

CHRISTMAS DAY

story and photos by
CHARLES MANN

at Ohkay Owingeh



down from their heads to the ground. White-lace leggings, bright moccasins, vests, and images of the Virgin of Guadalupe embellish the dancers' regalia.

But here's what I can piece together: As we all know, the Spanish came, bringing their Catholic faith and so much more. As the pueblos naturally occupied the most coveted places with arable soil, where streams and rivers descended from the mountains, there was an inexorable collision of cultures. Historians are still at work interpreting the results.

Whenever I witness some pueblo ceremonies, like a Deer Dance or a Turtle Dance, standing in a plaza where so many generations have come and gone, it is more than history. These undiluted rituals, passed down through the centuries, have helped sustain the Native Americans' identity. I sense a spiritual essence there which does not look toward Europe, but rather up at the sky, outward to the plants and animals and down at the earth.

In contrast, the Matachines represent, to me, a sort of cultural meniscus—a visual and tangible line of contact where a meeting of the pueblo world and the Spanish incursion appears. Christian symbolism mingles with feathers and leather and the pungent smoke of piñon fires has replaced the censer. The Matachine dances look back to the Moors and even earlier. It is said that the word *matachine* roughly translates to “kill the Chinese.” It seems that Arabic threads which once reached all the way across the Silk Road still linger here in the New World. For me, the repetitive drone of a violin and guitar through the chilly air of Christmas morning adds still another echo of Europe and the Middle East.

As a visitor, I will never understand the experiences nor all the stories of the pueblo culture, nor those of the Spanish Americans. But seeing the traces of both, incarnate in the Matachines, makes me reflect on our larger modern dilemma of cultural friction and conflict. This pueblo rite seems to have absorbed and preserved something vital and important from both legacies. It's a glimpse through a doorway into another world and it's one that expands my feelings of hope and possibility for the future of us all.



Like so many, I came to New Mexico from Somewhere Else.

I have often cheekily characterized the state as “the Lint Trap of the Southwest,” because it seems to attract and hold modern day pilgrims who have abandoned or outgrown their cultural origins. In my case, that was rural Arkansas. Further, I have speculated that the state of New Mexico might consider pilfering the official motto from Santa Fe, The City Different. Santa Fe is really an extension of The State Different. It's different here.

One of the things “different,” which happened to me after settling in to “Tierra del Norte” is that Christmas changed. My childhood December 25 was a playbook experience of extended family gatherings, stockings tacked to the mantle, presents under the decorated tree on Christmas morning and of course, Santa Claus.

Now, when each Christmas comes, I am transported by an experience that is always on my emotional radar. At Ohkay Owingeh Pueblo, just north of Española, Christmas Day is the day of the Matachines Dances.

It is beyond my vision to try to explain or understand the importance and meaning of these mysterious ceremonial dances, where young men wearing veiled, fringed headdresses shaped like a bishop's miter dance in the shadow of the church. Carrying symbolic tridents, they form two rows, moving in synchronized rhythm, step-step-step while long strands of brightly colored ribbons flow

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At the dance, my attention is drawn back into the moment by the presence of the *Abuleos*, two men wearing odd animal-like masks and snapping bullwhips. They chase after a young boy in an outfit resembling a steer, whose “Bull for Sale” sign elicits dollar bills being pinned to his clothes. Also among the dancers is *Malinche*, a young girl dressed all in white, said to represent the famous consort of Cortez, and the *Monarcha*, perhaps a characterization of the Aztec leader Montezuma.

Or maybe not.

Ohkay Owingeh welcomes the public to their Matachine dances. Visitors are invited into the circle of the pueblo’s community, and thus become a participant in a unique homage to our common humanity, acknowledging shared experiences of the present moment, as well as the past. In that way, it is like Christmas everywhere.

Of course, when taking photographs there, thoughtful discretion and respect for everyone involved is a priority. You are, after all, a guest. That, too, can be a way to acknowledge the privilege of sharing the joy, tradition and veneration the dances express. Speak softly, have an open heart, and your feelings of Christmas will expand.

It’s a dreamlike interlude, a view of a part of our American cultural mélange that can be seen only in New Mexico. It’s not something to analyze, but best to simply listen, watch and breathe in. It’s Christmas Day and you are, for now, Somewhere Else.

It is important to call at least two days in advance to confirm with the Pueblo that the dances listed will take place. Events may be cancelled due to weather or other tribal events. Directions to the pueblos can be found online. Permission to photograph events varies.

December 12 Jemez Pueblo, Matachines Dances

December 24, 25 Ohkay Owingeh, Matachines Dances

Visit www.indianpueblo.org/19-pueblos/feast-days for more information.

