

Introduction

THE INDIGENOUS PEOPLES of Mexico, Guatemala and the Andes have endured more than five centuries of pitiless violence and atrocities inflicted by colonial and independent governments, missionaries and corporate interests. Yet they never completely abandoned their earlier beliefs and practices. Instead, they have constantly rearticulated them into religious syntheses that continued to sustain their discrete ethnic identities throughout the 20th century. While differences in political regimes are clearly important, pre- and post-conquest histories also share religious continuities that are underpinned by deeply entrenched ontologies and patterns of thought. Even after central Mexico's population shrank from an estimated 25.2 million on the eve of the Spanish invasion in 1518 to 16.8 million in 1532 and less than 2.7 million in 1585,¹ Indigenous world views remained a powerful force for mobilizing political resistance against the imposition of European thought and habits. So deep were the continuing structural similarities between pre- and post-conquest religions that the Mexican scholar Alfredo López Austin insists that sharp temporal divisions based on the advent of conquest be abandoned and the agency of what have been variously described as "folk," "syncretic" or "anachronistic" Catholic beliefs be recognized as forceful Indigenous responses to the brutal conditions imposed on Indigenous populations.² The Indigenous thought and culture of the

central province of Mexico, Nueva España, which bore the brunt of early colonization, maintained a strategic resilience to many foreign ideas and practices. The approach to masks and masquerades adopted here, while accepting López Austin's admonition that both pre- and post-conquest beliefs are essentially part of long-established Meso-American or Andean world views, also examines the role of changing political, economic and social vicissitudes to better understand their fortitude and continued adaptations.

Hard historical divisions have in part been exaggerated because of the dislocation between studies of religion and research on magical and supernatural beliefs and practices.³ Mexican and Andean masquerades and dance dramas incorporate fabulous peoples, beasts and monsters; they use genres as disparate as narratives, dances, combats and clowning, and stage exotic scenographies to evoke places and events that periodically insinuate history and myth into the experience of the present. Nevertheless, despite their wide impact and religious inspiration, they too have often been described independently of their wider religious and metaphysical contexts, obfuscating their strategic and political importance. Contrary to earlier views, masquerade is now acknowledged to be so integrated into the older social and religious structures of communities that Miguel Ángel Rubio Jiménez refers to it as the carrier of a society's meanings, identity and

characteristics whose expressions reveal both its conservatism and its ruptures and contingent nature. Masquerades and festivals are, he asserts, texts and contexts that dialectically engage and openly interact with society.⁴

Conservatism, dedication to popular religion and ritual and opposition to technological and market adaptations were forms of Indigenous resistance to colonial and post-colonial society that buffered the continent against even greater accelerated change than the traumatic transformations that befell it.⁵ Nevertheless, in Nueva España and what became Mexico, it was not only Indigenous resistance that slowed down future development, as many 19th- and 20th-century contemporaries supposed, but also, and more importantly, as Irving Leonard forcefully argued, the rejection of the European Reformation and Enlightenment by its then leading intellectual and literary figures. For Leonard, Nueva España's intellectual complacency "enabled the Church to transform cities and hamlets, especially in the core region of Mexico, into an immense museum of Baroque architecture and art which remains a patrimony of the modern nation."⁶ The results of similar historical and theological tendencies can be seen throughout the South American cordillera from Bogotá to La Paz. Intellectual conservatism and Indigenous resistance gave an imported, essentially medieval form of Christianity and an extant pre-Hispanic world view close to four hundred years to mutually accommodate themselves and reach a spectrum of syntheses that created conditions for their precarious coexistence.

This work examines the variable significance of masks through four frameworks of knowledge articulation—the ontological, structural, semantic and performative—each of which mediates our perception of the world and may invoke greater criticality

toward it. Ontology is the most intransigent and fundamental framework through which we define being and its relationship to the world. The three subsequent frames are each dependent on its effect on consciousness. Paul Westheim's extrapolation of Meso-American realism provides a glimpse into one such articulation of pre-Hispanic ontological categories. For Westheim, Meso-American art did not aim to depict the perception of the world but to reveal its inner essences evoked in myth and prayer and materialized and placated through ritual. Writing in 1957, he opined that "modern realism pursues as its end, the reproduction of the visible; that of Mesoamerican realism is to make visible, the invisible. The artist of western civilization believes to represent a nut, he has to represent its shell. In pre-Cortezian Mexican thought, the nut's shell is only its external appearance of little importance. More essential is the nut itself." He summarily concludes that "in the world of magical mythical thought, the work of art is not the object of the aesthetic life destined to purify the passions: it is a vehicle for its own energies to inflame religious passion." Referencing Wilhelm Warringer, Westheim concluded his work by noting that the perception of the world "is not the subject of the eyes, but the subject of the whole man and of his inimical attitude before living nature."⁷

The distinction between appearance and essence, reality and dream, the seen and the unseen runs throughout ancient Mexica thought and that of other peoples of North and South America.⁸ One ancient Mexica text exhorts: "It is not true, it is not true. That we came to live here. We came only to sleep, only to dream."⁹ This is an attitude that is also sometimes found in contemporary Wixárika, Cora and other Indigenous knowledge systems. The binary categories explicated here anticipate López

Austin's distinction between "light matter," used to distinguish the numens of pre-Hispanic Mexica deities, and "heavy matter," which describes the physical constitution of the world.¹⁰ This perspective underpins an understanding of the role and significance of pre-Hispanic and post-Hispanic masks, and the difference between them and some 21st-century Indigenous ecologies infused by ontological precepts derived from foreign, commoditized world views.

Given the complexity of the continuities and disjunctures between different world views, the rough delineation of Mexico's post-conquest history into four periods runs invisibly throughout this monograph; the formative modern period corresponding to the 16th and 17th centuries, which saw the rearticulation and consolidation of an emergent Indigenous world view, underlies the treatment of chapters 5 and 6; the 18th to early 20th centuries, when African and European supernatural influences and practices were integrated into Indigenous thought, feature in chapters 3 and 7; the 20th century, when the Church tried to reimpose its authority on ethics, social relationships and domestic rituals in particular, is examined in chapter 2; and the fourth period, covering the last forty to fifty years, characterized by the encroachment of secular religions and the introduction of utilitarian attitudes based on market calculations and survivalist strategies, informs much of the focus of chapter 8.¹¹ Chapters 1 and 4 deal with the long-term development of masks and masquerade from the earliest times to the present, with a view to identifying continuities and discontinuities in their meaning and changes in their ontological and metaphysical significances.

This monograph, as will now be apparent, is not strictly ordered by chronology, beginning with the

region's pre-Hispanic city states, the establishment and consolidation of Nueva España and neighbouring colonial provinces, independence, and modern and contemporary Mexico. Neither does it aspire to bring the four frameworks of meaning into any fortuitous harmony or construct a full critical history of mask and masquerade in Mexico and the Andes. Nevertheless, I argue that while Indigenous ontologies and structures of thought have been remarkably resilient for over five hundred years, we can identify at least three periods when semantic and performative frameworks, resulting from contact with European and African world views, experienced substantial changes. After nearly five hundred years of troubled coexistence, in the fourth and final period considered here, the hegemony of Indigenous patterns of thought that began to be noticeably eroded in the early 1980s by U.S. economic interests were by the end of the 20th century decisively tipped against them. After 1994, the adoption of NAFTA further rendered Indigenous productive technologies and social organization uneconomic, destroying the agricultural basis of rural communities and accelerating their impoverishment. At the same time, the massive injection into Mexico of foreign capital directed to mechanizing agriculture and enlarging the country's industrial sector increasingly de-cultured an Indigenous peasantry into a marginalized class of wage labourers. When saints and spirits are no longer required to regulate the seasonal changes on which agricultural production depends, masquerades lose their religious motivation and significance. In the absence of the invention of a substitute pantheon of numens entrusted to regulate technological and digital production, the replacement of religious supplication by ludic performances, while preserving former appearance, imbues masquerades

with a wholly different ontological and semantic significance.

Many of the late 20th- and early 21st-century masks and masquerades described here, even when still performed, seldom carry equal conviction or are enacted with the same intention as they were before the early 1980s. The semantics and performance of masks and masquerades have changed in step with political, socio-economic and ecclesiastical policies, as have their repertoires, which have broadened to include characters from comics, video games, and Mexican and U.S. politics. Nevertheless, traces of their earlier significances still cling to the iconography and symbolism underlying masks and their choreographed movements that disclose structural and semantic echoes of a past that suddenly retreated in the face of what Jean Baudrillard described as the increasing reach of a viral simulacra. Under these new conditions of the late-20th and early 21st centuries, the former necessary relation between signifier and signified has given way to the promiscuous, indeterminate juxtapositions and arbitrary couplings of free-floating signs that parody the worlds from which they were derived. Baudrillard noted that “when things, signs or actions are freed from their respective ideas, concepts, essences, values, points of references, origins and aims, they embark on an endless process of self-reproduction. Yet things continue to function long after their ideas have disappeared, and they do so in total indifference to their own content. The paradoxical fact is that they function even better under these circumstances.”¹² This optimized but hollow performability, ultimately consecrated through UNESCO’s policies directed at essentializing and freezing heritage—or what John Berger once described as “a spectacle of empty clothes and unworn masks”¹³—is fast becoming the fate of many of Latin America’s popular performative cultures.

Migration, both into and out of rural communities, commoditization, narcotics and secularization have all so affected the financing and organization of village and town ceremonies, social cohesion, local identity and the prestige and veracity of traditional knowledge holders, costumiers, mask makers and dancers that I believe the world I encountered during my first stay in Mexico between 1979 and 1984 has almost ceased to exist.¹⁴ The Mexico of those days, when I began the research for this book, was already being transformed by the expansion of physical infrastructure and education, and its incorporation—through tourism, oil production and the export of cheap labour—into the global economy. No one at the time could have predicted the 1982 financial crisis, the 1985 Mexico City earthquake, the rise and application of digital infrastructures or the consequences of NAFTA, or the aftermath of such developments, including the dislodgement of communities through the migration patterns they exacerbated. With the world still in the grip of a pandemic that had claimed at least 130,000 Mexican lives by January 8, 2021, it is likely that even greater structural changes lie ahead. This monograph stands as a requiem for a world that has already very nearly passed.

The rich, entangled significances and histories of MOA’s Mexican and South American mask holdings, including those donated by Alfred Siemens and Samuel and Esther Frid, and the various field collections assembled by Diego Semper, Laura Osorio Sunnucks and myself are the central focus of this monograph. The work provides historical and modern contexts to explain how masks were once widely dispersed and used across a wide geography stretching from the Iberian Peninsula to the deserts of the southwestern United States, down along the mountainous backbone of the Americas from the Sierra Madre to the Andes and across their

lowland and coastal flanks and the islands of the Caribbean. By working with knowledge holders, mask makers, performers, museums, libraries and archival repositories, and attending masquerade performances for forty-six years, I have sought to extricate part of the underlying epistemologies and ontologies that informed the significance of masks in two major regions of Latin America. In part, the work is contoured along the boundary where dream and reality sometimes become indistinguishable. Parts of these chapters emerged from sharp, lucid images and sensory evocations, which often infused my thought, interrupting and then becoming part of the final manuscript. Recollections of intensely coloured landscapes, transparent and paling skies, imprecise and flickering aquatic reflections; the perfume of flowers and the pungency of animal blood sacrifices and tropical putridity; harmonious voices of men, women and children, the strains of lonely violins and the shrill piping of flutes are with me always and permeate the fragmented descriptions here recorded. This monograph is, in this sense, as much an exhibition as it is a scholarly text, a work of images and words to be looked at and felt as much as to be read. Undeniably, images require cautious introspection, especially, as Berger attests, because they are now more abundant than at any other time in history. “We have glimpses at any moment of what things look like on the other side of the planet, or the other side of the moon,”¹⁵ but far from physical appearances, images have become, if they weren’t always, mirages or refractions, detached from their referents. The distance between image and referent parallels for Berger, as it did for Baudrillard, the increasing void between political discourse and our experience of the world. Both relationships, by shattering the once assumed unity of the world, have engendered increasing and acute disillusion and alienation, which are as much

a part of the writer’s fate as of those worlds I have here tried to elucidate.

My interpretations of masks and masquerades are inextricably linked to research and field observations going back forty-six years. In one sense my work began in 1974, when as an undergraduate student at Hull University, I came across three Balinese masks in a local junk shop (thrift store) on the Holderness Road. These first masks, along with two Tibetan ones I found soon after in a London market and three old Sepik masks I bought in Nottingham, provided a portal through which I learned to explore my then emerging interest in comparative religions, the nature of time and ideas about divinity—interests that had first been awakened by Reverend Dr. Michael Grayfow, one of my early high school teachers. The nature of time was the focus of my MLitt dissertation, while the concept of divinity was taken up in my ethnographic work on the Wixárika of northwest Mexico. My focus here on Mexican masks more precisely began in 1981, when, with my dear friends Arnold and Petra Nelson, I began to spend weekends recording rural mask performances, combing markets and visiting mask makers living in villages in Guerrero and Morelos. In those early days, after my arrival in the country in 1979, I had the good fortune to meet and get to know Meso-American scholars, including Demetrio Sodi, Enrique Luft, María Teresa Davalos, Doris Heyden, Lourdes Arizpe and Yolotl González, who encouraged my interests. Initially, this stage of my research focused on the reinvention and use of pre-Hispanic motifs and iconography on commercial masks from the Río Balsas area of Guerrero and the Lake Pátzcuaro region of Michoacán. Later, I became especially interested in how the circulation of illustrations of newly invented masks had begun to influence established mask styles. I periodically returned to Mexico after 1984 and continued to meet and talk

with makers, visit museums and make excursions into mask-producing areas until 2004. In 2016 António Pinto Ribeiro and Joana Sousa Monteiro invited me to curate an exhibition for the Museum of Lisbon as part of the city's investiture as the 2017 Ibero-American Capital of Culture. This unexpected opportunity rekindled old interests and provided me with a pretext to examine collections like those assembled by François Reichenbach at the *Vieille Charité*, Marseille, and the Fredrick Starr collection at Cambridge University. It also led to several more trips to Mexico between 2016 and 2020, first to interview mask makers in Tlaxcala, Puebla, Guanajuato, Michoacán and the Zoque area of Chiapas, and later to document carnival celebrations in Huejotzingo, Puebla (2017, 2018), and Ocozocotla, Chiapas (2017), *Semana Santa* (Holy Week) in Purísima del Rincón (2017) and San Bartolomé de Agua Caliente, Guanajuato (2016, 2017), *El día de la Virgen de Guadalupe* (Day of the Virgin of Guadalupe) at Tepeyac (2018, 2019), performances of the *pastorelas* in Tocuaro, Michoacán (2019), and *Los días de los Muertos* (Days of the Dead) in Santiago Matatlán, San Agustín Etlá and Oaxaca City (2019). I indefinitely postponed two field trips—one to the Mexican Huasteca to record mask use during the Days of the Dead and one to Ecuador to photograph and collect dance costumes worn in Corpus Christi ceremonies—because of COVID-19 travel restrictions. Two months of field study in Mexico and ten more of intensive library and archival-based research in 2018 enabled me to complete the first draft of the monograph before you.

My interest in masks had expanded to the Andes in 1987 when I curated the exhibition *Bolivian Worlds, The Art and World View of an Andean Mining Community* at the British Museum. This exhibition, which focused on the Bolivian mining town of Oruro,

inspired two subsequent research trips I made for MOA to collect similar masks from Puno, Peru, and a study trip to Oruro to assess the possibility of assembling a parallel collection for the museum. These field trips led to MOA's first systematically assembled collections of Andean masks, some of which were displayed in *Luminescence: The Silver of Peru*, hosted by us in 2012, and the University of Toronto Art Gallery in 2013. I am planning a field trip to Puno, Oruro, Potosí and La Paz in 2021 to acquire complete costumes for each type of the carnival masks collected earlier. Lastly, during my time as a curator at the British Museum, I carried out a symbolic analysis and reinterpretation of its renowned collection of Mexican turquoise mosaics.¹⁶ The largely unpublished results of that research were indispensable in helping me to better understand the possible ontological presuppositions underlying the collections described here. I drew from these three different intellectual and curatorial projects, each now linked to MOA's own Mexican and South American mask collections, to compose this current volume.