



Dancing with the Spirits

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In a present colored by forces of globalization and the Anthropocene, Masewal dancers reconnect with their spiritual landscape to visualize alternative futures.

Mexico today is gripped by a major sense of despair. The country has become an open field for massive extractive industries, particularly mining and fracking. The so-called war on drugs, has dragged on for over more than a decade and wrecked regional economies, causing widespread migration across and out of the country. Consecutive neoliberal administrations have put millions more Mexicans out of work. Deregulation, various forms of corruption, and economic pressures have attracted transnational corporations in search of profitable exploitation to the point that many Mexicans feel the country is broken.

To dance, in Masewal terms, is to publicly commit to a set of social relations with spirits inscribed into the landscape, to remember them and, ultimately, to defend them.

In Mexico's current contexts, not only capital, markets, and jobs seem to migrate or evaporate, but also, the land itself. Surprisingly, an even larger foot has stamped its mark upon what we once understood as conventional economic and political globalization: the Anthropocene. Coined by geologists, the term signals the diverse geophysical effects of human action, from endangering biodiversity ([Cardinale 2013](#)) to altering global climate patterns ([Crutzen 2006](#)). The social sciences have also reimagined the concept to speak of human globalized actions and their harmful environmental ramifications ([Tsing 2015](#)). Such nihilistic anthropocentrism plays well with post-industrial moralities preoccupied with corroborating the ending of the world due to inherent human greed. As an epistemological stance, the Anthropocene has framed humans as inevitably harmful—constraining our capacity to establish more “de-anthropocentered” relations towards the production of alternative futures.

For indigenous Masewal people living in the eastern mountainous region of Mexico, the world today is breaking apart due to unwarranted human actions against the different spirits that inhabit and form the land. Settled in small rural towns spread across a rugged landscape, Masewal people, historically subsistence farmers of maize, now occupy a multifarious range of economic and professional activities. They maintain a particularly developed set of relations and practices with the local landscape. In particular, they *dance*. To dance, in Masewal terms, is to publicly commit to a set of social relations with spirits inscribed into the landscape, to remember them and, ultimately, to defend them.



The hunter and the Clown, Tepetzintla, 2010. Reyes Alvarez

Masewal dances surged in popularity in the aftermath of Hurricane Pauline in 1997, particularly among young people. The event took several human lives and many homes, farm animals, and crops, forcing countless people to migrate to cities. Other storms and hurricanes have followed, while government agencies continue to fail in delivering adequate information or to take effective actions to deal with their disastrous effects. Indigenous highlanders interpret this political and administrative failure as one of moral inequity and as the source of current spiritual vindictiveness.

Traditional Masewal dances are complex choreographed performances that include at least a dozen (and sometimes up to fifty) dancers of different age groups, ordered in a clear hierarchy. Each dance involves specific garments, costumes, and masks. The dance of *Wewentiyo* or “Dearest Elders” for example, shows the ancestors of the town stealing the first grains of maize from the inside of the mountain. Helped by a woodpecker, they then hunt down a badger who tries to eat the first corn plant. Several spirits come to their aid during the dance, such as *Tipewewe* or “The Owner of the

Mountain” who leads the hunt for the badger, and “Mother and Father of the Land” also called *Tlatikipanojke* or “Sustainers” who celebrate with the human hunters after their successful hunt. In the dance of *Tipekayomej* or “Mountain People,” each dancer transforms into a mountain covered by forests, caves, and water springs and crowned with winds and sun rays. Together they fight and kill a demonic snake bent on bringing disaster to the group.

In every dance, the characters portrayed by dancers are ancestral nonhuman entities, invisible members of a local human/spirit society. Even if dancers are not allowed to speak and lack a detailed knowledge of the meaning or story of the dance, each of them carefully learns the steps, purposefully rehearses, and ultimately knows the relations between each of the characters. Innovation is usually welcomed and every year new characters can be included, so teachers, engineers, bureaucrats, and mine prospectors become part of these inclusive dances. Dances operate as visual maps of relevant and ever-changing relations. The anticipated outcome of every performance has to do primarily with producing favorable relations that in turn enable good weather, fertility of the land, and prosperity for all.



Xinola dancing, 2010. Reyes Alvarez

Dances have re-emerged not because they are aesthetically beautiful performances and festive collective occasions, but because they are nuanced ways in which to visualize again the ancestral and interdependent relations between humans, spirits, and landscape. By embodying powerful local spirits, dancers reinstate the centrality of the mountains and its peoples against the peripheral economic framework in which they have been positioned. When dancing, Masewal say they are remembering their partners, the *itekomej* (the owners) of the land. These invisible beings, merged

with the land itself, form an alternative power structure that supports Masewal farmers against the abusive and neglectful actions of state agencies and corporations. Through dancing Masewal highlanders can express their disenchantment with urban modernity, their fear of disastrous climatic events, and their mistrust of extractive enterprises making their way into their territory.

Masewal people can dance as spirits because they live in an animated world full of life forms that include mountains, winds, and ancestral spirits existing in close interdependence. Such interdependence is conceptualized as *tlatikipanolistl* (co-sustenance), a key notion that must be constantly activated by acts of remembrance (*kilnamitl*). Dances are one such form of remembrance. Dances thus propose visualizations of otherwise intangible but not-less-real relations, as masked dancers can alternate their perception by a change face/vision or *kixpatla*, ultimately enabling them to see the world like the spirits they embody. By empathetically embodying spirits, dancers compel them to accept food and drink and enter into exchange relations with humans, acknowledging their common future based on co-sustenance.

Today, Masewal people are dancing again, in efforts to reconnect with their spiritual superiors. Along with these resolute activities, Masewal people have organized a number of protests, finding allies in NGOs, political activists, environmentalists, and scientists. Together, they are making legal cases to effectively delay mine operations, producing countless press releases and websites, and organizing informative assemblies in every town in the highlands. This larger political activity and discourse of resistance and territorial awareness also bridges cultural differences between Masewal and the neighboring Totonaku and Mestizo towns.

Dances are nowadays a vital element of protests as they explicitly manifest the connections between indigenous peoples and their land. They are becoming strategic resources to think about and to engage with the anxieties of the modern world. Dances are both a form of remembrance and an explicitly political posture: by acknowledging the preeminence of landscape spirits over federal authorities and private corporations, Masewal people have embarked on a long-term form of resistance against state agencies.

Perhaps Masewal people from the highlands of Puebla in eastern Mexico can share with us alternative ways to reimagine how powerful socializing technologies can carry moral values towards cohesive actions against the twinned despairs of globalization and the Anthropocene. Perhaps, through their masked eyes, we can learn too how to see, feel, and move into the possibility of a different future.

Alessandro Questa obtained his PhD in sociocultural anthropology at the University of Virginia. He is interested in the connections between ritual practice and Indigenous knowledge, particularly in relation to environmental concerns in Mexico and North America. He is currently professor researcher in the Social and Political Science Department at Universidad Iberoamericana in Mexico City.

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