

Chapter 1

La Danza de los Matachines

It was in the fiestas of the people that I discovered the true essence of my people
-Rudolfo Anaya, Alburquerque

“Ay vienen, here they come” a family member states. I, a young child seated along the sidewalk of Camino del Pueblo in Bernalillo, anxiously await them. I am gathered with family and friends, some who have come back from far away places, some whose families have lived in this small community in New Mexico since the times of the Spanish conquistadores. In the distance, gunshots are heard, marking the mysteries of the Catholic rosary. Four young boys pass in front of the procession, beating a drum, mirroring our neighboring Native American Pueblo traditions. Someone finally shouts “There they are!” Children, fearing the Toro, dash to the comfort of a parent’s arms, or of a locked car. A feeling comes to the stomach, not of nervousness, but of excitement. The feeling is difficult to explain but felt every August when the procession nears. The crowd gathered on Main Street hushes to catch a glimpse of their history. All turn to see two groups of masked dancers, waving wooden tridents in a figure eight and carrying gourd rattles.

The wispy sound of the gourd rattles beating in unison to the fast paced melody of the fiddle fills the hot August air. The dancers, wearing mitre hats with ribbons of every color, perform a fast skip step; continue in the ways of our ancestors. Several minutes pass, as do the dancers. Behind them, the people of Bernalillo carry their beloved patron San Lorenzo to his Santuario. In a few minutes, everything has passed, leaving only the sounds of gunshots, drums,

rattles and prayers- memories which for the rest of my life have left a thumbprint on my mind and my heart.

Deep in the valleys and mountains of New Mexico, one can witness the magnificence and brilliance of the Matachines Dance. Twelve masked individuals dance in unison to the Spanish instruments of the violin and guitar, carrying wooden tridents and gourd rattles. Amongst them, a leader dressed in white, wearing a red and white floral *corona* presides over the dance. Monarca, portraying Montezuma, the ruler of the Aztecs, is accompanied by a young girl dressed in white. La Malinche, the daughter of Montezuma, is influential in the conversion of her father to Christianity. Amongst them, a Toro, or bull, stalks the dancers attempting to disrupt Montezuma's conversion. El Toro represents the pre-Columbian religion and evil itself. His counterpart, El Abuelo, is the caretaker of la Malinche and the danzantes and instructs them on the ways of Christianity. The dance concludes with the conversion of Montezuma and the submission and death of the bull, thus the triumph of Christianity over Paganism.

Since the introduction of the Catholic faith upon the indigenous peoples of the New World, the Matachines Dance has been performed for specific Catholic feast days. Introduced as a means of converting the indigenous peoples of the New World to Catholicism, the dance has since taken on new meanings for those who perform it. The Matachines Dance is also performed in Mexico and other parts of Latin America, but differs in style and appearance from those seen in Southwestern Hispanic and Native American communities.

One community that has adopted the Matachines Dance into its own ritual calendar is Bernalillo, New Mexico (Map 1), a predominantly Hispano town of approximately 7,000 residents located just 10 miles north of Albuquerque. Bernalillo straddles the Rio Grande River and borders Santa Ana Pueblo to the north and Sandía Pueblo to the south. To the east lies

Placitas village, a once predominantly Hispanic community, which has now seen a large growth of Anglos move to the area. To the west, the rapidly growing community of Rio Rancho is home to corporations such as Intel and Hewlett-Packard which have stimulated growth and economy in the area. In the past, Bernalillo was the center for economic trade amongst Hispanos and Native Americans throughout the middle Rio Grande Valley. Eventually, Bernalillo saw its economic prominence decrease as Albuquerque grew larger in terms of size and economic stability, resulting in the out migration of many Bernalillo residents. Today, along with two teal church steeples, a sawmill and water tower can be seen above the line of cottonwood trees, hinting at Bernalillo's past regional religious and industrial prominence. Bernalillo has thus reverted to its past by embracing and dancing the Matachines dance. As its neighbors grow, Bernalillo continues to perform a dance that originated in the Old World, was used as an instrument of conversion in the New World, and finally embraced in Bernalillo.

Throughout the time that we have been occupying this beautiful valley, we have maintained a rich culture, deeply sown within our history. Since the time of the conquistadores to the present, we have always struggled to hold on to what we have—our culture. The older generations remember the days of old Bernalillo, without automobiles, paved roads, or technology. One can always be heard asking in Spanish “remember when...?” The younger generations, growing up in a small community on the outskirts of Albuquerque, are intrigued by the lure of the shopping malls, theme parks, and movie theaters that New Mexico's largest city has to offer. Many of this generation have grown up speaking English in school and at home. There is no longer a use for the Spanish language, except in those customs and traditions still celebrated in New Mexico. Because most young people can “understand Spanish, but not speak it” it is difficult to revert to a language that is lost or rapidly declining in daily use. Grandparents

begin to speak about a “vergüenza” that their grandchildren do not speak the language of their forefathers.

Urbanization has not bypassed Bernalillo or its neighboring communities. With large corporations, housing developments, regional soccer complexes, and gaming casinos sprouting up around Bernalillo’s peripheries, Bernalillo struggles to maintain the little culture and tradition that remains. Nestled between the Sandía Mountains and the Rio Grande River, we have maintained what we have become known for—the precious *promesa*. For over three-hundred years, our pride, Los Matachines, has stood as one of the integral parts of our community. Now that the world changes from the time that our ancestors first came to this valley to contemporary times, we continue every year with the Matachines dance in honor of San Lorenzo.

Bernalillo served as the site for my research project on the Matachines. This three day Fiesta of San Lorenzo is very important to the community, to cultural anthropology and folklore. The exploration of elements such as costume and dance steps becomes a necessity.

Anthropologist Sylvia Rodriguez states:

Every Matachines performance therefore needs to be examined not only as a sequence of distinct dance sets accompanied by certain tunes but also as a one-to-three day ritual event made up of multiple performances carried out in a meaningful sequence toward a certain completion, with an identifiable and patterned beginning, middle, and end. (Rodriguez 1996:9)

This research will shed new light on the folk performance of the Matachines. This work is intended for an anthropological audience, as well as the local Bernalillo audience.

Anthropological readers can see the emphasis placed on this dance in terms of the importance it holds to the people of Bernalillo. The residents of Bernalillo can thus use this book as a guide to teach the younger generations, as well as the older generations about our history and culture.

Chapter 1 is an introduction of the Matachines dance, including an examination of the scholarship on Matachines, and a discussion of data collection and methodology. Chapter 2 explores the different origins of the Matachines dance, including a description of the conquest of Mexico leading to a discussion of syncretism and the superimposition of the dance within existing indigenous culture. This chapter also discusses the different routes of diffusion of the Matachines dance, which ultimately led to the Rio Grande Valley in New Mexico. Consisting of primary and secondary sources, including oral history, Chapter 3 examines early explorers of the Rio Grande Valley. This chapter explores the Pueblo Revolt of 1680 and the Reconquest of 1693 and how these major events in Southwestern history served as catalysts to the performance of the Matachines dance in Bernalillo today. Since the late 17th century, the dance has been shaped and molded into its own distinct style by those who have performed it, including several changes, additions and omissions made to the structure of the dance. Chapter 4 provides a description of the roles and characters involved in the Bernalillo Matachines dance, including Monarca, Malinche, Musicians and Mayordomos. Chapter 5 provides an ethnography of the 2004 Bernalillo Matachines dance performance, including descriptions of the promesa, practice, and the three individual days of the Fiesta de San Lorenzo. Also, this chapter contains an interpretation of the cultural meanings of the performance, including dancer attributes, roles, dance steps, and how those elements are distinct to the Bernalillo Matachines. Moreover, the structure of the Fiesta de San Lorenzo is examined as a three day ritual with a beginning, middle, and end. Chapter 6 concludes the study with an examination of the meaning of the dance to the people of Bernalillo, intercultural syncretism, intracultural syncretism, cultural resistance and ethnic pride.

Matachines: History, Culture and Performance

Many scholars have investigated the topic regarding the origins of the Matachines dance. Some scholars (Robb, 1961) stress a Eurocentric origin of the dance, based primarily on the compartmentalization and separation between Native American traditional observances and the Matachines. On the other hand, some scholars (Kurath 1949; Lea 1963-64; Champe 1980-81) have stressed fusion of distinct New World, or more specifically Aztec, and Old World forms, resulting in the creation of the Matachines dance in the Rio Grande Valley. More contemporary scholars have explored other issues including what the dance means to those who perform it and how and what outside influences (socio-economic class, class structure, and inter-ethnic relations) have shaped the way the dances are performed in specific communities. In her book *The Matachines Dance* (1996), Sylvia Rodriguez compares the dance as performed at Taos and Picurís Pueblos with Hispanic Arroyo Seco. Rodriguez touches on several other versions of the dance that are performed along the Rio Grande, including San Juan Pueblo, Alcalde, El Rancho, Jemez Pueblo, Bernalillo, Tijeras Canyon and Tortugas. Her study's driving questions include "what does the dance mean to those who perform and celebrate it, and what does its performance reveal about the people who do it?" (Rodriguez 1996:10)

In her 1993 doctoral dissertation entitled "The Matachines Music and Dance in San Juan Pueblo and Alcalde, New Mexico: Context and Meanings," Brenda Romero compares the dances of San Juan Pueblo and Alcalde. Romero offers interpretations of the dances, as well as a detailed discussion of the music of each dance. Flavia Champe, in her 1983 book entitled *The Matachines Dance of the Upper Rio Grande*, explores the dance as performed at San Ildefonso Pueblo with complex descriptions of the choreography of each individual dance. In previous

scholarship, the Bernalillo Matachines have been mentioned only briefly. As one of the most recognized Matachines performances in the Southwest, the history, culture, and meaning of the Bernalillo Matachines have yet to be researched in-depth. It is important that a native researcher and participant observer take on the role of documenting this event, due to the importance it holds to the people of Bernalillo. As a resident, native researcher and dancer of nine years with the Matachines dance group, I would like to enrich the study of folk drama and performance. I would like to provide an additional scholarly perspective as to why people in Bernalillo continue to practice the Matachines.

Research Design

It is important to note that the bulk of the research was done as part of my senior thesis project at Colorado College. At the time, the project became difficult because I was not sure of when to stop. Upon graduation from Colorado College, I continued to dance and my involvement in this tradition left me yearning to give this work back to the community. Therefore, I began interviewing and talking to community members and researching certain aspects of the dance in order to add more content to the study. Interviews were conducted in 2004 and 2006. Participant observation was only conducted in 2004. The work in 2006 was conducted as a means of “filling the gaps” within the study to offer a more holistic view of this tradition.

The data for this project was collected from semi-structured, single-subject interviews, which revealed much about oral history of the Matachines dance, and the history of Bernalillo. Also, the book includes personal communication with many individuals involved in the Matachines tradition. Current dancers, as well as former dancers, the 2004 Mayordomos, a former parish priest, members of the community, and two musicians served as key informants to

this study. One Malinche was interviewed, along with her mother, about her involvement in the 2004 Matachines. Data was also collected from the Center for Southwest Research at the University of New Mexico's Zimmerman Library, the Town of Bernalillo Martha Liebert Library and the Sandoval County Historical Society.

As a Matachines dancer, I attended and documented weekly practices beginning in July 2004, the novena and daily practices beginning August 1, and the three days of the Fiesta de San Lorenzo August 9, 10 and 11. In data collection, I used general methods of documentation, including tape recorded interviews, field notes, and still photographs taken during the 2004, 2005, and 2006 Matachines.