Tierra Mestiza, Tierra Sagrada: An Indo-Hispano Heritage Revealed

Enrique R. Lamadrid

Miguel Gandert

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In the old plaza of Alcalde, all eyes are on the little girl, Malinche. Skipping and spinning, she has just led Moctezuma the king and his army of Matachín spirit warriors into a new era, into a new dimension. With triumph in her eyes, and the future of the New World in her hands, she pauses at the doors of the church, attentive to the celestial music of violins and guitars.

In the old plaza of Abiquiu, all eyes are on the cautivos, the captive children who dance in front of the church to the drums and ancient chant of the Nanillé. Outstretched arms and hands clutching eagle feathers lift them above their captivity and into the hearts of their parents, both lost and found. Radiant with hope and resiliency, the children have the power to transcend the conflict and cultural struggles of past and present.

In all the Indo-Hispano fiestas of the Upper Río Grande, children play prominent roles in the rituals that reenact the mixed cultural origins of their communities. The maternal saint who protects and nurtures these children is María herself, as Guadalupe, her own Indo-Hispano manifestation. Much has been said of the complexion of Guadalupe. Less obvious is the Aztec sash
tied around her belly, the sign of her pregnancy and portent of her Son to come: his heritage is clearly mestizo, for He comes for all the people. In her mission to the Americas, Guadalupe represents and sanctifies both cultural and racial hybridity.

On Guadalupe’s feast day, altars are placed outdoors on streets and plazas. The Virgin leaves her sanctuary to see the people dance. Even the indomitable warrior tribes of the northlands flock to her side—the desert Chichimecas, with bows snapping and reed aprons jangling, and the formidable Comanches of the plains, with drums beating and songs filling the air. The Comanches, so in love with the holy child and his mother, plot to take him captive and raise him as their own.

At the center of the mestizo legacy of New Mexico is the sanctity of the land itself, constantly resanctified by pilgrimage. On the journey of life, people come as pilgrims to offer prayers and sacrifice at outdoor sanctuaries like Tortugas Mountain and Cerro de Tomé, sacred sites with shrines and calvaries. Travelers walk for miles to Chimayó, where they wait patiently to see the leafy cross of the altar and collect holy earth at the true emergence place of their Indo-Hispano culture. They come seeking not only the redemption of the crucified Christ but also the grace of the holy child. Every journey requires its places of rest, and every pilgrim seeks a dwelling place in which to contemplate the final destination. Some places of refuge and meditation may face inward, as the Morada chapels of the Penitente brotherhood; others face the sky and sun on the slopes of a sacred mountain. After a pilgrimage of four centuries, the mestizo people of New Mexico have become indigenous to this place.

Mestizaje is the process and result of cultural and racial hybridization, which creates a culture distinct from its Spanish, Mexican, and Indian roots. The nation of Mexico takes pride in its mestizo heritage, yet paradoxically uses the concept to suppress and obscure contemporary native cultures. In the context of New Mexican culture, mestizaje has always linked us with our Indianness, whether as a denial or an affirmation of our native legacy. In the twenty-first century age of transnationalism and globalization, cultural hybridity is a concept that challenges old notions of bounded group identities, nations, and cultures. Until recently, historians, anthropologists, and folklorists deemed mestizo cultures unworthy of serious study because of the notion of “cultural contamination.” Recently, academics have come to the realization that to understand mestizaje is to gain new insight into the cultural future of the planet. Understanding traditional Indo-Hispano culture in New Mexico is an exercise in understanding the century to come.
Miguel Gandert has been exploring and redefining with his camera the mestizo heritage of his homeland for a new century. Since 1985, he has been doing fieldwork with folklorist Enrique Lamadrid, long motivated to challenge the elitist and rarefied vision of New Mexico as a kind of “Spain on the banks of the Rio Grande.” The “magnificent light” that has attracted generations of artists, photographers, and writers to the “Land of Enchantment” is also the stark and mystified light of historical amnesia. For half of Mexico to become a region of the United States, it had to be naturalized, its history erased, its people obscured. These are the shadows Gandert’s camera and Lamadrid’s pen are illuminating, setting the scene for remembrance to replace oblivion and for a new vision of history and identity to be realized and reinscribed. Their collaboration has helped inaugurate the National Hispanic Culture Center in a stunning photography exhibit and book entitled *Nuevo México Profundo: Rituals of an Indo-Hispano Homeland*. It promises to change the way people see and think about culture and history in this ancient place.
FIGURE 1
NANILLE: DANZA DE LA CAUTIVA
(NANILLE: THE DANCE OF THE CAPTIVES),
Abiquiu, New Mexico

FIGURE 2
MALINCHES GUADALUPANAS, (GUADALUPE’S MALINCHES),
Tortugas, New Mexico

FIGURE 3
VISPERAS DE LA VIRGEN (VESPERS FOR THE VIRGIN),
Tortugas, New Mexico
FIGURE 4
Aparicion de la Virgen (Apparition of the Virgin), Ciudad Juarez, Chihuahua, Mexico

FIGURE 5
Comanches Guadalupanos (Guadalupe's Comanches), Alameda, New Mexico

FIGURE 6
Todo para Ella (Everything for Her), Barrio de San Jose, Albuquerque, New Mexico
FIGURE 7
Por el Rastro de la Cruz (Along the Trail of the Cross),
Tome, New Mexico

FIGURE 8
Camino de la Vida (The Road of Life),
Chimayo, New Mexico

FIGURE 9
Despedida de los Aztecas (Farewell of the Aztecs),
Santuario de Chimayo, New Mexico
FIGURE 10
Camino de la Luz (The Road of Light), Tome, New Mexico

FIGURE 11
"¿Quién en esta casa da luz? Jesús." ("Who in this house gives light? Jesus."), Las Colonias de Arriba, New Mexico

FIGURE 12
Hermano Juan Roybal en su Oratorio (Brother Juan Roybal in his Prayer Room), Las Colonias de Arriba, New Mexico
FIGURE 13
Calvario (Calvary), Aguas Negras, New Mexico