

Holding fast to ancient footwork

P'urhepecha Indians from Mexico hold fast to their identity with a trancelike dance

Oregonian, The (Portland, OR) - December 29, 2008

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Section: Living - How We Live

Readability: 10-12 grade level (Lexile: 1160)

Clack! Clack!

Sandals with wooden soles land on a concrete garage floor. Homeboys in hoodies, a throng of young school kids and middle-aged men pull the sandals onto their feet.

One of the men turns on the boombox. He grabs a cane-like wooden stick with a sculpted root instead of a handle. Others follow with their sticks, squaring off in two lines.

Clack, clack, clack! More than 30 pairs of feet stomp, accelerate, in unison and with a deafening thud. Dust rises. Sweat drips off dancers' faces.

Men, women and children watch from the sides, as if still standing in the dusty plaza in Cocucho, a village high in the mountains of Michoacan in central Mexico. In this Southeast Portland garage, a second Cocucho thrives, carried by the rhythm and din of an ancient dance called Los Viejitos, the trancelike "dance of old men."

Los Viejitos is a stubborn, loud repetition in the face of possible disappearance. Cocucho, and now the Portland area, are home to the P'urhepecha Indians, an indigenous community from Mexico -- also known as Tarascans -- that has retained its unique language and culture even after the Spanish conquest, only to be threatened by the forces of globalization and migration.

In Oregon, where most of Cocucho's expatriates live, three worlds grind against one another: the indigenous, the Mexican and the American. Most parents still speak P'urhepecha, but their children prefer Spanish or English.

To keep the link with the Mexican Cocucho and a sense of identity, Oregon's P'urhepecha organize in a tight web of cooperation. They also teach the Los Viejitos dance and -- just like it happens in their village in Mexico -- hold a dance competition in Portland every year on Christmas Day.

"We don't want to lose our culture," 42-year-old Herlinda Pasaye says in a muddled singsong Spanish, wrapping a blue rebozo, a hand-woven shawl, tighter around her shoulders against the draft in the garage. "The young ones are dancing; they are learning our tradition."

The dance leader shouts:

Ya muchachos! A bailar! Let's dance!

Days of empire

The Kingdom of the P'urhepecha was one of the largest and most prosperous empires in the pre-Hispanic Mesoamerican world until the Spanish invasion in the 16th century, according to historians. The P'urhepecha language is not part of any known language family and is not related to Spanish.

Isolated villages safeguarded the indigenous culture, so that today more than 100,000 people in Michoacan still speak P'urhepecha, Mexican census figures show. But poverty and the demands of globalization led many P'urhepecha to clear forests for farmland, causing severe deforestation and upending the community's way of life, said Carlos Molina Santos, one of the P'urhepecha leaders in Portland.

Half of the Michoacan forest vanished during the past five decades, according to a study by that state's government. And P'urhepecha men, who could no longer rely on the traditional manufacturing of wooden crates, wood furniture and crafts, started migrating north.

The path from Cocucho to the Portland area was forged in the mid-1980s, Molina Santos said. Today, more than 300 heads of families are part of a Cocucho phone list, including 200 families from the metro area, 50 from Madras and a few more from California and Washington. Others from P'urhepecha villages also have settled in the Northwest.

Oregon P'urhepechas' tight social-cooperation network harks back to their village, where all men and women participated in unpaid community labor. In Oregon, they regularly activate their phone tree and gather to decide how much money to collect for a renovation project in Cocucho, to help those who stayed behind. And when a village member passes away, they all pay to send the body to be buried in Mexico.

"Whatever happens, we are there for each other," Carlos Molina said. "The idea is that we all cooperate and don't let anyone fall behind."

The efficient social network also re-creates a sense of home. Molina Santos and Pasaye, his wife, invited a Los Viejitos dance troupe called Los Tareris -- Tareris means "those who sow" in P'urhepecha -- to practice in the couple's garage. The dance provides distraction from the daily grind of American life, Molina Santos said, and "it reminds me of Cocucho."

Crossing cultures

In order to win the Los Viejitos competition, "dancers must be united and organized, like our community," said Pedro Blas Molina, leader of Los Tareris. Feet clad in wooden soles must clack in unison.

The dance Los Viejitos was once a pre-Hispanic religious ceremony, according to David Rojas, a retired anthropologist who taught dance history at the University of California at Santa Barbara. The dancers would honor and communicate with Huehuetotl, the Old God, Rojas said, revering the wisdom of old age. But after the "spiritual conquest" of Mexico by Spain, the dance became a Christian celebration.

"We were a nation that used to worship our gods by dancing and singing to them," Rojas said. "It was very hard to stop the P'urhepecha from doing that. So today they are replicating the old ceremonies."

During competitions, dancers still don old men masks, embroidered pants, the wooden-sole sandals and serape ponchos. They hunch over and lean on homemade wooden canes -- but then, joined by beautiful women dancers known as Maringuillas, they turn vigorous.

The dance's pre-Hispanic significance and name have been lost, but dancers say the performance in Portland -- as in Cocucho -- is a celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ. Another interpretation says the Viejitos mock Mexico's Spanish conquerors, and the woman dancer is La Malinche, the indigenous translator and lover of Spanish conquistador Hernando Cortes.

Many people join a Los Viejitos troupe because they "promise" the dance to the Virgin Mary in return for good health, a successful trip or another assurance, Blas Molina said. In Oregon, the dance is in its sixth year. Community members pay for the space rental, orchestra, food for hundreds of people and prizes. Women cook traditional corundas, a P'urhepecha specialty similar to tamales.

In the end, dancing or watching Los Viejitos is more than a distraction. It's a survival mechanism, because American and Mexican influences seep in, Molina Santos said, threatening the survival of the P'urhepecha language and identity.

Ironically, emigration offers the prospect of revival. Many of the men have learned to dance Los Viejitos only once they came to Oregon, making sure their community thrives despite its dispersal.

"We are proud to dance here," 28-years-old Miguel Ascencio Rodriguez said. "We're representing our village and keeping our culture alive."

Record: MERLIN_12997654

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