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Time, History and Ritual in a K'iche' Community: Contemporary Maya Calendar Knowledge and Practices in the Highlands of Guatemala

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IV. Ritual Memory and History

For writing this chapter, I am greatly indebted to don Leonso Lol, Francisco Lol, Luiz Lol, don Rigoberto Itzep, don José Angel Xeloj, Gregorio Itzep, Carlos Pérez Acabal and all the Tz'ulab' from Momostenango for the knowledge that they shared with me. Errors that might appear in the contents of this chapter are my fault alone. If such errors or any misrepresentations appear, I would like to apologize beforehand to the community of Momostenango.

INTRODUCTION

Whereas the previous chapters discussed the cyclical perception of time in the form of the *chol q'ij*, the *junab' q'ij* (Chapter I and II) and the synergy of Catholic and K'iche' calendars (Chapter III), in this chapter the discussion on the perception of time is directed towards the engagement between the past and the present. This is done through an analysis of the *baile de la culebra* ("Serpent Dance"), a ritual dance performed in several indigenous communities in Highland Guatemala. Although the importance of the dance is generally recognized in academic research, it has not been well researched (Looper, 2009, p. 204).

The *baile de la culebra* is not a mere spectacle or theatrical performance. Similar to precolonial Mesoamerican dance (Taylor, 2004), the *baile de la culebra* is a ritual, which uniquely blends the ancient past, recent history and the individual experiences or concerns of the performer(s) today. I will be using Carlo Severi's theory of *ritual memory*. In short, as discussed in the introduction, *ritual memory* is a form of memory in which historical experiences are embedded in ritual practices. As such the Serpent Dance can be analyzed as a process of engagement with history on the part of the K'iche' community. The main research question in this chapter is

therefore: how does ritual memory in the *baile de la culebra* transfer knowledge and experience about the past. This approach questions the Eurocentric view dominant in the study of World History and argues that there are plural histories, many of which are so far not rightfully recognized by scholars (Hobson, 2012; Kanth, 2009; Said, 2003). Studying the ritual memory in the *baile de la culebra* and the narratives that accompany it in Momostenango and in other Highland Guatemala communities can thus contribute to the recognition of K'iche' history, a constituting element of identity, and an important element in the processes of the Maya movement and struggles for indigenous rights.

The organization of this chapter is as follows: the first part contextualizes the dance broadly, by giving a short definition of the dance, its temporal and spatial characteristics, the terminology and the costumes. The following section discusses the fieldwork experience in 2014 and 2015. The last part focuses on the narratives that accompany the dance and analyzes how ritual memory and history are expressed in the dance in Momostenango and other communities. The discussion of the dance continues in Chapter V where I will discuss parallels with prehispanic symbolism. I will begin here, however, with a short definition of the *baile de la culebra* and with a contextualization of my fieldwork research on this dance.

A DEFINITION OF THE *BAILE DE LA CULEBRA*

The *baile de la culebra* is performed in towns and small communities scattered throughout the Guatemalan Highlands. I define the *baile de la culebra* as a cluster of symbols that come together in the dance. This cluster of symbols is shared among

the variants of the *baile de la culebra* performances in the Guatemalan Highlands. The dance is an unfinished product in a constant “process of becoming” (Ingold, 2011). As such, specific concerns that were shared by community members have, over time, been incorporated in the performance and are today expressed in the dance. Therefore, the dance and the narratives that accompany it differ slightly from town to town. The basic shared characteristics, or symbols, of the dance are as follows.

The dance takes place near or at important places in the community, although the nature of their importance may vary greatly in each community. The music that accompanies the dance is usually played on a marimba (a wooden percussion instrument similar to the xylophone). However, there are indications that the *chirimia* (a type of oboe music instrument) and drum were used before as well. Several dancers participate in the performance, usually dressed in old rags. Usually one dancer impersonates a woman in the dance, and in a few instances, several female characters are present. The female character, impersonated by a man, is seduced or sexually harassed by the other dancers during the dance upon which severe punishment ensues. In many cases the female character enjoys the attention that she receives from the other dancers. In most cases, the harassers are hit with a whip by a man who impersonates the woman’s husband. It is also possible that the woman herself punishes the seducers by throwing them on the ground. After being punished, however, the dancers continue to harass the woman undeterred. The woman and her husband are always characterized as *ladinos*, i.e. a Guatemalan person of Spanish descent. Living, wooden or stuffed-toy snakes are used during the dance. When living snakes are used, they are caught days or weeks before the event with the help of a ritual specialist and in the company of dancers who will impersonate the husband and wife in the dance. After the performance of the dance, the snake is released back in the woods where it was found. Whether wooden snakes, toy snakes or living snakes are used, they are carried by the dancers in their hand. All conversations are improvised in K’iche’ and there is no singing involved. There is no use of a memorized script⁷⁵ but the dancers improvise

according to a general storyline or narrative. The different narratives of the dances are discussed in a later section in this chapter.

Certain characteristics of the *baile de la culebra* are shared with other dances in some communities, such as in Joyabaj where there are bull fights, akin to those performed during the so-called *baile de los toreros*. Certain features can be present in other dances as well, for example the promiscuous behavior towards women (Wagley, 1949, p. 117; Wisdom, 1961, p. 508). At times, the borders between the *baile de la culebra* and other dances might appear vague as they may share similar symbolic elements. Unique to the *baile de la culebra*, however, is the presence of snakes in combination with the above-mentioned features. To my knowledge, snakes, whether real or ersatz, are not used in any other dance in the Highlands of Guatemala.

DOCUMENTATION OF THE DANCE

My fieldwork experience between 2014 and 2015 forms the basis of this chapter. In 2014, I met the dancers and organizers of the dance for the first time, on Holy Saturday. I experienced the dance that year from the sidelines and did not participate personally. In 2015, I was again introduced to the dancers and organizers. This year the organizers of the dance (in Spanish “autores”⁷⁶), don Leonso Lol, Francisco Lol and Luiz Lol, formally invited me to join them on the fourth Friday of Lent and the two days prior. On the fourth Friday of Lent I participated in the ceremonial cutting and preparation of the tree that would be used for *palo encebado*. I joined the authors and Tz’ulab’ (dancers) again during Holy Week 2015. During those Holy Saturday and Easter Sunday, I had the opportunity to participate as a dancer, a fact that was greatly appreciated by the Tz’ulab’ and authors. Apart from greatly enjoying it, this participation provided insights into the dance that would have been impossible to grasp by standing outside the group. Moreover, the

pp. 873-874), respectively working in Rabinal and Joyabaj, believe that there was a written script with the storyline and dialogues of the dance. Neither of these authors has been able to see the original document though.

⁷⁶ *Autor* is an honorary title for those who take on the burden of organizing a dance.

⁷⁵ Both Mace (1967, p. 116) and Hutcheson (2009,



Figure 83. Don Leonso Lol, the first author of the dance, poses as Xinula in front of the marimba.

interview and many casual talks with don Leonso (Figure 83), Francisco Lol (Figure 84), Luiz Lol and don Rigoberto Itzep were very important for my understanding of the dance. In 2016, I was not in Guatemala at the time when the dance should have taken place, but I later heard that the dance had not been organized that year. That same year I visited Santa Cruz Quiché on the 18th of August, in order to assist to the *baile de la culebra* in the community. I was able to appreciate the differences in the way the dance is performed. On the 27th of August, I furthermore visited Pologua, a small town near Momostenango where, according to the organizers of Momostenango, the dance takes place at the end of August, in the hope of seeing the dance. Unfortunately, I met a former dancer who told me that the dance had not been performed in the last couple of years.



Figure 84. Francisco Lol, the second author of the dance.

BROADER CONTEXTS

Temporal and Spatial Contexts

Indigenous dances in general were not often documented in the Highlands of Guatemala during the Colonial period and therefore it is not surprising that there is no mention of the *baile de la culebra* during this period (Looper, 2009, p. 191). During the 20th century, however, the performance of the *baile de la culebra* was widespread in the Highlands of Guatemala, especially in the region of Momostenango (Termer, 1957, p. 217)⁷⁷. The dance took place in the following towns: Momostenango, Santa Cruz Quiché, San Bartolo, Pologua, San Andrés Sajcabajá, Santo Tomás Chichicastenango, in and around Totonicapán, Chuisuc, Santa Lucía Utatlán,

⁷⁷ The first ethnographer to recognize the importance of the dance was Franz Termer. Before his research in the 1920s, the dance had not been described in detail.

Place	Date	Religious celebration
Momostenango	Between 1 st of March and the 9 th of April	4 th Friday of Lent
Momostenango	Between the 22 nd of March and the 25 th of April	Holy Week
La Esperanza	Between the 22 nd of March and the 25 th of April	Holy Week
San Andrés Xecul	3 rd of May	Day of Holy Cross
San Andrés Sajcabajá	8 th of June	Celebration of the day Ajaw
Rabinal	Between 23 rd of May and the 25 th of June	Corpus Christi
San Miguel Chicaj	Between 23 rd of May and the 25 th of June	Corpus Christi
San Andrés Sajcabajá	Between 23 rd of May and the 25 th of June	Corpus Christi
Santa Lucía Utatlán	Between 23 rd of May and the 25 th of June	Corpus Christi
Joyabaj	10 th -15 th of August & +/- 22 nd of August	Santa María de la Asunción
Santa Cruz Quiché	from the 12 th until the 19 th of August	Santa María de la Asunción
San Andrés Sajcabajá	15 th of August	Santa María de la Asunción
San Bartolo Aguas Calientes	21 st until 24 th of August	San Bartolo
Pologua	25 th until the 27 th of August	San Antonio de Padua
Chichicastenango	+/- 3 rd of October	The Virgin of the Rosary
Chichicastenango	1 st November	All Saints

Table 13. Chronological overview of the performance of the *baile de la culebra* in the Highlands of Guatemala.



Figure 85. Location of the towns mentioned in the text.

Cubulco, Rabinal, Joyabaj, San Miguel Chicaj, San José Chiquilajá, Olinpeque, in the aldea of La Esperanza in the district of Totoncapán, and in San Andrés Xecul⁷⁸. The degree and detail to which the ritual dances have been described varies greatly. Most studies mention the dance only in summarized form and only few have attempted an interpretation (Cook, 2000; Hutcheson, 2009; Looper, 2009). As far as I am aware, the dance continues to be performed today

in the following towns⁷⁹: San Bartolo, San Andrés Sajcabajá, Santo Tomás Chichicastenango, Pologua, Rabinal, La Esperanza, Chuisuc, Momostenango, Joyabaj, and Santa Cruz Quiché.

The timing of the performance of the ritual dance differs in each community (Table 13 and Figure 85). Although the exact date of some of the performances has not always been mentioned in ethnographic words, the dance always takes place during the rainy season or immediately before it,

78 See Bunzel (1952, p. 426); Hutcheson (2009, p. 880); Looper (2009, pp. 204-206); Mace (1967, pp. 95-139); Ordoñez (1970); Saquic Cael (1970); Schultze Jena (1933, pp. 204-213); Termer (1957, pp. 212-219).

79 According to Dr. Raúl Macuil, Nahua historian and native speaker, a similar dance known as *la danza de la culebra* is performed in Tlaxcala, Mexico, during the festivities of Carnival.

when the *milpa* is prepared for planting. This is probably why many researchers who have done research on this dance mention that it is related to a stage in the agricultural cycle (Cook, 2000; Looper, 2009, p. 206; Mace, 1967, pp. 107-108; Schultze Jena, 1933; Termer, 1957, p. 219).

The first yearly performance of the *baile de la culebra* in the region takes place in Momostenango on the fourth Friday of Lent and the two days prior. As this is a variable date, the moment of performance can vary between the 1st of March and the 9th of April. During Holy Week, the dance is performed again in Momostenango, on Holy Saturday and Easter Sunday. Also in the La Esperanza, an aldea of Totonicapán, the *baile de la culebra* takes place during the last three days of Holy Week culminating on Easter Sunday. Easter, and thus also the moment of performance of the dance, varies between the 22nd of March and the 25th of April. In San Andrés Xecul the dance used to be performed during the patron saint feast on the 3rd of May (T. García, 1993, p. 86). Both the communities of Rabinal and San Miguel Chicaj perform the dance during Corpus Christi festivities that fall between 23rd of May and the 25th of June (Mace, 1967, pp. 107, 122). In Santa Lucía Utatlán, the dance also takes place during Corpus Christi (Saucic Calel, 1970). The communities of San Andrés Sajcabajá performs the *baile de la culebra* on three occasions: (1) for a six-day period during the Corpus Christi processions, (2) on the 8th of June during the celebration of the creator *Ajaw*, and (3) on the 15th of August, when the members *cofradía* of the Assumption of the Virgin change authority (Looper, 2009, p. 204).

The dance is performed in Joyabaj during the festivities of the patron Santa María de la Asunción, 10th-15th of August, as well as one week after the Sunday mass of the patron saint feast⁸⁰ (Hutcheson, 2009, p. 873). Also in Santa Cruz Quiché the dance is linked to the celebrations of Santa María de la Asunción and is performed from the 12th until the 19th of August (Termer, 1957, p. 214). The performance of the dance follows directly in San Bartolo Aguas Calientes on the 21st, 22nd, 23rd, and 24th of August (Cook, 2000, p. 171) and from the

25th until the 27th of August in Pologua, where the dance takes place at the Chapel of San Antonio as part of the celebration of the patron San Antonio de Padua, a saint related to the period of the mating of sheeps and of harvest (Cook, 2000, p. 171). Finally, in Chichicastenango, where it is no longer performed today, the dance used to take place during the celebration of the Virgin of the Rosary (*Rosario*) around the 3rd of October and again during the festivities of All Saints on the 1st of November (Bunzel, 1952, p. 426).

Comparing the table above with the important stages in the agricultural cycle, discussed in the previous chapter, it becomes clear that the *baile de la culebra* is performed at important moments in this cycle. The performance of the dance begins in Momostenango during the preparation of the *milpa* (burning and planting) and ends in Chichicastenango at the moment of harvest and commemoration of the ancestors. Interestingly, the average moment for the earliest performance of the *baile de la culebra* is the 20th of March, which coincides with the spring equinox (see Chapter III). The duration between this moment and the last performance on the 1st of November is 227 days. Important stages in between the beginning and end are the celebration of Corpus Christi, which coincides with the sprouting of the first plants, and Santa María de la Asunción and other celebrations at mid to end August, which coincide with the end of the *canícula* and beginning of the second period of rain. In summary, the performance of the *baile de la culebra* in the Highlands of Guatemala coincides with, and marks, significant stages in the cycle of the *milpa*.

The link between the work in the *milpa* and the dance was also emphasized in an interview I had with the organizers of the dance in Momostenango. Don Leonso told me that the dance was borne out of necessity, as a dedication to the ancestors and as a petition for protection against the animals that damaged the *milpa*. The *baile de la culebra* takes place in Momostenango twice per year: (1) on the days leading to the fourth Friday of Lent and (2) at the end of *Semana Santa*, on *Sábado de Gloria* and *Domingo de Pascua*. Garrett Cook (2000, p. 172), who did research in Momostenango during *Semana Santa* in 1974 and 1976, stated that the *baile de*

80 According to J.M. Ordoñez (1970), however, the dance in Santa Cruz Quiché took place on the 18th of August while the preparations and rituals related to the dance started on the 15th of August and continued until the 19th.

la culebra is performed on every Friday of Lent, and during Holy Week from Wednesday until Easter Sunday. Martín Ordóñez (1968, 35) mentions that the dance is performed on the fourth Friday of Lent. The *autores* of the dance in 2015, however, told me that the *baile de la culebra* is only performed on the days leading to the 4th Friday of Lent and Holy Saturday and Easter Sunday; they emphasized that this had always been the case. When asked about the other Fridays of Lent, don Leonso, the oldest of the three *autores*, told me that when he was a child there were horse races organized in Momostenango on those occasions. Accompanied by the marimba and trumpets, the horse drivers would race to one end on the main road and back to the beginning again⁸¹. Of these festivities, he said, only the *baile de la culebra* has remained.

Terminology of the Dance

The *baile de la culebra* is known by different names in the Highlands of Guatemala. This section discusses the various names of the dance and the various interpretations given by the scholars. The last part discusses the names of the characters specific to the dance in Momostenango.

Franz Termer (1957, pp. 204-210) noted in the 1920s that the dance always consisted of two separate performances: the *patztah* and the *baile de la culebra*. Although they were clearly separate in each of the three communities he visited, they were never performed individually, but always in conjunction with one another. The same dancers participated in both dances, but the moods were quite different. The first dance to be performed was always the *patztah*, which included the harassment of the woman and the whipping of the perpetrators. In the second dance, the *baile de la culebra* proper, according to Termer, the dancers were respectful of one another and danced one by one with a living snake. As I experienced during my fieldwork, today the two dances seem to have merged into one in both Momostenango and Santa Cruz Quiché. There is no clear separation nor a change in the general mood during the dance, and the harassment/whipping and the snake dance are carried out at the same time. However, don Leonso, the author of the *baile de la culebra*, told me that the

way the dance is performed today differs from the original. He explains that the dance as we see it today is a later version of the one that Termer described:

Formerly, they played with the snake, they played a different type of dance which is not just that what we are doing today; formerly it was much more of a dance. This [what we do today] is the second dance, because we don't teach anymore how the dance was before: previously they danced with the snake, all of them played with it – Don Leonso Lol, 31st of March 2015.

To discuss the dance in general I will use the generic term *baile de la culebra*. This name emphasizes the importance of the snake in the dance, which is present in each town. According to don Rigoberto, the dance is called the *baile de la culebra* because of the snake that the woman impersonator carries in her hand and because of the movement of the group in procession, which mimics that of a snake. Sahagún mentions in the Florentine Codex the performance of a “Serpent Dance” during the religious festivals related to the veintenas of *Toxcotl*, *Uey Tecuilhuil*, *Tlaxochimaco*, and *Panquetzalitzli* (De Sahagún, 1950-1978, Book II, Chapters XXV, XXVII, XXIX, XXIX and XXXIV). Similar to don Rigoberto's explanation, he describes this Serpent Dance as a dance in which the participants form lines and parade in a serpentine, sinuous manner, mimicking the movement of a snake.

The name Tz'ulab' will only be used to refer specifically to the dancers in Momostenango because this is a term that I have only come across in relation to the Momostecan variant of the dance. The word Tz'ulab' has been translated in various ways. Cook (2000, p. 171) translates it as “foul-mouthed tricksters”. The dancers indeed swear constantly and insult heavily whoever crosses their path. Termer notes that the *baile de la culebra* is the only dance in which the dialogue is kept in K'iche'. According to him, in all other Highland Guatemalan dances the K'iche' dialogue had been replaced by Spanish already thirty to forty years prior to his visit to the Highlands (Termer, 1957, p. 210). Today, the only dialogue that is present during the *baile de la culebra* in Momostenango is improvised and consists of swearing, insults, and jokes that the dancers

81 This activity is possibly similar to the horse races organized in Todos Santos on the 1st of November.

scream at each other and at the public. There is no strict memorized dialogue or script of the dance. I do not know whether the swearing is the dialogue that Termer refers to or if at that time there was a different dialogue between the dancers that has been lost since then. During the performance of the dance in Rabinal, for example, a chant or prayer is recited three times. A lot of improvisation and normal dialogue in K'iche' also takes place during the dance, but at specific moments the dancers switch to the recitation of the prayer in K'iche' (see Mace, 1967, pp. 134-139). On the other hand, swearing during the dance has not been explicitly documented in Rabinal.

The root-word *Tz'ul* is also used in relation to the dance in the community of San Andrés Sajcabajá, where the dancers are called *Ajtz'ul*⁸² (Looper, 2009, p. 204). According to Cook (2000, p. 171), a *tzul* is a person with “a bad mouth”, but, as he points out, Edmonson (1965, p. 136) documented that *tzulun-ik* means “making love to”, which could be related to the sexual overtones of the dancers' behavior towards the woman. In Momostenango, the Tz'ulab' strike the woman with their whip in between her legs and try to seduce her as part of the dance. This suggests that Tz'ul could be related to sexual intercourse with somewhat negative connotations. At times, they also make explicit gestures mimicking sexual intercourse with the woman.

Cook (2000, p. 144) suggests furthermore that Tz'ulab' could also mean “the contraries”. In Momostenango, however, the dancers that I worked with and other acquaintances translated Tz'ulab' as “those who are dressed in rags”. I am not sure, however, if this should be taken as a direct translation or rather as a general description due to the absence of a direct translation. Among the Spanish speaking Momostecans, the dance is also called *el baile de los gracejos* (the dance of the clowns), which probably refers to the laughter caused by the punishments and explicit sexual behavior, which coincides with the K'iche' term *Ajtze* (“makers of laughter”) that Lothrop documented in relation to the dance in the end of the 19th century (Termer, 1957, p. 215). Termer does not mention the use of the term Tz'ulab', as it is now used in Momostenango. Finally Cook (2000, p. 213) and Looper (2009, p. 211) suggests that the word Tz'ul is related to a dance mentioned in the Popol

Vuh, the Ixtzul (the “centipede dance”). This dance consists of the self-sacrifice and resurrection of the Hero Twins in front of the Lords of Death in Xibalba (Christenson, 2007, p. 169).

Although there are references to laughter, both in K'iche' and in Spanish, the dancers take the dance very seriously and do not seem to consider it a satire. When I saw the dance, I noticed that people in the public smiled and on some occasions laughed – especially when one of the Tz'ulab' would make explicit jokes – but in general there was a respectful atmosphere, especially when the Tz'ulab' were whipped. Termer (1957, p. 213) also described the public's attitude as always very respectful towards the dance because it was understood to be a part of their religious culture. About the *baile de los gracejos*, he states that “even in the most obscene *baile de los gracejos* with pantomime representation of sexual orgies, I have never seen spectators laugh at them” (Termer, 1957, p. 213; translation mine).

The term *baile de los gracejos* (“dance of the clowns”) is used as a generic name for dances that make people laugh. Some of these names have occasionally been mentioned by ethnographers from the first half of the 20th century (La Farge, 1994, p. 111; Siegel, 1941, p. 72), but without any descriptions of their characteristics. As it is not clear if we are dealing with such a case with the *baile de la culebra* as defined in the beginning of this chapter, I will not take dances without description into consideration in my discussion about the *baile de la culebra*.

Lothrop (1929, p. 5) documented the name *patzcarin* for the dance, which he translated as “those who are transfigured”. He also documents a name which he spells as *esalguach* and translated as “may things be remedied”⁸³. The word *patzcarines* is also used in La Esperanza (Totonicapán). Cook (2000, p. 171) mentions that some people refer to the dance with the word *patzcar* which is also the term currently used in San Andrés Sajcabajá (Looper, 2009, p. 204). He could, however, not establish a translation of this word. When I asked for the meaning of *patzcar* in Momostenango, only one of the dancers recognized the term and told me that the dance was called *patzca* in another town far away. Termer (1957, p. 215), however, documented the K'iche' term *patztah*

82 *Aj* is an agentive prefix.

83 Frauke Sachse (2017, personal communication) suggests that *esalguach* should be read as *esa-l-wach*, which, in a literal translation, means “the one who brings out a face”.



Figure 86. Xinula is presented by her husband at the central square of Momostenango.

in the region of Momostenango in the 1920s. He also received the term *patztan* from someone in San Bartolo Aguas Calientes, but he notes that this could be a local variant or a misspelling. He interprets the term *patztaj* as meaning “the corn stalks are bent” or “to bend the corn”, which is an important activity in the field before harvest. At the same time, it might also refer to the damaging effect of the wind, which sometimes breaks the maize reed during the rainy season. It seems that the name *patzca* is used in Rabinal for the dance, in which snake scepters are used to call for the rain clouds to come (Mace, 1970, pp. 80-83). *Patzca* means, according to Mace, “the ones wrapped in blankets” (in Spanish: “chamarrudos”) because they have *chamarras*, wool blankets, wrapped around their legs. Thus, in Rabinal, the dance is called after the dancers’ attire, which seems to be the same for the term Tz’ulab’ in Momostenango. In both dances, the



Figure 87. According to the Tz’ulab’, the black mask was originally the only mask used in the dance.

traditional dress was in woollen clothing (see quote Francisco Lol below).

From all these different terms and names for the dance, I have chosen to use the term *baile de la culebra* because this is the most used name today in Momostenango. Although, as is apparent from the discussion above, the root “patz” seems to have been a widespread term for the dance in the Highlands of Guatemala. It is no longer in use in the region of Momostenango and therefore I prefer the term *baile de la culebra*. To refer to the dancers of the *baile de la culebra* I will use the term Tz’ulab’, which is the usual term for the dancers in Momostenango.

Costumes Used in the Dance

The attires used in the ritual dance are very distinctive, although they may vary in each community. This section discusses the variation and similarities in dance

costumes. Due to my own fieldwork observations in Momostenango, the discussion will largely focus on this town. Furthermore, this section also examines the use of alcohol in this ritual dance, which, as I will argue, plays a role in the transformation of the participants into the characters of the dance.

The *baile de la culebra* costumes are most elaborate and formal in Joyabaj (Hutcheson, 2009). The masks and costumes are rented for the occasion from a *morería* – a workshop that makes and rents out masks – in Chichicastenago and are as elaborate as the costumes of the *baile de la conquista* (Hutcheson, 2009, pp. 875-878). In Rabinal the nine or ten male characters have to be “dressed in rags and old clothes,” in a similar manner to the Tz’ulab’ of Momostenango (Mace, 1967, p. 110). One male dancer impersonates a woman, known by the Spanish name Lola and by the K’iche’ Ajmuy, whose meaning is unclear. She wears the traditional dress from Coban (a Q’eqchi’ town in the Alta Verapaz region of Guatemala), a beautiful mask, and a handkerchief. She is in the main focus of the dance and behaves flirtatiously towards the other male dancers, waving at them with her handkerchief. The beautiful dress and mask of the woman contrasts with that of the men. Four participants, known as the “Chuy” (“to bother”) (Christenson, 2001b, p. 32), carry the snake-caness and wear bigger masks than the others, with enlarged goiters. The other four or five dancers wear smaller masks with smaller goiters and are dressed in shawls. These dancers are known as the Patzcá. All the masks worn by the participants in Rabinal have an open mouth and appear to be suffering from some illness.

In the Momostecan version of dance, several men (the Tz’ulab’) are dressed in old rags and wear masks while they dance around a white woman with blond hair, known as *Xinula*⁸⁴. She is protected by her ladino husband, called *Nab’e mu* (“first ladino”) (Figure 86). The role of the Nab’e mu shifts constantly: none of the participants is dressed as a *ladino* but each takes turn in impersonating the husband. When a Tz’ul tries to seduce Xinula, he is dragged forward by

the Nab’e mu and hit with a whip several times. The Tz’ul shouts and then runs back to his group.

Francisco Lol told me that long ago, in the first years of the dance in Momostenango around a hundred years ago, no masks were used. Xinula did not wear a white mask, either. All the dancers covered their face with a cloth bound in the front. “They say that from long ago onwards, the woman dressed in a black dress, a red *huipil*, and a hat, and she did not use a mask; she used a red cloth to hide her face and she was well covered” (Francisco Lol 2015, interview 31st of March 2015). A friend of Franz Termer who lived in Momostenango in the beginning of the 20th century, don Abel de León, also mentioned the red cloth covering the face of the woman in a letter to Termer but further states that all other dancers did wear masks (Termer, 1976, p. 307). According to Termer (1976, p. 307), as soon as masks became available, however, they were quickly incorporated in the dance, a fact that was also confirmed to me by don Leonso. At the time that Franz Termer visited the region in the 1920s, all dancers used to wear masks. Martín Ordóñez (1968, p. 35) mentions that in 1968, the dancers wore masks made of leather or cardboard.

In 2014, don Rigoberto was formally asked to assist in the organization of the *baile de la culebra* because he used to participate in the dance when he was young and, therefore, knew the dance very well. Because not all of the dancers owned their own wooden mask, some used plastic or rubber masks. Don Rigoberto therefore travelled to Chichicastenango a couple of weeks before the dance to buy wooden masks for those who did not have them. Disappointed by the high prices, which had risen lately because of the tourist industry, he could only afford to buy masks that were made of the cheapest wood and not *pino blanco* (“white pine”). Among the masks that he was able to buy with the money of the Misión Maya, don Rigoberto’s Maya K’iche’ regeneration organization, several dancers pointed out to me that the black one with the moustache was the most traditional (Figure 87). This confirms what Franz Termer (1957, p. 215) describes for the places where he saw the *baile de la culebra* (Santa Cruz Quiché, San Bartolo Aguas Calientes and Pologua) where black masks were used. In all of the dances, he saw there was always one person dressed as a woman, while all the others were males. All wore a black mask, except for the Lady,

84 Allen Christenson (2001b, p. 146) translates Xinula as “(n) Spanish woman or dresses like one; girlfriend”. According to Garrett Cook (2000, p. 171) this word means “ladina”. Frauke Sachse (personal communication, November 2014), however, recognized that the word Xinula is basically a K’iche’ derivation from the Spanish word *señora* in which the “s” is replaced with an “x” and the “r” with the “l”, as usually happens with Spanish loanwords in K’iche’.

who wore none, and the Spaniard, who wore a mask with a light skin and a moustache. He states, however, that in contrast to all other performances, the *baile de la culebra* dancers made their own mask (Termer, 1957, p. 205) and did not buy them as is the case today. The Lady character is always a ladina, dressed in an indigenous dress. He describes, furthermore, that in Santa Cruz Quiché all dancers except for one were dressed as Maxeños (people from Chichicastenango) and only one dancer was dressed as a Sololoteco (coming from the Kakchiquel town Sololá) (Termer, 1957, p. 217). The Sololoteco was continuously whipped and insulted, which Termer interpreted to be rooted in the old rivalry between the K'iche' and the Kakchiquel people. He mentions furthermore that in the region of Momostenango the dancers would decorate their bodies with fruits in the shape of a phallus or breasts (Termer, 1957, p. 219). Both Termer (1957, p. 219) and Lothrop (1929, p. 9) mention furthermore that in the region of Momostenango *chichicaste* plants, poisonous plants with thorns, were used instead of whips. This decoration seems distinctive of the Momostecan tradition, as it persists today, with the only change being the use of the whip in place of the *chichicaste*.

In the 2014 and 2015 *baile de la culebra* in Momostenango, all the dancers wore old clothes except for Xinula. The clothes that they wore, however, seemed to be randomly picked old clothes. The *autores* regretted that the traditional clothing had been lost:

Those that used to participate in this regional dance of the gracejos a long time ago, very long ago, were only the ancient people who used woolen trousers. Everything was made of wool, their suits were of wool and they wore huipiles of a red color. According to the traditions there was no use of luxurious clothes like suits, nothing like that! Only sandals like the poor people wear. So these were the people that participated mostly in this dance. It was not a luxurious dance⁸⁵, but a traditional dance
– Francisco Lol, 31st of March 2015.

85 He refers to the fact that there are several dances in the Highlands of Guatemala for which the participants have to save a lot of money and need to be from wealthy families in order to be able to rent the costumes from the *morería*.



Figure 88. Don Rigoberto Itzep pours one of the Tz'ulab' a shot of *aguardiente*.

The organizers try to continue the tradition of dancing with wooden masks but the popularity of other dances such as the *convites*, communal dances based on Hollywood-inspired themes (R. Taube, 2009, pp. 97-117), may take the dance into a different direction. In Santa Cruz Quiché this already happened: today the dancers wear masks and costumes inspired by movie characters or actors. In the performance of the dance in Momostenango in 2014, one dancer joined the group when the dance had already started, wearing a mask typical of Mexican wrestlers (*lucha libre*). This was for the organizers a point of heated discussion: they were against the penetration of popular culture masks in the dance of the ancestors but on the other hand, as there were only a few dancers, every dancer that wanted to join was appreciated. Therefore, they agreed to let the dancer participate.



Figure 89. Don Leon is helped to change in the local female dress of Momostenango. Photo taken in the *calvario* of Momostenango.



Figure 90. The third organizer, Luiz Lol, binds the mask of a Tz'ul before entering the dance.

Like several other dances in the Western Highlands of Guatemala, drinking alcohol is an integral part of the *baile de la culebra*. Not all dances include the consumption of alcohol, however. According to Mace (1967, p. 122), for example, in Rabinal the *baile de la culebra* is the only dance in which alcoholic beverages form an essential part. The Tz'ulab' of Momostenango explained to me that the drinking is necessary to be able to withstand the beating from the whip and to endure the pain. As such, a high degree of intoxication is preferred for this dance. I saw a similar high consumption of alcohol among the dancers in the Patron Day Feast of both Chichicastenango and Santa Eulalia.

During the dance, drinking becomes an important part of the ritual in the sense that the participants enter into an altered state of consciousness (ASC). The rhythmic dancing and chanting contributes to this ecstatic state, during which the body is capable of enduring more pain than usual. The consumption of alcohol, herbs, tobacco, mushrooms, or other substances are used as a path to enter the ASC in rituals all over the Americas (Furst, 1976, p. 28). Franz Termer (1957, p. 212) mentions that in the highlands of Guatemala the dancers often wrap their heads in cloths behind the masks and attach strings of garlic to it. The smell of garlic, he was told, has a stimulating effect and protects the dancer against tiredness. Today, in the case of Momostenango, alcohol is used to prevent the dancers from feeling tired⁸⁶ and to assist them in their impersonation of the characters (Figure 88). The dancers change physically and mentally into an altered state of being: they become the Nab'e mu, the Tz'ulab', or the Xinula (Figure 89 and Figure 90).

History of the Dance

During the Colonial period, indigenous Highland Guatemalan dances were not often documented by Spanish chroniclers (Looper, 2009, p. 191). It is therefore difficult to trace the *baile de la culebra* in a different way than through the oral tradition. However, there have been attempts by scholars to connect the contemporary dance to Colonial Central Mexican dances. Termer (1976, pp. 310-311), for example, suggests that the *baile de la culebra* is related to

⁸⁶ The use of alcohol in order to curb tiredness was explained to me by the Tz'ulab' and by some of the dancers of the *baile de los toritos* in Chichicastenango.

Atamalqualiztli ("Feast of the Water Tamales"), the Aztec celebration for rejuvenation and abundance of corn that used to take place every eight years. He argues that putting snakes underneath the cloths in the dance symbolizes the eating of snakes which Sahagún described as part of the Atamalqualiztli feast in the Nahua speaking region. Mace (1967, pp. 96, 127-130), on the other hand, relates the dance to the Aztec feast Tepeilhuitl, which Sahagún and Torquemada describe as a rain dance in which the dancers carry canes in the form of snakes and in the form of human heads. Termer and Mace suggest that these religious activities were introduced in the Maya communities due to the prehispanic migration of Central Mexicans into the Highlands of Guatemala. However, neither Mace nor Termer offers any convincing proof that the dance was introduced from Central Mexico apart from the argument that a similar symbolism was present there. However, as there was intense intercultural contact between Central Mexico and the Maya for a very long time prior to the Spanish conquest, it is not surprising that specific symbolism and elements of worldview are present across the whole of Mesoamerica.

Due to the absence of the *baile de la culebra* in colonial documents, I restrict the discussion of the history of the dance to the knowledge that don Leonso and don Rigoberto shared with me. All dancers agreed with each other that the importance of the dance lies in the fact that it was founded by the ancestors. Don Leonso also added that the dance was related to the day *Kan* of the *chol q'ij*:

This is because according to the Maya tradition, we have days Kan, we have days Kej... So it is that we have the day Kan, which is the snake. So the days Kan are most fond of the snake, because this is the indicated animal. Previously, the dance was celebrated on a day Kan. We have taken this in consideration and we are thinking to bring new life to this tradition to celebrate it on the day Kan because it is very beautiful. But this entire dance came into being because of the necessity of our grandfathers, our ancestors: they made this dance out of necessity. It is not that they wanted to do this dance just to enjoy themselves, no! This dance emerged out of necessity and for this reason we are doing it until today – Don Leonso Lol 31st of March 2015.

According to don Rigoberto, the *baile de la culebra* was originally performed on the day 9 Kan of the *chol q'ij*. He told me that when the Spaniards invaded the region, the dance was always performed on that day. However, at some point the day 9 Kan fell together with the Catholic Holy Week. Therefore, the Spaniards decided to fix the performance of the dance in the Gregorian calendar, and to incorporate it in the festivities of the Holy Week and Easter. Similar to the days of the *chol q'ij*, Holy week is not based on the solar year and thus shifts in relation to the year. According to don Rigoberto, this made the incorporation of the dance in the Christian calendar easier.

Don Leonso shared a different narrative about the history of the dance in which he explained that the dance began 100 years ago to keep destruction away from the *milpa*:

This regional baile de los gracejos first began in front of the ancestors. It began in the year 1915 because of... It is said that formerly predatory animals, such as the coyote and the mountain cat, entered [Pueblo Viejo] and caused much damage to the people there: they ate all the animals and started to make a lot of damage. So the grandfathers, the great grandfathers, came together and said that burning places⁸⁷ should be constructed to help the village because what was happening was a judgement, something was going wrong. So therefore they constructed several burning places, so that they could burn. And this is where the idea behind the regional baile de los gracejos was born – Don Leonso Lol, 31st of March 2015.

Martín Ordoñez (Ordoñez, 1968, p. 37) states in 1968 that the dance has been performed for at least 100 years. I think that the 100 years should not be taken strict as "only 100 years" as I think it rather symbolizes that the dance already existed in the time before the current participants existed. A period of 100 years bridges the gap between those who live and perform the dance today and those who have died and participated in the dance before us (Assmann, 2011, pp. 45-49).

⁸⁷ *Quemaderos* is a Spanish term often used to refer to the altars ("place where one burns").

A similar history to that of don Leonso was given by Marcelo Díaz from Rabinal whose knowledge was documented in an unpublished manuscript from 1943 written by Sr. Ayala with the title “*Colección de bailes, loas, sainetes y pastorelas*”. According to Marcelo Díaz the dance was performed out of necessity, to protect the community from death and destruction. In his account he explicitly mentions the role of the dancers as mediators with the Divine Beings in order to bring rain to the milpas:

So now there is this certain tradition and this is what this old indian man from Rabinal, called Marcelo Díaz, says about it: “these were a couple humble workers who lived in a hamlet and who planted their milpas. But then it happened that during a specific epoch it stopped raining for a long time. It was so extreme that the seeds dried up in front of their sights and they managed to go heaven and beg God to send water to them, which they managed to do. This is the history that we repeat”. And this same Marcelo Díaz continues, when he is not given any alcohol, he says while almost fighting: “all say, those [guys] wrapped in wool... but these were the angels that arrived in front of God and this is why it rains”. To stop this gibberish they give a drink of liquor to the known Marcelo (Mace, 1967, p. 108; translation mine).

In another account, Mace (1967, p. 123) relates that Patzcá dancers came from Jerusalem; they tried to lift the Blessed Sacrament but because of the weight their goiters burst out. Not knowing what to do, Lola and the Patzcá dancers started dancing and crying. In another version, the dancers were actually the only ones that could carry the weight of the Blessed Sacrament in its first procession in Rabinal and to commemorate that they always accompany the procession. Mace (1967, p. 126) suggests, similar to don Rigoberto, that the *baile de la culebra* was displaced in time by the Spanish missionaries who incorporated it in Rabinal in the festivities of Corpus Christi.

Although it seems that the *baile de la culebra* is a widespread and shared activity in Central

Mexico and the Highlands of Guatemala, the origin of the dance can at the moment of writing, due to the lack of historical documentation, not be ascertained.

THE BAILE DE LA CULEBRA IN MOMOSTENANGO

During the 2014 fieldwork season, I was introduced for the first time to the organizers of the dance, don Leonso (first *autor*), Francisco Lol (second *autor*) and Luiz Lol (third *autor*), and the marimba player don Benancio Sambrocio on Holy Saturday during the performance of the dance. Francisco and his brother Luiz (both between 30 and 36 years old) decided to organize the dance that year but they needed the help of an elder who had the experience in organizing the dance and could teach them. They invited their relative don Leonso, an elder of around 65 years old, to become the first author of the dance, because he had organized the dance several years before and because of his extensive knowledge of rituals and religion as Chuchqajaw. He knows about the history of the dance and knows how to properly organize it. Don Leonso took the role of Xinula in the dance. He explained me that this role always had to be performed by a Chuchqajaw.

The Momostecan *baile de la culebra* is tied to the commemorations of Lent, Holy Week, and Easter. It is performed on the fourth Friday of Lent and the two days prior to it, and then during the consecutive days Holy Saturday and Easter Sunday. Each Friday during the period of Lent, which runs from Ash Wednesday until Good Friday, is marked by a *via crucis* procession which commemorates the path of Jesus Christ on his way to the Mount Calvary to be crucified (see Chapter III). The Fourth Friday of Lent in Momostenango revolves around the whipping of Christ during this path. On this day, the whipping in the *baile de la culebra* takes place before the *via crucis* but forms part of the Christian complex of Lent and the specific commemoration of Christ's suffering. As soon as the dance ends on the Fourth Friday of Lent, the procession of the *via crucis* departs from the *calvario*. Similarly, on Holy Saturday and Easter Sunday, the dance forms part of the Catholic celebration of Holy Week and Easter Sunday and overlaps with the processions.

The dance is dedicated to Cristo Acapetagua⁸⁸ – a representation of Jesus Christ on the cross, located in the center of the *calvario* at the cemetery of Momostenango – and to the Holy Sepulcher. Cristo Acapetagua has a blueish grey color and holds flowers in both hands. Behind him, in a chapel that Garret Cook (2000, pp. 164-165) identified as an artificial cave, lies the *Sagrado Entierro* (Holy Sepulcher). The image of Christ in the coffin is completely wrapped in cloths and cannot be seen. On top of the coffin lies a bundle in which bloodstained cloths of Jesus Christ are kept and in front of it lies a box for the offerings to the Santa Cruz. In 2015, the authors of the dance had invited me to join them the whole day on the fourth Friday on Lent, beginning early in the morning. I spent the whole day with the authors and dancers and participated in the preparations as any other member of the group. I had, therefore, the chance to talk in detail about the dance with the performers and the *autores*. During lunch, I joined the *autores* in the town center where we discussed the dance in detail.

The following section discusses the *baile de la culebra* as it unfolded chronologically during the year. First, I will describe the days leading to the fourth Friday of Lent, which due to the unexpected passing away of Francisco Lol's child, did not take place in 2014. Second, an overview of the performance on the fourth Friday of Lent in combination with the preparation and performance of the *palo encebado*, also based on my fieldwork experience in 2015. These days coincided in the year of 2015 with the Gregorian dates 11th (Wednesday), 12th (Thursday), and 13th (Friday) of March. Finally, I discuss in detail the performance of the dance on Holy Saturday and Easter Sunday. In 2014, I saw the dance for the first time on Holy Saturday and I was introduced briefly to the organizers of the dance. The following year, however, I fully participated in the dance.

⁸⁸ The crucified Christ. Cristo Acapetagua derives from the Nahuatl word *acapetlahuac*. *Aca(tl)* means "reed", *petla(tl)* means "petate", and *hua-* "owner" and *-c* place name suffix. *Acapetagua* can be translated as "the place of him who sits on the reed mat (throne)", a possible reference to the divine power of Christ (Raúl Macuil 2015, personal communication). Ordóñez (1968, p. 36) states that on the Wednesday and Thursday before the fourth Friday of Lent, the dance was performed at the house of the *cofradía del Señor de Acapetagua*. Since the 70s, however, the *cofradías* in Momostenango have decreased in members and resources, which in turn resulted in financial and logistical difficulties in organizing ritual dances (Cook and Offit 2008, 49-50). This is possibly the reason why the *cofradía* is no longer actively involved in the dance.

THE RITUAL PREPARATION

The *baile de la culebra* is a very delicate dance that requires proper (ritual) preparation. The authors of the dance are responsible for petitioning protection and for thanking the ancestors and divine landscape where they reside through ritual. The burden of organizing the dance requires a nine-year commitment to the ancestors⁸⁹. The three current authors started to organize the dance together in 2008. In 2015, don Leonso had participated in the organization of the dance for over ten year and his promise was therefore fulfilled. However, he took the burden to teach the new generation of dancers. Francisco and Luiz were organizing the dance for the seventh year in a row and had to continue for at least two more years. Failing to fulfill the promise, or even doubting about it, leads to severe repercussions:

When one promises somethings and says "I am going to do it", he has to do it. But I saw my time becoming very limited, so I repented and said "it is better if I don't do it". And as a result, as a consequence for not doing it or for not participating on the fourth Friday of Lent, well, one of my sons died, he was my new born baby. Therefore, it is very delicate to promise things. What we do is not a game – it looks like it is something beautiful but if one promises, one has to follow up on it. I organize the dance because I feel that it will hurt me, that it will cause me big difficulties, if I don't realize it.

Three or five years ago the same thing happened to me. I repented and asked myself: "shall I do it, shall I not do it, I do it, or I don't?" And at the moment that we performed I let myself fall on the pole. "Bamm!". I don't know if I told you a bit about the time that I went "Bamm!": I fell completely down to the floor! But thank God nothing happened to me, I did not break anything, because the pole was full of fat, full of wax. "Bamm!" All the way down. And I did not have anything to hold myself, just imagine! So those are the consequences when one decides to organize the dance and afterwards repents, or if he

⁸⁹ See also Ordóñez (1968, p. 37) who emphasized the nine-year period as well.

doubts to do it or not do it. One has to do it with faith. You don't gain anything by doing this, but you have to do it with faith; this is all an act of devotion. So it has to be done with faith, there may not be any repentance, because I have repented twice. As I repeat, my only relief when I told myself that it was better to not perform the dance, was that my wife survived. But my son died. And everybody, my grandmother, my grandfather, all of them, scolded me and told me "well, this happened to you because you promise something and then you don't do it". They know the custom of this, of the gracejos; it is a game but when you make the promise it becomes a very delicate thing – Francisco Lol, 31st of March 2015.

Each year thirteen ceremonies or *costumbres* have to be performed during the period that the dances are performed. The first and the last ceremonies are the opening and the closing ritual, respectively the *entrada* and *finalización*, which mark the whole period of the dance as a ritual period. As discussed in Chapter I, the sequence of thirteen rituals symbolizes the completion of a cycle, while the burden of nine years relates to the ancestors. Just as important, the number thirteen is a male number, while the number nine is a female number (see Chapter I). The numerology suggests that the dance is performed for the female and male ancestors, the first mother-fathers, and is a full completion of the wisdom that they left behind for future generations. In the ceremonies, the ancestors are asked for guidance during the dance. They are petitioned to prevent fights or injuries when climbing the *palo encebado* and guidance when the dancers return to their houses drunk or tired so that nothing will happen on the road and that none of them will faint or become sick⁹⁰:

Every day we perform ceremonies, [burn] candles, everything! Day after day. We also buy the guys⁹¹ that dance with us. We do

*not just tell them, we do not just invite them to dance, no! Each time when we mention them during each ceremony, we buy them. We say "well, that they may come, that they may participate, that it may appear in their dreams, that those who have the desire will join us". And finally, 15 days before we will begin to dance, each of us that participate in the dance receives a personal sign: our back begins to itch. It makes us want to... I don't know... as if they grab us there and as if we have received [whippings]. So it are signs that we receive, which indicate that the moment that we will be given whippings is approaching. Because the ceremony is well done, well performed... Because if one does not do the ceremony, does not do anything, then nobody will be joining us: nobody dances. Because there are only a few that are willing. There are many people that admire this: "how come you endure this?". We endure this because it is all *costumbre*, it is all because of the well performed ceremony; it has its candle, it has everything of that, for its protection. So for the same reason, those that participate are only few: we do not reach a quantity of twenty or eighteen persons because there are only few that can bear this. Sometimes people come and say: "No, not even one [hit]!". But we are there with twelve or ten elements, but we are there very well protected. We put there their candles, all of it. But always when we invoke them in the ceremonies, we invoke them with their names, their protections, so that that may not happen anything when we are responsible for them. During each game, for example on Saturday and Friday, each of the participants that starts dancing with us is under our responsibility. We do not want that anything happens to them. Of course, outside the activity, each person goes his own way. So it requires a lot of responsibility. This game requires a lot of responsibility – Francisco Lol, 31st of March 2015.*

90 Similar protection rituals are documented by Mace (1967, p. 111) in the *baile de la culebra* in Rabinal. The night before *Corpus Christi*, the dancers go with the ritual specialist to the door of the church and the cemetery to perform protection rituals.

91 Humans are owned by the earth. If anyone needs participants for an event, as in the case of the *baile de la culebra*, they can be ritually bought from the earth. The payment will occur in the form of offerings deposited in

the ceremonial fire. After the participants are bought, the earth will give the participants signs from which they will understand that they have to join the dance performance.

The day before the first day of the dance, the organizers invite all dancers to join in a ceremony in which they pray to request that nothing bad will happen during the dance. Apart from the ceremonies, the dancers need to follow the moral rules in order to secure protection. For the well-being of the whole group, all the participants are required to observe sexual abstinence during the days of the dance. If the sexual abstinence is not respected, serious accidents may occur.

According to don José Angel Xeloj, Ajq'ij and elder from Momostenango, it was customary for the dancers and the musicians to go to the forest to find a snake for the dance on Holy Thursday⁹²: the sound of the instruments would call the snakes and would make them appear from underneath the stones and out of the caves. Once a snake was caught, the musicians would play marimba music to it to calm it down. On Good Friday, the snake was fed and the musicians continued to offer their music to it. During the dance on Holy Saturday, Xinula, the Lady of the dance, used to carry the snake in her left hand and a rattle in her right hand. The rattle would hypnotize the snake and prevent it from harming Tz'ulab'. On Easter Sunday, after the dance, the snake was released at the place where it was caught by the dancers and the musicians. According to don José Angel, however, the snake would not survive its release. The other snakes that live in the forest would not recognize the snake anymore because the food, the music, and the dance had given the snake a human *nawal* and the other snakes would therefore immediately kill it.

Don Leonso and Francisco Lol explained me in detail how the snake was borrowed from the forest:

The ancestors bought the snake purely through performing costumbre: they mentioned it, they burned [offerings], and before the dance they say that one has to keep abstinence for forty days, one refrains from any sin, nothing, nothing, nothing. And they say that the woman and the man are the ones in charge of buying the snake. And the woman is in charge of bringing that what we call mulul, jícara in Spanish. The woman brings this and they go together with the

Chuchqajaw, the spiritual guide, to buy [the snake]. He is the one who guides us, and the woman and man from the dance go with him to buy the snake. They go to buy the snake, and the snake appears by performing costumbre. A big snake comes out. The woman receives it: she puts the jícara there and the snake, "shhhhhii", goes inside of it – Don Leonso Lol, 31st of March 2015.

One month or 15 days before the snake is actually bought, the buying begins. When the right moment arrives, when they need it, they go to pick it up and the snake will appear dancing. The marimba is also there and the snake starts dancing with its little head. The snake only takes its head out of the jícara and begins to dance on the music of the marimba because it is correctly bought. As they say, when one has not done anything, has refrained [from specific food and sexual intercourse], has protected himself, – because it is a dance one has to take care of himself – the moment of truth has arrived. So they take the snake out and they put it like here, and the snake begins to dance, it does not cause any harm to anybody. But normally if one has not taken care of himself, if one did not pay attention, then the snake will bite him and cause harm. For this we have a punishment. The punishment for if the snake bites you is twelve whippings. To close the history of the dance, it is said that after the dance they go to leave the snake there where it appeared. And there it disappears. It is brought back; it was only in loan. This is the history of the dance – Francisco Lol, 31st of March 2015.

The form in which the *baile de la culebra* is performed today is probably a blend of the two separate dances that were noted by Termer and mentioned by don Leonso. Today the living snake is replaced by a stuffed animal of a green snake (Figure 91). The last time that the Tz'ulab' danced in Momostenango with a living snake was around 30 years ago⁹³. Francisco Lol told me, however,

92 I do not know if the same preparations took place for the fourth Friday of Lent.

93 The reason why the living snake is replaced with

that they hope to “buy” (with ceremonies) the living snake for the ritual dance in the future. He hopes to reintroduce the form of dancing as it was done long ago and to reintroduce the snake that the woman will carry in her *jicara* (“gourd”).



Figure 91. A close up of the snake and masks used in the dance.

In the 1920s, similar ceremonies took place in Momostenango before the dance, during which a ritual specialist petitioned for the dancers to remain strong (Termer, 1957, pp. 218-219). Then, three days before the dance, the dancers would go with the Chuchqajaw to the forest or milpa for a second ceremony after which the specialist showed them where they could find living snakes for the dance. The next day the dancers returned to the same place to take the snake that the earth loaned them. Both poisonous and non-poisonous snakes – the *mazacuata* (*tolopón*), the coral snake, and the *cantil* – were used in the dance (Termer, 1957, p. 219). The mouths of poisonous snakes were sown, or in some communities the fangs are torn out, so that they cannot cause any harm during the dance. Immediately after the animals were received, they were put in clay vessels in which they were kept until

a stuffed animal is not completely clear. It is very likely, however, that the Armed Conflict played a role in this. During the 1980s, it was dangerous to go into the mountains or forest to perform rituals as one could be found by the guerilla or the army, which used to hide in the hills between Momostenango and San Francisco el Alto. Since the end of the armed conflict, violence and robberies are frequent in isolated places and it is still dangerous to go to the forest in small groups.

the dance. These vessels with snakes were kept at the house of the person who would impersonate Xinula.

The preparations of the *baile de la culebra* in Chichicastenango in the 1930s were very similar:

About three weeks or a month before the dance they go to the mountains to catch the snakes and they bring them back in gourds in their bags, bound up fast. They give them chichi and the snakes take it. When they go to their recitals, they come out with the animals, and they do not bite. There are ceremonies, of course, when they go to get the snakes; they make their payments in the World that they may find the snakes, and that nothing may happen to them. During this time the men who are taking part must not quarrel in their houses or with their companions in the dance (Bunzel, 1952, p. 426).

Leonard Schultze Jena (1933, pp. 204-211) transcribed the conversations in K'iche' between the ritual specialist and the husband and wife impersonators in the dance who set out to borrow the snake⁹⁴. On the day 10 I'x, while the ritual specialist performed the ceremony to *Juyub'-Taq'aj* (“Mountain-Valley”, or “the world”) petitioning snakes, they appeared. The participants caught them and put them in a vessel together with a piece of meat while they used their rattles to keep them calm. After performing the dance, the participants return to the same place for a thanking ceremony and to release the snake.

AROUND THE 4TH FRIDAY OF LENT

The performance of the dance is very similar on the fourth Friday of Lent (and the previous two days) and on Holy Saturday and Easter Sunday. The location of the dance is different, however. On the first occasion, the cemetery is the main locale for the dance. The *calavario*, located inside the cemetery, is the main base for the dancers to gather and change clothes. On Thursday, this is also the place where lunch is consumed. Due to the preparations of the *via crucis*, on Friday lunch has to be eaten while sitting in between and on the surrounding graves.

⁹⁴ They use the expression *qoxloq'o*, meaning “we buy” (Schultze Jena, 1933, p. 210).



Figure 92. The Tz'ulab' dance in front of the entrance to the cemetery.



Figure 93. The husband of Xinula grabs a Tz'ul by his testicles.

Although the cemetery is the main setting for the dance these days, on Wednesday the dancers depart from the cemetery and go down to the center of Momostenango, where the market takes place at that moment, to dance and announce the imminence of the dance. The Wednesday is only for this announcement, so on this day the dance takes only place from nine o'clock in the morning until lunch time. On Thursday, the dance is performed throughout the whole day, from nine o'clock in the morning until sunset, around half past five in the afternoon. Around noon, there is a one-hour break for lunch, which is prepared by the families of the organizers. Because of the preparations of the *palo encebado*⁹⁵, the *baile de la culebra* takes place on Friday after lunch, only after the pole of the *palo encebado* has been planted. I noticed that during lunch, some of the dancers were so excited about the dance that they continued to whip each other inside the *calvario* or between the tombs at the cemetery. Xinula, and some of the workers at the cemetery, also voluntarily received strokes during lunch.

In 2015, on Wednesday and Thursday early in the morning, the Tz'ulab' and other organizers met in the *calvario* where the dancers changed clothes and the organizers finalized the schedule. Xinula, impersonated by don Leonso, changed into the Momostecan dress and put on the mask and wig. Some of the dancers already whipped each other while changing clothes. As soon as everyone was dressed, the group left the *calvario* and started the dance immediately at the entrance of the cemetery, some 100 meter away from the *calvario*, while don Benancio Sambrocio⁹⁶ played the marimba (Figure 92). There were 12 dancers participating on the three consecutive days. As soon as the music started, the dance began. The majority of dancers were the Tz'ulab', who seduced, harassed and abducted Xinula. Sometimes the Tz'ulab' used the handle of the whip as a phallus by holding it with one or two hands in front of their genitals, and on some

95 The K'iche' name for the *palo encebado* is *che' ki kasaj ki puaq* ("the tree with grease and money").

96 The marimba player is the only participant that is paid for his services. Usually, he is paid around 250 quetzales per day. Don Benancio is a well-known virtuoso musician of about 80 years old. He knows many marimba melodies and is often invited to play on the patron feasts in highland towns. He is also the marimba player for the *baile del venado* during the Patron Saint feast in Momostenango.

occasions they pressed it against Xinula's back or front, or slip it underneath her dress (Figure 94). On other occasions, a dancer carried Xinula away on his back and would hide her from her husband. Usually Xinula plays along with the male seducers, dancing with them and hiding together with them (Figure 95). She would jump on the back of the Tz'ul with her arms around his neck. One of the dancers, the husband of Xinula, hit the other dancers as punishment for their behavior. As soon as Xinula was found, hiding behind a wall, car or house, the abductor was punished. Sometimes the attackers of Xinula were apparently dragged by their butt and testicles (Figure 93).

One by one the husband dragged the Tz'ulab' to an open spot on the street and hit them two or three times with the whip (Figure 96). The number of strokes depends partly on who is being hit: in some instances the dancer shouts that he wants more, while on other occasions the dancers tell the husband beforehand how many times they want to be hit. It is important for them to show that they are strong and that the strokes do not affect them at all. After being whipped, the dancers usually take a victorious stand, raising their hands, mocking the husband, and then walking away. Sometimes, however, a dancer falls down on the floor and remains lying as if he were dead (Figure 97). After the third day of dancing, some of them have sore and bloody wounds on their waists. According to several Tz'ulab', the alcohol makes the pain more bearable. Others, however, do not drink any alcohol, but endure the pain nonetheless.

During the dance, the role of the husband is passed from one dancer to another. Xinula is the one who decides whose turn it is to become the husband. Don Rigoberto and the authors told me that during the dance Xinula is also the one who points out those who should be whipped. The authors agree and emphasize that Xinula is the leader of the dance. As a spectator, however, it seems as if Xinula is a passive participant, a victim of the men around her. Later, when I had the opportunity to participate in the dance on Holy Saturday and Easter Sunday in 2015, I noticed indeed that Xinula keeps track of everything that happens. She holds a firm grip on her seducers and does not let go until she decides that it is time for a Tz'ul to get hit. She makes sure that the dancers are well. When she notices that one of them

is weak because of the alcohol, the long hours spent dancing or the whipping, she tells the Nab'e mu to whip one of the other dancers. If he continues to drag the weak participant away from Xinula, she will hold this dancer tight as if protecting him. Sometimes the dancers get in a fight and she is the one who keeps them apart. Xinula has thus the most responsible role in the dance as she takes care of the participants. She is acts as the authority for the other dancers.

THE GREASED POLE

The celebration of *palo encebado* always takes place on the fourth Friday of Lent. It is a separate event from the *baile de la culebra*. Usually, the dancers gather at sunrise at the entrance of the cemetery to go



Figure 94. A Tz'ul holds his whip in front of his genitals to make it resemble a penis.



Figure 95. Xinula is hiding behind a car with two Tz'ulab'.



Figure 96. The husband of Xinula whips a Tz'ul for harassing Xinula.



Figure 97. A Tz'ul lies on the ground, acting to be dead or severely wounded.

up the cemetery hill, located on a steep slope at the north-east side of the town, where they will cut the pine tree for the event. In 2015, however, the authors and several of the dancers met around 8 o'clock in front of the *calvario* to attend the mass for the fourth Friday of Lent in preparation to the *via crucis* that would take place immediately after the dance.

After the mass, around nine o'clock in the morning, we opened the hole in the ground where the pole would later be planted. This hole is located roughly eight meters south of the cemetery entrance and it is used over and over every year. Once we emptied the hole, we climbed to the top of the cemetery where we met with the sixteen leaders of the four *barrios* of Momostenango (Santa Isabel, Santa Ana, Santa Catarina, and Pa Tz'ite). The organizers of the dance had previously asked their permission to cut a tree at the cemetery for the *palo encebado*. As representatives of the community of Momostenango, the *barrios* leaders support and watch the activities of the Tz'ulab'. Once the tree was cut, the *Ajtz'ib'*, or secretary of the communal authority, wrote, as it is customary, an official act stating that this event took place with permission of the communal authority. The act was signed by the authors of the dance, the *Ajtz'ib'*, and me.

Don Benancio Sambrocio was already playing marimba when we arrived at the hill of the cemetery where we would cut the tree. He was standing between two graves at the edge of a small

ravine at whose bottom was the pine tree that would be cut. The tree that is used for the *palo encebado* is always taken from the cemetery and is usually selected a couple of days before by the Chuchqajaw and the authors of the dance. Don Benancio stood on a higher section of the hill, facing the middle of the tree and played the music towards it, with his back towards the communal authority. Meanwhile, Chuchqajaw don Leonso Lol, the impersonator of Xinula, performed a fire ceremony in front of the tree, in which he asked for guidance and protection during the dance (Figure 98). Furthermore, he asked the ancestors – out of whose body the tree has grown – and *Juyub'-Taq'aj* ("Mountain-Valley", diaphrastic kenning for "the World") permission to cut the tree and pardon for hurting it. Trees are alive, and cutting a tree for any purpose has to be done with respect. While permission and pardon rituals used to take place any time one would cut a tree, or damage something in nature, now these ceremonies are only carried out during specific ritual events such as the *palo encebado*. During the ritual, don Leonso carried the whip as a snake over his neck and shoulders and passed it around the trunk of the tree two or three times on a few occasions. Near the end of the ceremony, he danced with the tree on the music of the marimba by placing his two arms around the tree and moving his feet and upper body to the rhythm.

The marimba music stopped immediately when the ceremony came to an end, and the dancers started discussing the strategy for cutting down the tree. The tree stood among the graves, so we had to be cautious not to let the tree fall on the graves of the ancestors. One of the youngest dancers started to prepare the tree by climbing it and cutting off the branches. Meanwhile, don Leonso started cutting the tree with an axe and when he got tired, other dancers took over. Once a big part of the base of the tree was cut, the dancer that was in the tree came down and we pulled the tree with the rope that had been placed around it. This way we were able to direct its fall. While we were pulling the tree, a woman involved in the organization of the *via crucis* collected the pine needles of the branches that were cut off, to be used for the procession later that evening. Immediately after the tree fell, the secretary read the official act in Spanish stating that at 09:30 am of Friday the 13th of April, 2015, the authorities oversaw and approved



Figure 98. Don Leonso performs a ceremony for asking permission to cut the tree at the cemetery of Momostenango.

the cutting of a pine tree, to be used in the *baile regional de los gracejos* that afternoon, at the cemetery of Momostenango.

The tree was cleared of all its branches except for a thick one at the top, which would later be used by one of the participants in the dance to sit on, once one would reach the top. We carried the tree down the hill of the cemetery with a rope pulled by six persons at a time. Once the tree started moving, we ran down the slope of the cemetery. One of the dancers was behind us and hit the tree several times with the whip. This is done in order to ensure that the tree behaves well and that all negativity is taken away. Whenever we stopped to take a break or shift turns, the marimba reached us and the musician played to the tree. The tree is finally left on the ground close to the hole at the entrance of the cemetery⁹⁷. The tree was constantly watched

over, in case someone would step over it, which is considered a very disrespectful and a dangerous thing to do.

While the organizers and I went to the center to buy some things, the Tz'ulab' took off all the tree's irregularities and the bark. When we returned to the cemetery's entrance, all bark had been cleared off the tree and we rubbed wax and pork fat on the pole to make it greasy and slippery (Figure 99 and Figure 100). Before raising the pole, the dancers and authors began the ritual planting of the pole by walking around it, one behind the other, following the Chuchqajaw who carried a whip. The whip was, on this occasion, a sign of the Chuchqajaw's authority. Accompanied by the marimba music, the group walked two and a half times counterclockwise, and subsequently the same amount of times clockwise. Each time a dancer reached the end of the tree, he would bend over and touch it with his hands while both arms were

⁹⁷ According to all the participants, the tree was "planted" ("sembrar") in the hole.



Figure 99. The Tz'ulab' clear the tree of its bark.



Figure 100. Pig fat and candle wax is used to grease the pole.

crossed. Finally, the Chuchqajaw whipped the tree nine times proceeding from the base to the top, and another five times when walking from the top to the base.

Finally, the Chuchqajaw attaches a prize (“*premio*”) to the top of the tree. This prize consists of a basket filled with candy for the kids that will gather around the pole and an envelope with money for the person who is able to reach the top. The money has been donated by the municipality and none of the dancers knows the exact amount. If nobody reaches the top, the money is divided among all participants. Once the prize is attached to the top of the pole, the tree is lift up and planted in the hole⁹⁸. Because the pole is covered in grease, this is a difficult and risky undertaking. Some push the tree up from the ground while others pull a rope connected to the top of the tree standing against

⁹⁸ No offerings of any kind were deposited in the hole before planting the tree.



Figure 101. Around midday the pole is planted next to the entrance to the cemetery.

the wall of the cemetery. To make it stable once planted, the hole is filled up with clay and stones (Figure 101). Once the tree is secure and standing, it is time for lunch in between the graves of the cemetery. An hour later *baile de la culebra* starts (Figure 102).

The event of the *palo encebado* started at four o'clock. The place of performing the *baile de la culebra* moved towards the raised pole and the dancers continued dancing here. While the *baile de la culebra* continued, the dancers took turns in trying to reach the top of the greasy pole. When I assisted in 2015, it seemed that there was too much wax and pork fat on the tree so nobody was able to climb to the top.

Around 5 o'clock it was decided that nobody was able to reach the top. They pulled a rope over the last branch of the tree and Luiz climbed up to get the prize, which was later shared among all dancers. Luiz, at the top of the tree grabbed the



Figure 102. Don Benancio plays the marimba.

candy and threw it to the children, who eagerly ran and jumped to collect as much candy as they could. Once the prize was taken from the tree, the dancers went back to the entrance of the cemetery where they continued dancing until six o'clock in the evening. Towards the end of the dance, many people came to the cemetery and *calvario* for the following *via crucis*. The *baile de la culebra* usually finishes at sunset and immediately after the *via crucis* procession leaves the *calvario*.

HOLY SATURDAY AND EASTER SUNDAY

The dance that takes place on Holy Saturday and Easter Sunday is also dedicated to the Cristo Acapetagua and the Sacred Sepulcher. As during the fourth Friday of Lent, the dance starts in the *calvario*. The dancers, organizers and musician meet at the stairs and enter the *calvario* together to prepare. Don Leonso, who impersonated Xinula

in 2014, was not able to reprise his role in 2015 due to family matters. Therefore, the role of Xinula was up taken by don Leon, an elder with years of experience in the dance. As Don Leonso kept his clothes, mask, and snake at his house, we had to put together the costume anew, which caused some delay. The costume used by Xinula in 2015 was therefore slightly different from that previously used in 2014; Xinula now wore a rubber mask and a reddish brown wig, and holds a wooden snake. Before the actual dance began, the dancers started to take turns and whip each other. I accepted the offer of one of the Tz'ulab': I would whip him twice and then he would whip me twice in return (Figure 103). After being whipped, don Leon, who was already dressed as Xinula, taught me how to dance with Xinula at the top of the stairs of the *calvario*. This marked my initiation into the group and from that moment, I would be invited several times by the authors to join in the dance. My participation seemed very much appreciated by the dancers and organizers, who made sure that I was part of the group and always checked on me after each whipping.

When all the dancers were dressed, and had their masks on, we went to the *calvario* to pray before Cristo Acapetagua, kneeling in the space between



Figure 103. The author is whipped by a Tz'ul between the graves in front of the *calvario*.



Figure 104. Prior to the dance, the Tz'ulab' pray before the image of Cristo Acapetagua.

the Sacred Sepulcher and Cristo Acapetagua⁹⁹ (Figure 104). While we were inside, don Benancio played outside on the top of the stairs of the *calvario*. According to don Rigoberto, after the prayer in 2014, the dancers shouted and insulted the Cristo Acapetagua, blaming him for the pain inflicted by the whip. As I was not part of the group that year, I did not witness that. In 2015, however, nobody swore to the image of Christ. Once everybody was ready we left the *calvario*. Xinula first danced with her husband in front of the *calvario* and eventually all the other dancers formed two lines, with the marimba player closing the line behind all the dancers and continuing to play the marimba while walking. We headed towards the town center, while the group danced in walking-pace (Figure 105). Two assistants carried the marimba so that don Benancio could play while following the group. The dancing

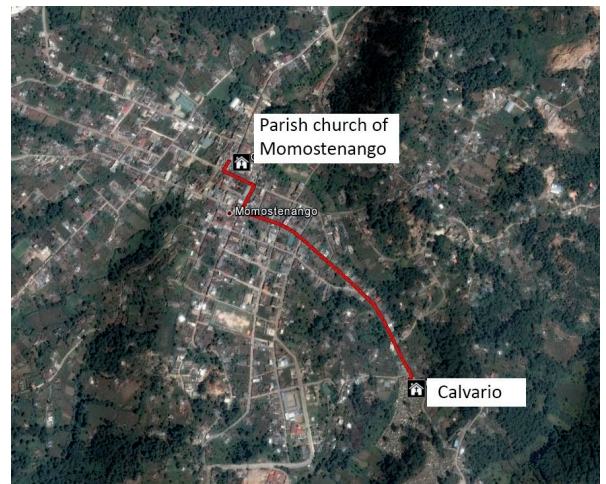


Figure 105. The route of the ritual dancing procession from the cemetery to the main plaza of Momostenango.

⁹⁹ The Holy Sepulcher is taken out of the cave for Holy Week.



Figure 106. The Tz'ulab' move as a snake through Momostenango while they go from the cemetery to center of the town.

procession moved, in don Rigoberto's words, as a snake through the town: from the cemetery to the central square of Momostenango.

Xinula walked on the right side at the front of the group. Some men carried a whip in their hands or over their shoulder (Figure 106). From time to time a man cried a howling "woohoo" after which the others repeated the shout. The group followed the main road through town towards the center and stopped a few times to ask for donations from the spectators or shop owners. Luiz Lol wrote in a notebook the names of all who donated and the amount given. In the meanwhile, the dancers began to whip each other. The dancers volunteered to whip or get whipped: at this time, Xinula is not yet harassed and it is not yet clear who is the husband.

The dancing procession continues to move until it reaches the square in front of the Catholic Church, in the town center, where the dancers take a short break. Meanwhile, the organizers officially announce in the town hall that the dance has begun and

ask for police support in making sure that no drunken spectators disturb the Tz'ulab'. Unfortunately, in either 2014 and 2015, no police support was given so the authors and their assistants¹⁰⁰ had to take on that responsibility.

After this short break the dance continues. In 2015 there were fifteen dancers participating, while in 2014 the dancing procession from the cemetery to the city center was performed by twelve dancers. However, when the group reached the square in front of the Catholic Church, four more men, who heard the announcements on the local radio *La Princesa Ixmukane*, came and joined the group¹⁰¹. The dancers usually position themselves in two lines facing each other. The woman then dances with one of the men, the Nab'e mu ("first *ladino*"), and together they walk forward in between the two lines of dancers

100 The assistants are older men who have participated in the dance since young age.

101 Cook (2000, p. 181) states that the dance is usually performed by twenty dancers. Don Leonso told me, however, that there is no fixed number of participants.



Figure 107. The *baile de la culebra* performed at the central square of Momostenango.

towards the marimba player. Here they shortly bow and continue to the right. After the husband and wife have presented themselves, the dancing men do the same and present themselves in pairs to the marimba player. When the dancers have formally presented themselves, the dance continues with the stealing of the wife and the whipping of the assaulters, just like on the fourth Friday of Lent and the two days prior to that: Xinula is the center of attention of all the dancing men. Just as on the Fourth Friday of Lent, they all try to touch her, dance with her, or carry her away on their back (Figure 107, Figure 108, and Figure 109).

Around one o'clock, there is a lunch break of one and a half hours. In previous years, each dancer would go and have lunch by himself. However, because this resulted in some dancers leaving the dance altogether, the authors decided beginning 2014 that they would organize a common lunch instead. In 2014, the *cofradía* of San Simón offered food and shelter for the dancers to rest. This was very uncommon because usually the *baile de la culebra* is

organized without any involvement of the *cofradías*. Lunch was organized in 2015 by the family of don Rigoberto, and the director of the *Casa de la Cultura* of Momostenango offered a room. However, usually some of the dancers are too intoxicated or exhausted to eat lunch and pass the lunch break sleeping.

After lunch, the dance continues for around two more hours. During the dance, Francisco Lol invited me to dance several times. He always first asked me if I was willing to participate and then introduced me to the public. I danced with Xinula and was subsequently dragged by the husband to receive the whippings. Prior and after the whippings, the Tz'ulab' made explicit sexual comments and jokes in K'iche'. Don Leon (as Xinula) and Francisco Lol always made sure that I was doing fine during my dance. After several turns, I was appointed as Nab'e mu by Xinula and I dragged the other Tz'ulab' forward. The public was visibly entertained by my participation: a foreigner playing the role of a foreign person (the Nab'e mu).



Figure 108. Xinula is harassed by the Tz'ulab' on the central square.

The dance usually ends between five and six o'clock in the afternoon. The dance might become very unstructured towards the end, as it happened in 2015. The most intoxicated dancers took off their shirts to get hit on the bare skin, producing bloody wounds. Many of them hit each other at the same time and no longer paid attention to *Xinula*. On *Sábado de Gloria* (Holy Saturday) 2014 the end of the dance was rather quiet instead: at 5 o'clock the marimba player stopped and each dancer went home.

The next day, Easter Sunday, there are usually less Tz'ulab' participating in the dance because of the pain and the general physical distress from the previous day. In 2015, only one dancer did not return, but another one joined the group. The main difference from the Holy Saturday dance is that in the morning of Easter Sunday the dance begins at the central park, in front of the municipal office. After lunch break the dance continues on

the central square again, but this time straight in front of the church, behind the altar *Kokoch* (Figure 110), whereas on the afternoon of Holy Saturday the dance is performed on the southern side of the plaza.

The reason for performing the dance in front of the municipality building on Sunday morning is simply because the square in front of the church is occupied by the weekly market. Around two o'clock in the afternoon the market winds down on the central square and there is enough room for the Tz'ulab' to perform there. However, the procession of the Resurrection also takes place in the morning and passes exactly on the same route of the dance. Therefore, the dance usually starts late on Easter Sunday, more or less after ten o'clock in the morning. In 2015, the group met in the *Casa de la Cultura* and waited for the procession to pass. Don Benancio, however, was still inebriated from the day before and was not able to play the marimba in the morning. The



Figure 109. Some of the dancers take off their shirts in the afternoon of Holy Saturday and Easter Sunday, and are whipped on their bare skin.

first session of the dance was therefore cancelled and only the afternoon session took place.

We began the dance at two o'clock and ended at exactly six o'clock in the afternoon. On Easter Sunday 2014, the dance ended very disorderly. Some of the dancers took off their masks and thick jackets and were whipped on their bare skin. Though the strokes visibly produced bloody wounds and red scores on their sides and back, they still told the husband that it did not hurt and immediately ran back to the woman. Once the dance was over, each of the dancers went back home and would not come together as a group until the following year, two days before the fourth Friday of Lent. After Easter Sunday, on an appropriate day in the K'iche' calendar, don Leonso performed the finalizing ceremony, thanking the ancestors and the *Juyub-Taq'aj* ("mountain-valley, world) for watching over the dance and protecting the dancers.



Figure 110. On Easter Sunday the *baile de la culebra* takes place straight in front of the parish church of Momostenango.

After two days of dancing, the participants have deep and sore wounds on their sides. A specialized healer treats the dancers and cures the wounds by rubbing and massaging over them. The dancers are also sent to the thermal baths of Payaxu, just outside of Momostenango. Payaxu (derived from *pa ja' chu* which means "the place of smelly water", in reference to the smell of sulfur from the thermal bath) is the most popular public bath in Momostenango. Due to the curing qualities of its water, Tz'ulab' are sent there especially for recovery. There is also a separate bath for pregnant women and *comadronas* (midwives) at Payaxu. The sulfur in the water has a healing effect on the damaged skin and within a few days, the participants are already feeling better.

VARIETY IN NARRATIVES

In each place where the dance is performed, it is accompanied by one or several narratives or it enacts a specific narrative. These narratives are in essence similar to each other and follow the outline described in the beginning of the chapter. Each contemporary narrative, however, provides insights in the message that is transferred during the ritual. Furthermore, many narratives show the K'iche' attitude towards the oppression endured under Spanish rule, first, and their *ladino* descendants, eventually. In this section, I will shortly discuss the different narratives that accompany the ritual dance. As a conclusion, I will discuss how the narratives or ritual storylines constitute indigenous historical accounts.

Momostenango

The general narrative that accompanies the dance in Momostenango is short and concrete. The Nab'e mu, or Spaniard, has a wife, known as Xinula. Xinula has the physical features of a Spanish lady, but is dressed in the local Momostecan dress. According to some people, the Nab'e mu is the brother of Xinula. The role of Xinula is always played by a *Chuchqajaw*, while the role of the Nab'e mu is played by the different Tz'ulab'. According to some, the Tz'ulab' represent the K'iche' people who attempt to seduce the wife of the Spaniard. They sexually harass her and steal her from the Spaniard as an act of defiance. The Spaniard whips each seducer in an attempt to protect his wife. According to Ordóñez (1968, p. 36), the narrative tells about the negative consequences that result from engaging with an adulterous woman. The Tz'ulab' do not surrender. Even though the Tz'ulab' suffer and appear to die, they resurrect and continue their fight, they do not surrender. According to the *autores*, the dance is an account of the colonial oppression of the K'iche' people by the Spaniards and a resistance against them. There is no formal ending of the narrative, the resistance and punishment continues until the *autores* decide that it has been enough and the dancers go home.

Joyabaj

The sexual interplay between the male dancers and a female personage is central to the performance of the *baile de la culebra* in Joyabaj as well. The

dance, performed in the center of town, is set on an imaginary cattle plantation, whose owner, Juan Antonio, is a *ladino* and his wife is a Maya shepherdess (played by a man) (Hutcheson, 2009, p. 873). The wife is assisted by two people, a black cook and a domestic servant (see Hutcheson, 2009, pp. 875-876), while Juan Antonio has two administrative *ladino* assistants: a labor boss of the plantation and a secretary. Several K'iche' *vaqueros* attend the bull, a personage dressed as a bull. Furthermore, there are two clowns that entertain the bull, and two young shepherds (played by young children). Finally, there is a person known as the *Maxeño* (inhabitant of Chichicastenango), who is a diviner and healer.

The plantation owner suggests to his assistant to make a celebration with dance and music in honor of the patron saint (see Hutcheson, 2009). After consuming a ceremonial meal and drink, the plantation owner suggests to the *vaqueros* to organize a bullfight, but before that they have to go and find snakes. The K'iche' *vaqueros* find several snakes and dance with them, but once they hand one to the plantation owner he is bitten and dies on a woven mat. Meanwhile, the plantation secretary runs away with the wife of the plantation owner (in other occasions she runs away with any other helper of the plantation). The *Maxeño* brings the plantation owner back to life by letting him confess his sins and by letting another snake bite him. When he resurrects, he goes after his wife and the plantation secretary adulterator. With the help of the *Maxeños* divination, he searches for them in the four corners of the town square until he finds them and punishes them. Before the final comical bull fight, the secretary passes by each *vaquero* to register their names to work on a sugar cane plantation on the coast, as used to be done in the past. With the bull fight the dance comes to an end.

San Andrés Sajcabajá

In San Andrés Sajcabajá, the dance is performed by twelve to eighteen dancers who represent distinct characters (Looper, 2009, pp. 205-206). Most of the dance is based on improvisation between the dancers. Here the men fight with each other to be with the women. Usually there are two to three seducing women who tease males in the public and the dancers. There are several dancers that impersonate

the character of the *Mam* (“grandfather”), a character with a long moustache, at the same time. A couple of persons are known as the Barbuas. The Barbuas have a white mask and big sunglasses, and sometimes carry a gun. These persons seem to represent Spaniards. They hunt and shoot the Ajooj, a character that has grains of corn around the mouth, indicating, according to the specialists of San Andrés Sajcabajá, that they represent animals that eat the maize plants from the *milpas* (Looper, 2009, p. 206)¹⁰². Sometimes several dancers hold snakes in their hands, and in the past they used to whip each other with bundles of grass. There does not seem to be a husband to the numerous women dancing in San Andrés Sajcabajá.

Rabinal

The dance in Rabinal is an account of suffering from goiter or malaria, brought to the dancers by the mountain gods that bring rain and wind (Mace, 1967, pp. 96-97). During the dance, the performers continuously scream that they are suffering¹⁰³ and that they need a remedy or medicine, a reference to a sip of *aguardiente* (Mace, 1967, p. 112). The dancers perform around a woman named Lola, who teases and seduces them. She is known as the mother of the male dancers, nevertheless, there is a clear erotic play between her and the dancers. The men also make sexual gestures to the public. Lola throws the men on the ground, causing them pain, but then she helps them up again. The woman was possibly accompanied by her husband in earlier performances. According to Marcelo Díaz, the director of the dance, the men are the angels that bring the rain (Mace, 1967, pp. 107-108). According to Mace, the dance represents the ability of earth to inflict pain and suffering on the people in case they lack respect.

Chichicastenango

Currently the *baile de la culebra* is not performed in Chichicastenango. Both Schultze Jena and Bunzel have documented the dance here, however. There were two groups and a woman participating in the

serpent dance in Momostenango (Bunzel, 1952, p. 426). One group was that of the Spaniards or *Kaxlan Winaq*. They carried swords and white masks. The other group was that of the *Mam* or *Viejos* (“the grandfathers”), which represented the K’iche’ people. The dancers danced with the snakes, inviting first the woman to dance with the snake in her neck after which the Spaniards did the same. The K’iche’ put the serpents in their clothes and let them pass along their bodies until it came out again. After this first part, the *Mam* tried to steal the woman from the Spaniards and sexually assault her. The Spaniards tried to defend her by punishing the *Mam*.

San Bartolo and Pologua

According to Termer (1957, pp. 217-218), the dance in these two villages was almost the same. He writes the following: “the argument of the dance consisted only of the scene of the indigenous woman who got stolen by the *gracejos*, which stood out in sexual aggregation and was very obscene. One after the other engaged in sexual intercourse with the woman while exchanging impudent gestures and phrases with her. Finally, the dancers made jokes with each other through the performance of perverse sexual acts” (Termer, 1957, p. 217; translation mine). After this first part, the dancers lined up in two lines, screaming and shouting, and started hitting each other with the whips. After this, they dropped on the ground where they remained for a while, acting as if dead. In Pologua, the dancer would dance in the second part with the living snakes.

Santa Cruz del Quiché

According to Termer, the dance emphasized in Santa Cruz del Quiché distinct ethnic identities. In the beginning of the 20th century, one dancer impersonated a woman while the rest of the dancers were divided into two groups: one group was dressed in rags and the other wore the local dresses from Chichicastenango and Chiché (Termer, 1957, p. 216). In this last group, there was also a male dancer dressed in the Sololá dress, from the Kaqchikel speaking region. Although dressed in local costumes, one performer represented a European person, who danced with the woman, while the other dancers – the Old Men – attempted to steal her from him. Meanwhile the groups from Chichicastenango-

¹⁰² As I discuss below, according to the first author of the dance in Momostenango, Don Leonso, the *baile de la culebra* began in Momostenango when the ancestors needed protection against animals that were destroying the milpas.

¹⁰³ “Oh, now it’s beginning! Now it’s hot, and now it’s cold!” (Mace, 1967, p. 112).

Chiché and those dressed in rags fight with each other with whips. Termer mentions that there is a lot of improvisation and sexually explicit jokes between the Lady, the European, and the Old Men. The performer in Sololá clothing is especially made fun of. After the fights, a jar with snakes is brought forth and the dancers dance with a snake.

While on fieldwork in 2016 I attended the performance of the *baile de la culebra* in Santa Cruz del Quiché on the 18th of August during the festivities for the patron saint Santa Elena de la Cruz (12th-19th of August). The dance was performed next to the stairs of the church in the main square of the city. Two large groups of around fifteen dancers each stood opposite of each other. There was one dancer dressed as a Spaniard, wearing a mask with a moustache while dressed in a *conquista* outfit. There were also two women played by two men, one belonging to each of the groups. Both women wore the indigenous dress and had *ladina* faces. Furthermore, each group had a person that impersonated a *cofradía* member from Chichicastenango (one had a white face, the other had a black face). Both groups tried to provoke each other by harassing the lady that belonged to the other group, and tried pull each other on the ground in a fight. The Spaniard is not much involved in this.

A living snake is still used in the performance of the *baile de la culebra* in Santa Cruz del Quiché. At times that the dancers are not harassing the lady or fighting with each other, one of the organizers brings the snake in and it is slipped under the clothes of some of the dancers (Figure 111). As I was not as involved in the dance as in Momostenango, I could not see clearly what led to the introduction of the snake in the dance, or for what reason the snake was taken away again. After the snake had been taken away by the organizer, the dancers continued to harass each other and the women. After a while, they lined up and circled in a counter clockwise direction, one behind the other, over the plaza. This marked the end of the dance for the morning. Later in the afternoon the dancers would continue again but I was not able to assist at that moment.

Santa Lucía Utitlán

The *baile de la culebra* in Santa Lucía Utitlán is documented by Saquic Calel (1970) according to whom more than sixty dancers were involved in the

dance. The main protagonists were a woman and her husband. Similar to the dance in Momostenango, the woman was dressed in indigenous clothing but her mask was that of a foreigner. The husband was a foreigner, a Caxlanwinaq. Furthermore, there were over fifty cowboys and another twelve dancers that impersonated bulls. The masks were made of black leather and had a beard and eyebrows made of white wool. The apparent storyline of the dance is similar to that of Momostenango: cowboys try to steal the wife of the foreigner who punishes them for this with a whip.



Figure 111. A snake is pulled from underneath the shirt of one of the dancers of the *baile de la culebra* in Santa Cruz del Quiché.

HISTORICAL EXPERIENCES IN RITUAL DANCE

Hutcheson argues that the dancers in the *baile de la culebra* are “reproducing different elements of historical and social practice within a story line that has all but been forgotten, so that the elements themselves stand forth as abstract and decontextualized cultural tokens” (2009, p. 872). In contrast to him, I argue that the meaning of the *baile de la culebra* and the historical lessons that it teaches are very well understood by both the dancers and

the public. The form in which history is presented, however, is different from the Western tradition, which makes it difficult for researchers to recognize it.

In all the communities where the dance is performed, the *baile de la culebra* stands as a performance of the history of the ancestors and the community. However, the ritual dances do not tell data and dates in a chronological fashion. As these dances are rituals, they have the ability to incorporate those parts of history whose impact have been so traumatic that it should never be forgotten (Severi, 1996). By pointing out shared historical trauma, the ritual contributes to the mutual identification of members in the community and emphasizes the shared hope of overcoming the trauma, in this case the processes of colonial oppression, in the future. The ritual memory embedded in the dance is updated to the current situations lived in the communities and their members at each performance (Rappaport, 1999). Therefore, it is not surprising that each dance has a slightly different twist, narrative or emphasis from the other, and that elements such as Hollywood masks become incorporated.

Similar to a Catholic priest who recites a part of the Bible during mass – and not the entire biblical story – the *baile de la culebra* emphasizes particular experiences and memories of the community's past together with social conventions such as morals and taboos. Doing so, the dance relates the past with current social concerns at stake within the community, bridging the gap between the ancestors and the living descendants. Ritual memory in the *baile de la culebra* is a tool to overcome the lack of a direct link to the past or access to first person testimonies of it due to the inevitable death of those who lived and experienced historical processes (Assmann, 2003). The never-changing aspect of the ritual enables the performers to transfer the message of the ancestors to the future generations (Rappaport, 1999, p. 187).

Therefore, the *calvario* and cemetery are such important places for the performance of the dance in Momostenango: this is where the ancestors who lived this history lay. Whereas their experience can only be reenacted in ritual, the ritual dance itself can, and should, be performed time after time. Whoever wants to organize the dance needs to be accompanied by one

or several elders who have participated in the dance and who can pass on their knowledge directly to the new generation of authors. In Momostenango, Don Leonso was the elder who ensured the right passing on of knowledge, assisted by Don Rigoberto. Thus, while events of the past cannot be re-experienced in daily life, the direct transfer of knowledge on how to perform the dance prevents the memory of the past from disappearing. Furthermore, it ensures the experience of a shared past, which contributes to the feeling of belonging to a community (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). The meanings of a dance – as there is no singular meaning – differ per person as during life each person learned different skills to interpret its given meaning (Ingold, 2011). However, the authors who organize the dance have a particular set of intentions or ideas that they are conveying, and the narratives about the dance that circulate within the community ensure that specific meanings are revealed to all spectators.

As some of the narratives show, Christian history plays an important part of the history of the communities. In Rabinal, for example, “the first dancers got goiter centuries ago when they came from Jerusalem to carry the Blessed Sacrament, and it is because of this belief that the Patzcá dancers lead the Corpus procession” (Mace, 1967, p. 126). The process of Christian and pre-conquest historical traditions becoming integrated and part of the same traditions can also be noticed in indigenous manuscripts dating from the Early Colonial period. For instance, in the *Título de los señores de Totonicapán* – an early colonial K'iche' manuscript that was probably written in 1554 – the sacred origin place Tulan¹⁰⁴ from which the K'iche' ancestors have migrated to the Highlands of Guatemala is transpositioned to have been located in Israel (Carmack & Mondloch, 1983, p. 213).

In Momostenango, the dance commemorates the suffering of Jesus Christ as the Christó Acapetagua. The performance of the *baile de la culebra* falls together with celebrations of the fourth Friday of Lent and Holy Week, which remember the whipping of Christ and his crucifixion. According to the authors, the *baile de la culebra* reenacted the suffering of Christ and the sacrifice he made for all the people in the world.

¹⁰⁴ The concept of Tulan was originally adopted from the Central Mexican traditions where it refers to the capital of the legendary Toltecs.

The strong identification with Jesus Christ among the indigenous peoples of Latin America might be due to the fact that both lived in an oppressed situation in which they were not allowed to follow their own worldview (Frassani, 2017). The ritual dance is an expression of a history of oppression and suffering which came with the colonization of the Highlands of Guatemala. Everywhere the *baile de la culebra* takes place the punishing person is a *ladino* or *ladina*, a foreigner. In Momostenango, for example, the Tz'ulab' dancers are said to represent the K'iche' people. Dressed as poor people, with old and ragged clothes, they are whipped by the male protagonist who represents the colonial Spaniard. He protects his wife from the K'iche' people who try to steal her from him. The whipping seems to be a reminder of the whipping punishments that were introduced by the Spaniards at the time of colonization and were applied for public punishments (Chuchiak, 2000, p. 239). The Kaqchikel document *Memorial de Sololá*, a 17th-century indigenous document that registers the Kakchikel history before and after conquest, shows for example an increasing documentation of public whippings on the central square on Sundays from 1590 onwards (Recinos, 1988, p. 139). The whippings in the dance call to mind, at the same time, the whipping of Christ who continued to resist an oppressive regime, and finally had to pay the ultimate price. In the experience of contemporary Highland communities, the ancestors have also died in resistance, fighting for the rights of their people. The dance incorporates the social memory of these events. Although the current participants did not receive the strokes from the Spaniards during their lifetimes, the characters that they impersonate did feel the whip. In this sense, the Tz'ulab' embody memory of the suffering of the K'iche' people; while the impersonators have a restricted life time and will pass away in the end, the Tz'ulab' will continue to exist as long as the elders share their knowledge with the next generations. By dressing as a Tz'ulab', the ritual dancers engage with history and transfer the experience of the suffering during the Colonial and post-independence period.

The history of suffering and resistance to oppression in the *baile de la culebra* is indeed not restricted to the Colonial period. In Joyabaj, the dance is performed in the center of the town, but

the setting is a plantation, a place that has played an important role in the history of many Highland Guatemala communities (Pozas, 1952). After the independence of Guatemala, the K'iche' people and all other indigenous peoples of Guatemala continued to live in a situation of internal oppressive regimes (Schlesinger & Kinzer, 2005). People from the highlands were forced to move to the coastal areas to work on cattle farms and coffee, banana, rubber, and pineapple plantations (Carmack, 2001, p. 55). The forced temporal resettlement of Highland communities to Guatemala's Lowlands plantations at the end of the 19th and throughout the 20th century resulted in an enormous loss of knowledge and traditions (Termer, 1957, p. 59; Wagley, 1941, p. 30). This history does not only live on in the memory of the K'iche' people but is shared among many other peoples in Guatemala. According to a calendar priest in the Ixil region of Nebaj, for example, a "grave break in the old traditions [...] took place when the people were sent in great numbers to the coastal plantations. This first happened in 1894" (Lincoln, 1942, p. 116). Money earned on the plantation could only be spent at the plantation shop, and alcoholism, triggered by suffering under extreme circumstances, caused many workers to fall into debt and never be able to emancipate from the plantation owners (Burgos, 1985, pp. 54-64). Furthermore, today, many accounts of sexual abuse on the part the plantation owners and their assistants continue to be told in the Highland communities.

Therefore, it is not surprising that the memory of the plantations has continued in and outside of ritual in the indigenous communities. The dance in Joyabaj reproduces the plantation hierarchy – including a ladino boss, his indigenous wife, a black cook, a domestic servant, a ladino labor boss for the plantation and the ladino plantation secretary – which after the death of the boss completely dissolves.

The form of suffering that stands central in the dance of Rabinal is that of deadly diseases. Although diseases were present in precolonial Mesoamerica, the indigenous historical documents mention explicitly these diseases that were introduced by the Europeans. This could have been because of a political statement, to highlight the destructive effect of the conquest, but recent studies indicate that the effects of newly introduced diseases were

indeed horrible (George Lovell, 1992; Guerra, 1986; Roberts, 1989). The exact numbers are highly contested but the introduction of new diseases caused the total population to diminish tremendously (George Lovell, 2001, pp. 58-60; Whitmore, 1991). This means an almost complete destruction of a continent. The *Memorial de Sololá* mentions for example the first arrival of plague between 1519 and 1520, when the Spaniards had just set foot on Mexican soil (Recinos, 1988, p. 95). After that, several waves of diseases followed, resulting in an extremely traumatic experience:

*It was the [twenty-]fifth year¹⁰⁵
 When the plague began, oh my children
 They first got sick with coughing
 Then they became sick with blood and yellow urine
 It was truly horrible, the death that came by at that
 time
 When the Lord 6 Ajmak passed away
 We were close to the arrival of the great darkness
 The great night
 Over the heads of our ancestors
 Over our heads, oh my children
 When they got sick of eruptions
 [...]
 How bad was the stinking smell of the dead people
 When our grandparents died
 Half of the people were thrown in the canyon
 Where the dogs and vultures ate the people
 It was a terrible death, how your grandparents were
 killed
 (Recinos, 1988, pp. 95-96; translation mine)*

It was not only the plague that caused epidemics of sickness and death. The *Memorial de Sololá* mentions a certain disease that caused eruptions among children and led to high rate of child mortality in the 16th century. In 1601 there was an epidemic of a throat sickness that caused many deaths among men and women, and left many orphans behind (Recinos, 1988, p. 154). Diego de Landa describes a similar suffering by outbreaks of the plague on the Yucatan Peninsula (De Landa,

1966, pp. 19-20). The ritual memory of the *baile de la culebra* in Rabinal expresses the concerns about these sicknesses. The experience of the ancestors, who died or who have seen people dying of these diseases, is embedded and transferred in the ritual. Although goiter is not a disease that was introduced by the Spaniards, its prominent presence in the dance is probably a reminder of the epidemics that the ancestors had to suffer. Although the disease is the main reason for suffering of the dancers in Rabinal, the element of punishment is still present: the *ladina* throws the sick dancers on the grounds and mocks them for their suffering.

Although the dance clearly expresses the unequal power relations between the K'iche' people and the ladinos, it does not portray the K'iche' people as a victim. The *baile de la culebra* rather tells a history of resistance. In Momostenango, each attempt to oppression by the ladino is followed by resistance of the Tz'ulab'. As they are not in power to whip the ladino, the Tz'ulab' perform other rebellious acts to resist the power of the ladino. They steal his wife and treat her as, according to the histories told in the Highland communities, how the ladino treated the indigenous women on the plantations: they sexually assault her¹⁰⁶. Many times the woman joins the Tz'ulab' willingly, preferring the "guys dressed in rags" over the fancy ladino. The ladino becomes a person who is pathetically trying to keep control over something that is outside of his power. While he drags one Tz'ul away from his wife, she is being attended by at least two others. He punishes the Tz'ulab' by whipping them but they resist it, they ask for more. And if the husband refuses to whip them more, they ridicule him in front of the public. For the public, it is a mystery how the Tz'ulab' can

¹⁰⁵ This means the 25th year after the rebellion by the Kaqchikel people against the K'iche' people, which is in the *Memorial de Sololá* the main reference point for discussing the recent past. The 25th year coincides with the Gregorian year 1521 (Recinos, 1988, p. 95).

¹⁰⁶ Rape and sexual dominance over "the Other" is an instrument of power and oppression is currently still applied in warfare and invasions (Card, 1996). The symbolic sexual assault to oppressor's wife during a ritual dance seems to be a reaction on the reality of life on the plantations or as a maid in the city, where, according to what is generally told in the Highland communities, many women have been raped by the man of the house. In the *baile de la culebra* the representation of sexual harassment might be a form of showing that they are actually in control over and dominate the ladino. On the other hand, however, the sexual harassment in the dance is also likely to be an expression of the very dominant machoism present in the Highland communities themselves, where flirting women are generally considered to be guilty for being raped (R. Thompson & Hanamaikai, 2005, pp. 126-137) and where cases violence against women, rape, and femicide are increasing each year (Morales Tujillo, 2010, pp. 127-137; Muñoz, 2016).

endure so many whippings but the dancers show no pain or fear, even though their wounds are bleeding and swollen. Receiving the strokes willingly shows the determination of the K'iche' communities to resist the colonial oppression, no matter if this would lead to death. Therefore, some of the dancers symbolically die after the strokes, while pursuing the collective goal of the K'iche' communities: resistance against the colonial oppression. It is a sacrifice for the survival of the future generations. The *baile de la culebra* shows that the K'iche' peoples are not victims of history, but rather a group with clear intentions that rejects the supposed power of the invaders by working collectively.

Here the dance connects again to the history of Jesus Christ, who not just suffered but also resisted the dominant powers. Similar to the K'iche' ancestors, he had to pay for his resistance with his life. Because of that, he was never a victim; it was his choice to fight for his ideals and sacrifice his own life for that of the future generations. The K'iche' People live in a similar context where they are marginalized for, among other reasons, having a different religion or religious practices from those who are in the government. The identification with Christ is therefore not just based on the shared fate of suffering but maybe even more on the resistance, which is both commemorated in Momostenango on the 4th Friday of Lent and Good Friday and Holy Saturday. The Tz'ulab' emphasized many times that they hit each other to commemorate Jesus Christ. In essence, it is therefore similar to the Christian flagellation practices that imitate the passion of Christ, but it commemorates each community's own history.

Apart from oppression and resistance, on some occasions the dance indicates the social relations between different indigenous communities. For example, in Joyabaj the one who plays a person from Chichicastenango represents what Chichicastenango is mostly known for: keeping the knowledge of the ancestors. Ancestor communication and revival through ceremonies are examples of this knowledge. During the 20th century there were three indigenous communities represented in the dance of Santa Cruz Quiché: the two main groups wear the dress from Chiché and Chichicastenango, and another individual represents a Kaqchikel neighbor from Sololá. In the region it is well-known that Chiché and

Chichicastenango used to celebrate the feast of their patron saint Santo Tomás together but split because of disagreements and fights. The dance mimics the old feud between the two villages. The Kaqchikel impersonator is especially the victim of cruel jokes and harassment, which probably refers to old tensions between the neighboring linguistic groups (Termer, 1957, p. 216). These tensions are addressed in several Colonial period documents written by indigenous hands such as the *Memorial de Sololá: Anales de los Kaqchikeles* (Recinos, 1988, pp. 78-97) the *Título de los señores de Totonicapán* (Carmack & Mondloch, 1983, pp. 197-200) and the *Popol Vuh* (Christenson, 2007, pp. 257-267), and also continues today in the Highlands of Guatemala, despite the efforts of the Maya Movement to unite all Maya communities and linguistic groups. Today, however, the *baile de la culebra* in Santa Cruz Quiché has incorporated many new dresses and it is not clearly discernible what towns they represent. Rhonda Taube, who did research on the incorporation of Hollywood-inspired elements in traditional dance, has shown that these dances are continuously updated and made relevant (R. Taube, 2009, pp. 97-117). By doing this, they continue to be appealing for new generations while, to a certain extent, still being able to tell the history of the ancestors.

In summary, in each community where the *baile de la culebra* is performed, important experiences of history are incorporated. As the dance coincides with agricultural moments these histories are told within the context of the agricultural cycle. Don Leonso explained to me that the ancestors started the dance in Momostenango a long time ago because they needed protection against the insects and animals that came to eat the *milpa*. The dance was performed for the ancestors and divine beings that watch over human life and over the *milpa*. The narrative of San Andrés Sajcabajá clearly expressed this concern as one of the protagonists, *Barbua*, tries to shoot the one who eats the corn, the *Ajooj*. The *Ajooj* has pieces of food around the mouth of his mask, showing his activities at the *milpa*. As discussed in the previous chapter, the *milpa* is of vital importance for the survival of the Highland communities. Ceremonies and dances such as the *baile de la culebra* protect the *milpa* against plagues, rain, wind and droughts.