

*List of Illustrations* ix

*Foreword by Max Harris* xi

*Preface and Acknowledgments* xv

**1. Incongruous Beginnings** I

Experience and the Embodied Self 4

The Action of the Dance 5

The Locus of Attainment 8

The Zocalo as Palimpsest 9

An Oral Tradition 10

The City as Experiential Context 13

The Chapters 14

Titles and Word Usage 16

**PART I: THE EXPERIENTIAL CONTEXT**

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**2. The Concheros** 21

The Association and Its Palabras 22

The Principal Dance Events 25

The Sacred Geography of the Four Winds 26

## CONTENTS

A Mesa and Its Organization	26
The Jefe and His Oratory	26
The Sahumadora	31
The Captains: Cabeceras to Palabras	34
Other Positions: the Sergeant and Alferez	35
The Soldiers	37

### 3. The Obligations: Framing the Context 43

A Vigil in Puente Negro	44
The Limpia	50
The Dance	56

## PART 2: THE EXPERIENTIAL NEXUS: FORMING THE SELF

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### 4. Agency and the Dance: Ritualization and the Performative 67

Analyzing Ritual and Performance	67
Toward Ritualization	69
The Performative (or Performativity)	73
From Performance to the Performative	74
Mimesis: Learning to “Carry the Word”	80
The Relationship between Ritualization and Performativity	81

### 5. Conchero Speak: Carrying the Word 87

The Ritual Language of the Concheros	90
The Banner	91
Union	93
Conformidad	94
Conquista	94
El es Dios	99
Carrying the Word	101

### 6. Clothing Matters 103

Style and Aesthetics	107
The Chichimeca Background	107
The Precursors	109
Aztecquismo	111
Aztec Style	114
The Mexica Asthetic	118
Women’s Vestments	119
The Showing of Position	124

Inspiration, Competence, and Protection	124
Clothing Matters	127

## **7. Why Dance? 129**

Dance in Theory	131
To Dance	132
Getting the Feel of the Concheros' Dance	133
The Interaction with Music and the Other Media	134
Dance as Work	136
As a Source of Power	137
To Transcend	139
Meaning?	143
Why Dance?	144

## **PART 3: POWER CONCERNS: PERFORMING THE SELF**

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## **8. Alliances and Identity Politics 149**

Alliances	151
The Meeting of Jefes	154
Inheritance	155
Division/Fission	158
Identity Politics	162

## **9. Oral Tradition, Myth, and History 165**

Mythical Antecedents	167
Documentation on the Dance	170
Confraternities	172
The Dance of the Moors and the Christians	175
The Chichimeca Trope	176
The Eighteenth to the Late Nineteenth Centuries	178
The Testimony of Compadre Ernesto	182
The Reliquia (Re)Establishes the Dance in Mexico City	183
The Palabra of Santiago Tlatelolco	185
The Gobierno	186
Ernesto Ortiz and His Mesas	187

## **10. The Mexica and Mexicanidad 191**

Mexicayotl	194
The Fifth Sun	197
Mexicanidad Today: Nahui Mitl	197

## CONTENTS

New or Cosmopolitan Mexicanidad	198
A Nativist Spirituality?	198
New Agers?	200
Early Mexica Influences on the Concheros	201
The Mexica today	201
The Context of the Mexica's Dance	205
Is It Just Show?	206

## Epilogue 209

## Appendices 225

1. Timelines for Santo Niño de Atocha 225
2. Spanish and English Names of Dances, 1989 227
3. Spanish and Nahuatl Names of Santo Niño de Atocha's Dances, 2001 228
4. Principal Mesas in Mexico City of Significance to Santo Niño de Atocha 229
5. Genealogy of the mesas of Santo Niño de Atocha and San Juan de los Lagos 232

*Notes* 233

*Glossary* 267

*Bibliography* 273

*Index* 291

## INCONGRUOUS BEGINNINGS

Those occasions when we come across the incongruous are comparatively rare. In Mexico City in the early 1990s, however, I encountered just that: groups of dancers who, calling themselves Concheros, enacted a sacred dance, circular in form and sometimes preceded by an all-night vigil. In one of the largest cities in the world, a religious tradition that claims to have indigenous rural roots was still flourishing as unchangingly as it could, despite the pressures and complexities of everyday life at the end of the twentieth century.

My first encounter with the Concheros was at a *velación* (all-night vigil). Usually held some nine days after a death, this particular vigil was for a man whose sons were dancers. The deceased was quite well-known in the Mexico City art and media worlds as he directed films and was also a dealer in antiquities. The occasion was thus supported not only by Concheros, a heterogeneous group of people who come literally from all walks of life, but also, at least during the earlier part of the night, by the luminaries of cinema, theater, and dance. In marked contrast to the professional middle-class aspect of the gathering was the ritual that slowly unfolded and took on more significance as the evening wore on. By midnight, most of the party attendees had departed and those remaining were fully involved in the rite to honor not only the dead man's soul (*ánima*) but also those of the Concheros' antecedents. What struck me most forcibly at the time was how contradiction-laden the occasion seemed. Here were apparently sophisticated urbanites in one of the biggest cities in the world

## INCONGRUOUS BEGINNINGS

performing the various rites of an all-night vigil with the care, dedication, and love usually found in Mexico in the rituals of rural peoples: the kind of religious devotion predominantly associated with those living in small face-to-face communities of a few thousand. In such communities people come together, from a sense of obligation as much as commitment, to celebrate a way of being by contacting one or more superhuman agents, a religion in the sense of a re-joining (*re-ligio*) with each other as much as the deity.<sup>1</sup>

Although this particular vigil was not followed by a dance, a few days later I witnessed thousands of Concheros dancing at one of their major obligations in the small town of Chalma. The narrow, congested streets were filled with numerous stalls selling candles, small statues of saints, devotions, pamphlets, and the other bits and pieces associated with the kind of religiosity found in a pilgrimage town. As I got closer to the church, the sound became louder until suddenly, nearing the gates of its precinct, out in the open space of the atrium I was hit by the full force of the drums mingled with the sounds of various types of rattles and the fainter melodic music of various stringed instruments. The energy in the air was palpable. The courtyard was completely filled with what at first sight appeared to be a multitude of undifferentiated dancers who from a proximate high point could be seen to be dancing in circle formations. Each circle's movements was constricted by those adjacent, each focused inward around its own upheld standard that, combined with the columns of smoke rising from the incense burners, gave a sense of extending inward and upward. The dancers were dressed in a wide variety of costumes, some with their bodies completely covered, others freer to move in more minimal accoutrements decorated with plastic silver and gold that caught the light as the sun descended toward the hills behind the church.

This was the end of the second day (Thursday) of one of the Concheros' biggest dances. That particular obligation is held in a place that is not so much a town as a large shrine dedicated to the incursions of large numbers of people, where every other house seems to be an inexpensive hotel. Many large crosses stand on the steep, cliff-like protrusions of rock that rise steeply from the fast-flowing river. Some had already been brought down and decorated with flowers, to be followed by candlelit vigils held all night in their vicinity. Pilgrims unconnected with the Concheros had been arriving throughout the day on their knees, having placed on their heads small crowns of fragile orchids obtained at the Ahuchuete, a huge tree probably dating back to before the Spanish Conquest situated in a village a few kilometers above.

As I watched the dancing, I realized that despite the spatial restrictions, the Concheros do not touch each other, that their movements are predominantly in their feet and torsos, leaving the hands free to play various musical instruments.

Facing inward, they dance in circle formation, enclosing their *jefe* (leader) and others who hold named positions. The dance is not performed for an audience, although on many if not most occasions there will be people watching. If the dance is a small one, locals will be present, people visiting the nearby church to pray, and curious passersby; at a large dance such as this one, people have come especially for the fiesta, to make offerings of flowers and prayers, and incidentally also to watch, and of course the omnipresent tourists. Predominantly, however, dancers enact for the sake of dancing, largely unaware of the image of their bodies in the eyes of other dancers in the circle, let alone in those of the bystanders, although the rich variety of their costumes may seem to belie this (Chapter 6).

A dancer never enacts alone but is part of a group (*mesa*). Each needs to work with the other members for necessarily they dance together and yet are apart, and this is of significance. The Concheros are backed by neither a formally endorsed institution (as are most churches) nor a prescribed organization (as are most religions). Rather they form a complex associative network of long-standing interpersonal connections and often affective relationships framed by the discipline of their tradition. Respectfully by means of the dance combined with their ritual prayers, the singing, and the music, the group as a whole aims according to the precepts of this oral tradition for “union” and “conformity” while each more individually may be moving toward the attainment of an impersonal and transcendent state of consciousness. The Concheros manifest a way of being that has become rare and certainly very different from the self-conscious and increasingly secular nature of everyday urban life.

To become a Conchero gives people the chance not so much to join an already existing organization (the Association of Concheros), although that is partly the case, but to be instrumental in an ongoing experiential process of a kind that particularly appeals to them.<sup>2</sup> As a multilayered phenomenon, the dance can be (and is) different for everyone, hence its appeal. No two dancers will necessarily give the same explanation as to what the dance signifies, and although most aspects of it display not only strong Catholic but also some indigenous influences, and increasingly those from other forms of spirituality, in the end each has his or her individual explanation. There is no one dogma: the metaphors deployed resonate differently for each (Chapter 5). Robertson Smith suggested a century ago that the practice of ritual is much more stable than the beliefs related to it.<sup>3</sup> What matters to the dancers most is the experience of participating rather than speculating as to what their dancing means.

There is also not just one way of enacting. Each group has its own style, yet each group guards the forms of the dances and attempts to keep them

## INCONGRUOUS BEGINNINGS

as unchanging as possible. Perhaps somewhat contradictorily, although it is expected that celebrants exert strict conformity to the dance's tenets, the dance can and does give agency to those who participate in a way that their everyday lives may not. This is especially significant for those who are frustrated by their lack of personal opportunities. To dance and follow the other practices too can provide that *something* that is otherwise missing in a person's life and for many being a Conchero becomes of central importance. What that *something* is, is one of the questions that this book attempts to answer. The book does not catalog the dances per se but rather focuses on the practice of dancing: of what is going on as a dancer enacts (Chapters 4 and 5). It looks too at what some of the Concheros—with whom I danced and talked to at length—believe themselves to be doing while they dance and what their experiences of the dance were, which is different for each (Chapters 5 and 7).

## EXPERIENCE AND THE EMBODIED SELF

Experience is notoriously hard to get at. People are either reluctant to talk about what they have experienced during a dance and/or have difficulty putting it into words: it is interior, individual, and above all a private matter. Although two dancers may execute the form of a dance in a very similar manner, what they experience and how they interpret that may be quite different.<sup>4</sup>

What the dance offers is the opportunity to re-member the body: to attain anew, by means of the "body-as-experiencer," another kind of embodied state.<sup>5</sup> It enables dancers to achieve a sense of connectedness and of intersubjectivity by means of a reawakening of all the senses, numbed by the doings of everyday life, and a rejoining (or re-ligio) with the earth by means of the feet: a form of unmediated experience.

For those involved in a full-time, routine job, five days a week in Mexico City, the daily round is often typified by a certain "disembodied" style of life, but the desire to try to compensate for this is strong, especially among the more self-conscious middle classes. Many of them cultivate their mind-body in various ways: a theme familiar throughout much of the so-called developed world.<sup>6</sup> For some (and not necessarily those from the middle classes) the way chosen is to dance as a Conchero at the weekend, which provides an opportunity to turn a mere physical (and spiritually deadened) body (*Korper*) into an energized and alive one: a reanimated body (*Leib*).<sup>7</sup> To dance is a way for the person who, in the Maussian sense, plays a role in everyday life to become reconnected with her inner sense of self and for that self to be opened to new experience. To put it concisely, the Concheros' dance enables a rejoining, an opening up, and sometimes the attainment of at-one-ment (atonement).



How does the dancer's bodily state change? The body has been investigated in the last few decades from a variety of theoretical stances.<sup>8</sup> To analyze the Concheros' dance, a phenomenological approach that looks at the reanimated emergent body (the *Leib*) and sees the body as the "existential ground of culture" seems most appropriate.<sup>9</sup> I am not primarily concerned here with the symbolism of the body nor with the body as a representation (although this is important) but rather with the body as a "crucial site or nexus in the construction of subjectivities" by means of embodiment, and in particular of what happens to the body during the activity of dancing.<sup>10</sup> Dancing in a circle creates necessarily a sense of intersubjectivity, for dancers not only can see each other across the circle but also need to respond to the dancers on either side of them. What a Conchero experiences during a dance is a "heightening and intensification . . . an altered awareness of his or her" self.<sup>11</sup> The dancer becomes less immersed in the preoccupations of her everyday life, less the bounded individual self constrained by her body, so characteristic of Western society, and more open not just to others but also to the world of the numinous; the world of the *animas*—the spirits of the Conchero's ancestors. A dancer becomes a more "diffuse, fluid self—a self that is multiple and permeable, and infused with the presence of others."<sup>12</sup> The circle as a form implies an interacting sodality that when in action with the dancers facing into the center as they do is effectively closed off from and largely unaffected by the outside physical world. This for the Concheros can occur even in the heart of downtown Mexico City in a place such as the Zocalo, the square outside the cathedral.

Embodiment is, however, a mediated state that is in flux and that, when dancing, is changing from moment to moment. As Csordas has put it, the essential characteristic of embodiment is its existential indeterminacy.<sup>13</sup> To aid in understanding this, I use two processual terms, the "ritualized" (or ritualization) and the "performative" (or performativity), that at a subtle level can account for much (but by no means all) of what is occurring as the Concheros dance. I use these concepts to develop a paradigm of practice or activity grounded in "the socially informed body."<sup>14</sup>

## THE ACTION OF THE DANCE

Much has been written in recent decades on so-called practice theory.<sup>15</sup> Bourdieu's compelling notion of *habitus* endeavors to explain how practices are generated, how we do what we do as we do it: that is of how dispositions and values are embodied.<sup>16</sup> An actor's activity is objectively determined by his *habitus* and excludes the possibility of creativity.<sup>17</sup> Bourdieu takes up this position at the expense of human motivation: his sense of agency lacks subjective

## INCONGRUOUS BEGINNINGS

empowerment. As Comaroff has indicated, "Bourdieu's formulation leads . . . so far into the domain of implicit meanings that the role of consciousness is almost totally eclipsed." In Bourdieu's effort to counter a subjectivist bias, he has gone "so far in the other direction that his actors seem doomed to reproduce their world mindlessly."<sup>18</sup> Jackson has pointed out that any theory of the "habitus or lifeworld must include some account of those moments in social life when the customary, given, habitual, and normal is disrupted, flouted, suspended, and negated."<sup>19</sup> As actors, we are both of the world and in the world: it constitutes us but we also constantly constitute it.

Humphrey and Laidlaw have developed a theory of ritual action that is a particularly appropriate tool for analyzing both the dance and a vigil because it allows for motivation or choice. Their concept of ritualization emphasizes "action" rather than "practice" and thus uses a different language.<sup>20</sup> Action in their terms is "intrinsically directed . . . so that action and purpose are ontologically inseparable."<sup>21</sup> This then is a "qualitative view" of action that does not see action as being opposed to thought.<sup>22</sup> Ritualization is then a process whereby the relation between intention and action is subtly transformed: a form of action that can be chosen. It pinpoints the means by which any action can come to have those special qualities that emerge when a particular modification of consciousness is made, namely, when the celebrant's awareness of his or her action is "preceded and accompanied by a conception of the action as a thing, encountered and perceived from outside."<sup>23</sup> Ritual is thus different from everyday action. Although the celebrant is still an agent in that he or she enacts the ritual act, the "act itself appears as already formed, almost like an object, something from which the actor might 'receive.'"<sup>24</sup>

When a dancer starts to dance on any particular occasion, the dance activities that have become habitual to the body through time, that (following Bourdieu) we might call the dance habitus, are called up. The Conchero aims to add as little that is new to them as possible. She attempts to curb her more usual everyday agency: her imagination and her desire to innovate. She endeavors to re-member them with her physical body and re-present them in her dance in the way (and this will inevitably be different for each) that she has always danced in the past: that is, to reproduce the conventional steps. This I too have called "ritualization" or ritualized action.<sup>25</sup> But ritualization is not easy to achieve: it is a quality that action "can come to have," providing the dancer is able to put aside her desires and ambitions or the thoughts that are running through her mind, so that she can focus her body/mind totally on her dedicated goal. Ritualization is effectively action that is intentionally made nonintentional.

Against this will be the actuality of enactment. No one can, or even necessarily desires to, reproduce only what has been inculcated time after time.

Although the dance is enacted under conditions that demand tight framing and re-presentation, this is not a professional or theatrical setting with the training that that implies. Inevitably, something of the personal is added each time, if not to the dance steps themselves then to bodily gestures, for example, how the shoulders or the hands are held. In the circumstances under which the Concheros enact, a dance that is repeated in its kinaesthetic totality in exactly the same way, occasion after occasion, would become stale and be unstimulating not only to those who might be watching but more importantly to the dancers themselves. Although the dancers should be aiming for nothing other than the “anonymous” movements of the dance, inevitably dancers express aspects of themselves and their desires when they enact.<sup>26</sup>

Moods such as happiness, exuberance, or sadness may inform their actions. These expressive aspects become apparent when a dancer is either unable to suppress the manifestation of certain emotions or, more significantly for this book, actually permits herself to express something of herself in her dance, whether this be a desire to enact more flamboyantly than usual or to try out something different. It is the latter that I have subsumed under the performative, and most dancers are involved in both ritualized action and the more performative; that is, they aim to carry out the dance as habitually as possible while at times expressing with their bodily movements something that is unique to that occasion.

In everyday life, embodied memory is brought into play for many of the activities we engage in, and analysts have tended to be more concerned with the habitual, with what is considered to be customary, than with the exceptional. Dance is enacted under rather different circumstances. What is exceptional on however small a scale—perhaps unique and attention grabbing—also needs to be taken into account. The non-habitual activities of daily life have a goal and are usually instrumental, intentional endeavours (on a physical level), and the actors have agency. When dancing, the enactors have a different kind of agency; they have what Hastrup has called “double agency.”<sup>27</sup>

As individual dancers endeavor to enact conventionally, they may be thinking about “how” to achieve these nonintentional actions by trying to decide “what” needs to be added to them in order to get them right. They will thus also be caught up in trying to “get it right” in a subconscious way, whether this is by means of extra movements, unusual gestures, or facial expressions—a smile, a grimace, or an expressive twinkle in their eyes that can act as a sign to other dancers. This activity is produced in relation to and in addition to ritualization’s intentional conventionality and is contingent and context dependent. Such performative actions can be communicative and are a not inconsiderable aspect of the dance. The performative then is that part of the action that is

## INCONGRUOUS BEGINNINGS

added (predominantly more, rather than less, consciously) to the ritualized action of the dance and emanates from practices or actions that are not necessarily dance specific.

Dance could perhaps be viewed crudely in terms of a division between opposites, between two types of experiential activity whose qualities differ. Put simply, from similarity of enactment to difference, or from repetition of the anonymous habitual forms to the new and one off. As already indicated, the actual situation is more complex than this: the ritualized and the performative are not a dichotomy but rather a result of the dancer's double agency. Any part of what appears to be continuous dance will consist of ritualized activity with respect to some performativity and of everyday movements and gestures. Ritualization and performativity are then differing but linked modes of activity with which to capture "the immanent logic" of a dance's instantiation.<sup>28</sup> They designate the type of activity in which the dancer involves her body-as-experiencer (see Chapter 4). The dancer can also focus on the kinaesthetic, on feeling or sensing what is going on in the body—that is, on her inner experience—which is much less easily controlled.

When dancers can be persuaded to talk about their dancing, it is clear that many urban Concheros conceive of it as a search for states of being beyond those of the everyday, for when some time into the dance ritualization aided by the performative begin to act together and the latter begins to augment the former, the state of consciousness of the dancer changes. Through time, the movements carried out with devotion, dedication, and increasingly the forgetting of the self can induce "an exaltation," which Deren refers to as "the province of divinity."<sup>29</sup>

A wide range of terms is used to encapsulate such states and the dancers themselves talk about them in a variety of different ways. The attainment of "sacred" experience, or at least the approach to it, I have loosely called "transcendence." Such a state emerges when the awareness of the physical world and of what a dancer is actually involved in decreases, and the dancer brings herself ever closer to the extreme of subjectivity. I have preferred "transcendence" to "exaltation" or "ecstasy" as its verbal quality emphasizes the processual nature of what is occurring—a state that is always in the making—rather than the substantive quality that the latter two give with their implications of a state attained that has static resonances (see Chapter 7).

## THE LOCUS OF ATTAINMENT

In a transcendent state, dancers lose much of their awareness of their surroundings, but locations are nevertheless of the greatest importance to the

Concheros. The Concheros do not just dance anywhere. Many people first come across them in the main Zocalo in Mexico City. Most mesas dance there occasionally, mainly for obligations that are distinct from their more usual dances, such as those linked to political events or historico-civic occasions like those that glorify Aztec culture heroes. Since the early 1990s the Zocalo has also become the location where would-be dancers congregate in the evenings to learn the steps of the various dances by mimesis in a non-ritual situation. Although dances are predominantly held in smaller locations, the Zocalo provides the exemplar par excellence of the kind of relationship that the Concheros have with the places in which they dance and is too the location that is central to many Mexicans' sense of identity.

### THE ZOCALO AS PALIMPSEST<sup>30</sup>

Although all cities, most towns, and even villages in Mexico have a Zocalo, the one in Mexico City is more significant than most because it is the site where Mexico as a nation-state is symbolically instantiated. Every morning and evening soldiers in formation accompanied by a brass band ceremonially raise the nation's flag. This is also the place where Mexicans from all over the country come to feel at the heart of both Mexico City and Mexico as a modern nation-state. In addition to this, it is one of the principal localities in the city where links with the pre-colonial past can be regenerated, for the Zocalo was part of the open space of the Aztec *teocalli*, or sacred precinct, at the center of the city of Tenochtitlan. The National Palace was built over the temple to Tezcatlipoca and the cathedral on an adjacent side covered, among other constructions, the skull rack (*tzompantli*) and possibly part of the ball court (or the temple to Quetzalcoatl).<sup>31</sup>

The area of the Zocalo can thus be seen as a palimpsest consisting of the overlying layers of previous cultures, each not quite obliterating the former and evocative of the changing history of Mexico, from being the center of the Aztec (Mexico) empire to Spanish colony to modern nation-state.<sup>32</sup>

To the foreign tourist this history is just one of many, of interest for the moment but probably soon to be relegated to the status of memento. For the Mexican visitor, on the other hand, it has until recently been part of an erased past, the memory of which has largely been suppressed and relegated to insignificance at a popular level.<sup>33</sup> The Zocalo has been predominantly a mere *lieux de mémoire*, a site "in which only a residual sense of continuity" remained, clearly European in architectural style as is the whole historic center.<sup>34</sup>

For the Concheros, however, both the Zocalo and the many other places in which they more habitually dance, some of which are not even in Mexico

## INCONGRUOUS BEGINNINGS

City, have a different significance.<sup>35</sup> They are locations that concentrate “experiences and histories, even languages and thoughts,” places with embodied potential, both political and spiritual.<sup>36</sup> As such they are *milieux de mémoires*, settings “in which memory is a real part of everyday life” and which can act as mnemonics to the past.<sup>37</sup> Nora has argued that such places predominantly no longer exist (at least in France) but for an oral tradition in Mexico, such as that of the Concheros. The places where they dance are infused with or permeated by cultural memory, albeit in some cases refashioned from historical sources during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries but continuously regenerated since then.

## AN ORAL TRADITION

There has been a tendency in social anthropology to assume that specific places are not of significance: locations have often been seen less as figure than as ground.<sup>38</sup> Sometimes they have even been fictionalized in the interests of universally valid assertions. But the ways in which notions of belonging and attachment to particular localities emerge, are mobilized, maintained, and modified through time are increasingly being explored.<sup>39</sup> Locations can no more be taken for granted than can practices for they are relational, contextual, and by necessity “remade” on each occasion, just as the practices themselves need to be regularly re-enacted, particularly when they are part of an oral tradition. Locations can not only stir up memories linked to beliefs but can at the same time act as a familiar backdrop and mnemonic for bodily practices.

The many places where the Concheros dance are the loci of cultural or historical memory and these form a nexus with embodied memory and lived experience. Before they start to dance, the Concheros add another dimension to a *milieu de mémoire*. By calling on the deity and their ancestors, they ritually enact a cleansing of the space, thus bringing their past into the present and creating a coeval space-time context.<sup>40</sup> No full annotation of the steps of the various dances has yet been made, and until 1992 there was no complete record of the many songs and accompanying music or the prayers, all of which have been passed on predominantly by word of mouth. The verbal and musical can be easily annotated and become an inscribed and fixed form, but this is much less easily accomplished for dance (Chapter 7). Dance is probably more deeply embodied than other oral forms. As Connerton has remarked, “every group will . . . entrust to bodily automatisms, the values and categories which they are most anxious to conserve.” They know “well [that] the past can be kept in mind by a habitual memory sedimented in the body.”<sup>41</sup> There is some evidence to show that the steps and the overall forms of the dances do indeed change much

less rapidly than other aspects of the practices, such as the clothing, which by its variety can give a very good indication of the changing beliefs held about the origins of the dance (Chapter 6).

Many who see the Concheros dancing in the Zocalo assume that they are witnessing a folkloric presentation, perhaps part of a comparatively new tourist attraction. For them, the dance is seen primarily as a leisure activity carried out in people's spare time or a personal fad, as a manifestation of popular culture that with time will lose its significance and disappear. This belief is reinforced occasionally by the fact that some dancers elicit donations; however, these dancers, known as *chimaleros*, are not considered part of the Association of Concheros. The Concheros never dance for money; as already indicated, the purpose of their dance is a spiritual one.

The Concheros' practices are not new but have been a tradition in some families for generations and passed on from father to son. In the nineteenth century, dancers performed in close collaboration with Catholic confraternities in many of the small towns and villages of central Mexico and still do so in many today. At present, however, dancers are found predominantly in the larger towns and cities, the dance (at least in its present form) having been brought to Mexico City by migrants toward the end of the nineteenth century (Chapter 9). Additionally, for some time now the Concheros have permitted people from non-Conchero families to join their ranks and have danced more publicly and on non-ritual occasions, effectively coming out into the open.

In the last two decades or so, dancers who call themselves "the Mexica" have emerged who appear to threaten many of the Concheros practices. The Mexica were omnipresent as I did my initial fieldwork. In this book I focus predominantly on the Concheros, but I discuss the Mexica too because of their ever-growing influence on the Concheros' practices. Further, the presence of the Mexica helped me to formulate my theoretical position more clearly as their mode of dance was so different from that of the Concheros. An observer at any of the large dance obligations would clearly notice the differences between the various dance groups. The Concheros enact sedately, with the male and female dancers placed alternately in a well-ordered circle. Most of the men will be dressed in similar costumes that cover much of their bodies, decorated with a plenitude of plastic silver and gold, with headdresses made from brightly dyed ostrich feathers. The leader of the group will be obvious, as he dances in the middle with several of his personnel. Some of the other dancers play the stringed *concha*, which they strum as they dance. This musical instrument, formed from the carapace of an armadillo, is unique to the Concheros and probably gave them their name. A drum and other percussive instruments usually back up the *conchas*, giving rhythm to the dance. Between sets of dances, there are occasional

## INCONGRUOUS BEGINNINGS

peregrinations into the church and the dancing may cease completely for a while as the dancers stop to sing. If our observer stays long enough, she will also see that the dancers sing and pray as the overall dance obligation finishes, for it ends as it begins, in a highly ritualized way (Chapter 3).

The Mexica, however, go through no elaborate procedures of ritualization and do not visit the church. Although the Mexica dance the same dances, there are no stringed conchas and their music is predominantly percussive provided by a variety of drums. Their clothing, too, is much more minimal with the men often wearing mere loincloths (topped occasionally by capes) and made only from natural materials with definitely no plastic silver or gold. The onlooker may find it difficult to determine exactly which dancer is the jefe, and the dances are enacted more performatively, much faster and more flamboyantly with what appear to be a plenitude of extra steps and ostentatious flourishes. Most put as much effort into their dancing as they can muster. For these enactors the dance is primarily a form of spectacle. They are noticeably younger, predominantly male, and clearly very aware of their bodies. Female dancers in such groups are rare and those who do participate are often unable to keep up with the speed of the dancing.

The observer might then ask, as indeed did a number of priests whose monastery sponsored one dance that I attended, "Is there anything to this dance other than show?" Such a comment is unlikely to be made about the first group described above, a very traditional mesa of Concheros whose spirituality is palpable. The Mexica are eager to differentiate themselves from the Concheros and have been vociferously intent on making radical changes. Although they have not altered the actual forms of the dances, the manner in which they enact them and the organization that supports them are different (Chapter 10).

Whereas the Concheros aim to move in harmony in their circle, each taking cognizance of the dancers immediately to their right and left, and invoke the deity, however this may be conceived, the Mexica have a very consciously formulated agenda. Each dancer enacts egotistically and in competition with every other, primarily concerned, it seems, with drawing attention to himself by his difference, whether by means of his complex foot movements or by his eye-catching attire.

Those who insist on calling themselves Mexica are peripheral to the tradition and are not recognized as members of the Association of Concheros. For the Concheros, continuity is of the utmost importance and many dancers claim that no aspect of the dance ever changes, that their tradition is part of an existential way of being. Innovation and conscious creativity are strongly discouraged. The Mexica, on the other hand, are determined to rid the dance of any Spanish elements and to "restore" it to its pre-Colombian form. Mexica



groups are seen dancing throughout the week, as they performatively assert “Mexicanidad” in and around the Zocalo, which, as they are very aware, was the heart of the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlan.<sup>42</sup> For the Mexica the meanings attributed to the dance are as important as, if not more important than, the dance itself.

There are thus significant contradictions in the dance, which are exemplified at their most obvious level in the contrast between the Concheros and the Mexica; the former consciously attempting to ensure the preservation of the ritual forms, whereas the latter have a performative attitude linked to their desire for change. But this dialectic, as already indicated, is also found in the practice of most Conchero dancers, in the tension between memory and experience, between the habitual (the so-called traditional) and how the dances are actually enacted. The Concheros seek again the embodied forms of the practice and attempt to enact only those. However, it is difficult to do so even if the desire to innovate and add something new and expressive of the individual is kept to a minimum. The dancers are not actors on a stage but the inhabitants of a city, and Mexico City can be seen as an ever-changing backdrop to the dance, the theater of its enactment.

### THE CITY AS EXPERIENTIAL CONTEXT

In general, as Mexico becomes part of the First World, the many autochthonous practices that have in part given its inhabitants their identity, and hence for so long their values, are gradually being masked, if not subsumed, by modernity. As the ethos of capitalism gets ever stronger, everyday life in many parts of Mexico, as elsewhere on the globe, is increasingly characterized by “transnational flows of people, information, money and things,” and Mexico City itself is a site of myriad transactions.<sup>43</sup> Mexico City has both the size and character of a global city, combining international innovative enterprise where finance and commerce are articulated with a multicultural population consisting not only of Mexican immigrants but also many from other countries. With its high “concentration of artistic and scientific elites and a large volume of international tourism,” it is a dynamic place with enormous creative potential.<sup>44</sup> Although it is a creolized and hybrid space, at another level it is a localized, even autochthonous place with its own ongoing traditions.<sup>45</sup> For Mexico City dwellers, the city is predominantly a space of habitual practice.

As with most rapidly expanding cities, it seems overcrowded and impermanent, even precarious, and is a place of shifting immigrant populations. Mexico City is made up of a conglomeration of former towns or villages now linked to the older central city district and to each other by urban infill. There

## INCONGRUOUS BEGINNINGS

are many betwixt and between zones, some of which are considered violent, no-go slum or squatter areas where the middle classes seldom venture, but in some of which Concheros live and vigils and/or dances are held.

Much of the city's vibrant cultural life occurs on the streets. Each *colonia* (district) has a distinct character and still-strong sense of community engendered by its civic organization, its market, church, and festivities. Mexicans tend to be gregarious, and at weekends many venture to the city center or the outlying areas. Mexico still has a powerful Catholic culture, but one that is often synergistic and place specific. Religious practices are very much a part of everyday life; many still go to church and religiosity spills ineluctably out onto the streets with processions seen on the streets at all hours of the day and night. With the rise in consumerism, there has tended to be an ever-increasing disenchantment of the world, but in many places in Mexico and even in Mexico City spirituality still flourishes. The overall sense of the Concheros' practices is of a long-term retention of an oral rural tradition that has taken from Catholicism while maintaining itself as distinct and separate.

The Concheros make a significant contribution to the cultural life of Mexico City. They are frequently referred to in the media—in television interviews, in articles about the dance that appear in the popular glossy press, or seen dancing in photographs in the national daily newspapers. They have been exoticized in television films at home and abroad and described as a “living” aspect of the Aztec past. A number of their dances form part of the repertoire of the well-established Ballet Folklórico, a long-running entertainment at the theater of the Belles Artes, to which many better-heeled visitors, both foreigners and nationals, are drawn. But, as indicated, many will have noticed them dancing perhaps in their home *colonia*, by the side of the road as they travel through the city or beside the cathedral in the main Zocalo.

## THE CHAPTERS

This volume is in a way a book within a book. I begin by contextualizing the dance to understand why the dancers enact and what it is about the dance that draws them. My aim is to situate the dancers “within the system of signs and relations of power and meaning that animate them,” although my overall view of the dance can only be partial, capturing “fragments” of the cultural field.<sup>46</sup> Chapters 2 and 3 are ethnographic and set out details of the context in which each dancer gains her experience of the dance in the sense of knowing what is expected of her. In Chapter 2, I outline the organization of the overall Association of Concheros and of a *mesa*, and in Chapter 3, I detail the activities that the Concheros perform during a vigil and a dance.

After providing an idea of what being a Conchero involves in terms of external practice, I turn in the second part, “The Experiential Nexus,” to aspects of the dance itself. There I am less concerned with the physical context in which the dancers enact than with the internal state of the dancers. I focus on the buildup of experience and the various elements that contribute to that and explore the relationship that a dancer develops with the dance and with others by means of their shared experience and various external markers integral to the dance.

In Chapter 4, I explore the activity of the dance, examining in more detail than I have so far how dancers aim for ritualization tempered with a degree of the performative, the very basis of their experience of the dance. Chapter 5 looks at how the desired ethos of the dance, which develops through time as each obligation unfolds, is indicated by various verbal mnemonics. The words carried on the banners held aloft during the dance help to direct that experience, for they indicate the various phases that the body-mind should go through in the overall obligation and what it is that the dancers are seeking, although this is often difficult for them to put into words. I look too at the various tenets used to talk about the dance and in particular the phrase “carrying the word,” which is how they tend to verbalize their embodiment of the dance. This tenet resonates with what they see themselves as doing as they dance. The emphasis in this chapter is strongly on ritualization and the denial of personal agency.

In Chapter 6, however, I show how clothing is one aspect of the dance over which each Conchero can openly assert a degree of individual preference. Although each mesa usually has an overall idea of how dancers should costume themselves, some more uniform-like than others, it is in the details of their dress (and, more rarely, the overall style) that dancers are permitted a measure of creativity. In this aspect, they can express realizations that have come to them during its enactment or at other times. The clothing worn can give the outside observer and other dancers an indication of the degree of experience or attainment of a dancer.

In Chapter 7, I ask the question, Why dance? to draw together the various threads of this experiential “commission” (a term the Concheros themselves use) in which the dancers are involved and how it lifts them out of their everyday selves. Although I begin by discussing briefly the significance of the other media used and of the music in particular, overall in this section of the book I focus on the processes of inner empowerment, that is, how the dance acts upon its enactors to change states of mind and achieve contact with the deity.

The third part, “Power Concerns,” shifts the focus to analyze a different kind of power: the kind of empowerment that at the extreme becomes the egocentric pursuit by some of external prepotency by means of identity politics

## INCONGRUOUS BEGINNINGS

(which is touched on briefly in the discussion of clothing, for what should be the external representation of inner realizations are at times ego driven). Despite the claims that the dance must always be about denial of the self, in Chapter 8 I discuss the power struggles that have shaped the dance's organization and, more importantly, how dance groups form and segment through time. In Chapter 9, I look at these processes in a historical perspective. Here the dance is placed in the context of a long-term overview built up from the few known historical traces. Despite attempts to suppress most of the spiritual aspects of Aztec life after the Spanish Conquest, dance practices as oral traditions continued for centuries, particularly in rural areas such as the region of the Bajío, where the Concheros' origin myth claims their dances began. Dance, when mentioned in colonial documents and especially those related to the indigenous subaltern population, is usually described in negative terms. In the second part of the chapter, I reconstruct the history of the dance during the twentieth century by means of oral histories—an analysis that begins in Chapter 6 when I look at how the clothing worn has changed during the twentieth century.

Chapter 9 also provides the foundation for understanding the position taken by the breakaway Mexica, whom I discuss in Chapter 10. For them the dance is not so much an ontological necessity as part of a political stance, one of the many arrows that can be deployed in the bow of Mexicanidad. Although in the early 1990s, the Concheros strongly rejected any Mexica-ization of their practices, they have gradually adopted some of the Mexica's aspirations, ideas, and modifications. In effect, since 1992, the Concheros' dance has become increasingly Nahuatl-ized, and that of the Mexica, although still largely political, has become more concerned with the spiritual.

## TITLES AND WORD USAGE

"Carrying the word," one of the Concheros' main precepts, should be understood metaphorically, implying the forms of the dances, the words of the songs, and the music. The dance practices in particular, once embodied, enable the dancer to enact in a ritualized way, giving up at least in part her self-conscious self as she aims devotedly to recreate the ritual movements.

The "Forming the Self" of Part 2, on the other hand, cogently sums up what many dancers realize as they dance and why I believe they are prepared to dedicate themselves to "carrying the word." But if the dancing body (following what some dancers have said to me) is seen as a crucial "medium of self-development,"<sup>47</sup> "performing" rather than "forming" the self is by implication different. In performing, the dancer, rather than being open to inner

experience, is presenting his (but less often her) self, at least in part, as a pre-formed being that is seen as complete or finished and not available to the kinds of ontological changes that transcendence can and does bring. In performing the self, the dancer chooses to assert intentionally. In Part 3, the book looks at power concerns and identity politics and touches once again on the difference between the Concheros' approach to the dance and that of the Mexica. Where for the Concheros there is a sense in which the dance is a means for them to open themselves up to it, as a fount of experience, and learn from it (which for some is seen as "work-on-the-self"). To the Mexica, the dance is much more a flaunting of a self that has already been formed; the Mexica have no personal existential doubts or uncertainties. They tend to describe their achievement in the dance as a "high," by which they mean an endorphin high, a form of physical "catharsis." The idea that this could (or, in the Concheros' terms, will) be connected to spiritual experience is mostly absent; for them the dance is less a form of communal devotion and more a performance backed by their ideology: a nativist and restorationist doctrine (Chapter 10).

Finally, as the perspicacious reader will by now have noticed, I have used "she" rather than "he" or "he and she" when I am talking generally about both genders. I have too used "Mexica" for both the singular and the plural. Because I frequently use "ritualized activity" linked to the "performative" to analyze the kind of activity in which the dancers are involved, I have on the whole avoided using "perform" as a verb and have wherever possible employed "enact." This is partly because perform has the everyday sense of "to do" or "carry out" and is used for a whole range of activities, but more particularly because I have given the "performative" or "performativity" a very specific sense.<sup>48</sup> "Enact" is a neutral term that does not imply any particular mode or way of acting but rather action carried out in a framed situation. The framing of the dance is important as the discussion on ritualization has already implied, and it is to this that I turn in Chapter 2 and even more specifically in Chapter 3.<sup>49</sup>