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Volume 61 Number 3, May/June 2008

Conversation: Ancient Maya Dance

Using archaeology to reconstruct lost rituals

Mexican choreographer Rodolfo Reyes no longer restricts himself to movements of the body when constructing a dance—he now includes history and tradition as well. Reyes is the head of the ethnochoreography team at Xcaret, an archaeological park at the ancient Maya port city of Polé, located about an hour's drive from Cancún on the Yucatán peninsula. Reyes's job is to use archaeological and ethnological research to create live performances of Maya rituals. Reyes spoke with journalist Mike Elkin about bringing ancient dances to the modern world.



(Courtesy Rodolfo Reyes)

How do you combine archaeology and dance?

We take the methodology of cultural anthropology and use it to analyze the performance and the choreography of thousands of dances throughout Mexico. The indigenous communities are still very much alive. When we create a performance we go to these communities and analyze the folkloric traditions with the eyes of an archaeologist, ethnographer, etc. For the rituals and dances that no longer exist, we construct them using archaeological artifacts, mostly from glyphs on Maya monuments.

How do the archaeological ruins provide clues?

It's complicated to convert what archaeologists have discovered about the Maya culture into dance. Nevertheless, we have examined the cities and pyramids at Tulum, Chichén Itzá, and Palenque. For example, at Palenque we were very pleased to be able to study the glyphs on a stone that was found about four years ago. It depicts a local chief, his mother bearing a crown, his son, and several rats, which symbolize secrets. From these scenes we begin constructing the ceremony almost in slow motion. But of course we only have a few images to work with, so we have to be creative.

What about the music that accompanies the dances?

At the ruins of Bonampak we have also worked with the large murals—full of human figures playing wind instruments and trumpets. We try to bring these murals and the glyphs to life. We don't know what these instruments sounded like, but we try to imitate them as best we can. We know we are taking liberties, but there's simply no way we can know exactly how they danced, sang, or played instruments.

Describe some of the dances.

In Chiapas there are many dances involving reptiles and jaguars. Take the "Dance of the Stag," which represents the cosmos. On one side, the god Kukulcán appears with a toucan and on the other side there are dancers representing jaguars trying to trap him. But in the middle there is also an enormous stag to defend him from the jaguars, smacking their bodies so they can't get too close. There is also a boy, about five or six years old, whom they call "Giant." He represents one of Kukulcán's guardians. This dance is one of dozens from the Maya highlands and it is still performed by their descendants.

Your show includes a Maya ballgame demonstration. How much do we really know about how it was played?

I wouldn't use the word "show" because it doesn't quite explain what we do. We perform what is supported by the most in-depth research possible. This is an ethnographic investigation, and that is not a show. That said, the Maya ball game is completely lost. The only thing we have is what Linda Schele [the late Maya scholar] tells us could possibly have taken place. Let's not forget that in Mexico today there are thousands of ball games but nothing like what went on back then. There have been studies on what the ancient games could have been, and we think we can improve and enrich them.

Based on your research?

Of course. What I do is guarantee that the performance matches the archaeological and anthropological record. If there are any errors we make a case for changes. We check everything from the dance movements to details like the colors of the four cardinal directions of the Maya universe: red, black, white, and yellow. We are valued by thousands of tourists for our ability to perform the materials truthfully, respecting the ethnographic information. They feel the spirit that inspires all these traditional cultures. And, if some details like the conquistadores' shoes aren't right, we change them.

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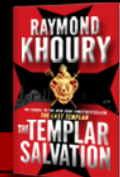
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