

The Indigenous Tradition in San Miguel de Allende

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Located in what had been the land of the Chichimecs, the city of San Miguel de Allende was founded and populated in the second half of the sixteenth century.

Friar Juan de San Miguel had arrived in 1542 accompanied by a group of indigenous people who stayed to continue their mission work. A short time later, the discovery of silver in Zacatecas and Guanajuato initiated growing migration and a road had to be built to move carts full of merchandise, mules, horses and cattle.

When the Chichimecs, ancient hunting and gathering peoples who inhabited the region, began to suffer the consequences of the destruction by the Spanish and their cattle on their resources, they banded together and began what is known as the War of the Chichimecs.

The conflict affected the fledgling town, which was attacked by the Chichimecs and abandoned by its surviving inhabitants. Years later, so the legend goes, Friar Juan de San Miguel and his indigenous followers from different ethnic groups moved the town to a more appropriate place. Their dogs located a generous spring at the foot of which the town of San Miguel el Grande developed. Its Nahuatl name, *Izcuinapan*, means “river of dogs.”

Founded to offer better protection to wayfarers, the town was on an ideal site for settlement because of its pleasant climate, abundant water and the possibility of using the land for both cultivation and cattle grazing.

In the eighteenth century, San Miguel el Grande was already so prosperous that it had a great many orchards and gardens, rich agriculture and many cattle. An important workshop-based textile industry had developed and commerce was growing. The main work force was made up of indigenous people who lived in the town’s neighborhoods and surrounding hamlets.

The criollo population gained economic stature and social and political standing, evidenced

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in the city's architecture. Particular circumstances led this group to identify with the insurgents fighting for independence, whose military heads were illustrious natives like Ignacio Allende, in whose memory the town's name was changed to San Miguel de Allende in 1862.

By contrast, the indigenous population, by the eighteenth century mainly Otomí, suffered from poverty, mistreatment and overwork. Given their precarious circumstances, this sector of the population has left vestiges of its existence mainly in its most traditional cultural expressions.

In today's San Miguel, indigenous traditions are clearly seen in some of the fiestas that are most important to the community, such as that of Our Lord of the Conquest, the Holy Cross and, of course, the September 29 fiesta of Archangel San Miguel, the city's patron saint.

THE FIESTA OF SAN MIGUEL

In 1927, Carlos Diez de Sollano wrote, "The Friday before the fiesta the Indian dances arrive: these dances, a very regional attraction, are done by Otomí men and women. They have their generals, captains and lieutenants of both sexes, distinguished by the leadership scepters they carry with them. They dance every year and the leadership passes down from generation to generation; others, the majority, dance because of a vow they have taken."¹ Diez then described their clothing: "The men wear a special suit with short skirts made of brightly colored cloth, reds, blues or yellows, embroidered with sequins and gold; a shirt of a different color, embroidered or decorated; and a feather headdress with colored beads, replete with abundant pictures of saints. On the front, of course, there are images of San Miguel and Our Lady of Guadalupe, and a multitude of long ribbons hang down the back. Many of them also wear fake hair that hangs down their backs and a short cape."

They also wore sandals, brightly colored stockings and strings of paper beads as necklaces. The women wore long, wide petticoats made



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of beautiful percale with blouses to match. “They wore their hair loose, heavily greased” and feather headdresses like those of the men.

Diez Sollano states that the dances were accompanied by musicians who played instruments made of armadillo shells, sometimes strung like mandolins, sometimes like guitars. He also writes that “the tunes or *sones* for the dances are very rhythmic and monotonous, the dances themselves very interesting with more than 20 different steps; each step has a different *son*, and they switch from one to another at the shout of the captain general.”

For the San Miguel festival, the communities that followed indigenous traditions have gone to the municipality to hold their fiesta from time immemorial. They also organize and finance it.

Though the fiesta of San Miguel is held on September 29, in the past, festivities began in mid-August with the ritual hunting of the bull that would later be slaughtered at the fiesta. On the following four Sundays, the group went to different places of special significance. They called this “requesting permission to hold the fiesta.” They would take flowers and candles as offerings and sing and pray accompanied by music made with shells.

Indigenous communities from almost the entire state and even from Querétaro came to the San Miguel fiesta, meeting along the road. They spent the night before at a predetermined spot where they would pray together. At this evening ceremony, amid songs and music, they would make the *súchil*, a 2.5-to-10-meter-high structure made out of reeds, decorated with the bone-colored petals from the heart of the *cucharilla*, marigolds and other seasonal flowers and with corn stalks and tortillas painted different colors.

The next day, they set out with the *súchil* and traditional images toward San Miguel to bring together the souls, the *súchiles* and the dances in the place where tradition has it that one of the four conquistador strongmen of San Miguel was killed for having accepted Christianity. The processions always arrived at this



Courtesy of Aurora Jáuregui



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Many parts of the fiesta have changed but it survives thanks to community interest.

place after noon from the four different directions and the group from San Miguel would go out to meet them. The ritual would then become solemn for at that moment everyone present would declare that they were leaving behind their resentments and problems and were coming to an agreement, the prerequisite for continuing toward the center of the city. According to the elders, this ceremony commemorated the city's moving to its new location in the sixteenth century.

First the captain generals entered with their lieutenants, who carried the flags and standards; after them went the family crosses of the old *caciques* or strongmen. Then a dance was performed and a *súchil* went in, and so on. They arrived dancing through the streets until they reached the main garden, which they circled three times, dancing all the while. On their first turn around the garden, the stewards used to go to the jailhouse to feed the prisoners in a show of solidarity. On the last turn, they would come out of the jail and, as the dances continued, put the

súchiles in the atrium of the parish church. The dances continued until evening fell, when the towers of fireworks were lit. The next day, they entered the parish church on their knees carrying offerings of flowers, fruit, candles and food. Later the priest would celebrate responsories for the souls of their ancestors. The celebrants left the church crawling backwards on their knees.

Today, many parts of the old fiesta of the Archangel San Miguel have changed; some have disappeared or been transformed, as surely has always been the case. But the fiesta survives because there are still communities that organize it despite their economic limitations and because there is a society that accepts it, needs it, appreciates it and encourages it. ■■■

NOTES

¹ All quotes are from Carlos Diez de Sollano, "Las fiestas de San Miguel," *Revista Mexicana de Estudios Históricos* 1 (Mexico City: Editorial Cultura, 1927), pp. 213-227.