Chapter 2
Origins of the Matachines Dance

The origin of the Matachines dance has been the topic of much discussion by several scholars, changing as research progressed. Some of the earliest scholars (Arbeau 1967) believe in a European origin, claiming that the dance evolved from ancient Roman rituals. As our knowledge base has increased, scholars have developed new views that offer many avenues for future research. This discussion will include interpretations by several key scholars, beginning with the sixteenth century and leading to contemporary times. Some scholars (Lea 1963-64; Champe 1980-81) have suggested a New World origin, claiming that the Matachines is a remnant of an Aztec dance grafted with European elements, resulting in the Matachines dance. Other researchers (Kurath 1949; Robb 1961; Forrest 1984; Romero 1993) view the Matachines as a cultural practice brought to the New World from Europe. In order to clarify the scholarship on the Matachines and its origins, this chapter reviews the different perspectives concerning the origins of the Matachines. The second section of this chapter highlights the cultural diffusion of a popular and culturally significant folklore practice in the Southwestern United States: los Matachines of Bernalillo, New Mexico.

Thoinot Arbeau (1967)[i] was one of the earliest scholars to make references to the Matachines. Arbeau, in his book *Orchesography*, includes descriptions of the ancient *Salii* and *Pyrrhic* dances. According to him, this dance consisted of 12 Salii dancers who were dressed in painted tunics with rich baldrics and pointed caps, and had swords at their sides and a shield in hand. They danced in celebration of the "sacred festival of Mars" (1967:182). According to Arbeau, the Pyrrhic dances were performed "to amuse the infant Jupiter" (1967:183). These

dancers dressed in small corslets and helmets made of gilded cardboard. They carried a sword in the right hand and a shield in the left (1967:183). Arbeau goes as far as to conclude that the Buffens or Mattachin dance "evolved" from the Salii and Pyrrhic dances based on similarities amongst the costumes and props of both dance groups. Whereas Arbeau focuses on costumes and props, other scholars focus on a more linguistic explanation in order to offer additional lines of inquiry regarding the origin of the Matachines.

Gertrude Prokosch Kurath, in her 1949 article "Mexican Moriscas: A Problem in Dance Acculturation," states that in the Middle Ages Matachini were "masked buffoons in Motley and bells" and that they "cut capers and struck at each other with air filled bladders" (1949:97). Furthermore, Kurath claims that the meaning of the word Matachin is derived from the Arabic 'mudawajjihin,' which can mean 'those who put on a face' or 'those who face each other'" (1949:97). The Matachins performed at private secular entremets, which then evolved into court Masques, known as the matacinio of Italy and German Carnival plays of the fifteenth century (1949:97). According to Kurath, these dancers were dressed "with ribbons on their shoulders, morions of gilded cardboard, bells on the legs, sword in right hand and buckler in the left" (1949:97). This interpretation, in addition to a linguistic interpretation, deals with the costumes and props as the main evidence for claiming a cultural diffusion or cultural borrowing of the Matachines dance group claiming strong European and Arab origins. However, other scholars attribute the origins of the Matachines dance not entirely to costume and props but to the choreography of this folk dance.

According to John Donald Robb (1961), Willi Apel states that the mattachin dance is "related to the dance of the bouffons and to the morris dance of England" (1961:88). He also

states that the dance is related to the "morisca, or moresca" which is "a pantomimic dance of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries that was executed in Moorish costumes and other grotesque disguises" (1961:88-89). Robb describes the moresca dance as consisting of two dances: a solo dance and a "dance between two groups representing a sword fight between the Christians and Mohammedans" (1961:89). Robb distinguishes New World (Rio Grande Pueblo) and European features based on the following: 1) the similarity between the names: matachines, matachin, matassin, moresca, and morris; 2) the preservation of ancient Spanish customs in Spanish speaking villages; 3) the view of the Matachines dance in the Rio Grande Pueblos including the dancers being fully clothed as opposed to bare torsos and legs in Corn dances; 4) the allowance of photography of the dance; and 5) the participation of Spanish speaking fiddlers and guitarists (1961:89-90). Robb focuses on the choreography, linguistic and costume features to account for the Matachines origins. Other scholars rely on the music and choreography, looking closely at the dance steps to offer further interpretations.

In her article "More about the Matachines," Aurora White Lea (1963-64) offers her interpretations regarding the origins of the Matachines dance. Citing Paul Nettl's "Musica en la danza," she states that Lee Rozmental makes the claim that morisca dances were the result of dances of the mid-fifteenth century "that were exotic and Oriental in nature" (1963-64:7). Rozmental goes on to say that this dance "came to Europe from Spain from whence it spread to surrounding countries" (1963-64:7). Lea then pays some attention to possible Aztec sources of the Matachines dance. Citing Carabajal's "Historia de Mexico, Volume I," she describes an Aztec dance called the "Baile Pequeño" which was "held in the palaces, in the temples, and in the homes," performed both religiously and recreationally (1963-64:8). Parallel lines were

formed by dancers, including clowns disguised with animal skins who interacted with the crowd to offer comic relief (1963-64:8). She then goes on to state that the dancers were "nobles and/or priests or seminarians" and that sometimes the leader took part in the dance (1963-64:8).

Lea proceeds to describe Mexican versions of the Matachines dance including dances from the Tarahumara and Yaqui regions of Mexico. The Tarahumara Matachines are similar in many aspects to those of New Mexico: church calendrical relevance, the presence of Monarca and gourd rattles. Lea notes that this version of the Matachines does not contain a Malinche or Abuelos. Rather *chapeones* are stationed near the dancers and call out dance movements in falsetto voices (1963-64:9). The Yaqui dance includes a Monarca and a little boy who dresses as Malinche.

Finally, Lea describes the Pueblo and Hispano Matachines dance in New Mexico. Many similarities are evident in both dances: attire, the presence of Abuelos, Toros, Monarca, Malinche, music, and dance steps (1963-64:9). Regarding the origins of the dance, Lea concludes that the Mexican and New Mexican Matachines "are a composite of the 'Baile Pequeño' of the Ancient Aztecs and the European Matachines. The costumes and music came from Europe, the dance steps from the 'Baile Pequeño'" (1963-64:10).

Flavia Waters Champe, in "Origins of the Magical Matachines Dance," provides a description of the Matachines dance in Zacatecas, according to a 1958 publication produced in Mexico City by the Secretaría de Educación Pública (1980-81:36). Believing in a Zacatecan origin of the dance, Champe includes a description of the Mexican "Los Pardos" and "Los Sembradores" dances. The former dance contains the same dance patterns as the Matachines of New Mexico, and in the latter performance dancers perform the act of throwing, seeds, weeding

and harvesting (1980-81:36-37). Because Zacatecas contained the second largest concentration of Spanish occupancy during the 1500s, Champe claims that this region was an excellent area for the blending of European, Black (African) and Indian cultures to occur (1980-81:37). She goes on to state that the Nahuatl Indians of Zacatecas maintained many pre-Columbian dances with elements of the dance seen in New Mexican Matachines, including the feather fan (*palma*), the Aztec lord and noble crown (*cupil*), and the custom of hiding the face in honor of the deities (*mascada*) (1980-81:37).

Furthermore, she cites a sixteenth century etymologist to discuss the origin of the word Matachine. Champe explains that "matachin was derived from the verb matar: to kill, because with the blows that were given, they seemed to kill each other" (1980-81:38). She goes on to say that in "ancient Persia, the word *mat* signified death, and the word *chine* referred to China," and that the "combination of the two words, using the term *chine* in a derogatory manner, might have designated a burlesque type of performance," (1980-81:38) reflecting the "scoundrel, buffoon, harlequin, etc." definition given of the Matachine in Europe (1980-81:38). Champe's description adds to the rich discourse on the origins of the Matachines and focuses on the cultural diffusion of the dance from Mexico to the Southwest.

In his 1984 publication *Morris and Matachin*, John Forrest describes the Morris dances of England and the Matachines dance of New Mexico in an attempt to discover similarities between the two. Forrest addresses the issue of what previous scholars of the Morris dances focused on: if the dance was a remnant of ancient fertility rituals, or if the dance was imported or indigenous to England (1984:1). Forrest begins with Joseph Strutt's 1801 publication entitled "Sports and Pastimes of the People of England," in which he suggests that the Morris is "a

remnant of the ancient fool's dance" (1984:1). Forrest goes on to say that Strutt implies the dance is of Moorish origin (1984:1). Citing Francis Douce's 1807 "A dissertation on the Ancient Morris Dance," Forrest states that Douce also favors a Moorish origin of the dance (1984:1). Forrest then cites Sir Edmund Chambers stating that folk dancing derives from ancient ritual; a processional dance occurred in which people went "round the boundaries" from "field to field, from house to house, from well to well of the village" (1984:2). Considering the Morris ritual of blackening the face, Chambers concludes that this custom derives from "the primitive custom of smearing the face with the beneficent ashes of the festival fire" (1984:5). Citing Cecil Sharp's 1899 *Morris Book*, Forrest describes Sharp's interpretations of the Morris. Sharp states that the Morris dance is Moroccan and "spread from Spain over the whole of Europe" (1984:5). Sharp believes that the Morris dance is a result of pan-European customs (1984:6).

Forrest continues with descriptions of publications by Violet Alford and Rodney Gallop (1933-35), stating that both authors agree with Sharp's work regarding the origin of the Morris. They believe that the Morris is connected to many dances under the names of "Mouriscada, Mourisma, Morisca, and Moreska," which "involve a ceremonial combat between a group of 'Moors' and another of 'Christians' in celebration of the expulsion of the Moors from Europe in the Middle Ages" (1984:6). Forrest also includes work by Joseph Needham in which he sought to classify seven versions of male ceremonial dance in England. Needham concludes that the Morris dance is Celtic in origin (1984:8).

Forrest then presents his model which analyzes the principal elements of assessing or comparing ceremonial dance types: setting, dance group structure and composition, musicians, music, costume, individual body movements, group movements, and social function, both implicit and explicit (1984:10-12). Forrest uses this model to analyze the Cotswold Morris dance

in an attempt to show that the dance is a “direct descendent of the matachin, a European courtly dance” (1984:13).

Forrest classifies Morris dances according to time period including: the early Morris (1498-1650), the eighteenth century Morris and the Contemporary Cotswold dance. According to Lowe (1957), the costume of the early Morris was based on personal taste of the dancer, including expensive “gaudy coloured coats (sometimes decorated with ribbons)” and bells attached at the knee (1984:15-16). Lowe also explains that two dance types occurred at the time: a dance featuring a central female figure and a processional dance (1984:18). Using his model of dance assessment, Forrest describes the early processional dance as a dance used for entertainment, which was performed on city streets (1984:18). Instead of concerning his argument with the “Morris” dance, Forrest’s following descriptions are exclusive to a form of the Morris called the Ring Dance, which unlike processionals, were performed at royal celebrations by members or guests of royalty which was, according to Forrest, characteristic of early Morris dances (1984:19-23).

The dance then began to undergo substantial changes in terms of setting, dance group structure, costume, individual body movements, and group movements (1984:23). According to Forrest’s model, the dance was now performed by members of the lower class; previously members of the upper class exclusively performed the dance. The central female figure and the Fool of the Ring dance were now passive figures. The importance of sword clashing was now the main focus, and the blackening of face with soot was evident (1984:25).

Forrest claims that the Cotswold dance became much more complex in the nineteenth century with the addition of a more uniform dress consisting of white shirts and trousers, cross-over baldricks, and bell pads attached to the knee. These dances were now classified as three

distinct dances: stick dances, handkerchief dances, which were performed by six dancers performing in two files of three, and solo jigs (1984:26).

Forrest's attention now focuses on the Matachin in Europe and England. Forrest states that the Matachin is well documented during the latter half of the sixteenth century, first referred to in Italy, then in France, Spain and England (1984:34). Citing French and Spanish authorities, Forrest notes that the word Matachin derived from the Italian *Mattaccino*. The term *Mattaccino* is formed from the word "*matto* 'mad' or 'fool', which is ultimately derived from the Latin *mattus*" (1984:34). Forrest claims that from Italian the word was adopted into French (*matassins*) and Spanish (*matachin*) (1984:34). Citing Arbeau's work, Forrest again uses his model to describe the European Matachin dances, then compares those results with his earlier assessment of the Cotswold Morris. Forrest's findings examine the similarities between the two dances, including the presence of males only, music, dance steps, sword clashing, and use the of bells (1984:39).

Forrest then describes the Matachines dance of the New World, particularly those of New Mexican Hispano and pueblo communities. Forrest classifies the dances of this region into three categories: male line dance only, male line dance and drama, and miscellaneous, including male and female social dance, and the Maypole dance (1984:43). The male line dance only is performed by the Yaqui, Mayo, Ocoroni, and Tarahumara Indians (1984:43), the male line dance and drama is performed by the Rio Grande Pueblos (1984:45), and the Miscellaneous dances are performed by the Yaqui, and inhabitants of the Huasteca region of Mexico (1984:48). Using his model, Forrest focuses on the similarities between the Morris and Matachines dances: the association with local holidays, music played by a fiddler, costume uniformity and style, and dance formation (1984:48-49). Based on his model, Forrest states that using this evidence forms

"a powerful argument for the case that the Cotswold morris and the matachin are the *same dance*" (1984:53).

Brenda Romero, in her Ph.D. dissertation entitled "The Matachines Music and Dance in San Juan Pueblo and Alcalde, New Mexico: Context and Meanings," compares the Matachines Dance as performed at the Hispanic village of Alcalde, New Mexico to the Native American version of San Juan Pueblo. Romero first analyzes the "maske" performances of England which were performed on "the daie of the Epiphanie," also called "the twelfth day" (1993:50). Romero makes the connection that because it took place on the twelfth day this "might explain why there are twelve masked dancers" in the Matachines dance (1993:50).

The term masque developed from the Arabic word *Maskhara* which "is associated with clowns and buffoonery and came to England via France in the early sixteenth century" (1993:49). According to Evans the dancers wore visors and their hair and beards were of gold or silver (1993:51). Immediately following Evans' explanation, Romero states:

> I would like to suggest that this or a similar religiously-affiliated, masked dance was the introduction to the English of the Spanish predecessor to the New World Matachines, which at the time was probably associated with the Arabic word for mask, so characteristic of the New World Matachines. (1993:51)

Romero continues to states that certain dances were outlawed by the Church in the sixteenth century (1993:57). Among these dances was a bell dance "entitled 'The Dance of Gayferos and rescue of Melisendra,' which consisted of nine personages: four Frenchmen, four Moors, and the infanta Melisendra; also an enchanted castle, a horse of painted pasteboard (papelon), and Don Gayferos" (1993:57). Romero then relates the characters of the Matachines to the Dance of Gayferos as being the only reference in which she could find a child female

figure. She also states that “the cast parallels the characters of the Matachines: eight Matachins, a Malinche (Melisendra), a Monarca (Gayferos), and a Toro or perhaps Abuelo (the horse)” (1993:59).

Romero then proceeds to make a North African connection by analyzing a dance of the Tuareg people of North Africa. She describes the dance as a “masked ‘warriors dance’ in which the men carry swords and wear tall, decorated morion-shaped hats from which cloth fringe falls from the head”(1993:67). Romero states that the headdress is very similar to that of the New World Matachine stating that the fringe, which hangs from the front of the dancer’s headdress, consists of “glass beads threaded on strings” that are used “as protection against the evil eye” (1993:67), and that this concept may have been introduced by the Spanish, who also believed in the evil eye. The fringe was also used as a metaphor of rain-bringing.

Romero states that ceremonial combats, performed for the purpose of producing rain, were of Phoenician influence. Processions also occurred in this area of Africa in which a “woman gives birth to a child,” which parallels that of Northern New Mexican villages in which a female character gives birth to a child during the course of the Matachines dance (1993:69). This Moroccan dance also contains “a man dressed in the skin of a sacrificed animal who was both mocked and ridiculed and held to possess healing powers” who carried short sticks in each hand (1993:69). Another man or small boy played his wife. Concerning the behavior and drama aspects of the dance, Romero states that the Plains Arabs believed that “being beaten with the skins of the sacrificed animals could heal illness” (1993:71). Romero goes on to say that “the Romans also struck people, mostly infertile women, with the strips of hide from the sacrificed animal” (1993:71). Westermark offers some interesting facts about the similarities of Roman

festivals with African ceremonies and concludes that “the ancient Roman sword dances are the early basis for the dance which eventually becomes the matachines” (1993:72).

Claude Stephenson, in his 2001 Ph.D. dissertation entitled “A comparative analysis of Matachines music and its history and dispersion in the American Southwest” believes that the Matachines is “likely [of] Mexican descent that has many elements of Spanish culture, notably Catholicism grafted onto it” (Stephenson 2001:216). This contradicts earlier beliefs that the dance was of European descent with elements of Aztec tradition grafted onto it. Stephenson refutes this claim stating that if the dance were of Spanish derivation, “there would likely be a surviving text… if the dance was of indigenous meso-american ancestry, there would not be a surviving text” since the Spanish were excellent record keepers (Stephenson 2001:215). In conclusion, Stephenson states that “one can logically conclude that the dance sprang from a New World source” (Stephenson 2001:215), further emphasizing his claim that the dance is “a simple manifestation of a cultural blending- a new hybridized product, manufactured in the melting pot of Southwest American cultures” (Stephenson 2001:216-217).

Most of the early scholars point to a European origin of the dance, but more recent contributions to the debate now question how the Matachines dance was introduced into the New World. Why is the topic of origins important? Because of the importance of the dance to the people of Bernalillo, the dance serves as an example of how Bernalillo presents itself to itself, as well as to the outside world. This dance is Bernalillo’s connection to its past. The coming of the railroad, which will also be discussed in Chapter 6, created an interesting glamorization of the

Native American traditions but created a denigration of the Hispanic people and their traditions. Believing in a European, particularly Spanish origin of the Matachines dance, Bernalillo thus reverts to its chivalrous and powerful linkage to Spain by performing this dance. As long as scholars attempt to prove or disapprove of a European origin to this dance, the people of Bernalillo are taught that this dance came from Spain and serves as an example of how people not only in Bernalillo but in New Mexico at large proudly affirm their Spanish ancestry. To add to the discussion of origins, I will now examine the role of the Aztecs and Pre-Hispanic influences on the folk dance of the Matachines. This discussion will emphasize and explain the cultural diffusion process.

Montezuma, Malinche and Cultural Diffusion

In 1519, sentries sped into Tenochtitlán with news of strange men who were marching toward the Aztec capital. Moctezuma II, interested in learning who these fair skinned men were, invited them into this powerful, dominant city. Hernán Cortés with approximately 400 soldiers and thousands of Tlaxcalteca (Tlaxcalan) allies came upon the valley of Mexico to see a sprawling city built upon a lake. For one hundred years, the Aztecs dominated Mesoamerica, showing brute force in the conquest of many peoples throughout present-day Mexico.

Exploring the coast of the Yucatán Peninsula, Cortés learned, through his Aztec interpreter Malinche, of a powerful empire to the west, ruled by a leader named Moctezuma. He learned that this city contained many riches from gold, to spices, to exotic birds, all of which were desired in Europe. With a hunger for fame and fortune, Cortés weighed anchor off the coast of Veracruz and began his march west. Along the way, he encountered a hostile people from a

region called Tlaxcala, which for many years had resisted the iron fist of the Aztecs. After many intense battles, the small Spanish army was able to gain the allegiance of the Tlaxcaltecas.

On November 8, 1519 Cortés entered the Aztec city and was welcomed by Moctezuma (Diaz 1963:219). For weeks, the Aztecs entertained Cortés and his soldiers, showing them the grandeur of the city. Cortés, desiring to overthrow this leader, began to plot how he would control this city with its hundreds of thousands of inhabitants. Cortés was then called to attend to matters with other Spanish officials off the coast, but he left a soldier named Alvarado in charge of affairs in the capital. During an important Aztec ceremony, Alvarado killed a high standing Aztec official.

Cortés returned to a quiet city to find the Spanish army huddled together fending off a contingent of hostile Aztec warriors. Taking Moctezuma prisoner, the Spanish army was able to see the violence subside. The violence resurged when the Aztecs discovered that their leader had been killed (Townsend 2000:35). During the middle of the night, the Spanish army began to flee from the Aztec city, only to discover that their plot had been revealed. Thousands of Aztec warriors descended upon the Spanish, but the Spanish fled with few fatalities. With the Spanish army in exile in Tlaxcala, the Aztec people had no time to recover from the actions of these strange men from the east. People began to die of a silent killer. Small pox, a European disease to which Aztecs had no immunity, began to kill individuals by the thousands. Cortes' army returned to find a city struggling to survive and began to open fire with their cannons. Destroying temples and slaying the newly elected leader, Cuauhtémoc, the Spanish army successfully conquered Tenochtitlán in 1521.

Shortly after the conquest of Tenochtitlán, Europeans began to populate the New World along with Franciscan friars who spread the word of a Christian God. In an attempt to spread

their message, the friars began to introduce music and dance to the Indians, using their pre-Columbian rituals and beliefs as a basis for evangelization. Curcio-Nagy states that with the conquest complete, Spanish officials utilized "persuasion through music, dance, and public display, rather than the blasts of muskets," in an "effort to maintain control of a newly acquired empire" (Curcio-Nagy 2004:3). Aurora White Lea also states that since Mexican Matachines contained no Malinche figure, she was introduced to the dance "as a symbol of Christianity" since she was one of the first converts. Dance was now used "as a medium of instruction to emphasize the superiority of Christianity over Paganism" (Lea 1963-64:8). Champe claims that the Order of St. Francis introduced dances and fiestas in honor of Christian saints in order to "replace the worship of Aztec deities" (Champe 1980-81:35). Along with the introduction of the Malinche character, Moctezuma was also added at this time to the cast of characters of the Matachines in order to show the population his "conversion" to Christianity. The Toro figure may also have been added at this point in order to symbolize the pre-Columbian religion which was now to be disregarded. Because of an uneasy peace between the Spanish and Aztecs, the shield and sword, which were characteristic of European Matachines, were now replaced by a gourd rattle (*guaje*), which was known to the Aztecs as a *cocolli* (Lea 1963-64:8), and a palma, which some scholars believe to be a remnant of the Aztec feather fan (Champe 1980-81:37). The palma and guaje could have been introduced because the Spanish feared placing the earlier sword and shield of the Matachines in the hands of the Aztecs, who might lead an uprising. The Spanish fiddle and guitar were also added at this point as a means of attracting individuals with the lure of new instruments with new sounds and melodies. The focus will now turn to the issue of who was responsible for the diffusion of the Matachines dance with arguments made by previous scholars.

As the crown of Spain began to expand, especially to the north, it is questionable whether or not the Franciscan friars were responsible for the introduction of the Matachines to New Mexico. It is likely that in the 77 years since the time of the conquest of Tenochtitlán to the occupation and settlement of the Rio Grande Valley by Juan de Oñate that a new group of individuals were performing the Matachines in New Mexico. Mary Montaño states that the Matachines "was most likely introduced to the area by the early Spanish-Mexican settlers and their Tlaxcalan allies" (Montaño 2001:171). Champe claims that tensions were high between the Native American and Spanish settlers, and that the pueblos were "persistent" in maintaining their native religion. Because of such tensions, Champe claims that it is unlikely the Franciscan Order introduced the dance to the inhabitants of the Rio Grande Valley since "such an environment was not one in which a happy celebration of music and dance could have developed" (Champe 1980-81:36). With high tensions between the inhabitants of New Mexico, the Matachines dance eventually made its way into the Rio Grande valley, in both Native American and Hispanic villages, including the small community of Bernalillo, New Mexico.

It is unlikely that the Matachines dance was performed in Bernalillo prior to the Pueblo Revolt of 1680. Many local historians of Bernalillo agree that the dance of the Matachines was introduced at the time of the Reconquest. We now turn our attention to the history of Bernalillo

in order to understand when this dance was introduced and why it has become central to the identity of the inhabitants of this small Hispanic village.

[i] First published in 1588

CHAPTER 3 NOTES