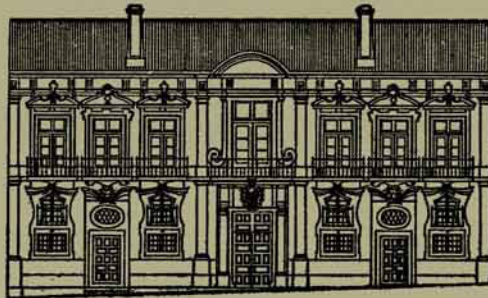


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THE STILT DANCERS OF ANGUIANO

LOGROÑO, NORTH EASTERN CASTILLE, 21st JULY 1968

SEPARATA DA REVISTA DE ETNOGRAFIA N.º 27
MUSEU DE ETNOGRAFIA E HISTÓRIA



JUNTA DISTRITAL DO PORTO

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WHEN the stilt dancers were announced in the Spanish Tourist Calendar, I decided I must go to see them before their traditions became mixed up with modern innovations. The «Danza de los Zuecos» (stilt dance) as it is called, is a man's ritual dance originally devised to strengthen the sun on its skyward course at the summer solstice.

Anguiano, where the stilt dancers perform, lies some 40 km SSW of Logroño, in North Eastern Castille. Logroño is a large modern town on the high plateau surrounded by mountains on one of the important pilgrims' routes to St. James of Compostela. Pilgrims from Navarre had to pass through Logroño to cross the great river Ebro, then go on to Nájera, Santo Domingo de la Calzada, and on to Burgos, in order to reach St. James of Compostela. Santo Domingo is called 'de la Calzada' (of the paved road) because a pious person caused the pilgrims' road to be paved, as travelling along this road was such a muddy affair and so difficult and he wanted to make the pilgrims' way less bothersome. This same Domingo went out at night with a bell and a lantern to look for pilgrims who had strayed off the road on a dark night. He would take them to safety and next day put them on the right road for Compostela.

The country is rough and mountainous. Winding rivers and high, forbidding peaks create an atmosphere of wonder and awe, as fertile valleys alternate with sharp rocky cliffs along the pilgrims' way.

Our coach from Logroño wound its way up and up, round mountain sides and along river valleys, on a hot, brilliantly sunny day, the 20th July 1968. At last we reached Anguiano, perched on a steep slope, a narrow river chasm down one side and on the other, the very long straggling village which comprises Anguiano, topped by high peaks and rocks. As one looked up the mountain, this old village looked down on the newcomer in that special way mountain villages have, of making you want to be above it, yet taunting you to have the courage to climb so high.

Anguiano was obviously a very ancient site, presumably the spot had been chosen some many centuries ago as an appropriate place to cross the river which had broken through the sheer rock cliff just there, and carved its narrow gorge over which a stone bridge had been built to reach the other side of the river and the few straggling houses along the main road. What an imposing sight this bridge was, with its deep chasm with rushing water in the narrows overlooked by that sheer rock wall above, piercing the sharp blue sky with its menacing outline.

The urgent question was, however, where to lodge for the night, for the one hostel was already taken by the band that had come up for the festival. After much searching, a lady took us in, as her family was unable to come for the festival that year.

The houses tower above the visitor from storeys on one side, yet you can enter straight into the loft if you happen to be on the upper side, and then you have to go down numerous stairs to get to the front door and to the hostess! The village, therefore extended along the side of the mountain. As it rains heavily in winter, all the streets are paved cement, except the church yard and one steep lane leading from the church to the main square, most appropriately called 'Rúa de los Danzantes' (Dancers' Street) as the stilt dancers spin down it. By keeping the old black basalt cobbles, the dancers are able to have a better foothold, which they could not do otherwise on the cement.

On the eve of the festival, 20th July, a little before sundown, the eight dancers appeared in the church yard, each with his two men dressers, carrying their ritual costumes. The dressers are usually elderly men who have been dancers in their youth and know the intricacies of dress and the

utmost importance of dressing correctly. The church yard filled instantly with spectators, for dressing is a long business and an interesting one. The young men were well under 30 years old as no one will dance if over 35. It is too dangerous. First, the dancers slipped their alpargatas over their white stockings. (Alpargatas are canvas, rope-soled sandals), then their multi-coloured waistcoats over white cotton shirts. The waistcoats are adorned with satin ribbons of blue, red, pink and yellow arranged in broad stripes sewn only along the top of each row of ribbons, so as to allow the lower edge of the ribbons to flap in the wind. Each stripe is about 3 inches wide and very reminiscent of the English Morris Men's brilliant and equally multi-coloured waistcoats. Stiff white starched petticoats were fastened round the waist, after the stilts had been adjusted to his feet and fastened to his knees. Each stilt is 50 cm from the ground, with added supports on either side of the leg up to the knee. The stilt looks like a gigantic 'Y' and the footrest is in the fork of the 'Y'. Little thick, white cushions are fixed to the knees and keep them well fixed to the stilt. The foot is also tied. This is the most important part of dressing, for if the cords do not hold the stilt in place or the cushion slips, the dancer may have a severe accident, which would never do! The stilts are made by the local joiner. Last of all comes the orange yellow skirt of the dancer reaching nearly to his ankles. It is very wide and must billow as he turns. He also carries castanets, which click in time to the music

It took over half an hour to dress the dancers, after which they all got into two rows, facing the church door, on the side of the church because the steep slope on which it is built does not allow the main front to be used.

The dance consisted of two rows of four men each, crossing and re-crossing to opposite place and in the process forming the figure of a double cross. On and on they danced, crossing and re-crossing, first from east to west, then from north to south, always using the same step which is a kind of skip, each time picking up the foot at the back, level with the knee, in $2/4$ time. (This step was curiously similar to a Pyrenean step, found right down into Catalonia, where men pick up the foot at the back, to touch the thigh at every skip).

It is not easy to vary steps on stilts! These boys kept perfect time as they jerked their elbows backwards and cut, at the same time clicking their castanets. It was a wonderful sight to see the boys looking like giants, and of course they are meant to look like some creature from another world.

After about twenty minutes's dancing, they took off their stilts and danced a pasacalle (street dance) along the horizontal streets, which consisted of series of long skips, still jerking their elbows. On and on they danced the whole length of the villages, which was about a mile and a half long. Then the crowds and dancers retired to refresh themselves at cafés and taverns, waiting for the evening ball, on the main square, while music from loudspeakers filled the air mixed with excited babble of conversation, song and popular tunes. The ball lasted till the small hours of the following day.

Next morning at 11, High Mass was celebrated in the church, after which the dancers came up the steps leading to the church yard, which was already filled with dense crowds eagerly awaiting the coming out of the statue of Saint Ignacius, followed by the authorities, military, civic and ecclesiastic, for the main event of the festival: the dancing of the eight young men before the Image. They danced as on the previous evening, forming the pattern of the cross, and then suddenly the music changed to a quick $4/8$ time (ϕ) and while the main body of dancers danced still facing the Saint, one detached himself from the group and turning round and round to his left crossed the yard and came down the stone steps along to the road below. Unfortunately, he slipped and fell. Immediately several elderly men rushed to him lifted him onto his stilts again and helped him up the steps again to the church yard. He started once more spinning as he descended the steps, this time reaching the road in safety, where he was caught by men who held him upright. A stilt dancer can never be still — either he must move or fall. One by one the dancers in the church yard detached themselves from the group and each successfully came down those stone steps on the road, turning round like living tops, till all the dancers were on the road, followed by their musicians, the Image and the authorities. As these advanced, so the dancers danced backwards, that is, facing the Image, as they progressed slowly along the horizontal road to the bridge, then they came back to the church for the sensational performance.

Under the broiling sun, everyone crowded along the walls of the 'Rua de los Danzantes', that steep salope down to the main square. Balconies were filled on every floor overlooking it, the great event was about to begin.

At last the shrill piping of the 'dulzaineros' (shawn players) announced the dancers. There they came, rounding the corner of the street at the top, and most exciting it was too to see these dancers still dancing backwards, facing the Image, which was very, very slowly coming down that slope.

The piping quickened, and one dancer detached himself from his fellows and came turning round and round to his left, all down that long street of cobbles, spinning like a top yét never missing a beat. How did he do it? It was a miracle. Down he came right under our balcony to the main square, where he was caught and held upright by a group of men, while a second dancer detached himself from the group at the top of the street and he too came down spinning right down to the square. Each of the eight dancers in turn came down, and after a short rest in the square they climbed up the slope still on their stilts to join the main group who were dancing backwards down the slope, moving slowly, ever facing the Image. Each dancer waited his turn to spin down the slope once more. They never missed a beat, either with their castanets or with their steps. It was wonderful. The Image was never allowed to be without a dancing escort, yet a dancer was always spinning round and down the hill, so creating an uninterrupted chain of turning dancers. If one seemed to get too near a wall, a man would gently push him back towards the centre of the street as he passed spinning down. The dancers knew that if they fell they would immediately be picked up, as quick as lightning, for a dancer must never stop turning while coming down this hill. At long last the Image, followed by the authorities, passed our balcony, and came down to the square, where the procession was formed once more for more dancing along the horizontal street parallel with the upper one. Onto the bridge, and back to the church to deposit the Image. The dancers danced backwards all the time from the moment they left the bottom of the church steps to the time they deposited the Image back in the church.

Excitement and the heat exshausted everyone, so a good midday meal lasting several hours allowed them to recover and prepare for the evening ball, which included a dance by the stilt dancers in the main square, but this time they danced a simple stick dance on their own feet — they had finished with stilts.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Each dancer receives a fee of 1,000 pts. for his dancing (roughly about £7.10.0) and as already stated, only young men under 35 will dance. Every year it is harder to get people to dance on stilts. This needs practice, for

in order to avoid falling while spinning one has to get used to looking at a fixed spot for as long a time as possible, before turning the head round, otherwise it is easy to be giddy and fall, or lose one's sense of direction.

But what was the origin of this extremely difficult performance? There is only one answer: faith, in its power to control the movement of the sun, thereby ensuring food for the community. Summer magic is sought, for the dancers spin to show the sun what is required of it, so that it will have sufficient strength to ripen crops and bring forth grass and fruit next year.

If a dancer falls while dancing, this brings bad luck, as the spinning is interrupted and the sun might lose strength. So he must be put on his stilts immediately and must start again, to achieve an uninterrupted spin down the stone steps—or the cobbled sloping lane. Naturally, nowadays only the rite is remembered, not the origin or the reason for the dance.

Other countries such as in Asia and some American Indian tribes also have this belief in spinning round and round, and its vital importance to the sun and its cycle. An other way of ensuring the spinning or turning of the sun is by spinning a top, like the Eskimos do at New Year festivals, and also in parts of Asia.

STILTS

They are important as a means of representing super-beings. The tradition of size is widespread and has its roots in very early times when it was customary among the Sumerians of old to make tall effigies of their gods and carry them through the fields and from temple to temple, for the people to see and worship. (See A B Cooke, *Zeus*, -912). Stilts are worn by the 'pirit men' or local gods of some African states—such as in Sierra Leone—and also some Asian and some South American people, when representing spirits or super-beings. Size of a figure indicated its importance too among the ancient Egyptians whose pharaohs caused gigantic statues of themselves to be carved and put up. During the Middle Ages, in Europe, among painters it was usual to paint the figure of Christ or the Saints much larger than the other figures, to show their importance over the others.

MUSIC

«Music can make us do anything», said the eminent ethnomusicologist, Peter Crosseley-Holland, recently. It can. Music influences animals and birds, as well as man. And music certainly had an influence on the stilt dancers of Anguiano. For fifty years the same musician had played for them — he lived in Anguiano. He enthused the dancers for he shared their faith in the efficacy of spinning round and round on stilts to make 'good luck magic'. He played so as to fit in with the dancers' steps and he put in so much vigour and rhythm in his play that they got into the type of frenzy needed to dance continuously without getting tired. This year, however, as the old man had died, new musicians had been called in from Navarre. Two of them played the *dulzaina* (a short, shrill shawm) and the third played the drum. They had learnt the tunes by ear, then set them down on paper and where the melodies seemed slightly 'odd' to them (as folk tunes can do to suit certain steps) they had 'modernised' it to suit their musical criteria. So the dancers said «the music is different this year — we cannot dance as we used to do because of the different music». Music and dance are one, and if they are separated one or the other suffers. How often this type of misfit must have happened over the centuries, and how many unique dances and tunes must have got lost, never to be recovered!

Man needs music and dance. Man created music to suit his dance and vice versa, so let us try and keep the tunes appropriate to their dances, as we inherit them from our forefathers, as they received them from their ancestors, and let us not change them arbitrarily, just for the sake of modernising them! We only distort them.

COLOUR

Colour too has its special importance in ancient traditions. Colour meant a great deal, as the Christian Church can show us to this day.

The skirt of the stilt dancers had to be orange-yellow, to imitate the colour of the sun, just as the waistcoats had to be multicoloured for a purpose. Red, blue, green, yellow, pink — and the white shirt, — each colour representing a vital function. Red for Life, blue for the sky, or spiritual beings, green for nature, growth: crops, fields and regeneration; yellow

for wisdom, esthetics and esoteric influences. White for the moon, And/or purity. Colours have a magic import. Red or ochre,, represented life and re-birth to neolithic man, and we all know the Virgin must wear blue, so did the early Greek goddesses wear blue, as they represented the sky or firmament. So the waistcoats of English Morris men, just like their Italian ritual brothers and the ritual stilt dancers of Anguiano, wear multicoloured waistcoats. Colours represent many facets of spring: all parts of the cosmos as well as the three Kingdoms: Earth, the Spirit world below, and the Heavens.

So it seems to be one more proof of the underlying unity of thought among ritual agriculturalist communities, to perform all-important ritual dances by young men, full of strength and vitality, to help Nature carry out its cycles. This fundamental element of thought is found widespread over wide areas of the world, as far apart even as Aztec and other South American cultures, and Asians, Africans and European practitioners of ritual dance. Let us, oh! let us respect their traditions.

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