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# *Hermanos y Amigos de Guatemala*

## Folklore as Strategy for Cultural Survival

BY TOM VAN BUREN

Since the hurricanes of 2011 (Irene) and 2012 (Sandy), New York folklorists have been thinking about the impact of climate change on the resilience of local communities and the survival of folk and traditional cultures that depend on them. In the Caribbean and coastal areas of the southeastern United States, the regular but unpredictable experience of high winds, floods, storm surges, and damaging waves of major climate events have been a cultural constant throughout history. The final scenes of Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* offers one iconic, traumatic description from the 1930s. The recent devastation in the Philippines from the 2013 Typhoon Haiyan is a further reminder of this ongoing struggle. Northeasterners' recent interest in the subject is new only to those whose notion of normal does not include such events. That sense of novelty is bound to change, and the fields of folklore and community cultural development in New York State, as well as beyond, had best learn to find creative and flexible approaches to working in this new environment.

Those folklorists working with refugee communities, especially from areas torn by civil war, have long faced challenges of framing the remnants of cultural survival, but the assumption has often been that the best response to the initial trauma is the reclamation or re-creation of traditional culture in the new context. On the other hand, we are beginning to take a closer look at communities who have faced catastrophe on a regular basis and whose cultural practices encompass that experience. Many immigrant communities of

the region have lifetimes of experience with much harsher and unpredictable climates than ours, as it once was, not to mention political and social upheaval. In the New York metropolitan area, these include communities from Haiti, Trinidad, and other Caribbean regions whose experiences with cyclones run deep.

Some communities reflect an equally catastrophic experience of political, social, and military turmoil, including the Lost Boys of Sudan in Syracuse, as documented by Faye McMahon, or the Liberian community of Staten Island, and over the past 30 years, Central American immigrants, including survivors of Guatemala's "civil war" of repression. Since the 1980s, Guatemalans have been part of the stream of immigration drawn by economic opportunity, but also pushed by oppression and war.

Guatemalans now make up an increasing part of the Latin American population of Westchester County in New York and neighboring Fairfield County in Connecticut, having established a significant presence in the towns of Port Chester, Mount Kisco, and Elmsford in New York, and Stamford, Stratford, and Danbury in Connecticut. Guatemalans are beginning to be recognized as a social and cultural force, both across the region in pan-Latino cultural programs and in social service programs that address healthcare issues, education of next generations, and the multiple challenges facing day laborers.

During the past five years, in my work as a county and regional folklorist in Westchester, I have come to know the Guatemalan community of the region. My initial contacts with

community members, who were organizing cultural programs, evoked for me the painful and awkward knowledge of that country's largest 20th-century disaster: the repression of civil war and genocide dating back to the US-led coup d'état of 1954 and continuing through the orgy of killing of indigenous peoples by the army in the 1980s, aided and abetted by the US, as it waged its counterinsurgency campaigns in neighboring El Salvador and sought to overthrow the government of Nicaragua. Although the worst atrocities of that period ended in Guatemala during the 1990s, accountability remains a distant hope for the people there.

No stranger to the memory of hardship and disaster at home, the community was struck again in early October 2005, when Hurricane Stan barreled in from the Caribbean toward Central America, crossing Mexico's Yucatán Peninsula and its southern state of Chiapas. Immediately to the south, central Guatemala suffered some of the worst rainfall and damaging winds in memory, which caused extensive mudslides and killed hundreds, even thousands.

As news of the catastrophe reached the Guatemalan community of Port Chester, NY, a local Guatemalan couple, Heriberto and Ivonne Diaz, responded with an appeal to the community and to a local Latino church congregation to raise and send support to the affected communities at home. The Diaz's family brought together activists of the Guatemalan community to form an association to raise support. They chose the name *Hermanos y Amigos de Guatemala* (HAGUA). In the spirit



Masked dancers, in the form of Spanish conquistadores at a HAGUA community event at Saint Peter's Church in Port Chester, February 5, 2010. All photos courtesy of Tom van Buren.

of other mutual aid societies that have been integral to immigrant communities throughout US history, they raised money and collected food, clothing, and medical supplies to send back to the community of Santiago Panabaj in Guatemala, one most affected by the storm.

Bridging the spirit of cultural survival with community survival, HAGUA started a new project in its second year, which has proved essential to its cohesion and development. They founded a folk dance troupe to serve as a showcase for the organization in Port Chester and at New York metropolitan re-

gional Hispanic and Latino events. Founded as *Grupo HAGUA*, the troupe has served to engage its own members further in a celebration of Guatemalan culture and reinforce the mission of service on which the larger organization was founded.

The troupe is led by Liliana Lopez, a resident of New Rochelle and native of Chichicastenango in Guatemala. She grew up in a family dedicated to upholding their cultural traditions. In Guatemala, she was a member of *Hombres de Maíz* (Men of Corn),<sup>1</sup> a cultural troupe that has performed inter-

nationally. She has an extensive knowledge of both traditional dress and folk dances of Guatemala. She regularly travels to Guatemala to learn new dances, collect costumes, and stay connected with the traditions and community there.

Members of Grupo HAGUA construct props, paint their own backdrops, and make other decorations for performance events. In addition, they have a set of spectacular costumes and masks imported from Guatemala. These include their signature masks representing deer, trickster monkeys, and other





**Barriletes:** Replica of votive kites. The one on the left was made by Hartford, CT-based Guatemalan artist, Balam Soto.

and post-*conquista* cultural *mestizaje* or mixed ancestry.

Although the dancers of Grupo HAGUA often perform to recordings of traditional marimba music of Guatemala, they have also partnered with live marimba bands, of which there are several based in Stamford, CT. Among these are Marimba Jalapenaca and Marimba Flor de Selva. The signature feature of these bands is the use of a large traditional marimba with its characteristic hanging wooden resonators. Played by three musicians simultaneously, the marimba is a colonial era import to Central America, most likely from Africa through the agency of African slavery, but adopted throughout Guatemala as a national instrument. Modern ensembles typically add a drum set and bass guitar to complement the marimba's sound with enhanced rhythmic elements.

Grupo HAGUA has participated in Hispanic heritage parades throughout the tri-state area and in both Guatemalan and Latino cultural festivals as well. In addition,

animals, as well as human carnival characters such as Spanish conquistadores and officials of colonial times. The troupe has developed a repertoire of dances, including themes of tension and balance between man and the

natural world, of planting and harvest, and montages of sickness and shamanic healing rituals. The folk dance tradition that HAGUA represents is a carnival festival genre, with costumes that evoke both a Mayan ancestry



Deer mask dancer, a member of HAGUA performing at ArtsWestchester concert, May 1, 2010.



*Gigantes* puppets, of Grupo Cucumatz of the Guatemalan Casa de la Cultura, NYC.

HAGUA has also become a lead organizer of Guatemalan community events in Port Chester, particularly at Saint Peter's Episcopal Church; the Dominican American pastor at Saint Peter's, the Reverend Hilario Albert, has been attracting a growing Latino congregation that has brought new life to a previously declining Episcopal church.

### ***Barrilletes: Votive Kites for the Dead as Symbols of Living Culture***

HAGUA has also developed material and decorative crafts, often coinciding with the need to create costumes and decorations for its public events. Most notable among these are mural painting and votive kite making. Hartford, Connecticut-based visual artist Balam Soto has assisted HAGUA in the creation of large octagonal kites and leading community-based mural painting workshops. The kites are modeled on the giant kites

known as *barilletes*, which are created in honor of the dead and flown on All Saints' Day or *Día de los Santos*, particularly in the town of Santiago Sacatepéquez, Guatemala. While the original kites often reach sizes of 30 feet in diameter and are flown by a dozen men or more, HAGUA's versions do not exceed 12 feet in diameter and are not built for flying, but rather for display. They have used these kites as props in regional parades to great effect.

### **Staging and Display: The Confluence of Paper Arts and Performance**

In 2010, as folklorist for the Westchester Arts Council, I worked with members of HAGUA to develop two programs: an evening festival concert in May of that year, featuring folk dances, live marimba music, and a visual arts display. The following autumn, I organized an exhibition of Latin American folk arts that use paper as a primary mate-

rial, and HAGUA lent a set of *barilletes* that became a banner for the exhibition. The May program, entitled *Costumbres y Tradiciones de Guatemala* (Customs and Traditions of Guatemala) was a major event, bringing together a wide sector of the community in a public showcase of the artistry, color, and diversity of Guatemalan folklore. HAGUA invited the New York City-based Guatemalan ensemble Cucumatz to participate in the dances with a set of 16-foot tall puppets that took to the dance floor in the middle of the program.

### **Hurricane Survival and Cultural Survival**

*Hermanos y Amigos de Guatemala* has drawn inspiration from adversity in forming their organization, simultaneously rendering aid to the home communities while creating a cultural program in Port Chester to center the participants' focus on the legacy of a culture that is no stranger to misfortune.





Trickster Monkey character.

Folklorists may view many traditional cultures as fragile and threatened, and often they are, but at the same time, we can benefit from the knowledge that folk culture may also be highly resilient in the face of adversity. There are several reasons for this resilience. One is the fact of the survival of traumatic experi-

ences that lie behind many immigrant community's cultural experiences. It is perhaps simplistic to claim that these communities have developed exceptional strategies to cope with calamity, but experience seems to bear out that conclusion. Another is the quality of artistic and imaginative energy, which is seen

not as a luxury or pastime of privilege, but as an essential element of community life. As we contemplate the likelihood of more dramatic climate events, we would do well to give special recognition to community-based strategies for rendering assistance to recovery efforts, especially if they are grounded in expressions of cultural continuity and affirmation. ▼

### Endnote

<sup>1</sup> This name is taken from the *Popol Vuh*, the Mayan creation story, to describe the first peoples who were made from corn, an elemental component of Mayan folklore. This name was used as a title for the widely acclaimed 1949 masterpiece of fiction by Guatemalan writer and Nobel laureate, Miguel Ángel Asturias.



Marimba Jalapenaca ensemble of Stamford, CT, in concert at ArtsWestchester.

Tom van Buren, PhD, is an ethnomusicologist and has served as director of the Folk Arts Program for ArtWestchester in White Plains, NY, since 2003.



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