

The Resilient Danza de Matachines Ceremonial

By Brenda M. Romero*

My work explores ways in which a multimodal, vernacular ceremonial dance-drama, Los Matachines ("Matachines") has survived in transcultural performances against the corrupting influences of nationalism and racism. The ceremonial Matachines, with iconographic evidence of an early prototype in Greece around 640 BC, is widely believed to have been imported from Western Europe to the Americas beginning in the sixteenth century. The embodiment of identity through dance was common to colonial era Europeans, Africans, and Indigenous societies, thus Matachines was used to evangelize White peasants, African slaves, Indigenous peoples, and mixed ethnicities thereof. This essay touches on ancient European and North African prototypes and narratives that surround Matachines and its variants — today common in New Mexico (USA), Mexico, and Colombia among other locations in the Americas. The early history of Matachines is shrouded in mystery in part because the documentation of vernacular street performances was not viable in imperialist Western European societies. The earliest documentation was in ancient melodies for male enactments transcribed by Thoinot Arbeau (1589) or linked to Spain's Golden Age of Theater (1590-1681) and to a burlesque character named Mattaccino in the Italian Commedia dell'arte, improvised street theater. My larger study focuses on processes of transcultural exchange throughout the Americas observable in variations of Matachines and suggests that the Matachines ceremonial gradually merged with Indigenous and/or Afro-descendant rituals and dances and spread widely. As such, different genealogies with their own distinct ancient lineages and cosmologies have combined with the received tradition to become local or regional variants. Conclusions assert that human societies are creative in the ways they incorporate outsider perspectives into the performing arts, allowing for conflict and the processing of resolution.

Keywords: creativity, danza, multimodality, performance, resistance

Introduction

In 1987 I became fascinated with the Danza de Matachines in New Mexico—which is a Southwestern state in the US and shares a border with Mexico.

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Figure 1. Screenshot of map of US-Mexico borderlands¹

Map of U.S.–Mexico borderlands showing federal lands. Cartography by Eric Leinberger.

Some descendants of the Spanish colonists of New Mexico claim Matachines came from Spain, but this is challenged by others who see the visual manifestations of Indigeneity as proof that the ceremonial dance originated in Mexico. My attention was initially called to the Indigenous New Mexican Towa-speaking Pueblo of Jemez (*Hemish* in Towa) where two versions co-exist—the Turquoise Kiva’s version accompanied by violin and guitar, often termed the “Spanish” version, and the Pumpkin Kiva’s “Tombe” (Drum) version with traditional Hemish male chorus and drum(s).² I later played the violin for the Turquoise Kiva from 1989–98 but focused my 1993 doctoral dissertation 77 miles from the Pueblo of Jemez, on two closely related enactments in northern New Mexico, where I lived as a child. The two dissertation sites are separated by four miles, including the “Indo-Hispano” (discussed below) town of Alcalde, and nearby Ohkay Owingeh, where the Spanish colonists arrived in 1598, renaming the municipality the Pueblo de San Juan de los Caballeros (“Town of the Knights of Saint John”). In 2005, the town voted to reinstitute the Tewa language name, Ohkay Owingeh, which translates to “Place of the Strong,” although the term “Pueblos” (also “Puebloans”) describes the totality of nineteen Indigenous municipalities who inhabited organized and self-governed towns (or perhaps city-states) prior to Spanish occupation. My initial study (1993) demonstrated how the differing belief systems influenced local interpretations of the Danza’s symbolism and established a solid foundation for the following decades of my research into the transcultural histories and significances of Matachines enactments in Spain, New Mexico, Mexico, and along the Andes of Colombia and Peru.

The Danza, or ceremonial dance, was and continues to be present among various Puebloan municipalities, as among descendants of the Spanish colonists, the self-named “Manitos” —from *hermanitos*, the Spanish for “younger brothers,” a reference to the ancient society of piety, La Cofradía de Nuestro Padre Jesús

1. https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Map-of-US-Mexico-borderlands-showing-federal-lands-Cartography-by-Eric-Leinberger_fig1_241709039.

2. A Kiva is a sacred ceremonial chamber, but the term is also used to designate the two ceremonial moieties (halves) in the Pueblo of Jemez.

Nazareno, locally coined “the Penitentes.” The Brotherhood of Our Father Jesus the Nazarene maintain practices that conserve the visceral memory of the pain endured by Jesus Christ. Local branches are led by the Hermano Mayor (Older Brother), who also leads the ancient sacred song and prayer cycles of their *morada* (austere chapels) during Holy Week and in funerals and wakes.

Coincidentally, from the Haudenosaunee Iroquoian groups in the Northeastern US to the Kogi of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta in Colombia, Indigenous spiritual leaders considered the European newcomers “Younger Brothers” because of their lack of respect for nature and ecology (see Baldauf and Stetson Freeman, 2026).³ The Iroquoian *Onieda Declaration of Neutrality, 1775*, took a brotherly view of the Europeans over the Revolutionary War: “Brothers! For these reasons possess your minds in peace and taken umbrage that we Indians refuse joining in the contest; we are for peace” (*Oneida Declaration of Neutrality, 1775*). And from the Colombian Sierra Nevada’s highest peak at 5000 meters or 16,404 feet:

The Sierra Indians call themselves “the older brothers” and believe that they have a mystical wisdom and understanding which surpasses that of others. They refer to outsiders as “the younger brothers.” The older brothers believe it is their responsibility to maintain the balance of the universe. When there are hurricanes, droughts, or famines around the world it is said that they are the cause of human failure to keep the world in harmony. Balance is achieved by making offerings to the sacred sites to give back to the earth what is taken out of it (Survival International ND).

In a colloquium I attended at the University of New Mexico, comprised primarily of local scholars in the 1990s, the participants discussed how the term “Indo-Hispanos” more accurately reflected the ethnogenesis that created a mixed “race,” and agreed as a group that the term Indo-Hispano deserved currency (Oropezca, 2014). By then I had become aware of a symbiotic relationship between Indo-Hispano musicians and local Indigenous Pueblo Matachines/Matachina enactments and I lived that symbiosis in 1989 after Adelaido Martinez, the Indo-Hispano violinist of three decades at the Pueblo of Jemez died of lung cancer in 1988. I was subsequently given permission to take his place pending an audition (which I passed).

But although ubiquitous in local publications and tourist magazines, little was known with certainty in New Mexico about the history of Matachines in the 1980s. I learned much later that this was due to the gradual decline of New Mexico’s Fiesta complex after the Era of Americanization beginning in the mid-1800s. Thus, much of what I gradually learned about the history of contemporary Matachines was in Mexico and Colombia.

3. Because I had forgotten where I read this, I inquired of AI thus: “Where is it cited that American Indians considered the White man their “Younger Brothers?” In this paper I have summarized AI responses and listed the source materials in the bibliography.

Following is a brief introduction to the elements that inspired my interest in Matachines enactments in New Mexico and then beyond. I continue with a literature review that reflects my interests in Matachines since the 1980s, featuring New Mexican and US scholarship on Matachines and references I eventually searched for online and in Spain, Mexico, Colombia, and Peru.

What are Matachines?

The etymology of Matachines, or Matachines Danza, is contested. Called “Matachina” among the Pueblo people of New Mexico and in some parts of Colombia, and “Matlachines” among a growing number of Mexican groups, in Spain the term “Matachín” was also associated with those who quartered beef, butchers. *Matachín* is also related to the Italian *Mattaccino*, a stock character in the improvised street theater called *Commedia dell’arte*, whose antecedents began in fourteenth-century Italy. My empirical observations have suggested that this is the current that has come to dominate Matachines enactments during Carnival events in Colombia, where many Italians settled. My work has identified Indigenous danza troupes in Colombia that differ and appear to be examples of the general variation seen in Mexico, and further research may reveal Colombian Andean versions more closely related to those in isolated Mexican villages.⁴ An Afro-descendant variant of Matachines also survives in Brazil in a satirical music drama that translates to *The Ox and the Slave* (wa Mukuna, 2003).

The Matachines typically tell an ancient story of the triumph of good over evil and have traditionally been contextualized in the Roman Catholic saint day celebrations, or Fiesta complex (“Las Fiestas”); in Advent (Christmas); and in the pre-Lenten Carnival, all of which are heavily informed by folklore, music, dance, theater, and rhetoric. The Matachines is significant in part because it was one of a very few artistic forms allowed during the early colonial period, and thus their stamp on future dance genres was inevitable. A variety of versions abound among Mestizos (mixed populations), Indigenous peoples, and Afro-descendants in the Americas, among them are many re-semanticized versions in which Iberian elements are understated in favor of Indigenous- and Afro-dominant cultural forms that also exist as Matachines or have taken on new names. As well, Matachines are significant because Matachines troupes are increasingly performing in Mexican immigrant communities in the US, where most observers do not know of the ancient root systems but appreciate the immediacy of the battle between good and evil and its representation in Los Matachines. This is not to say that practitioners see it in this generalized conception, as opposed to a formal offering to the spiritual forces that generate life (Botello, 2022; Cantú, 2009; Sandell, 2015).

4. The widespread violence that has hounded Colombia for decades, especially in rural and isolated regions, has prevented me from attempting to conduct that research since I began my fieldwork in Caldas and Huila Departments in 2007.

Los Matachines enactments are shrouded in myths and narratives; their roots are uncertain but the predominance of Spanish instrumental dance music in New Mexico and formerly in Mexico implies that early Matachines genres in New Spain arrived with the Spanish and became tools in the so-called spiritual conquest of the Americas. Although some scholars (first among them Treviño and Gilles, 1994) have argued that Matachines, or better, the Mexican Matlachines, existed prior to European colonization, recent scholarship in Mexico dates the use of the term Matlachines to 1910 (Cervantes Montoya, 2018); some say it was in use during the 1800s. Historical accounts also confirm the use of Matachines in the evangelization of Indigenous and Black subjects. For instance, Iberianist Rogerio Budasz, in his 2006 open access article “Of Cannibals and the Recycling of Otherness,” describes an example of the indoctrination of captive children in Brazil, stating that the Jesuit missionaries “promoted syncretism and regarded colonists as a bad influence” (9). Budasz provides an especially lucid account that took place in Brazil in the mid-1500s, where the Portuguese term for *matachín* was *machatin*. Budasz summarizes what was at stake for the Jesuits, led by the colonizer, linguist, and cleric, José de Anchieta (1534–97), along the northeastern Brazilian coast:

The Jesuits in Brazil were especially worried by the natives’ “bad habits” —drinking fermented *cauim* and engaging in cannibalism,⁵ polygamy, and revenge wars—that could hamper the religious and political project of subjecting them to the Catholic Church and the Portuguese monarch. In order to help convince the natives to abandon those practices—the core of their culture—Anchieta, and before him Manuel da Nóbrega, devised a form of moral theatre featuring songs and dances. Since their target public also included Portuguese colonists, these plays were often written in two or more languages (Tupi, Portuguese, Spanish, and occasionally Latin) (Budasz, 6).

Budasz continues:

Anchieta’s plays also incorporated Iberian and native dances, in some cases a mixture of both. In a play prepared for the day of the Virgin’s Assumption, six Indians, playing the role of savages newly arrived from the jungle, are asked to dance the *machatins*—the Portuguese word for the Spanish *matachín* (*mattaccino* in Italy and *matassins* in France...). The natives probably replaced the swords and shields of the European choreography with their own clubs – the *tacapes* – and tapir-skinned shields... The choreography could maintain some features of the *machatins*—according to Anchieta—but it would require some modification in order to represent Amerindian rather than European combats (Budasz, 7-8).

5. Among Budasz’s most interesting points: “In the twentieth century, artistic and musical avant-gardes in Brazil developed the idea of ‘cultural cannibalism’, urging a critical ingestion of European culture and the reworking of that tradition in Brazilian terms, assuming a sort of national unconscious in which the cannibal mind is still at work, in the masticating, digesting, and rewriting of the outsider” (2005:15).

Budasz thus documents a presumed earlier tradition, before the sixteenth century, connecting “moral theater” to Matachines, and Matachines to “swords and shields” and “European combats.” In 1986 the late Adrian Treviño told me he believed that the choreographies have martial implications, and indeed various terms used to describe the troupes were originally associated with military forces.⁶ For example, the Spanish term *cuadrilla* for Matachines troupes in Colombia and elsewhere suggests a phalanx, the term for a military unit in close formation.

Budasz’s note to the paragraph cited above is also particularly revealing of the colonial claim to the bodies of Native children, as occurred in the boarding schools in the US and Canada. Budasz cites Anchieta:

“They teach them [the native children] to sing and they have their ensemble [*capilla*] of voices and flutes for their feasts, and they perform their dances in the Portuguese fashion, very graciously with small drums and vihuelas, as if they were Portuguese boys, and when they perform these dances they place on their heads some sort of adornment made of bird feathers of various colours...” (Budasz, 8 n. 21).⁷

I knew that the ancient Europeans used drums and other musical instruments in war, but that did not explain the dancing and theatricals or narratives associated with Matachines enactments. In the 2010s I became aware of scholarship on the Chigi vase from 640 BCE found in an Etruscan tomb; I have since based my hypothesis about the early movement of Matachines enactments on the iconography and the scant scholarship that Harry Anastopulos provides online (ND). Anastopulos describes narrative warrior enactments; I interpret these as represented iconographically on the Chigi Vase in two lines of warriors in procession, accompanied by a musician playing the Greek *aulos*.

6. Adrian Treviño, personal communication with the author, 1986. Treviño, an amateur folklorist, was originally from Corpus Christi, Texas.

7. “Anchieta, ‘Enformacion de los collegios y casas de la Companhia del Brasil.’” Évora, Biblioteca Pública, codex CXVI/1–33, fo. 39r, quoted in Paulo Castagna, “Fontes bibliográficas para o estudo da prática musical no Brasil nos séculos XVI e XVII” (MA thesis, University of São Paulo) 1991: ii. 223.

Figure 2. Screenshot of the Chigi Vase from 640 BC (Anastopoulos ND)



At the 2026 Athens Institute on the Visual and Performing Arts, I learned from historian Dr. David Philip Wick about new scholarship on the Chigi Vase suggesting that the ritual and narrative enactments were performed in anticipation of and in preparation for war⁸ (see Hurwit 2002). The date 640 BC is within the period in which the Greeks were perfecting the hoplite phalanx. The *hoplite* were the soldiers, (who carried a shield, *hoplon*) and the phalanx a tight military formation in which armed soldiers stand close to each other in lines creating a square that advances as a unit (Britannica AI).

Elsewhere I have cited Edward Westermarck's two-volume *Ritual and Belief in Morocco* (1926), that the ancient Libyans had "ceremonial combats for the purpose of producing rain" (2:262); and that such combats may have been due to the influence of the ancient Phoenicians as a goddess called Athena is featured in at least one of these combats that act out the "strife between drought and rain" (2:272). In addition, processions could feature masquerades (Romero 1999, 351-52). In Fresnillo, in the northern state of Zacatecas, Mexico, one Apache Matachines dancer told me they dance for rain—not uncommon in ceremonial dancing (sometimes masked) throughout the arid areas of North Mexico and New Mexico.

The mention of the goddess Athena in the Libyan narrative supports the belief that "the goddess Athena was originally a pre-Hellenic or Minoan house/palace goddess" the Greeks later adopted and worshipped as the patron deity after whom the city of Athens is named (Britannica AI). The dance-drama may have already migrated to farming communities, where conflict was associated with natural forces for and against agrarian lifeways, or perhaps urban elites had appropriated rural traditions to fuel the fires of war—a seemingly endless practice among imperialist societies of all kinds.⁹ Through these wars they obtained slaves and

8. Personal communication with the author, June 9, 2026.

9. A friend from Kenya has suggested that Matachines are rooted with the African Bantu. The early Bantu (mostly in the southern half of Africa) developed

materials with which to build lavish stone structures to honor their cosmological gods. Although Athena, the patron deity of Athens, carries a sword and shield, she is said to have won the rulership because of offering the olive branch, a symbol of nature and abundance in the Mediterranean.

In the Americas, colonial processes preserved Matachines among Indigenous societies and absorbed Indigenous elements in many locations over the last five hundred years, leading to a widespread belief that “Matachines” originated among Indigenous peoples of the Americas. In New Mexico, however, local pride in things Spanish, including the language, has generated a fierce possessiveness of Matachines among Indo-Hispano practitioners, while some Tiwa-speaking Picuris Puebloans affirm in their local reinterpretation that Matachines were brought by the last Aztec emperor, Moctezuma, on the wings of an eagle (Shipley, 1987; Rodríguez, 1996, 80). To the Hemish it is well known that the Matachines arrived as a form of Catholic evangelization. Nonetheless, based on widespread North American Indigenous beliefs that songs and rituals are desirable for their healing capacities, the Hemish (like many other North American Indigenous societies) have always “received,” bought, or bartered for songs and rituals and incorporated them into their ceremonial calendars as a form of respect for their spiritual properties as they recognize a single Creator. In their successful 1680 Pueblo Revolt against Spanish authoritarian rule, Puebloans demonstrated in no uncertain terms that they were not “conquered” peoples. The Hemish are the only Pueblo to enact two versions of their Matchina: the Pumpkin Kiva’s “Tombe” version is an example of resistance to Spanish forms, although I have observed the choreography to be almost exactly the same as the Turquoise Kiva’s version that acknowledges the mestizaje.

Los Matachines Enactments

The *Matachines Danza* refers to a pantomimed ritual dance-drama, a morality play the Spanish superimposed on Indigenous rituals as a means of evangelization during colonial times, as noted above. Matachines ought not be confused with *Moros y Cristianos*, the tradition of mock dramatic conflict between Moors and Christians, although their typical performance contexts on feast days celebrating Catholic saints have been the same. The widespread use of the term *danza* and *danzante* for ceremonial, religious dance and dancers originates in Spain where *danza* referred to formal dance (Esses, 351–52, including N23–N29), but it was not a term originally used in New Mexico or Colombia (to my knowledge), where I heard simply “Matachines.” Matachines survive not only among Puebloans and Indo-Hispanos of New Mexico in the southwestern US, but also in various Mexican Indigenous and Mestizo communities, especially north of Mexico City. An

seafaring skills. Looking closely at their paths of migration on online posts, they likely traded largely with India and Arabia by way of the Indian Ocean.

interesting variant south of Mexico City, in Oaxaca, resonates with Matachines in the Andes of Colombia and Peru and these carnivalesque versions have not been known outside of their local contexts until recently. In all geographical locations, the danza represents complex processes of transculturation, with ancient roots that precede the contested etymologies of the term “Matachines.”

Although there are many variations from place to place, a drama typically takes place between two lines of *Matachines danzantes* (ceremonial Matachines dancers), after whom the danza is named. Some sequences are very similar in all Danzas called Matachines, as is the kneeling sequence. In New Mexico—as formerly in Mexico—the ever-present violin with guitar accompaniment remains iconic of the Indo-Hispano-rooted Matachines danza that is also in the Pueblos. You can see a short clip of the Ohkay Owingeh Tewa Matachina on December 25, 2022 [here](#).¹⁰ In Central Mexico a gradual decline of violin players has led to a dynamic percussive large drum accompaniment, with or without violin or accordion, and this is heard in most Mexican versions.

Matachines today is a masked performance complex spanning from Brazil to what is now New Mexico, California, Texas, Arizona, and southern Colorado, and most recently as far north as New York City and no doubt Canada, where many Mexican immigrants have been welcomed (and better paid than in the US). It is easiest to note different types by examining the regalia, or ceremonial dress associated with each type. The oldest New Mexican Indo-Hispano version features male danzantes who wear dress shoes and mainstream trousers and dress shirts with capes and coronas, tall headdresses with colorful falling ribbons, called *coronas*. Although in the past it was essential to wear black leather shoes, today it is common to see tennis shoes. The leader of each of two lines typically wears laced leggings sometimes called *polainas*. What is most important is for the danzante and or his close relatives to create an iconic Matachines attire, or regalia, with noticeable personal touches that may represent symbols known only to the danzante and perhaps family and peers. Today it is common in Mexico and New Mexico to see the image of Our Lady of Guadalupe prominently featured on the shawl that covers the danzante's back. A mask is created with a handkerchief covering the mouth and nose and a headdress with fringe that hangs over the eyes. More so in the past, the mask resembled a desert Tuareg as in Figure 1, or a Bedouin from North Africa (as an Iranian tourist once told me at then-San Juan Pueblo).

10. Filmed by the author with permission and paid permit.

Figure 3. “III. *Amajer* in ceremonial uniform, wearing the *takoumbout* on his head” Ceremonial headdress of the Tuaregs of the Ahaggar Mountain region in Algeria (Lhote, 1944, 305)¹¹



Many early folklorists believed the Matachines Danza to have originated in the Middle East. I have come to believe that this is partially true, but only because of Catholic representations of subdued Islamic warriors, *mujahidin*, dating back to the Crusades and the Portuguese resistance against the North African Berber Dynasty Al-Moravids who ruled Muslim Spain from 1046–1146. (The Al-Moravidds were replaced by the Al-Mohads in 1147 until Christian forces defeated them in 1212.) The Arabic term is easily transformed or corrupted into *machatin* in Portuguese and subsequently *matachines* in Spanish (see Romero, 1999). In 1998 I observed a troupe with tunics resembling North African Islamic warriors in Juárez, in the state of Chihuahua, Mexico (across the border from El Paso, Texas in the US). Tunics are a feature of a troupe from the state of Durango, Mexico that Norma E. Cantú and I documented in Kansas City, Kansas in 2017. A photo of a danza troupe from Palencia, in Castilla, Spain in the first half of the twentieth century shows men in two lines with a central figure in-between, all wearing white tunics and resembling today's Sufi dancers more than Matachines but wearing headdresses (see García Cuesta 1978).

In the past, los Matachines featured only men; a young man typically dressed as a woman enacted the role of La Malinche dressed in a white holy communion—or perhaps wedding—dress. La Malinche is at once the first Christian convert and the Indigenous multi-lingual translator and wife of the conquistador Hernán Cortéz.¹² Her role in Matachines is indicative of the “spiritual conversion.” According to Nancy Saldaña (Kurath, 1967, 280-81):

11. Please note that Google translated *amajer* as “a Major” but I have been unable to corroborate this elsewhere.

12. In Mexico la Malinche is multi-salient; further discussion is beyond the scope of this article but is discussed at length in my forthcoming monograph.

In Mexico, as in Europe, transvestites were often associated with such ritual. . . The Spanish thought of Malinche as a sign from heaven, sent to aid in the Christianization of the Mexican Indians. They used the Mataachines as a vehicle for showing the nonliterate Mexican and Pueblo Indians how God and Good were on their side and had enabled them to overcome Montezuma's forces. Malinche, costumed in communion dress, symbolized the church and its power.

In contemporary times a girl enacts this part, with a few exceptions, one being among the Pascua Yaqui of Tucson, Arizona where a preadolescent or adolescent boy is given the honor of dressing in a white blouse and flowered skirt to dance as Malinche. Another unique feature in my decades of observations—also among the Pascua Yaqui in Tucson in 2017—young girls played the parts of angels carrying wands with ribbons at the end that may have represented angelic authority within the choreography.¹³ Figure 4 features the author's photos of two artifacts gifted to her by close friends: an angel carrying a wand with a star at the tip and of a wand like the ones I saw in Tucson; and Figure 6 is yet another gifted item of two angels kneeling on either side of Christ on the cross.

Figure 4. Left: Winged Androgynous Angel with Star Wand (wood carving). Right: Decorated Angel's Wand with Carrizo (cane) and Yarn Streamers



Provenance unknown. Author's personal collection

13. Folklorist Norma E. Cantú and I were guided and introduced to the Pascua Yaqui community elders and their Matachine (as they call it) in 2017 by University of Arizona ethnomusicologist Janet Sturman (now Emerita), to whom we owe a grateful acknowledgement.

Figure 5. Painted Ceramic Crucifix with Two Female Angels Kneeling in Prayer at Christ's Feet



Provenance unknown. Author's personal collection

In New Mexico the *danzantes* carry a decorated trident in the right hand and a rattle or *guaje*, in the left hand, typically turned inward and sometimes covered with a handkerchief, as in the Pueblo of Jemez (Figure 6). Of some significance, in New Mexico and a few locations in Mexico, a boy plays the part of a *toro* or *torito*, a young bull with horns who is chased by clownish *vaqueros* (cowboys), resulting in mirth and laughter, especially among children, who also chase or are chased by the bull (Figure 7).

Figure 6. Pueblo of Jemez Lead Dancer Stanley Waquie at a 2008 Memorial Celebration in Ponderosa, New Mexico in Honor of the Late Adelaido Martinez, Jemez Matachina Violinist for Three Decades



Photo by author used with permission

Figure 7. Malinche (in Holy Communion dress), Monanga (in Wolf Mask), El Monarca (seated), and El Toro (kneeling). Pueblo of Jemez Matachina at the National Hispanic Cultural Center in Albuquerque, New Mexico in 2008



Photo by author used with permission

The dance sequence featuring the bull is evocative of the bullfight, although in the Pueblo of Jemez the music is somewhat playful. Entertainments that featured actual bulls date to the ancient Minoans and the cult of Mithra or earlier. As well, the ancient Greek myth of Theseus slaying the savage Minotaur—a *man with the head of a bull*—resonates with the killing of what is literally a boy “with” the head of a bull in northern New Mexico, where it is said the *toro* represents evil. Bovines were brought to the Americas with colonization, and thus this character helps to locate the European roots of Matachines in some sites. Nonetheless, resistance movements have re-semanticized many features of the Danza to conform to local belief systems and integrity. For instance, the Hemish do not kill the bull but only subdue it because they honor animals.¹⁴ They do hunt and kill game and eat meat but observe ritualistic practices of prayerful gratitude for the life given up for human survival and seek to utilize every part and waste nothing of the sacrificed animal. To mock its killing would be a dishonor.

14. Randolph Padilla. Documented in an unpublished interview at the 1990 Los Angeles Festival. Padilla was the Governor of the Pueblo when I first sought permission to play the violin for the Pueblo of Jemez Turquoise Kiva Matachina in 1988. Padilla was an important Hemish Elder, Educator and Lead Matachina Danzante, among other important leadership roles. His untimely death by pneumonia was a tremendous loss to the world. My own work with the Pueblo of Jemez Turquoise Kiva Matachina could probably not have proceeded without him and Stanley Waquie, Pueblo composer and at that time the other Lead Danzante for the Turquoise Kiva Matachina

It is unclear why red is so prominent in another type of Matachines—often called “Chichimecas”—seen in New Mexico and often associated with Mexican immigrants from Northcentral Mexico.¹⁵ Along the borderlands between the US and Mexico, this version features large communal groups reminiscent of Pueblo corn dances (Romero, 2003), but often dressed in red with *carrizo*, cane fringe that sounds (some say like rainfall) when the danzante moves. It is common to see multiple Malinches enacted by young girls in these versions, but they dress in vivid colors. The groups sometimes carry a trident, called a *palma*, and instead of rattles might carry a bow and arrow that makes a percussive sound. The Mexican groups in New Mexico still tend to wear red, but this is gradually changing and troupes choose other colors for their regalia, which almost always includes the *carrizo* fringe, a material with a long history of adaptive uses in north Mexico, but now often made of store-bought plastic tubes.

Literature Review

I have provided a brief introduction to the elements that inspired my interest in Matachines enactments and now continue with a literature review that reflects my research on Matachines since 1987. I found that little was available in libraries in Spain and concluded on further study that Matachines, typically seen as street performance, had not been considered important enough to study and document in scholarly literature until Matachines enactments were included in Spanish (and perhaps French) theatrical entertainments. Various musicological studies were conducted on Matachines theater contexts by musicologist McDowell E. Kenley, and some of these and other references are listed in my 2025 extensive entry article on Matachines published in *Oxford Bibliographies in Latino Studies Online*. The bibliographic annotations are in English, although the work includes online publications and media in both English and Spanish from New Mexico, Mexico, and the Andes of Colombia and Peru and is organized as follows: Visual Overviews (including a critical Greek iconographic source); Music; Dance/Danza History; Theater/Teatro; Folklore and Musicology Studies; Performance Ethnographies; Festive Culture, Fiesta and Carnival Studies; and concludes with Reference Works—all with Subsections. Because of the great variety of writings that bear on Matachines, the following citations are primarily monographs, with notable exceptions, but numerous journal articles and websites can be found in the 2025 published article.

The early history of Matachines Danzas is shrouded in mystery (if not secrecy) in part because the documentation of vernacular street/outdoor performances was not viable in imperialist societies. It was not important enough, but also, in Western Europe resistance to the social order was both implicit and explicit via parody and

15. A pejorative term for the ancient Nahua hunter-gatherer peoples in the north-central region of Mexico formerly known as La Gran Chichimeca (assisted by AI summary).

burlesque built into dramatic scenes and characters. This reached its height in the Golden Age of Theater in Spain, where Matachines danced in interludes or to finalize a drama (Coterlo and Mori, 1911). Drama, i.e. storytelling, appears to have always been a mainstay of Matachines enactments. Differing narratives have attached to different community enactments.¹⁶ In his article, “*Il Mattaccino: music and dance of the matachin and its role in Italian comedy*” (2012), Kenley begins with a description that still resonates in Colombia:

The theatrical character known as *Il Mattaccino* takes his name from the Italian word *matto*, meaning mad or crazy. Choreographies called *Il Mattaccino* and *La Mattaccinata*, which are named after this performer, have been called the dances *par excellence* of the professional improvised comedy that came to be known as the *commedia dell'arte*. *Mattaccini* appear in fully scripted forms of Italian comedy as well, yet they did not originate in the comedy—they antedate the *commedia*. Known in English as ‘matachins’, these masked dancers performed acrobatic feats and *moresque* dances with high leaps, wearing bells on their legs to accentuate their rhythmic motions. Their grotesque gestures were similar to street entertainers and *saltimbanques*. Guillaume Bouchet (1584) compared the mimetic actions of matachins to buffoons, jugglers, and mountebanks (*bateleurs*), whose movements were performed in “rhythm and tempo” (*avec mesure & cadence*) in a manner not unlike the dancing and leaping called *saltare* by the ancients. Popular street mimes danced, clowned and performed gymnastic feats that entertained the public, sharing the outdoor trestle stage with *zanni* and other precursors of the *commedia* (Kenley, 2012, 659).

The first scholarly writings on the Matachines Danza originated with professional folklorists and dance ethnologists, including Gertrude Kurath by the 1940s and 50s. Collaborating with tradition bearer Antonio Garcia, Kurath coauthored a chapter on Matachines in *Music and Dance in the Tewa Pueblos* in 1970. The first complete monograph, however, did not appear until 1983 with dance teacher Flavia Champe’s *The Matachines Dance of the Upper Rio Grande: History, Music, and Choreography*, focused on the Matachines/Matachina in the Tewa-speaking San Ildefonso Pueblo of New Mexico. This was followed in 1984 by English folklorist John Forrest’s *Morris and Matachin, A Study in Comparative Choreography*. My doctoral ethnomusicology dissertation, “Matachines Music and Dance in San Juan Pueblo and Alcalde, New Mexico: Contexts and Meanings” appeared in 1993, closely followed in 1994 by Adrian Treviño and Barbara Gillis’s controversial article “The Dance of Montezuma” (1994) and in 1996 by New Mexican anthropologist Sylvia Rodríguez’s monograph, *The Matachines Dance*. In 2001, folklorist Claude Stephenson published his doctoral

16. Possible connections with Arabic culture were largely erased from Spanish history books by the 1650s (see Copestake et al. 2005). In Mexico, where thousands of Matachines and Matlachines troupes still dance, the Spanish conquistadors burned the libraries of the ruling Mexica (Aztecs), erasing the histories of possible Mexican antecedents, although Mexican dance scholars today are tracing the precortesian danza lineages that merged with Matachines ceremonials.

dissertation, “A Comparative Analysis of Matachines Music and Its History and Dispersion in the American Southwest.” Numerous articles have since appeared on the New Mexican Matachines, including by Mexican scholars (see Romero, 2025). A trace of the Mexican roots is found in Robert R. Botello’s *We Dance for the Virgen, Authenticity of Tradition in a San Antonio Matachines Troupe* (2022) and folklorist Norma E. Cantú has written several articles and chapters on Matachines in Texas, including on how the Danza sacralizes space (2009).

Due to Mexico’s great number of ritual Danzas, several Spanish language monographs or anthologies appeared that did not focus entirely on Matachines. A focus on dance as resistance appeared with Pedro de Velasco Rivero’s *Danzar o morir, religión y resistencia a la dominación en la cultura tarahumar* (1987). A monograph on the importance of dance as a symbol of the enactment of power in precortesian Mexico appeared with María Sten’s 1990 *Ponte a Bailar, Tú que Reinas, Antropología de la danza prehispánica*. Then in 1996, Mexican structural anthropologists Jesús Jáuregui and Carlo Bonfiglioli edited *Las danzas de Conquista* in four sections: I. “Danza-Dramas of Conquest,” II. “Mediterranean Themes,” III. “Three Mexican Exceptions,” and IV. “Codes of Conquest.” In 1998 Miguel Olmos Aguilera’s monograph, *El sabio de la fiesta, Música y mitología en la region cahita-tarahuara* explored the relationships between ritual Danzas, including Matachines, and Indigenous Tarahumar (Rarámuri) cosmologies. Most recently, studies have appeared that focus on the importance of the precortesian antecedents, such as the Danza de Moctezuma, in Jesús Gonzalo Camacho Jurado, Camilo Raxá Camacho Jurado, and María Eugenia Jurado Barranco’s 2023 “La pervivencia de un patrimonio histórico: *La Danza de Moctezuma*” in E. Fernando Nava L., Edmundo Ricardo Camacho Jurado, Camilo Raxá Camacho Jurado, Coords. *Danza de Moctezuma, Homenaje al arpista nahua Joselito Hernández (1932–2019)*. Numerous articles have recently appeared online, among them Sabino Cruz V.’s “Matachines o matlachines: una revisión del constructo” (2024).

In Colombia, early studies were largely written by folklorists, and some include descriptions of Matachines choreographies and narrative sequences. Two excellent examples are Luis Fernando Duque’s 1988 “Tres Coreografías del Tolima” and Alberto Londoño’s 1998 *Danzas colombianas*. A strong Cultural Studies scholarship that includes Matachines has developed around studies of Fiesta and Carnival in an international network. Colombian “scholars of the Master’s in Interdisciplinary Research in the Humanities at the Universidad Distrital Francisco José de Caldas in Bogotá created a collaborative research network “Red Internacional de Investigadores en Estudios de Fiesta, Nación y Cultura” (REDRIEF) to encourage regional and international studies of festive culture in the Americas” (Romero, 2025). Among the anthologies they have published is Marcos González Pérez’s 1998 compilation, *Fiesta y Región en Colombia*. Other anthologies extend beyond Colombia, as in González Pérez edited 2014 *Carnavales y Nación, Estudios sobre Brasil, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba y Venezuela*. My work in Colombia revealed the great importance of the Fiesta Complex regarding the continuity of Matachines Danza enactments.

Methodology/Materials and Methods

I began to study Matachines in 1984 as a Graduate School Challenge Grant recipient assisting with cataloging the John Donald Robb Archives of Southwestern Music housed at the University of New Mexico. Working in the Archives meant getting acquainted with the actual taped performances of the thousands of songs Robb had collected and first published in a hefty volume in 1980. I met Adrian Treviño, a volunteer in the archives whose work cataloguing and labeling Robb's tape recordings of individual songs made my own work in the Archives feasible. Treviño introduced me to Matachines repertoires that Robb had recorded, and he told me about the version at the Pueblo of Jemez, where a "Spanish version" precedes a "Drum" version. I gravitated to Jemez after that, although I was not allowed to include ethnographic research on Jemez in my doctoral dissertation, other than the musical sequences I had transcribed.

I didn't claim to be a fiddler, although I played for the Pueblo of Jemez Matachina (their name for the Danza) for nine years before coaching my successor, whose grandfather and great grandfather from nearby Ponderosa, New Mexico had played the violin for the Matachina at the Pueblo for decades in each generation. I played the violin in part because it was a role that Indo-Hispano musicians had occupied roughly until the 1990s, when more Pueblo musicians began to play the repertoire themselves. I was the first woman to play for the Danza at Jemez, if not in New Mexico. Today in New Mexico there are a number of women playing for the Danza, among them Angela Pérez Drew, Audry Davis, Leticia Gonzales, and Soledad García.

Because dance ethnologist Gertrude Kurath had implied that Matachines could be rooted in Arabic culture when she circulated the idea that the term Matachines came from the Arabic for "to face each other" (1957), I had taken special care to notate the intricate musical ornaments to see if the music could have come from the Middle East. To prepare for this I had taken a seminar on Middle Eastern music and played the violin in the Near East ensemble with the acclaimed musician-ethnomusicologist Ali Jihad Racy, during my graduate work in ethnomusicology at UCLA. The transcriptions discount possibilities that the music was originally Arabic. The fringe over the eyes in the face covering one sees in New Mexico was another link to the Middle East, but I eventually came to believe this was left over from versions in Portugal and Spain that emphasized the conversion of jihadists, or *mujahidin* (which sounds like the Portuguese *machatin* and the Spanish *matachin*, as mentioned above).

I have applied ethnomusicological methodology to my research on Matachines. That means that thick descriptions are based on fieldwork and scholarly research. Today that research extends to the internet, as many Matachines enactments are now posted online by members of communities of practice, in stark contrast to the 1980s when I began to study Matachines.

After completing my doctoral dissertation on Matachines in New Mexico in 1993, I conducted library and field research for nine months in Mexico as a CoMexus Fulbright García-Robles research scholar in 2000-2001. During that time, I learned of Matachines in Colombia and began to conduct fieldwork in Riosucio-Caldas Department in 2007 and Neiva-Huila Department in 2009. In 2011 I received a Fulbright Colombia scholarship that allowed me to conduct further library studies in Bogotá-Cundinamarca Department, and fieldwork in Neiva.

In Mexico in 2012 I was invited to present my work in a *Conferencia Magistral* ("Master Lecture") for the *Primer Coloquio Nacional de Etnocoreología, "Del Movimiento a la Palabra"* (First National Colloquium of Ethnochoreology, "From Movement to Words"), held at the Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla (BUAP), Mexico. My work on Matachines has since been presented at each Ethnochoreology Colloquium since its inception in 2012; it also became an International Colloquium in 2018. In collaboration with BUAP scholars, I participated in a transcultural research study on Matachines sponsored by the Mexican government. Together with distinguished folklorist Norma E. Cantú, in 2017 we conducted fieldwork in Kansas City, Kansas, and Kansas City, Missouri. I also conducted collaborative fieldwork in the Mexican states of Aguascalientes and Sonora with Dr. José Luis Sagredo Castillo and other members of the BUAP Ethnochoreology faculty. This allowed me to work closely with insider (scholarly and community of practice) perspectives on the Matachines throughout Mexico. I spent four years compiling the entries for the 2025 Matachines article for *Oxford Bibliographies Latino Studies Online* and in 2026 I attended the Athens Institute Conference on the Visual and Performing Arts, where I began to network with Dr. David Philip Wick, historian of Greek culture and Director of the Athens Institute for Education and Research (ATINER).

After four decades of research and study of Matachines in transcultural contexts, I have answered most of the questions for which I sought answers—questions that seemed endless over time and are too numerous to list here. In the forthcoming monograph, tentatively called *Los Matachines Fronterizos, Creativity and Renewal in New Mexico and Beyond*, which tracks my field and bibliographic studies. It is my hope my contributions may help future scholars advance and finetune the content.

Conclusion

Colonization brought many hardships to non-Europeans and poor Europeans in the so-called "New World," now termed "the Americas." In New Mexico, as elsewhere, a saving grace came in the form of the Catholic ritual calendar, which assigned patronal saints and their feast days, *las fiestas*, to each Indo-Hispano village and Indigenous Pueblo, and on days commemorating Advent and Lenten events as well. Fiestas became common throughout the year as transcultural celebrations that attracted music, theater, and dance practitioners, vendors, and

extended friend and family gatherings. In Colombia, Matachines are contextualized primarily during Advent and especially in the pre-Lenten Carnival, which did not flourish in New Spain (including New Mexico). My first documentation of a Colombian troupe was in January 2007 at the Carnival de Riosucio (Caldas Department), where I was fortunate to see a classic Matachines performance by a visiting troupe from Aipe, near Neiva (Huila Department). As a result of Carnival's suppression, in present day New Mexico Matachines ceremonial *Danzas* survive on feast days and around Christmas during Advent. Further, in comparison to fiestas in Mexico and Carnival in Colombia, the Fiesta complex has largely declined in New Mexico except in some Pueblos, among them the Pueblo of Jemez where I played the violin for their *Matachina* between 1989-1998.

My current research takes a close look at Matachines variants that parallel the *Danza's* dissemination throughout the Americas, where Matachines continue as reinterpretations that reflect the resilience of local beliefs and *mutualismo* within Catholic contexts. This is particularly true because the tradition continues among Indo-Hispanos and Mestizo populations only due to the efforts of volunteer community members who offer their time as a form of prayer for the community's happiness and well-being. In contrast, in the Indigenous Pueblos of New Mexico the *Matachina* enactment is incorporated into a ritual calendar and organized by an appointed "War Chief" in each Kiva.

Matachines are significant because they have survived in New Mexico and the Americas since colonization in the sixteenth century, while their roots extend deep into European and Mexican Indigenous and African cultural histories. The systematic use of Los Matachines in processes of evangelization and domination ensured its survival and dissemination over time while it offered contexts for creative expression and resistance to oppression; this is discussed further in my forthcoming monograph. Matachines continue in distinct cultural traditions that tend to borrow from other rituals and ceremonies throughout the Americas, and although Matachines troupes are performing in Mexican immigrant communities throughout the US, including large troupes in New York City, most observers have no basis for appreciating their resilience. In a forthcoming monograph I delve into multiple cultural narratives that surround Matachines and its variants across the Americas.

In the course of my research over many years, I eventually came to understand Matachines as multimodal depictions of the eternal struggle between the forces of "good" and "evil," which many scholars had previously asserted. Learning about the iconography on the Chigi Vase allowed me to make connections with ancient forms of warfare among the Greeks, and to piece the puzzle into a coherent narrative, but mine may well be only one more of the many narratives that surround Matachines. My conclusions assert that many societies have incorporated outsider—even colonial—perspectives into the performing arts, while allowing for conflict, resistance, and resolution through creative agency. Matachines have

transformed into perpetual incarnations of spiritual warriors for the continuation of life. I'd like to quote from the Bernalillo Matachines (Lew, 2019):

It's important to honor our ancestors who have gone before us, and my eighteen years are small compared to the amount of years that we have performed this dance. A lot of our traditions we've lost. The language, we have almost lost it. But this, we haven't. So, I think it just shows the importance of it in the community to ensure its survival.

I end with a quote from the Athens Institute policy page (2026):

In conclusion, as Heraclitus said, "Everything flows, nothing stands still," while Parmenides held the opposite view, "Nothing changes, everything remains the same."

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