

Olga Najera-Ramirez. *La Fiesta de los Tastoanes: Critical Encounters in Mexican Festival Performance.* Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1997. vii + 187 pp. \$50.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8263-1795-7.



Reviewed by Ignacio Gallup-Díaz

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Through the anthropological analysis of a religious festival which takes place annually in Jocotan, Mexico, Olga Najera-Ramirez attempts to answer the following interesting and complicated questions: "Exactly what was the point of this celebration? Was this festival an active expression of resistance to the conquest? Or was I witnessing the feeble remains of an ancient rite? Was this ... a painful reminder of the Spanish conquest of the native population?" (p. 3).

For three days in September, members of the population of Jocotan (a town of 6,000 to the west of Guadalajara, Mexico) enact a festival celebration which they call the *Fiesta de los Tastoanes*, which reproduces in festival form the struggle between Santiago, Spain's patron saint, and the leaders of the indigenous peoples of pre-conquest Mexico. The word "*tastoanes*," Najera-Ramirez states, "derives from the Nahuatl word *tlatoani* meaning spokespersons or leaders" (p. 4). Noting the presence of Santiago and other structural similarities, the author prudently classifies the dance of the *tastoanes* as a variant of the festival of the *moros y cristianos*. This event, she states, "celebrates the Spanish Christians' defeat of the Moor-

ish people who had occupied the Iberian Peninsula for almost seven centuries ... (T)he Moors and Christians dance-drama reinforces a simplistic opposition in which the Spanish Christians represent all that is good, while the 'other' assumes those qualities which the Spaniards perceive as evil or otherwise undesirable" (p. 8).

The major players in the festival are the sainted horseman, Santiago, the argumentative indigenous *tastoanes*, and a figure named Cyrineo. Santiago wears a hat trimmed with ribbon and feathers, silver spurs on his boots, and bears a short sword. He is also the only participant who rides a horse during the enactment. Consequently, the *tastoanes* who oppose him work diligently to try to force the horse to throw the sainted rider. The saint has three assistants: *El Moro*, *El Sargento*, and *El Perrito Rastrero*. The *tastoanes* are divided into three sub-groups: three kings, Herodes, Anas, and Pilatos; Cyrineo, and the general corps of the *tastaones*. The *tastoanes* wear dark jackets, and each sports a pair of bright, comical short pants on the outside of their long, dark slacks. Leather masks hide their faces and make it difficult for their voices to be heard clearly. Cyrineo,

who is the only figure from this group to befriend Santiago, wears "the mask of a white man" and dresses "in a suit reminiscent of a court jester" (p. 18). The *fiesta* vividly enacts the conflicts that ensue between the *tastoanes* and Santiago, and, in the end, it is the *mestizo* Cyrineo who ushers in the death of Santiago at the hands of the indigenous rulers. After arguing fiercely with the *tastoanes*, the white-faced Cyrineo rings the church bells, and when Santiago arrives in response to the summons, he is killed by two of his opponents. Cyrineo, overcome with grief, throws himself on the corpse, which he tries to revive with a branch.

Najera-Ramirez comes to the conclusion that the members of Jocotan's Indian community who take part in the festival are "symbolically affirming a link with the indigenous inhabitants of pre-conquest Jocotan" (p. 148). The author argues that:

(t)he native response to this dance-drama, and to the missionizing forces it represents, was to resist by actively retaining as many indigenous practices as possible. As a result, *La Fiesta de los Tastoanes* emerged as a hybrid form, encompassing multiple meanings and contradictions ... Santiago is both Spanish conqueror and native healer; the *Tastoanes* are both uncivilized animals and brave resisters of subjugation. *La Fiesta* ... is both indigenous and Christian, allowing Jocotenos to accept the framework of Christianization and conquest, yet infuse this framework with subversive elements (p. 8).

Najera-Ramirez reiterates this key point several times in the text and the above quotation actually serves as a concentrated statement of the monograph's major conclusion. The active retention of indigenous elements within the outwardly Christian *fiesta* is central to the author's argument that the pageant enacts a form of indigenous resistance. Najera-Ramirez's sixth chapter, "The Prenda System: Reciprocity and Resistance," argues for the persistence of non-capitalist, indigenous forms of ceremonial gifting within the *fiesta* structure. She ambitiously describes this act of re-

tention as the "Jocotenos' critique of, or at least discontent with, the larger capitalist system in which they exist ... (They) work to perpetuate what they perceive as indigenous values and practices ... because ... they believe in them, and most importantly, they represent away of life that works for them" (pp. 115-16).

Najera-Ramirez's text is one with great potential class-room utility for it is a case study of how, in a region in which being an Indian often carries immense negative connotations, Najera-Ramirez's Jocotenos have actively embraced an imagined indigenous heritage in order to express their resistance to, and rejection of, certain political and economic structures to which, she argues, they stand in opposition. The Jocotenos, in calling themselves *indios*, infuse the term with their own positive meanings, rejecting both the negative slurs associated with it, and the paternalistic, state-sponsored *indigenismo* which romantically idealizes the "classical" Aztec and Maya Indian civilizations. These positive meanings pervade the manner in which the Jocotenos practice the three-day festival. A text that describes a Latin American community's active engagement with its (imagined) collective indigenous identity should provoke wide-ranging classroom discussion. The text's central focus on the question of ethnicity and identity makes it a welcome addition to undergraduate courses in anthropology, sociology, and history.

Though I think that Najera-Ramirez's text would serve as an ideal classroom text assignment, there are a few problems with the author's analysis. Her claim, for example, that the Spanish tolerated, fostered, and, in some instances, deployed indigenous festive practices in order to reinforce Christianity amongst the Indian population during the colonial period is made early on in the text. A discussion of exactly how such a process could have occurred with respect to the festival in question would have been a most welcome addition to the text.

More importantly, although Najera-Ramirez makes such a central use of the concept of hybridization, *La Fiesta de los Tastoanes* surprisingly dismisses the hybrid central figure of the festival's narrative, the comical Cyrineo, quite early on. The clownish *mestizo*, the author notes:

is the only *Tastooan* who befriends Santiago. His ambiguous character is reflected in his costume and behavior. Wearing the mask of a white man ... Cyrineo visually stands apart from both groups ... Cyrineo may ultimately represent the folly of attempting to become the 'other' simply by making superficial changes (p. 18).

In a text in which a community's embrace of the indigenous is the author's major finding, it is perhaps inevitable that the dithering *mestizo* figure would receive such devastatingly short shrift. I would argue, however, that Cyrineo merits closer attention, and a more extended analysis. Is his character meant to provide a lesson in betrayal, ambivalence, or does he embody the dangers that the process of colonization brought to the region's indigenous polities? He may be presented as an outright clown in the present-day iteration of the festival, but was his characterization ever carried out differently in the past? What factors might have led to the present mode in which the Jocotenos interpret the Cyrineo character?

The acceptance of the analytical concept of hybridization to explain the elements that make up the festival introduces the danger that the text could degenerate into a sterile, and ultimately futile, search for the "pure" sources of the various elements which, it might be postulated, provide the "source material" for the complicated social events making up the *Fiesta de Tastoanes*. It must be said that at some points in the analysis Najera-Ramirez wanders onto this problematic ground. However, when she steers her argument away from the distant past and returns to the Jocotenos' attempts to explain their place in the socio-economic system of modern Mexico, she leaves behind the pitfalls mentioned above. Her analysis of

why the Mexicans with whom she lived have fervently embraced the yearly festival, and, most importantly, have made its presumed indigenous elements their own, is nuanced, complex, and interesting.

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