

La Fiesta de la Tirana
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Intro and History

Festive dancers paint the cold desert sky in blue, red, glitter and gold. The low thuds of marching bass drums crash against cymbals and snares – as sticatto horns wail the romantic melodies of vintage boleros, ballads and waltzes. Where the songs and dances of one group ends, another begins – a sensory mosaic of sound, color and movement. The energy is high, the central plaza packed with hundreds upon hundreds of religious dancers – offering their blood, sweat and tears in the cold crisp air of the arid desert night. On the eve of July 16, there are over 250,000 attendees, pilgrims who have made the long journey to the small desert town of La Tirana, Chile. Why have they come? Why do they dance day and night, for 10 days on end? What drives this powerful and profound sacrifice each year en el Norte Grande de Chile?

They come to pray, to give thanks, to entregar, offer their pasos/steps to la Virgencita del Carmen, patron saint of Chile. She protects Chile as a country, and is more specifically the guardian of the armed forces, the navy, the police. Believers throughout the region make peticiones to la chinita, and are obliged to complete their promises of multiple years of dancing to show their devotion and thanks. Families and sociedades of dancers have carried on this vibrant tradition for generations, with the earliest modern groups forming in the mid 19th century.

But this tradition has even deeper roots in the land, in the footsteps of Inca and Aymara travelers of this dry and expansive landscape. For centuries, these sandy hills served more as a crossroads, a place of transit for the llama caravans led by indigenous migrant peoples who traveled from the Andes to the coast in a constant motion. To support the journey through this

harsh and extreme environment, travelers began recording and expressing their visual culture through ongoing geoglyphs – monolithic, geometric and anthropomorphic figures that remain on the hills to this day.

This energy of pilgrimage was embedded ever deeper after a fateful cuento took place at this site. La Fiesta de La Tirana finds its origin in this popular myth; a story of love, betrayal and death. The oral tradition tells of a fierce indigenous princess, Huillac Ñusta, known throughout the region for her unrelenting defense of her people and land, killing and enslaving any Europeans or Christian Indians that crossed her path. Her nickname, La Tirana – the tyrant – gives this small town its name. The story describes how she ultimately falls in love with one of her prisoners of war – a European (Portuguese or Spanish) man named Vasco de Almeida. In order to marry, she must convert to Christianity, and therefore betray her commitment to her own religion, and her people. As with many popular legends, there are many different interpretations and versions of a similar series of events, but each story agrees that Huillac Ñusta was baptized by Almeida, and at that very moment Ñusta's warriors fired a sea of arrows upon them, killing them both in an embrace of impossible love. Whether Ñusta herself gave the orders, or her people decided to carry out the attack on their own is one of many sites of debate within the oral history. Nonetheless, on the site of their murder was erected a cross and when another missionary priest Antonio Rendón traveled to this site in the mid 18th century, he decided to erect a church to commemorate and mark it as a sacred site – a site of pilgrimage. Huillac Ñusta then becomes baptized and canonized in her afterlife as La Virgencita del Carmen, an apparition of the Catholic Virgin Mary. This is a story we find throughout the Americas, one that is rooted in founding colonial mythologies of mestizaje and Christianization of Latino America.

La Fiesta Today

Today, the fiesta represents a complex and interlocking system of cultures and histories - each layer emerging in different moments of the 10-day popular fiesta. Chinos, Morenos, Indios, Gitanos – this year over 220 different religious dance associations arrived to offer their songs and bailes. The number of pilgrims and dancers continues to grow each year, especially since the founding of the mining boom in the early 20th century. La Fiesta de La Tirana in many ways would not exist without the mining industry that surrounds it.

The bailes themselves are organized in an elegant and cooperative spirit. Caporales (head dancers) from each group are represented in a larger association of dancers, deciding beforehand the spatial and temporal flow of the fiestas. Practices of mutual respect and asking permission of elders is a fundamental ethic that guides the organizing and energetic principles of the fiesta.

A fiesta of such magnitude - with 250,000 attendees in a small town of 1,500 - requires a great deal of organization, commitment and temporary infrastructure. Thus the fiesta creates its own community-based systems of healthcare, commerce, and housing to name a few. Security, law enforcement, and transportation sectors from surrounding areas know to stay close to La Tirana during these 10 special days each year. Furthermore, juridically each year the town of La Tirana has a mandatory dry law, with alcohol checkpoints at each entrance, to avoid public drunkenness and recklessness that would otherwise compromise the religious intent of the fiesta, and is also a public safety concern. Notably this also has an historical precedent in that the fiesta was known for many years as a site of religious abandon, prone to extreme alcohol abuse, widespread unofficial gambling, and sexual promiscuity. The dry law was passed sometime in the mid 20th century to bring the fiesta back to its Christian intentions, though this remains a

contested and heavily policed space during the fiesta. More investigation into this transition would most likely yield some very interesting dynamics of the fiesta.

Bailes Religiosas

Of the bailes religiosas, the baile de las Diabladas are the most popular and iconic of the fiesta, even though they are a more recent introduction to the celebration, arriving first in 1957 by way of Bolivia's Fiesta de Oruro. The diablos represent sin, all the bad of humanity, all our pecados, therefore to dance the devil is to work out these demons, to turn them over to the virgin, to be forgiven and shown mercy by her grace. Of course there is also a deep history of the diablos as a racialized and gendered performance within the Catholic church.

The Osos and other tricksters play between the danzas, as border crossers, the playful figures interact more with the children and also cross over between groups of bailerines. Free agent diablos also play this role, holding the space for other groups and not belonging to any particular group themselves.

As an outsider to these traditions one notices the racialized dynamics of each baile religiosa. Chinos, Morenos, Indios, Diablos with dread locks, these are the racial others of a white supremacist Eurocentric paradigm of mestizaje. Further questions here are: how do these performance interact with regional racial/ethnic identities? Of the dancers? Of spectators and other pilgrims? With structures and cultures of racialization at large? For example, do chinos identify with the Chinese rail workers from which this dance comes? Do morenos identify as the racial slaves of the mines?

The grupos indios are a particularly noteworthy cultural performance. They are the complex result of US cultural imperialism and the mining industry in the area. As the primary

entertainment for miners in the 1950s became American Westerns with Cowboys vs. Indians, local dancers began to identify more with the representation of Indians than cowboys, and adopted the dress and dances of the Native North American Nations they met on screen. Coopting Lone Ranger and John Wayne movies, these dancers found an outlet for being Indian in public through an alternative indigeneity. They wear headdresses, moccasins and bear tomahawks to this day, being one of the few dance traditions that does not use horns in their ensemble. Instead, los Indios or Pieles Rojas (Redskins) dance to the bare sound of tribal drums. The complexities and contradictions of these danzas also merit further research, especially in light of ongoing debates regarding cultural appropriation and power.

A note on governance

The “order” of many of these dances come from indigenous worldviews, namely Aymara and Inca cosmovisiones. Governance comes from a deeper, grander authority, that is, Nature, the Creator. Therefore, the church and the dancers are in a dialogical struggle for meaning making at this fiesta. Further research is needed to understand the role of the church as a governing authority in the fiesta vis-à-vis the sociedades/cofradías of dancers and caporales. Also, how recognized are the indigenous roots of the organizing principles and the steps of these danzas? For example, organizing in the duality of male/female to represent the harmony masculine/feminine? Are there third, fourth or other genders represented in these bailes? Organizing by age from eldest to youngest, the geometry of the bailes themselves, how are these taught or passed down in relation to their indigenous roots?