not have any children, would you like them to be involved in La Danza?
16. What does it mean to you to pass on this lineage to your children?
17. Do you find La Danza to be empowering for yourself? For your community?
a. If so how?

b. If not why not?

18. Is there a difference between being religious and being spiritual? If so, what is the difference?

19. Do you consider yourself a religious person?

   a. If so how?

   b. If not, why not?

20. What does the term “sacred Space” mean to you? Would the term sacred space mean anything in terms of La Danza Azteca?

21. Does La Danza have its drawbacks or negatives?

   a. If so what are these?

   b. If not, why not?

22. How do you feel about those Danzantes that mix in other traditions La Danza?

23. How do you feel about those Danzantes that reject the Catholic traditions of Mexican culture in La Danza?

24. Is there anything you would like to comment on that I have left out?

   DVD of La Danza Azteca

   The DVD included in this dissertation shows my dance group’s annual ceremony held July 19-20, 2008. The DVD demonstrates four of the “rituals of kindness” of the Danza Azteca:

   1. A general practice of the researcher’s dance circle at a recreation center
2. A traditional gathering of groups to perform an “ensayo real,” or dress rehearsal
   for the upcoming Azteca dance “sacrificio” (sacrifice or dance ceremony).

3. A “velación” (a candle vigil) to receive the guest dance groups, as well as the
   spirits of the ancestral elders.

4. A dance carried out at the 28th annual Danza Mexi’cayotl dance ceremony held on
   July 20, 2008 at Chicano Park, San Diego.
I Am Joaquin

Rodolfo Corky Gonzales (Gonzalez, 1967)

Yo soy Joaquín,

perdido en un mundo de confusión:

I am Joaquín, lost in a world of confusion,

caught up in the whirl of a gringo society,

confused by the rules, scorned by attitudes,

suppressed by manipulation, and destroyed by modern society.

My fathers have lost the economic battle

and won the struggle of cultural survival.

And now! I must choose between the paradox of

victory of the spirit, despite physical hunger,

or to exist in the grasp of American social neurosis,

sterilization of the soul and a full stomach.

Yes, I have come a long way to nowhere;

unwillingly dragged by that monstrous, technical,

industrial giant called Progress and Anglo success....

I look at myself.

I watch my brothers.

I shed tears of sorrow. I sow seeds of hate.

I withdraw to the safety within the circle of life --
MY OWN PEOPLE

I am Cuauhtémoc, proud and noble,

leader of men, king of an empire civilized

beyond the dreams of the gachupín Cortés,

who also is the blood, the image of myself.

I am the Maya prince.

I am Nezahualcóyotl, great leader of the Chichimecas.

I am the sword and flame of Cortes the despot

And I am the eagle and serpent of the Aztec civilization.

I owned the land as far as the eye

could see under the Crown of Spain,

and I toiled on my Earth and gave my Indian sweat and blood

for the Spanish master who ruled with tyranny over man and

beast and all that he could trample

But...THE GROUND WAS MINE.

I was both tyrant and slave.

As the Christian church took its place in God's name,

to take and use my virgin strength and trusting faith,

the priests, both good and bad, took--

but gave a lasting truth that Spaniard Indian Mestizo

were all God's children.

And from these words grew men who prayed and fought
for their own worth as human beings, for that
GOLDEN MOMENT of FREEDOM.

I was part in blood and spirit of that courageous village priest
Hidalgo who in the year eighteen hundred and ten
rang the bell of independence and gave out that lasting cry--

El Grito de Dolores

"Que mueran los gachupines y que viva la Virgen de Guadalupe...."

I sentenced him who was me I excommunicated him, my blood.
I drove him from the pulpit to lead a bloody revolution for him and me....
I killed him.

His head, which is mine and of all those
who have come this way,
I placed on that fortress wall
to wait for independence. Morelos! Matamoros! Guerrero!
all companeros in the act, STOOD AGAINST THAT WALL OF INFAMY
to feel the hot gouge of lead which my hands made.
I died with them ... I lived with them .... I lived to see our country free.
Free from Spanish rule in eighteen-hundred-twenty-one.

Mexico was free??
The crown was gone but all its parasites remained,
and ruled, and taught, with gun and flame and mystic power.
I worked, I sweated, I bled, I prayed,
and waited silently for life to begin again.
I fought and died for Don Benito Juarez, guardian of the Constitution.
I was he on dusty roads on barren land as he protected his archives
as Moses did his sacraments.
He held his Mexico in his hand on
the most desolate and remote ground which was his country.
And this giant little Zapotec gave not one palm's breadth
of his country's land to kings or monarchs or presidents of foreign powers.
I am Joaquin.
I rode with Pancho Villa,
crude and warm, a tornado at full strength,
nourished and inspired by the passion and the fire of all his earthy people.
I am Emiliano Zapata.
"This land, this earth is OURS."
The villages, the mountains, the streams
belong to Zapatistas.
Our life or yours is the only trade for soft brown earth and maize.
All of which is our reward,
a creed that formed a constitution
for all who dare live free!
"This land is ours . . .
Father, I give it back to you.
Mexico must be free. . ."
I ride with revolutionists
against myself.
I am the Rurales,
course and brutal,
I am the mountain Indian,
superior over all.
The thundering hoof beats are my horses. The chattering machine guns
are death to all of me:
Yaqui
Tarahumara
Chamala
Zapotec
Mestizo
Español.
I have been the bloody revolution,
The victor,
The vanquished.
I have killed
And been killed.
I am the despots Díaz
And Huerta
And the apostle of democracy,
Francisco Madero.
I am
The black-shawled
Faithful women
Who die with me
Or live
Depending on the time and place.
I am faithful, humble Juan Diego,
The Virgin of Guadalupe,
Tonantzín, Aztec goddess, too.
I rode the mountains of San Joaquin.
I rode east and north
As far as the Rocky Mountains,
And
All men feared the guns of
Joaquín Murrieta.
I killed those men who dared
To steal my mine,
Who raped and killed my love
My wife.
Then I killed to stay alive.
I was Elfego Baca,

living my nine lives fully.

I was the Espinoza brothers

of the Valle de San Luis.

All were added to the number of heads that in the name of civilization

were placed on the wall of independence, heads of brave men

who died for cause or principle, good or bad.

Hidalgo! Zapata!

Murrieta! Espinozas!

Are but a few.

They dared to face

The force of tyranny

Of men who rule by deception and hypocrisy.

I stand here looking back,

And now I see the present,

And still I am a campesino,

I am the fat political coyote—

I,

Of the same name,

Joaquín,

In a country that has wiped out

All my history,
Stifled all my pride,
In a country that has placed a
Different weight of indignity upon my age-old burdened back.
Inferiority is the new load . . . .
The Indian has endured and still
Emerged the winner,
The Mestizo must yet overcome,
And the gachupín will just ignore.
I look at myself
And see part of me
Who rejects my father and my mother
And dissolves into the melting pot
To disappear in shame.
I sometimes
Sell my brother out
And reclaim him
For my own when society gives me
Token leadership
In society's own name.
I am Joaquín,
Who bleeds in many ways.
The altars of Moctezuma
I stained a bloody red.
My back of Indian slavery
Was stripped crimson
From the whips of masters
Who would lose their blood so pure
When revolution made them pay,
Standing against the walls of retribution.
Blood has flowed from me on every battlefield between campesino, hacendado,
slave and master and revolution.
I jumped from the tower of Chapultepec into the sea of fame–
my country's flag
my burial shroud–
with Los Niños,
whose pride and courage
could not surrender
with indignity
their country's flag
to strangers . . . in their land.
Now I bleed in some smelly cell from club or gun or tyranny.
I bleed as the vicious gloves of hunger
Cut my face and eyes,
As I fight my way from stinking barrios
To the glamour of the ring
And lights of fame
Or mutilated sorrow.
My blood runs pure on the ice-caked
Hills of the Alaskan isles,
On the corpse-strewn beach of Normandy,
The foreign land of Korea
And now Vietnam.
Here I stand
Before the court of justice,
Guilty
For all the glory of my Raza
To be sentenced to despair.
Here I stand,
Poor in money,
Arrogant with pride,
Bold with machismo,
Rich in courage
And
Wealthy in spirit and faith.
My knees are caked with mud.
My hands calloused from the hoe. I have made the Anglo rich,
Yet
Equality is but a word--
The Treaty of Hidalgo has been broken
And is but another treacherous promise.
My land is lost
And stolen,
My culture has been raped.
I lengthen the line at the welfare door
And fill the jails with crime.
These then are the rewards
This society has
For sons of chiefs
And kings
And bloody revolutionists,
Who gave a foreign people
All their skills and ingenuity
To pave the way with brains and blood
For those hordes of gold-starved strangers,
Who changed our language
And plagiarized our deeds
As feats of valor of their own.
They frowned upon our way of life
and took what they could use.
Our art, our literature, our music, they ignored—
so they left the real things of value
and grabbed at their own destruction
by their greed and avarice.
They overlooked that cleansing fountain of
nature and brotherhood
which is Joaquín.
The art of our great señores,
Diego Rivera,
Siqueiros,
Orozco, is but another act of revolution for
the salvation of mankind.
Mariachi music, the heart and soul
of the people of the earth,
the life of the child,
and the happiness of love.
The corridos tell the tales
of life and death,
of tradition,
legends old and new, of joy
of passion and sorrow
of the people—who I am.
I am in the eyes of woman,
sheltered beneath
her shawl of black,
deep and sorrowful eyes
that bear the pain of sons long buried or dying,
dead on the battlefield or on the barbed wire of social strife.
Her rosary she prays and fingers endlessly
like the family working down a row of beets
to turn around and work and work.
There is no end.
Her eyes a mirror of all the warmth
and all the love for me,
and I am her
and she is me.
We face life together in sorrow,
anger, joy, faith and wishful
thoughts.
I shed the tears of anguish
as I see my children disappear
behind the shroud of mediocrity,
ever to look back to remember me.

I am Joaquín.

I must fight
and win this struggle
for my sons, and they
must know from me
who I am.

Part of the blood that runs deep in me
could not be vanquished by the Moors.

I defeated them after five hundred years,
and I have endured.

Part of the blood that is mine
has labored endlessly four hundred
years under the heel of lustful
Europeans.

I am still here!

I have endured in the rugged mountains
Of our country
I have survived the toils and slavery of the fields.
I have existed
In the barrios of the city
In the suburbs of bigotry
In the mines of social snobbery
In the prisons of dejection
In the muck of exploitation
And in the fierce heat of racial hatred.
And now the trumpet sounds,
The music of the people stirs the
Revolution.
Like a sleeping giant it slowly
Rears its head To the sound of
Tramping feet
Clamoring voices
Mariachi strains
Fiery tequila explosions
The smell of chile verde and
Soft brown eyes of expectation for a
Better life.
And in all the fertile farmlands,
the barren plains,
the mountain villages,
smoke-smeread cities,
we start to MOVE.

La raza!

Méjicano!

Español!

Latino!

Chicano!

Or whatever I call myself,

I look the same

I feel the same

I cry

And sing the same.

I am the masses of my people and

I refuse to be absorbed.

I am Joaquín.

The odds are great

But my spirit is strong,

My faith unbreakable,

My blood is pure.

I am Aztec prince and Christian Christ.

I SHALL ENDURE!

I WILL ENDURE!
El Plan Espiritual de Aztlan

It was adopted by the First National Chicano Liberation Youth Conference, a March 1969 convention hosted by Rodolfo Gonzales's Crusade for Justice in Denver, Colorado (University of Texas at Austin, 1998).

In the spirit of a new people that is conscious not only of its proud historical heritage but also of the brutal "gringo" invasion of our territories, we, the Chicano inhabitants and civilizers of the northern land of Aztlan from whence came our forefathers, reclaiming the land of their birth and consecrating the determination of our people of the sun, declare that the call of our blood is our power, our responsibility, and our inevitable destiny.

We are free and sovereign to determine those tasks which are justly called for by our house, our land, the sweat of our brows, and by our hearts. Aztlan belongs to those who plant the seeds, water the fields, and gather the crops and not to the foreign Europeans. We do not recognize capricious frontiers on the bronze continent.

Brotherhood unites us, and love for our brothers makes us a people whose time has come and who struggles against the foreigner "gabacho" who exploits our riches and destroys our culture. With our heart in our hands and our hands in the soil, we declare the independence of our mestizo nation. We are a bronze people with a bronze culture. Before the world, before all of North America, before all our brothers in the bronze continent, we are a nation, we are a union of free pueblos, we are Aztlan. For La Raza to do. Fuera de La Raza nada.
Program

El Plan Espiritual de Aztlan sets the theme that the Chicanos (La Raza de Bronze) must use their nationalism as the key or common denominator for mass mobilization and organization. Once we are committed to the idea and philosophy of El Plan de Aztlan, we can only conclude that social, economic, cultural, and political independence is the only road to total liberation from oppression, exploitation, and racism. Our struggle then must be for the control of our barrios, campos, pueblos, lands, our economy, our culture, and our political life. El Plan commits all levels of Chicano society - the barrio, the campo, the ranchero, the writer, the teacher, the worker, the professional - to La Causa.

Nationalism

Nationalism as the key to organization transcends all religious, political, class, and economic factions or boundaries. Nationalism is the common denominator that all members of La Raza can agree upon.

Organizational Goals

1. **UNITY** in the thinking of our people concerning the barrios, the pueblo, the campo, the land, the poor, the middle class, the professional—all committed to the liberation of La Raza.

2. **ECONOMY**: economic control of our lives and our communities can only come about by driving the exploiter out of our communities, our pueblos, and our lands and by controlling and developing our own talents, sweat, and resources. Cultural background and values which ignore materialism and embrace humanism will contribute to the act of
cooperative buying and the distribution of resources and production to sustain an economic base for healthy growth and development Lands rightfully ours will be fought for and defended. Land and realty ownership will be acquired by the community for the people's welfare. Economic ties of responsibility must be secured by nationalism and the Chicano defense units.

3. **EDUCATION** must be relative to our people, i.e., history, culture, bilingual education, contributions, etc.; Community control of our schools, our teachers, our administrators, our counselors, and our programs.

4. **INSTITUTIONS** shall serve our people by providing the service necessary for a full life and their welfare on the basis of restitution, not handouts or beggar's crumbs. Restitution for past economic slavery, political exploitation, ethnic and cultural psychological destruction and denial of civil and human rights. Institutions in our community which do not serve the people have no place in the community. The institutions belong to the people.

5. **SELF-DEFENSE** of the community must rely on the combined strength of the people. The front line defense will come from the barrios, the campos, the pueblos, and the ranchitos. Their involvement as protectors of their people will be given respect and dignity. They in turn offer their responsibility and their lives for their people. Those who place themselves in the front ranks for their people do so out of love and carnalismo. Those institutions which are fattened by our brothers to provide employment and political
pork barrels for the gringo will do so only as acts of liberation and for La Causa. For the very young there will no longer be acts of juvenile delinquency, but revolutionary acts.

6. **CULTURAL** values of our people strengthen our identity and the moral backbone of the movement. Our culture unites and educates the family of La Raza towards liberation with one heart and one mind. We must insure that our writers, poets, musicians, and artists produce literature and art that is appealing to our people and relates to our revolutionary culture. Our cultural values of life, family, and home will serve as a powerful weapon to defeat the gringo dollar value system and encourage the process of love and brotherhood.

7. **POLITICAL LIBERATION** can only come through independent action on our part, since the two-party system is the same animal with two heads that feed from the same trough. Where we are a majority, we will control; where we are a minority, we will represent a pressure group; nationally, we will represent one party: La Familia de La Raza!

**Action**

1. Awareness and distribution of El Plan Espiritual de Aztlan. Presented at every meeting, demonstration, confrontation, courthouse, institution, administration, church, school, tree, building, car, and every place of human existence.

2. September 16, on the birth date of Mexican Independence, a national walk-out by all Chicanos of all colleges and schools to be sustained until the complete revision of the
educational system: its policy makers, administration, its curriculum, and its personnel to meet the needs of our community.

3. Self-Defense against the occupying forces of the oppressors at every school, every available man, woman, and child.


5. Economic program to drive the exploiter out of our community and a welding together of our people's combined resources to control their own production through cooperative effort.

6. Creation of an independent local, regional, and national political party.

A nation autonomous and free - culturally, socially, economically, and politically- will make its own decisions on the usage of our lands, the taxation of our goods, the utilization of our bodies for war, the determination of justice (reward and punishment), and the profit of our sweat.

El Plan de Aztlan is the plan of liberation!
El Plan de Santa Barbara

The plan was adopted in April 1969 at a symposium held at the University of California, Santa Barbara, USA. Below is the Manifesto (introduction) to the Plan de Santa Barbara, the founding document of MEChA; “El Movimiento Estudiantil en Aztlan ("El plan de Santa Barbara," 1998).

For all peoples, as with individual, the time comes when they must reckon with their history. For the Chicano the present is a time of renaissance, of renacimiento. Our people and our community, el barrio, and la colonia, are expressing a new consciousness and a new resolve. Recognizing the historical tasks confronting our people and fully aware of the cost of human progress, we pledge our will to move. We will move forward toward our destiny as a people. We will move against those forces which have denied us freedom of expression and human dignity. Throughout history the quest for cultural expression and freedom has taken the form of a struggle. Our struggle tempered by the lessons of the American past, is an historical reality.

For decades Mexican people in the United States struggle to realize the "American Dream". And some, a few, have. But the cost, the ultimate cost of assimilation, required turning away from el barrio and la colonia. In the meantime, due to the racist structure of this society, to our essentially different life style, and to the socio-economic functions assigned to our community by Anglo-American society - as suppliers of cheap labor and dumping ground for the small-time capitalist entrepreneur- the barrio and colonia remained exploited, impoverished, and marginal.
As a result, the self-determination of our community is now the only acceptable mandate for social and political action; it is the essence of Chicano commitment. Culturally, the word Chicano, in the past a pejorative and class-bound adjective, has now become the root idea of a new cultural identity for our people. It also reveals a growing solidarity and the development of a common social praxis. The widespread use of the term Chicano today signals a rebirth of pride and confidence. “Chicanismo” simply embodies and ancient truth: that a person is never closer to his/her true self as when he/she is close to his/her community.

Chicanismo draws its faith and strength from two main sources: from the just struggle of our people and from an objective analysis of our community's strategic needs. We recognize that without a strategic use of education, an education that places value on what we value, we will not realize our destiny. Chicanos recognize the central importance of institutions of higher learning to modern progress, in this case, to the development of our community. But we go further: we believe that higher education must contribute to the information of a complete person who truly values life and freedom.

The destiny of our people will be fulfilled. to that end, we pledge our efforts and take as our credo what Jose Vasconcelos once said at a time of crisis and hope: "At this moment we do not come to work for the university, but to demand that the university work for our people."
El Nuevo Plan De Aztlan

An updated version of the MEChA Plan de Santa Barbara, it was created by Ruben Botello as an updated call for action in the 21st century (Botello, 2008)

WHEREAS, We the Chicanas y Chicanos of the United States of America honor our Native American heritage with all our hearts and minds;

WHEREAS, We the Chicanas y Chicanos of the United States of America honor the sacred call of our Native American ancestors for peace and justice throughout our Americas; and

WHEREAS, We the Chicanas y Chicanos of the United States of America recognize La Raza has been struggling with a new wave of racial harassment, discrimination and persecution in our Americas since September 11, 2001.

NOW THEREFORE, We the Chicanos y Chicanos of the United States of America resolve as follows:

SECTION 1. TITLE

This resolution may be cited as Nuevo Plan de Aztlan.

SECTION 2. TERMINOLOGY

Nuevo Plan de Aztlan is based on the following terms:

a) Americanas y Americanos

Americanas y Americanos are ALL AMERICANS regardless of our races, colors, languages, cultures, nationalities, ethnicities, religions or creeds.

b) Aztlan
The concept of Aztlan is derived from the Nahua history of the Mexicas before their southern migration from Norte America into Centro Mexico during the 11th Century. Aztlan today is Indigenas of Mexican-American and(or) Mexican descent who consider ourselves Chicanas y Chicanos regardless of where we were born, live or die.

c) Carnalismo

Carnalismo is the love and compassion Chicanas y Chicanos have for each other as carnalas y carnales (sisters and brothers). Carnalismo is what unites and strengthens Chicanas y Chicanos as we work together for peace and justice.

d) Chicanas y Chicanos

Chicanas y Chicanos are Indigenas of Mexican-American and(or) Mexican descent who consider ourselves Chicanas y Chicanos based on our Native American heritage.

e) El Movimiento

El Movimiento is the Chicana y Chicano Movement for peace and justice. El Movimiento is comprised of numerous academic, athletic, artistic, business, commercial, cultural, educational, political, recreational, social, spiritual, wholistic and other Chicana y Chicano organizations and individuals working for peace and justice throughout Aztlan, our Americas and the world.

f) Heritage

Our Native American heritage includes our ancestral lands and freedoms; and all the histories, cultures, traditions and mores of our Native American ancestors.

g) Indigenas
Often called Native Americans or American Indians, Indigenas are all the indigenous peoples of our Americas including those of mixed-race heritage like La Raza.

h) La Causa

La Causa is for peace and justice, the eternal cause of Chicanas y Chicanos who recognize there can be no true peace without true justice, i.e., the abolition of poverty, racism, sexism and all other injustices in our Americas.

i) La Raza

Chicanas y Chicanos can be Black, White, Brown, Red, Yellow and(or) any other “skin color” like the rest of La Raza and the human race. The concept of La Raza was derived from a 1925 essay published by Jose Vasconcelos, a Mexican educator who called the millions of mixed-race Indigenas with Latin-American and(or) Latin-European ancestors La Raza Cosmica.

La Raza is comprised of every race, color, nationality, ethnicity, culture, language, religion and creed in the world. This rich diversity is the unifying power, force and strength of Chicanas y Chicanos and of all La Raza as we grow to know, understand and honor our great heritage.

j) Latinas y Latinos

Latinas y Latinos of our Americas are Indigenas with a Latin-American and(or) Latin-European heritage. Millions of Latinas y Latinos also have African, Asian and other Non-Latino ancestors.

k) Racism
Racial categories are crude labels based on parentage, genetics and (or) physical traits, not religious or scientific proof of one’s superior or inferior nature like racists believe.

Racism is the belief one or more “races” are inherently “superior” to one or more other races. [Example: Many Americans believe “White people” are inherently superior to “Non-White people” and that “Black people” are inherently inferior to all other people.]

Racism includes the belief “mixed-race” people like La Raza are inferior to those with birth parents of the same race. “Race-mixing” is still condemned by racists today. Indigenas were considered savages (less-than-human) when Europeans first invaded and occupied our Americas. "Christianized" and (or) otherwise assimilated Indigenas are still considered inferior by today’s racists.

Racists are not just poor or poorly educated citizens, there are wealthy and highly educated racists throughout government and society who strive to protect and preserve their privileged status via institutional, industrial and commercial racism. Racists are not just White, either; there are Brown, Black, Red, Asian and other racists, too.

The racist imposition of the colonial English language on Indigenas continues to cause horrendous problems for Chicanas y Chicanos in education, employment and virtually all other aspects of life in the U.S. Laws, rules and regulations are selectively enforced by local, state and federal institutions against La Raza, as English is used as a weapon to deprive Chicanas y Chicanos of liberty, equality and justice throughout our lives.
Private industry ("free enterprise") also causes havoc for Chicanas y Chicanos by perpetuating racist stereotypes and beliefs about La Raza for profit and gain.

[Example: Mass media and the "entertainment" industries commercialize racist stereotypes and beliefs about Latinas y Latinos throughout the world, while pretending to be "spreading freedom and democracy" alongside the Pentagon.]

1) Terrorist(s)

A terrorist or terrorists are human beings who use unwarranted violence and(or) the threat of violence to kill, rob, rape, torture, imprison or otherwise impose their will over other human beings.

SECTION 3. STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

Nuevo Plan de Aztlan addresses the alarming attacks orchestrated against Indigenas throughout Norte America since September 11, 2001 (9/11). U.S. officials are using La Raza as a scapegoat or smokescreen to distract or divert attention away from their heinous war crimes in the Middle East.

According to their domestic propaganda, the "real problem" and therefore actual enemy or threat to national security is Mexicans and other Indigenas "invading" Norte America, not the Pentagon killing, torturing, maiming, imprisoning and destroying other indigenous peoples' lives in faraway lands.

Thousands of racist media, vigilante, "homeland security" and other hostile actions have been executed against Indigenas since 9/11, as tens of thousands of these indigent men, women and children have been rounded up and herded out of Norte America like cattle.
SECTION 4. HISTORICAL ANALYSIS

Indigenas have suffered centuries of injusticias including genocide, rape, torture, mayhem, kidnapping, slavery, peonage, poverty, homelessness and groundless imprisonment at the hands of the original European invaders and occupiers of our Americas.

The offspring of these European terrorists expect Chicanas y Chicanos to ignore or forget this true account of their ancestors’ horrendous atrocities, as if these abominations against our Native American ancestors never occurred or mattered.

As English imperialism via the U.S. government seeks to conquer the entire world, La Raza is increasingly faced with discriminatory law enforcement, housing, education, employment, healthcare, mass media, entertainment and other racist industrial, commercial and institutional policies and practices, especially since 9/11.

The offspring of the European terrorists who originally stole our ancestral lands are guilty of receiving this stolen property. Receiving stolen property is no less a crime than stealing it. These aliens remain in denial as they continue to exploit, oppress and otherwise deprive us of our ancestral lands and freedoms from generation-to-generation much like their terrorist ancestors did against our ancestors for the past few centuries.

U.S. racists are now working to outlaw MEChA and other Movimiento organizations being blamed for “too many Mexicans” and other Indigenas in Norte America today. Local, state and federal government agencies have also made it extremely difficult for the Partido de La Raza Unida to rise
politically against this institutionalized harassment, discrimination and persecution in any significant way.

These same racists oppose Chicana y Chicano Studies, affirmative action, financial aid, bilingual and multicultural education, ethnic studies, fair housing, equal employment opportunities and all other ways and means of attempting to create level playing fields for La Raza, as if the U.S. only belongs to Anglo-Americans and everyone else is a second-class citizen at best.

SECTION 5. MEXICO, CENTRO Y SUR AMERICA

The 21st Century campaign against Mexicans in the U.S. is also aimed at Chicanas y Chicanos since we are all familia. Chicanas y Chicanos have a natural, inherent or innate relationship with Mexicanas y Mexicanos because of our common Native American heritage that is everlasting. Other Indigenas throughout our Americas are suffering from these racist attacks too.

We are all being treated as a threat or potential threat to national security by the racist U.S. government at the local, state, federal and international level.

SECTION 6. GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

a) We the Chicanas y Chicanos of the United States of America must reach beyond nationalism to establish and (or) coalesce with parallel movements of other Indigenas united around our multilingual, multiracial and multicultural heritage throughout our Americas and on outlying islands.
b) El Movimiento’s mass communication, organization and mobilization initiatives call for Chicanas y Chicanos to join forces with all La Raza against our common exploiters and oppressors because we cannot be free unless and until all La Raza is free.

c) Economic justice cannot be achieved without social and political justice. La Raza must join together as an international union of Indigenas to work for this justicia as opposed to permitting the racists to continue to exploit and oppress La Raza via commercial, industrial, and institutional racism from generation-to-generation.

d) This indigenous union must ensure liberty, equality and justice for all Americanas y Americanos so We can all live, work and travel freely in peace and justice throughout our Americas for so long as the rivers flow.

e) The first priority of our new union is to abolish poverty, racism and sexism throughout our Americas.

f) This union must ensure all workers in our Americas receive good jobs and compensation so that all Americanas y Americanos can have nice homes in safe and secure neighborhoods and communities. People unable to work will also have nice homes in these safe and secure neighborhoods and communities because no one will live in poverty or homelessness in our Americas except by her or his own choosing.

g) We the Chicanas y Chicanos of the United States of America must ensure our children learn about our indigenous ancestors, at home and in all the schools, colleges and universities of our Americas so they and future generations will know, understand and honor our Native American heritage.
NOW THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED, We the Chicanas y Chicanos of the United States of America will live our daily lives in accordance with Nuevo Plan de Aztlan to the best of our abilities.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, We the Chicanas y Chicanos of the United States of America will encourage Chicana y Chicano organizations everywhere to review, adopt and incorporate Nuevo Plan de Aztlan into their own missions, goals and objectives so all Indigenas can stand united against the new wave of racial harassment, discrimination and persecution La Raza faces in the 21st Century.

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Nitlanquiyaya!