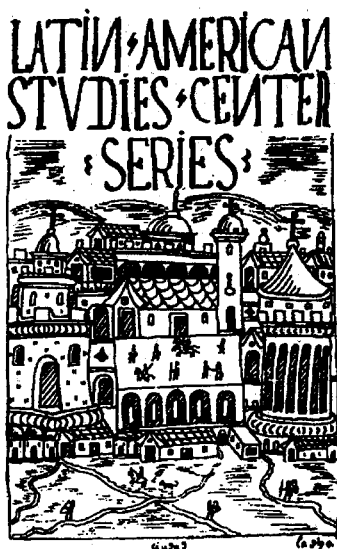


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*1993-94*

***“Indianness” and the Construction of  
Ethnicity in the Day of the Monkey***



*No. 9*

*University of Maryland at College Park*

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## **“Indianness” and the Construction of Ethnicity in the Day of the Monkey**

*It has no European or African roots whatsoever. This is native. It's the only festival in Venezuela, and perhaps the world, which is celebrated on just one day only: the 28th of December. And it has no European influence nor any African. It's native to the indigenous Carib culture, and what's more, I'd say, to the region of Caicara. Descended from the Chaima, the Guaraao, and the Guaiqueri.*

Edgar Baquero

*They could have called it some other animal, but they called it “the Monkey.”*

Argelia Cardiel

### **The Performance of Ethnicity**

A welcome stream of literature over the last several years has begun to challenge the myth of racial democracy that has long dominated discussions about African-Americans and their position in Latin America.<sup>1</sup> Nearly all of these works have exposed the manner in which the concept of *mestizaje* has silenced black voices, denying that any racial distinctions exist in such purportedly colorblind societies as Brazil, the Dominican Republic, or Venezuela. And yet the ideology of

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<sup>1</sup> Examples of this literature are to be found in Burdick 1992a, 1992b, Hanchard 1993, and Skidmore 1974 for Brazil; Wade 1993 for Colombia; Whitten 1981, 1986 for Ecuador; García 1990, Guss 1993, and Wright 1990 for Venezuela; and Whitten and Torres 1992 for a general overview of Latin America.

*mestizaje* has not only affected black populations in Latin America, but also those of Indian ancestry. This has been particularly true in various Andean countries where the seemingly all inclusive discourse of *mestizaje* has been employed for the precise purpose of excluding those who do not conform to national ideals of progress and a market economy. Just as Wright (1990) and others (see note 1) have shown that the language of *mestizaje* masks unequal social relations between blacks and whites wherein *blanqueamiento* or "whitening" is the unstated physical and cultural goal, so too in the Andes have Indians been subsumed into a national ideology which continues to exclude them. The most articulate expression of this sinister process whereby *mestizaje* excludes not only those who fall outside of the 'mixed' category but also those who fall within it, (specifically blacks and Indians), may be Whitten's discussion of ethnic and racial politics in Ecuador:

The practical process of excluding those considered to be nonmixed is carried out by the very persons who espouse an ideology of inclusion based on racial mixture, *mestizaje*, and the resulting contradiction is obvious to ethnically identifiable black *costeño* and black *serrano* Ecuadorians as well as to indigenous Ecuadorian peoples. Additionally, the superficially inclusive claims of *mestizaje* ideology are further undercut by a tacit qualifying clause which ups the price of admission from mere "phenotypical mixture" to cultural *blanqueamiento* ("whitening," in terms of becoming more urban, more Christian, more civilized; less rural, less black, less Indian). This compounds the contradiction by continuously generating internal dissension and dissensus within "mixed categories..."

The designation *blanco*, white in terms of national standards, is inextricably linked with high status, wealth, power, national culture, civilization, Christianity, urbanity, and development; its opposites are *indio*, Indian, and *negro*, black. The false resolution of the opposites is found in the doctrine of *mestizaje*, the ideology of racial mixture implying *blanqueamiento* (1981: 15-16).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Several other authors have also addressed the way in which the ideology of *mestizaje* in Ecuador has functioned as a mechanism of exclusion, both dominating and

In the double-bind situation described by Whitten those who are included in definitions of *mestizaje* will feel as excluded as those who are not. For the *mescolanza* or “mix” is never an equal one, and the contributions of blacks and Indians will continue to be undervalued or ignored entirely. For those who retain a strong ethnic identity and either reject or are refused entry into the national ideal the cost may be even higher. Beyond the likelihood of discrimination and derision are the accusations of unpatriotic behavior and even sedition. Claims will be made that these groups, through their relentless attachment to alternative values, and particularly to alternative modes of production, are impeding the nation’s ability to modernize and progress (see Guss 1994). While these tensions between ethnic and national identities, or what Cohen calls “particularist versus universalist” (1993), may be found everywhere, their resonance in Latin America is particularly strong.

As indigenous groups begin to organize around such issues as land rights, environmental protection, constitutional representation, bilingual education, and health care, initial governmental response, regardless of the country, has been one of denunciation. The simple fact that groups have been demanding consideration based on a collective ethnic interest has been seen as subversive if not treasonous. It is revealing that when in 1988 two Kayapo leaders returned from meetings in the United States with World Bank and environmental leaders, they were arrested and charged with violating the “foreigners law.” The outrageousness of indicting Brazilian Indians under a law reserved for foreigners who interfere with national politics was further compounded when judges

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eradicating indigenous culture and history (Muratorio 1993; Stutzman 1981; Weiss 1991). Muratorio summarizes this well when she writes:

As part of an *ideology* of domination, *mestizaje* hides dialogue by turning it into a monologue—the monologue of the Self who has incorporated the Other or is in the process of doing so. It creates the illusion that the Other, as forged by the dominator, can be brought into the “imagined community”—the useful term by which Benedict Anderson (1983) refers to national social identities—through the doorway of “natural” ties...

Like other master fictions, *mestizaje* was invented by the dominant turn-of-the-century elites for the subordinate peoples in order to hide and maintain the asymmetrical relations of power between whites and Indians that they had inherited from the colonial administration (1993: 23-24).

refused to allow the defendants into court unless they wore "white men's clothes" (Cultural Survival 1989: 18).<sup>3</sup> Charges were eventually dropped and the following year the Kayapo were able to bring representatives together from over forty tribes in a well-publicized protest against the construction of the Gorotire dam. This successful campaign not only led to the suspension of the project but also helped to promote the eventual demarcation of indigenous territories and the inclusion of various amendments protecting indigenous rights in the new Brazilian constitution.<sup>4</sup>

While the Kayapo's victory in Brazil may have signalled a turning point in rain forest politics, it also indicates a shift in the strategic use of ethnicity as an organizing tool. In Belem, Brazilia, and most importantly Altamira, the site where the dam was to be built, the Kayapo carefully orchestrated a series of well-publicized demonstrations in which the performance of their ethnicity was the primary focus.<sup>5</sup> It

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<sup>3</sup> Soon after this event, Kayapo leaders reciprocated the insult by refusing to let a group of government officials into their village unless they donned "proper" Kayapo attire.

<sup>4</sup> Such campaigns as that of the Kayapo are not unique. Today in the Brazilian Amazon alone there are over 50 indigenous federations. In Ecuador the Federación de Centros Shuar, organized in 1964, has not only gained title to their lands but also runs a successful radio station, publishing house, and bilingual education and health programs. Similar developments have also occurred among the Arahua of Colombia and the Mapuche of Chile. And among the Amuesha of Peru, the Yanasha cooperative has been developing alternative strategies for the harvesting of wood products. While these are but a few of the many projects which indigenous communities have launched over the last three decades, they signal what must be seen as the vanguard of a true cultural diversity movement throughout the continent, a movement which is not simply asking for greater representation but is presenting an economic and cultural alternative to the Eurocentric paradigm of development that has dominated the Americas since the arrival of Columbus 500 years ago. (See Gennino 1990 for a more exhaustive listing of these groups).

<sup>5</sup> The staging of the Altamira meeting itself was comprehensively planned with a view to its appearance on film and video media. The daily sessions were in effect choreographed with gorgeous mass ritual performances which framed their beginnings, ends, and major high points. The encampment of the Kayapo participants was created as a model Kayapo village, complete with families, traditional shelters, and artifact production, all on display for the edification of the hundreds of photo journalists, television and film camera crews, and video cameras. The Kayapo leaders saw Altamira as a major opportunity to represent themselves, their society, and their cause to the world, and felt that the impact it would have on Brazilian and world public opinion, via the media, would be



is little surprise therefore that Turner, in documenting this process of “cultural self-conscientization and sociopolitical empowerment,” has referred to the Kayapo as the “consummate ethnic politicians” (1991: 309, 311). Through a self-conscious dramatization of their culture the Kayapo have been able to mobilize world support and attention for their struggle and in so doing convert ethnicity itself into a powerful symbol of resistance. Hence, while ethnicity may be oppositional by its very nature, the Kayapo along with others are using it to articulate and defend rights that national governments refuse to recognize.<sup>6</sup>

Is it possible, however, for groups identifiable both objectively and subjectively as *mestizo* to make use of the same ethnic politics as the Kayapo have? And if so, what strategies will be employed to differentiate them as ethnically distinguishable? And which element of the three available —Indian, African, or European— will be selected as the most prominent and meaningful? And what will determine this choice, and once having been made, give it legitimacy and authority? And finally, what are the historical reasons for such ethnic manifestations? Is it simply as Sollors claims that ethnicity is “the acquired modern sense of belonging,” replacing all others in an attempt to reestablish the ties

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more important than the actual dialogue with Brazilian representatives that transpired at the meeting itself (Turner 1991: 307-08).

<sup>6</sup> Stutzman has also witnessed this shift from ethnic victim to ethnic resister among indigenous peoples of Ecuador, claiming that: “Ethnicity as a cultural system stands in implicit judgement of the expansionist state... Ethnicity protests against the larger national situation, not by struggling to take over or overthrow the state apparatus, but by refusing to be deceived by the definitions of contemporary realities that the controllers of the state are promoting in the name of national development” (1981: 47, 73). Urban and Sherzer (1991) also present various examples from throughout Latin America of this rapidly changing national-indigenous discourse. And finally, it is important to note Cohen’s observations that it is a shift in political theory itself that has transformed our notions of ethnicity:

Democratic theory and ideology has shifted to include both individual and group rights. In this sense, ethnicity has been legitimized in political theory, making it a means not only of anti-alienative, diffuse identity but also a means of asserting one’s rights in a political community in which ethnicity is a recognized element. This being so, ethnicity is not just a conceptual tool. It also reflects an ideological position claiming recognition for ethnicity as a major sector of complex societies and points the way to a more just and equitable society (1978: 402).

of community (1989: xiv)? Or are these ethnic choices "nesting hierarchies," temporary perches from which to assess and redefine new social relations and hence tools of empowerment and resistance (Cohen 1978: 395)? All are questions one must ask when visiting Caicara, a small, uniformly *mestizo* farming community in the easternmost state of Monagas where a celebration known as El Día del Mono, or Day of the Monkey, has been used to assert the singular "Indianness" of its participants' pasts. For the Day of the Monkey may not always have been an indigenous celebration and, according to some Caicareños, was very likely not even known by that name. If so, it may be an irony of this festival's current elaboration, that in seeking to establish its purity of origin, it has underscored its own syncretic invention. And instead of creating solidarity through this ethnic construction has merely given voice to the many competing interests which this celebration had once sought to unite.

### **Santo Domingo de Guzmán**

Like most of Monagas's first towns, Caicara was established by Capuchin missionaries for the express purpose of settling Indians into one location where they could be both converted and put to work. But historians and local residents are unable to agree as to when exactly this occurred. Some put the date as early as February 1728, while others claim it occurred the following year. Many, however, insist that the town was not established until April 20, 1731, for its acknowledged founder, Father Antonio de Blesa did not even arrive in Venezuela from Puerto Rico until January of that year. When an official seal was designed for the community, the debate was resolved by displaying all three dates with equal prominence (Chitty 1982: 85-87; Ramírez 1972: 12-28).

The Indians, who Father de Blesa was continually chasing after, were from various groups. There were Pariagotos, Coacas, Cores, Karíñas, and most numerous of all, Chaimas. Carib-speakers like the others, the Chaimas inhabited a territory spreading from the coastal Turimiquire range to the mesas overlooking the Guarapiche River, the site where the new community was to be placed. The town's official name was Santo Domingo de Guzmán de Caicara, and it was Santo Domingo, the patron saint, who was said to have saved the town soon

after its founding.<sup>7</sup> As various accounts, both written and oral, tell it, a large group of Indians had gathered at the outskirts of the village and were preparing to overrun it in the middle of the night. Yet as they approached, they were stopped by the image of a huge figure in gleaming armor seated on a horse with sword drawn. By his side was a snarling dog. So startling was this image that the Indians fled in fear. To confirm what had happened, they returned to Caicara the next morning. Finding the village asleep, they timidly entered, arriving at last at the Church. When they entered, they found a statue of Santo Domingo with his dog and immediately recognized that a miracle had happened. The date was August 4th and from that moment on was celebrated as the official Patron Saint's Day of Caicara.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Caicareños are equally divided over the origin of the name Caicara. Some claim it derives from an Indian chief named Caicuara while others say it comes from an indigenous, yuca-like plant called caracara. The British botanist Robert Schomburgk wrote that "Kaikara" was a native term for the three stars in Orion's belt (cited in Ramírez 1972: 11). But the most thorough study of the term was done by Juan José Ramírez who concluded that, while it is impossible to ever be certain, Caicara is probably a Carib-derived word meaning "Ceiba creek" from *cai*, or ceiba (*Bombax sp.*) and *cuara*, "creek" or "brook" (1972: 9-11).

<sup>8</sup> Most Caicareños seem capable of recounting at least some version of this story. For the most fanciful written account, see Ramírez (1972: 71-73) in which he not only identifies the Indians as Pariagotos but names various chiefs. The following version was told to me by María Maita de Guevara in 1990:

That was when Caicara was founded, after all of that. There was a church put up by the Spaniards and the bells were in front in a huge tree. One day they said the Indians were about to attack the village. And then the people were frightened and went into the church. And the people all gathered together praying to God and in the night on the 3rd of August when Santo Domingo appeared, there in the gully they call Santo Domingo. And when the warriors came in the night they saw a man mounted on a horse and a dog at the feet of the horse and a huge army and they saw how the gold and silver from his buckles and buttons glowed. And when the Indians saw that they became frightened and ran away. And they told the other chiefs: "There was an enormous army there at the edge of the village guarding it and we couldn't get by." Then the other Indians crept up very slowly. But they didn't find anything. They were frightened by what the others had told them. They didn't go any further but stayed where they were till dawn. And you know the Indians are very brave so a group of the brave Indians dared to enter the village to see what exactly had happened. They came in little by little, and among them were some of the ones who had seen Santo Domingo when he

The town grew slowly and more than fifty years after its founding still had only 400 inhabitants (Vila 1978: 97). But its location at the crossroads between larger commercial centers such as Maturín in the south and Cumaná and Barcelona in the north helped establish it as an important stopping point for mule trains and travellers. Even more important was its access to the rich farm lands of the Guarapiche valley which soon began to attract large numbers of settlers. Cotton, corn, indigo, and tobacco were the earliest crops but as farms were broken up into smaller holdings vegetables such as tomatoes, cucumbers, and cabbage became even more important.<sup>9</sup> By 1961 there were over 4,700 people living in Caicara and an equal number in the smaller surrounding

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was riding his horse. They saw the people who were in the plaza and the bells were ringing and so they went into the church and what was their surprise, their terror when they went in and saw the man who had danced upon his horse on a pedestal in the center of the altar. And they all ran out terrified. And it was from that moment on, from the apparition of Santo Domingo that the Indians became more religious. Ever since then every August 4th, the Indians come with their *parrandas* and things, dancing, to make offerings and pay homage to the church.

It should be noted that while Caicareños claim that August 4th was the date of Santo Domingo's miracle and thus the reason for their holiday, it is also the Catholic Church's official day for this saint. Known in English as Saint Dominic, Santo Domingo de Guzmán was a 12th Century monk who founded the Dominicans or Order of Friars Preachers. Born in Calaruega, Spain, he rose to prominence for his success in combatting the Albergensians in Southern France. The events described in Caicara resemble not so much Santo Domingo, however, as they do Santiago. Patron saint of both the Re-conquest over the Moors as well as the Conquest over the Indians, Santiago frequently appeared in battle to rally Spanish troops from imminent defeat. The description by Garcilaso de la Vega of Santiago's appearance in Peru — "seated on top of a white horse grasping his leather shield in one hand and his sword in the other and many Indians, wounded and dead, thrown down head long at his feet" — is remarkably similar to the accounts of Santo Domingo in Caicara (Silverblatt 1988: 176).

<sup>9</sup> The shift in crops can be attributed to a number of causes including access to markets and changing settlement patterns. Nevertheless, one important factor has been the agrarian reform movement begun in 1959 which sought the redistribution of arable land into smaller holdings. The most detailed analysis of this area's economic and agricultural history is to be found in Arzelay *et al.* 1984.

communities and *caceríos* (Ramírez 1972: 7). Almost none of them could be identified as Indians.<sup>10</sup>

Then as now, the festival cycle revolved around two main holidays, the Fiestas de Santo Domingo de Guzmán or Patron Saint's Day of August 4 and the Día del Mono on December 28. While sharing some similarities, they are in most ways structurally opposite. For if the Mono, as many of its participants claim, is an expression of all that is indigenous, the Festival of Santo Domingo commemorates the miraculous triumph over the native. During the patron saint's day, all activity emanates from the church. While there are various diversions from local rodeos to travelling carnivals, the principal events remain the mass and the lengthy procession following it in which the image of Santo Domingo is slowly carried throughout the town. In recent years there have also been enactments of Santo Domingo's miracle wherein children dressed up as Indians are first vanquished and then converted by the sudden appearance of the Saint. Throughout the celebration, the message remains the same —the triumph of order over chaos and faith over paganism. The Día del Mono, however, is an inversion of this triumph, and rather than emanate from the church begins in the small outlying communities and farms surrounding Caicara. Yet in a sense it is also a reenactment of the battle waged against Santo Domingo. Only in this version, the outcome is reversed and it is the power of the Church and state which are now defeated. Caicareños are well aware of the oppositional nature of these two celebrations. Or as one participant summarized it in a rather startling reference to an earlier conflict:

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<sup>10</sup> Caicara and the surrounding communities form an administrative entity called the Municipio of Caicara which in turn joins two other municipios to create the Distrito Cedeño. While the population for the Municipio of Caicara did not increase substantially between 1961 and 1971 (from 9,384 to 10,804), the proportion living within the village of Caicara itself nearly doubled to between seven and eight thousand. Unfortunately, it becomes more difficult after this date to obtain specific data for the village of Caicara as subsequent censuses report only the populations for the municipio and distrito. This may be an indication of how much the municipio is now identified as the town. In any case, the 1981 population for the Municipio of Caicara was 13,638 and for the Distrito Cedeño 21,909 (Arzolay *et al.* 1984: 313; Ramírez 1972: 7). A reasonable estimate is that the present population of Caicara is between nine and ten thousand. There are no statistics for the indigenous population of either Caicara or the municipio. However, in 1981 the indigenous population for the State of Monagas was 2,142, up from 515 in 1950 while less than half that first reported in 1783 when it was 5,451. The 1981 population for all of Monagas was 390,071 (Arzolay *et al.* 1984: 104, 313).

"Render unto Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and unto the Monkey what is the Monkey's."

### The Dance of the Monkey

The performance of the monkey dance is relatively simple. Sometime before dawn on the 28th of December, groups, referred to as *parrandas*, begin to gather in various parts of town as well as in the smaller, outlying *caceríos*. Most of these groups have danced together for years with names such as Garibaldo, Zanjón, Gavilán, Eufracio Guevara, and Viento Fresco. Some of these are place names, indicating the village or section of town where the group comes from, while others derive their names from famous figures, most often well-known *moneros*. Many are wearing costumes with monkey masks while some have simply painted their faces blue with indigo. Ideally, they will be led by a woman in a long flowered dress or a white *liquiliqui*.<sup>11</sup> This is the "mayordoma" or "capitana" who, wielding a large machete, keeps order amongst the group. But some are not led by women and instead have men parodying a "mayordoma," dressed in skirts with oversized breasts and exaggerated whigs. The most famous of these transvestite figures is Chilo Rojas, a seventy year-old *monero* who has been dancing for over fifty years. Like other groups, his is a mix of men and women. Yet as he leads his dancers clothed in an elegant dress with purse dangling from his arm, a young woman advances ahead, waving a banner with the group's name and the number 28 painted on it. Equally important to each group is its band, for as the *parrandas* wind through the streets on their way to the main square, they dance and sing improvised verses:

Allá viene el mono  
por el callejón

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<sup>11</sup> The *liquiliqui* is a white linen or cotton suit with a high, upturned collar. While there are various theories as to its origins, it is generally assumed to have come from the southern llanos or plains and is considered by many to be the *traje típico* or "typical dress" of Venezuela. Another important aspect of the Mayordoma's costume is a large straw hat decorated with flowers and fruit.

Abrele las puertas  
a ese parrandón.<sup>12</sup>

Arriving at different times and from different directions, the parrandas enter with a flourish, parading in front of the review stand, and then finally mounting the stage to perform. Here is each group's opportunity to display its costumes as well as the skills of its band and the brilliance of its singers' improvisations. The order of the parrandas' entrance is anything but random and although it does not remain the same each year, still retains a clear symbolic importance. In 1990, the first group to enter was the Parranda de San Pedro, a group which had not marched for several years and as Padre Freites, Caicara's priest claimed, "had required a superhuman effort to bring." In reserving this privileged position for this group, festival organizers were able to emphasize the Día del Mono's traditional character as well as its indigenous roots. For not only is the Parranda de San Pedro considered the oldest remaining group, but it is also the only one composed of Indians. It is also one of the only parrandas still organized around a small rural community in the hills outside of Caicara. Following the Parranda de San Pedro was the Parranda de Gavilán, also known as the Negros de Chilo Rojas.<sup>13</sup> As with the San Pedro group, the placement of Chilo, the oldest *monero* still dancing, was both symbolic and honorific.

But the entrance of the parrandas is not a system of ranking. Many of the larger groups, for instance, prefer to come later in the morning

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<sup>12</sup> Although improvisation is most often based on both the people and locale immediately surrounding the singer, there are popular verses which are commonly repeated each year. The one cited here is among the most famous and may be translated as:

Here comes that monkey  
down the narrow street  
Open up your doors  
to those dancing feet.

<sup>13</sup> Gavilán is the area in Caicara from which the Rojas group comes. However, they are also known as the Negros de Chilo Rojas because the group marches with their entire bodies and faces blackened. It is Rojas' contention that the use of blue indigo is a recent innovation and that formerly all celebrants were covered in black.

when there are bigger crowds gathered. With much larger bands, such groups as Garibaldo and Zanjón can also remain on stage much longer. Yet eventually each is replaced by the next and leaves the stage to be swallowed up by the mass of revelers that has been steadily growing since dawn. It is this much larger group, uniting both the public and the parrandas, which is doing the monkey dance. Spiralling and swaying back and forth, long lines of dancers are whipped about, hanging desperately onto the belts or shirrtails of those in front. The leaders of these long columns swing belts which they periodically use on any bystander they happen to see. At times they crouch down, leading the dancers in difficult hopping motions while at other moments they move so quickly that shirts are torn through the mere effort to hold on. Others drink from skins of wine and rum or carry paint cans of blue indigo used to splatter anyone they might pass. From the stage come warnings against ripping clothes or other rowdy behavior. Yet by dusk, the plaza is entirely filled with an increasingly chaotic and inebriated mass of dancers. And then as suddenly as it started, the groups begin to drift off one by one, and the festival, without any pomp or ceremony, fizzles to an end.<sup>14</sup>

It may be difficult to imagine at first glance what this apparent free-for-all has to do with the indigenous traditions preceding the arrival of the Spaniards. Without the focus of a recognizable ceremony or the central image of a saint, the celebration seems improvised and undirected. And indeed, my own impression of the dance when I first saw it in 1983 was that of an "anti-festival." Yet many Caicareños are quick to insist that the Day of the Monkey represents the same ritual behavior that Carib-related peoples of this area have practiced for hundreds if not thousands of years. As evidence, they point to the style of dancing, claiming that while Europeans hold hands and move in pairs, indigenous peoples, in a more collective manner, form long lines. They also point out that the musical form is a *marisela*, derived from the traditional Carib or Kariña *mare mare*, and that the instruments used

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<sup>14</sup> For the last several years, festival organizers have held a large dance on the evening of the 28th in order to raise funds for the celebration. These dances, with *salsa* or *merengue* groups brought in from either the capital or Puerto Ordaz, are held in a large hall where an admission fee is charged. Because of this dance, the Mono usually winds to a close between six and seven o'clock.



are of predominantly native origin.<sup>15</sup> The *ciriaco* and the *conch*, the pan-flutes and the maracas, all of them are the same played by the original inhabitants of the area. A further indication of the dance's indigenous origin is the use of face paint, even if somewhat chaotically applied. But the most important link connecting this dance to an Indian predecessor is the figure of the monkey itself. For underlying all of this activity is the widely held belief that the dance is actually a harvest celebration honoring an ancient simian deity. As one young man explained it:

It happens that the monkeys protected the harvests that the Indians here in Venezuela had, basically corn, which originated here in Latin America. The monkey was the one that frightened the birds away from the harvest. The birds would drive those monkeys crazy. And so this is what happened. They turned the monkey into a god. In gratitude, the Indian made him a god. And they would dance. *El Baile del Mono*. The Dance of the Monkey. You know how the monkey swings from branch to branch in single file. And the monkey dance ... the monkey walks holding on to the tail of the monkey in front. And so that's the way the Caicara monkey dances. Understand? Because the Chaima Indians from here used to participate in that harvest. And we're "*culturistas*," followers of the Caicara culture. And we're not going to let anyone from outside come in here and change our tradition.

And yet another person insisted that while the dance was indeed a harvest festival, it was directed toward the God of Rain:

Look, señor, this is a story that comes from generation to generation. The Monkey goes back to the beginning of Caicara ... *Caicuara*. Caicuara, the name of the Indian cacique who founded Caicara, before the Spaniards came. Yes, this was an Indian village. And they used to dance the Monkey. But not

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<sup>15</sup> For more on this slow, liturgical music sung in quatrains and most commonly identified with the Kariña or Carib Indians of Venezuela's eastern plains, see Acosta Saignes (1952), Carreño and Vallmitjana (1967), Corradini (1976), and Domínguez and Quijada (1969).

for entertainment. They danced to the God of Rain. This was their God of Rain, the Mono. And every twenty-eighth of December they would dance to him, asking for rain. That's why ... I don't know if this is your first time here or if you'll believe this, but that's why people say that on the twenty-seventh, it's bright and sunny. But on the twenty-eighth when it dawns, it's usually overcast and grey. Because this was a rain dance. Well, this is what we know from what we've been able to read.<sup>16</sup>

What explanations such as these resolutely deny is that the Day of the Monkey might also share its origins with an African or European past. And yet it is not difficult to discern how elements from these cultural traditions have also contributed to the festival. In fact, in many ways, it is the African and European influence which initially impresses the observer. The parrandas with their marching bands, waving banners, and masked dancers are much closer to the African-derived Carnival tradition from nearby Trinidad than anything that existed among Venezuela's native peoples. In fact, as Corradini correctly observes (1976), indigenous dance was usually circular and inward, unlike the parranda style with its long lines moving from place to place. Such claims are also supported by Chilo Rojas who recalls the former importance of black musicians and dancers and the African songs they would bring:

Yes, they came from outside. There were lots of blacks who arrived here from Guiria [near Trinidad] because I remember

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<sup>16</sup> The narrator is speaking metaphorically or at least referring to fictive historical texts, either indigenous or colonial, when she claims that "this is what we know from what we've been able to read." Nevertheless, since the publication of Ramírez's *Remembranzas Caicareñas* in 1972, many authors (including Abreu 1984; Méndez 1978; Pérez and Bermúdez 1978; Guevara 1974; Salazar ND; and Zuloaga 1990) have subscribed to the view that the Día del Mono "has to do with ancient rites staged to increase the growth of corn, cotton, and other garden harvests. For this reason we can detect a magical base, which is even more undeniable when we remember that these dances were also characteristic of the Cumanagoto who lived from gathering fruit and fishing" (Ramírez 1972: 59). At the same time, it should be noted that Hernández and Fuentes 1992, Ontiveros 1960, and Pollak-Eltz and Fitl 1985, who are all from Caracas, have written that the festival is not of indigenous but rather European origin.

that black preparing his dancers (“*negritos*”). They would sing a chant. He’d come out with a chant and say to them:

Jalé tamba  
gongo tó

And the dancers would respond:

Bamba cailá

Then

De mi  
Bamba fe menor

And the dancers:

Bamba cailá

... the *negritos*, I remember them as if I were seeing them right now, understand? Which means there’s an origin to that. That black came here with his thing from some place else.

In addition, it is possible that even the long bamboo *ciriaco*, that emblem par excellence of “Indianness,” may be traced back to an origin in the West African *carángano* (Hernández and Fuentes 1992: 96; Méndez 1978: 11; Ramírez 1986: 60).<sup>17</sup> Yet equally if not more pronounced than these African influences is the relationship of the festival to one of Europe’s oldest Church celebrations —the Day of the Holy Innocents.

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<sup>17</sup> A simple cordophone played with sticks and an inflated pig bladder filled with seeds, the *ciriaco* is found in various parts of Venezuela and is also known as a *marimba*, *tarimba*, *guarumba*, *guasdua*, and *carángano*. While Ramírez claims *carángano* is a Mandingo word (1986: 60), Aretz cautions against ruling out an indigenous origin for this instrument as well (1967: 117).

### The Feast of Fools

Known also as Childermas, the Day of the Holy Innocents was established to commemorate King Herod's slaughter of every male child in Bethlehem under the age of two. While the Bible gives no date for this event, the early Church Fathers established it as December 28th, thereby associating it with the four-day Roman Saturnalia concluding the year. In many parts of Europe, it was considered the unluckiest day of the year and was commemorated by giving children (in order to remember Herod's deed) a sound thrashing (Hatch 1978: 1157). Called Cross Day in Ireland and other parts of the British Isles, it was an inauspicious day in which altars were draped in mourning and no major event, such as a wedding or coronation, ever held. A more common tradition did not punish children but rather elevated them into a position of power. It is quite likely that this latter custom began in abbeys and monasteries where the youngest cleric or nun was placed in charge for the duration of the holiday. This inversion was soon to spread, however, into a more generalized burlesque of all power. In England and France, young boys were chosen to be bishops with all the authority that position entailed (Mackenzie 1987). In Belgium, children locked up their parents, requiring them to pay a ransom before they could be freed. But it was not only children who joined in these games. Peasants, women, and other disenfranchised groups took advantage of this holiday to not only assume power but to mock it. What was once the unluckiest day of the year was now the most absurd, and so the 28th of December also became known as the Feast of Fools.

The Church, it should be noted, did not appreciate becoming the target of its congregants' humor, and as early as the seventh century began an active campaign to prohibit it. But it would be nearly a thousand years before the Feast of Fools finally began to disappear in Europe (Bakhtin 1984: 77).<sup>18</sup> In the New World, however, it had

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<sup>18</sup> Such were the 'feasts of fools' (*feſta ſtultorum, fatuorum, follorum*) which were celebrated by ſchoolmen and lower clerics on the feaſt of St. Stephen, on New Year's Day, on the feaſt of the Holy Innocents, of the Epiphany, and of St. John. Theſe celebrations were originally held in the churches and bore a fully legitimate character. Later they became only ſemilegal, and at the end of the Middle Ages were completely banned from the churches but continued to exiſt in the ſtreets and taverns, where they were abſorbed into carnival

already taken hold, and in countries like Venezuela was extremely widespread. There the 28th of December was a type of April Fools' Day in which newspapers ran false headlines, wives put salt in their husbands' coffee, and children were sent on pointless errands. The names of objects were also changed. Rum might be called "water" and the flag, "dishtowel." In the coastal towns of Barlovento entire "governments of women" were set up, parodying male authority with absurd decrees and other acts such as crossdressing. While in the highland communities of Lara, masked figures known as Zaragozas danced through the streets behind miraculous images of the Holy Innocents' massacre. And in Caicara workers from the outlying *haciendas* paraded into town, singing and dancing in the homes they passed, until finally arriving in the plaza where the landowners had set up tables covered with liquor and food. At least this, according to some accounts, was the way the Día de los Inocentes was celebrated until around 1925.<sup>19</sup>

It was at this point, elderly Caicareños say, an innovation in the dance occurred. Indians arriving from the community of El Cerezo suddenly grabbed onto each other, forming a long line of hopping figures. One man, who claims to have witnessed the event, says it was in fear of getting separated from one another. In fact, Jacinto Guevara says it was Balbino Blanco's daughter Veronica who first clutched onto her father, giving the dance its distinctive step. It was at this point that a bystander, perhaps Celestino Palacios, screamed out, "Allá viene el mono." "Here comes the monkey." Although he meant it derisively, others took up the dance, and within several years, it was the only step being done.

While Chilo Rojas also insists that the Monkey Dance is a recent innovation, he remembers its origins somewhat differently:

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merriment and amusements. The feast of fools showed a particular obstinacy and force of survival in France. This feast was actually a parody and travesty of the official cult, with masquerades and improper dances (Bakhtin 1984: 74).

<sup>19</sup> For more on the Day of the Holy Innocents tradition in Venezuela, often referred to by its Andean variation of Locos or Locainas, see the sources from which the examples included here are derived, González (1991), Hernández and Fuentes (1992), Lecuna (1985), Pollak-Eltz and Fitl (1985), and Salazar (ND).

How did that begin? There was a family around here named Palacios who lived around El Cerezo. They lived up around the Rio de Oro. Okay, and on the Calle de la Casualidad there was a man named Jorgito Taylor who had a business. And he sold *ponsigué rum, rum*. A Mr. Peña Guzmán lived over there as well. And Félix Díaz. And those people, because that was the main street here, the Calle de la, de la ... That was the town ... the Calle de la Casualidad!

Okay, they, well, they began to drink rum over there. That was an enormous family that Palacios family. Incredible. There were, no shit, at least fifty. And they were living in the farmworkers' camp. There are still a few old guys living over there on Calle Tracadero. They began to drink rum, and they bought a *carafe* of rum. They're an enormous family. And so they began to drink rum. And the old man said, "Hell, whoever doesn't leap from there to here, doesn't get a drink!"

They were all over there crowded into the middle of the street. I was just a kid then, around 17 years old.<sup>20</sup> And so they began coming. One would leap and grab onto the bottle and take a drink and then stay in front. And then the next. And they started in with that and before you know it they were just about at Félix Díaz's corner with the *carafe* of rum. They went on grabbing one another and then they really got going with that. They grabbed onto one another's belts. Jesus! They belted one another. They'd jump, grab the *carafe*, take a drink of rum, and keep on going. No shit, they took over the whole street. They held onto one another's belts and just kept on dancing. And monkey, by God! And drinks, no shit ... And I took off my own belt because that stuff ... That's the problem.

And that's the way the monkey began. But they didn't dance the monkey before that. I remember ... Look, it's as if I were watching it today.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Rojas was born in 1920 and so must have been a good deal younger if this was the late 1920s.

<sup>21</sup> In another statement concerning the recent invention of the Monkey Dance, Rojas was even more candid in his disdain. This statement also explains Rojas's belief that formerly all participants painted themselves black, hence the alternative name for both his group (the *Negros de Chilo Rojas*) and the festival (*Día de los Negros* or "Day of the

What is clear from these multiple versions of the festival's origins is that Caicareños do not agree as to what the celebration represents. For even upon hearing the first-hand accounts of such respected elders as Jacinto Guevara and Chilo Rojas, many still claim the festival has absolutely nothing to do with the Day of the Holy Innocents. Even the official state historian Juan José Ramírez has chosen to ignore these sources and instead construct an origin based on the uncorroborated account of a single eighty-two year old man. In it, Balbino Blanco also appears, but the year is 1895 and it is to honor Santo Domingo that he revives the ancient Monkey Dance beneath a giant ceiba tree in front of the church. What is interesting in this depiction is that Ramírez also reports interviewing such elders as Jorgito Taylor and Domitila Campos Guzmán who both insist that there was no Monkey Dance. What did exist they claim was a simple *Maremare*, performed annually as part of the Holy Innocents celebration (1972: 62-63).

In order to understand these conflicting claims, it is important to see who is making each of them. Those stating that the Monkey Dance was simply a craze, taking over in the 1920s and eventually silencing any reference to the Day of the Innocents, are predominantly older people with strong ties to Caicara's agricultural past. However, those insisting that the Day of the Monkey is a completely indigenous celebration, with no link whatsoever to any European or African tradition, are for the most part, young men who have left Caicara in order to study or work. For this group, which continues to grow with the changing face of Venezuela's economy, the Day of the Monkey is

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Blacks''):

The 28th of December? The Day of the Holy Innocents, and that's that! Day of the Blacks. It was later that ... My thing is black. Simple. That, that's not indigo. They never used that here. Here they used kettles from the store or grills ... Here it is (referring to the soot).

Día de los Negros, Día de los Santos Inocentes. They didn't talk about Monkeys. That stuff about monkeys they invented. Like now, if I grab that drum and we say, "Shit, let's invent the dance of the rooster, the dance of such and such." And we go out dancing some thing, hopping around.

Because of Rojas's belief that the current Día del Mono celebration is a corruption of the earlier holiday, he has refused to take his turn performing on stage as all other groups do when they enter the plaza.

a homecoming celebration, or as they themselves say, "un día de retorno." It is on this day, conveniently situated between Christmas and New Years, that every Caicareño, no matter where he or she is, will make every attempt possible to return to the village. Such sentiments are strongly reinforced by the many lyrics now incorporated into the dance welcoming these Caicareños home. The following example, credited to María Maita de Guevara, is but one of many:

Caicareño si estás lejos  
 vente corriendo el 28  
 no importa que tú  
 /estés viejo  
 o tu burrito está mocho

Caicareño if you're far away  
 come running on the 28th today  
 it doesn't matter if  
 /you're old  
 or if your burro's lame

Caicareño, si no vienes  
 es porque no eres de aquí  
  
 tú sabes que el mono tiene  
 muchas cosas para ti

Caicareño, if you don't come  
 it's because this isn't  
 /where you're from  
 you know full well  
 the monkey has many  
 /things in store for you

For those returning to *la Patria Chica*, or "the Little Country," as it is sometimes called, the dance is a symbol of identity, distinguishing them from (rather than joining them to) a larger national tradition that continually threatens to engulf them. The "Indianness" of the Day of the Monkey therefore is the quality of being native and rooted. It is the ability to localize the no longer local. Or as a young dentist dressed as a priest, who was also a Caicareño living in the Andes, claimed:

For me the monkey represents the beginning, the essence.  
 Why? Because it's my identity as both a Caicareño and a  
 native of this community.

The use of "native" here ("*indígena*" in Spanish) is intentionally ambiguous. It indicates that he is native because he does the dance and a Caicareño because he is native. The fact that since the 1920s "indigenous" aspects of the festival have been selected as the most characteristic and meaningful is no doubt a response to the socio-economic changes that have been occurring throughout this area. It is



little surprise therefore that the appearance of the Indians dancing in from El Cerezo should coincide with the sudden appearance of another band of strangers —Standard Oil of New Jersey, who at the same moment was drilling its first wells in Monagas.

### The Sultan of the Guarapiche

Although well below the oil extracted in the westernmost state of Zulia, Monagas is still one of Venezuela's main oil-producing areas.<sup>22</sup> The effect upon the economy of this state has also been tremendous. It is significant therefore that Jesús Guevara begins his monograph on the Mono, *Sobre las huellas de El Mono* (1974), with an analysis of the impact the oil industry has had upon Caicara and other rural communities in Monagas. After describing the original irresistibility of working in the nearby oil fields, he tells of the tragic results when mechanization arrived and this new labor force was suddenly unemployed.<sup>23</sup> Unable to return to their former agricultural work, they soon became part of a growing underclass in such exploding urban centers as Caracas and Puerto Ordaz. What is particularly revealing is the illustration Guevara includes in his study to dramatize this process. It is a picture of oil fields and refineries with a long row of hopeful *campesinos* (identifiable by their straw hats) entering them. One of them has his hand raised as if to signal "onward." Yet on the other side is the same row of men (now wearing hardhats) coming out. Instead of *campesinos*, they are now workers, despondent, unemployed, and with their hands in their pockets. Above this whole scene and filling the sky is the God-like figure of the Mono, arms outstretched in an embrace of the entire landscape (Guevara 1974: 7). The symbolism of this image

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<sup>22</sup> In 1981 Monagas was responsible for 7.8% of the total oil produced in Venezuela which is a tremendous amount for a nation whose foreign exports are 80% oil dependent. Almost all the remaining oil comes from the Lake Maracaibo area of Zulia (Arzolay *et al.* 1984: 249-77).

<sup>23</sup> The main part of this irresistibility was the fact that in the 1920s when Standard Oil first arrived, farm workers could increase their salaries from 30 cents a day to \$2.50 or more (Guevara 1974: 5). See Arzolay *et al.* for a well-documented analysis of the shift in Monagas's population from rural to urban. In 1950, the population was 42.5% urban and 57.5 rural. By 1981 this ratio had shifted to 66.4% urban and 33.6 rural. Their estimate is that by 2001 the ratio will be 85.1 to 14.9 (1984: 73).

is both powerful and clear. The oil industry has been a factory for the production of urbanism, unemployment, and destabilized social relations. And in such a world, it is tradition alone (and particularly that of the Mono) that can hold these various disintegrating elements together.

The illustration reproduced by Guevara indicates another powerful explanation for why this festival suddenly became a celebration of indigenous values and what exactly those values signify. For in addition to being native, as suggested above, the "indigenous" is also being used to indicate an edenic pastoral past which no longer exists. It is a reminder of another festival and another era in which the dancers did indeed come from the surrounding *haciendas* and *caceríos*. They were *campesinos* who worked the land and used the festival as an important occasion to join together on an annual basis. Yet today the parrandas almost all come from the town and are largely composed of urban workers who return simply for this day. As the man who claimed the Mono was a celebration of his "nativeness" also admitted:

The San Pedro Parranda is the only native one left that comes from outside. The others now are all from town, and they're like us. We're *mestizos*, but they aren't.

If it is true that the Mono is being used to invoke the memory of another, less-industrialized reality, then it is one which many Caicareños insist was a much more prosperous one for their town. Caicara before 1920, before the arrival of cars and the oil industry, was still a rural hub for traders and travellers, a town with restaurants and hotels, none of which it now has. As Freddy Natera, a long-time Caicara resident said:

Look, Caicara was even more important than Maturín [the state capital]. Caicara had an ice plant. It had a soda bottling plant. Caicara de Maturín, that's what it was known as. And why? One simple reason, it was the agricultural capital of Monagas.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> A more probable explanation for why Caicara is referred to as Caicara de Maturín is to distinguish it from Venezuela's other Caicara which is located in the state of Bolívar and known as Caicara del Orinoco. In terms of the importance of Maturín in relation to other Monagas communities, it is not simply the site of almost all manufacturing done in the state but in 1981 was the home of 58% of Monagas' 390,000 inhabitants (Arzola *et al.* 1984: 313)

Chilo Rojas was even more emphatic in recalling the glories of this former golden age when Caicara serviced the needs of the many campesinos and traders who depended upon it:

It was an amazing town, filled with activity. Caicara had so much ... Maturín was a pigsty compared to Caicara. And on the weekends ... even the president of the state would come to spend his weekends here. Because Caicara was so important! Caicara had a tobacco shop, which Maturín didn't, two shoemakers, four or five sandalmakers [*alpargaterías*]. It had saddle and harnessmakers where they even made buckles. It had a blacksmith. It had four soapmakers. It had cotton gins, corn mills, four or five corn mills. And the first soda bottling plant, where was it? Right here in Caicara de Maturín. "La Libértico..." Caicara had everything and now it has nothing. Look, now there's not even a single store to buy a handkerchief in. In a town that had more than a hundred shops!

But economic realities are always bound to social ones and if the "Indianness" of the Mono celebration is being used to indicate an era of pastoral plenty and well-being, it also resituates the participants who wish, at least for the day, to recover that reality. In this sense, "Indianness" may be seen as a classic instrumental use of ethnicity to restore relations which have been ruptured or destabilized.<sup>25</sup> It

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<sup>25</sup> It is worth noting Bentley's (1987) discussion on the difficulties of categorizing ethnicity as either instrumental or primordial, and particularly his warning against interpreting the motives of individuals' actions based on their results:

In ethnicity studies this meant that if ethnic groups act in ways that appear strategically advantageous, then strategic advantage must be the *raison d'être* of those groups; if ethnicity increases in visibility during times of disorienting change, then it must be because people seek in ethnicity an emotional refuge from change. The theory of practice avoids this fallacious reasoning because it does not identify the systemic consequences of collective action with individuals' intentions (1987: 48).

In relation to these observations, it must be noted that there are other interests, political and economic, which are achieving strategic advantage through the promotion of the Mono's purportedly unique indigenous status. As the Mono gains more national attention, tourism increases along with government grants and stipends for those

resuscitates the memory of a forgotten "tribe" long dispersed throughout Venezuela's various urban centers. It creates distinctions where distinction has been lost and makes Caicareños unique among all others. Or as Caicareños continually proclaim about their Mono: "It has nothing to do with the Día de los Inocentes or any other holiday, because the only place where it is danced is here."<sup>26</sup>

What is fascinating about the way the Mono has been used to express this new ethnicity is that those who identify with it most closely do not consider themselves Indian, nor for that matter black or European. They are *mestizos*.<sup>27</sup> Hence, not only do they see themselves

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promoting the festival. Along with such financial support can come an important power base. And indeed, both major political parties, COPEI and Acción Democrática, have their own culture centers with their own parrandas.

<sup>26</sup> It is in this sense perhaps that ethnicity may be seen as a modern response to the loss of distinction formerly provided by regional identities as defined by local or 'vernacular' economies. With the absorption of these communities into national and even transnational realities, a host of creative cultural responses have arisen of which ethnicity is one of the primary examples. Sollors articulates this idea well when he writes:

Ethnicity is not so much an ancient and deep-seated force surviving from the historical past, but rather the modern and modernizing feature of a contrasting strategy that may be shared far beyond the boundaries within which it is claimed (Sollors 1989: xiv).

<sup>27</sup> The representation of Indians by non-Indians is to be found in numerous other celebrations in not only Venezuela but throughout the Americas. In nearby Ipure, for example, *mestizos* regularly perform a dance known as the *Culebra* or "Serpent" which is said to derive directly from Chaima mythology. And in Tostos, in the Andean state of Trujillo, the appearance of the Virgin of Coromoto is celebrated by a pageant in which local residents dress up as natives and parade through the streets playing flutes and other indigenous instruments. It is not only *mestizos*, however, who take on this Indian identity. In the Día de los Inocentes celebrations of Barlovento, an Indian figure known as the "messenger" or "runner" acts as the mediator between opposing groups of black women and men. Blacks also take on the identity of Indians during the Corpus Christi celebrations in Barbacoas, Colombia where as Friedemann explains:

Since the group has been pushed back to the headwaters of the rivers, the Indians no longer come to Barbacoas. However, in recent years the blacks in the riverport have been symbolically representing the Indians who formerly participated in this celebration (1976: 293).

as unrelated to the members of the San Pedro Parranda, which is composed of Indian-descended campesinos, they also see no contradiction in the fact that their performance of the Monkey Dance is in many ways unrelated to that of the group championed as both the oldest and most authentic. For the aspects they claim make the Day of the Monkey an indigenous celebration are generally absent from the San Pedro presentation. Instead of dancing in long lines with each person holding on to the one in front, the San Pedro performers dance in couples or as many would say, "European style." And even more significant is the absence of any reference whatsoever to the supposed Monkey God. Masks, when they do appear, are fashioned from simple gourds. More common are the large straw hats from whose brims are hung colored ribbons and on whose tops are placed fruits and flowers. Coupled with the skirts of dried banana leaves, these dancers evoke images of fertility and nature. It is the same image Jacinto Guevara recalls when describing Balbino Blanco and his dancers from El Cerezo in the 1920s:

With Balbino all you could see was his hat. That's all. A straw hat all covered with wild flowers piled on top.<sup>28</sup>

But Caicareños are not disturbed by such discrepancies. While they claim that the Day of the Monkey's "Indianness" is supported by such traditions as the collective style of dance, the instruments and whips, the face paints, and the reverence for the monkey itself, it is not

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An even more elaborate example of blacks assuming Indian identities is to be found in New Orleans, where during Mardi Gras and St. Joseph's Day, "tribes" of local African-Americans parade through the streets in sequined and feathered costumes that have taken all year to prepare (Lipsitz 1990).

Such ethnic-crossdressing may also go the other way as Bricker has demonstrated among various Mayan groups in Chiapas, Mexico. Here, during Carnival and Holy Week, dancers regularly impersonate blacks, Jews, whites, and even monkeys (1981). Indians also dress as whites in various Ecuadorian San Juan celebrations, and in Peru during Qoyllur Rit'i, highland groups take on the identity of Amazonian tribes who are called "ch'unchos" or "savages" (Sallnow 1987). What is clear from this small sampling of an almost endless pool of examples is that in the festive language of inversion and conflict, ethnicity is as important an expression as any other.

<sup>28</sup> See Abreu (1984) for a discussion of what he claims "divides the parrandas into two types, the country and the town parrandas." While stating that each has "its own sense of the monkey [*sentimiento monero*]," he still insists that "the purest expression of this ritual dance is to be found in the country parrandas" (1984: 132-33).

'authenticity' as normally defined that gives it its real authority. In fact, it may be an irony of this insistence on local, indigenous culture that the most important validation is that derived from both national media and the state. Without the historical depth or textual and artifactual records of a festival like San Juan, the Día del Mono has had to legitimate itself through other means.<sup>29</sup> This 'folklorization' process has taken a number of forms, all reiterating the same 'objective' claim: that "the Mono is Eastern Venezuela's greatest folkloric treasure." In fact it is this identical expression that has been used by one author after another to describe the festival (Abreu 1984; Pérez and Bermúdez 1978; Ramírez 1972, 1988; Zuloaga 1990). It is also the phrase used to announce one's arrival in Caicara. For at the town's entrance is an enormous billboard with a monkey on it, accompanied by the following message:

Está llegando a Caicara	You are entering Caicara
Tierra del Mono	Land of the Monkey
Máxima Expresión	Maximum Folkloric
Folklorica del Oriente	Expression of the East
Salud Amigo	Welcome Friend

Such sentiments go well beyond the simple rhetoric of civic pride or commercial promotion. They have become part of the vernacular which Caicareños employ to locate the festival and hence themselves. Or as one member of the Parranda de Zanjón put it: "On the 28th of December in Caicara, all roads lead to the Monkey, which is the Rome of tradition and the Mecca of Eastern Folklore ... The Monkey is the

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<sup>29</sup> The earliest written record I discovered of the celebration of the Día del Mono in Caicara was the 1960 article by Benigno Ontiveros. In this description of the event as witnessed by him in 1953, he makes no mention whatsoever of any indigenous connection, stating simply that "it is of genuine Spanish origin" (1960: 302). Only with the publication of Ramírez's *Remembranzas Caicareñas* in 1972 does a written tradition linking the Día del Mono to an indigenous past begin. However, like Zuloaga (1990), Ontiveros does mention an undated colonial document in which Bishop Díaz Madroñero condemns such dances. It is not clear though whether the "monkey dances" the Bishop refers to are those associated with Caicara, for he simply denounces "Diabolical dances commonly referred to as fandangos, sarambeques, monkey dances and other such things in whose execution groups or teams of men and women continually offend most gravely Our Lord God" (Ontiveros 1960: 301).

Sultan of the Guarapiche.” Frequent statements such as these reflect the way in which an officializing discourse has been transformed into the common language of shared perception. The strategies through which this has occurred are a complex blend, mixing elements from almost every media. One of the most significant of these is that of public art, discovered not simply in the billboard at Caicara’s entrance but on the walls throughout the town.

If it is the case that the Día del Mono can not be confirmed through any historical or written evidence, the murals which now line Caicara’s streets may be said to provide this textual record. Created over the last fifteen years, these murals tell the history of the festival, aggressively asserting both its traditionalness and its “Indianness.” Paintings commissioned by individuals, parrandas, political parties, cultural organizations, and commercial interests, such as rum companies, provide an inventory of the festival’s diverse elements. The most common of these images is that of the monkey, either its body contorted in dance or a portrait of its head. Many paintings, however, simply depict the instruments or a bowl of indigo with the image of a blue hand next to it, while others show famous costumes such as that of Perucho Arcilla and his twins. Yet there are also more complex ones such as the tableaux of parrandas being led through the streets behind the leaping figure of a monkey playing a cow’s horn. Almost all of these images are accompanied by messages, exhorting participants to “take care of your monkey,” to “maintain your tradition,” or to “defend your cultural identity.”<sup>30</sup> Together these paintings form a body of knowledge, a catalogue on walls detailing exactly why the Mono is such a unique and important tradition.

The culmination of this complex public text, which has been added to year after year was the erection in 1990 of an official “Monument to the Dance of the Monkey.” Designed by José Roca Zamora, a Caicareño now living in Puerto La Cruz, it was placed at the end of the main square opposite the Church. Standing on a pyramid-shaped base, the monument depicts a two-headed monkey atop a twenty-foot high

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<sup>30</sup> Certain slogans often contain more explicit political messages referring to current issues of national concern. When in the late 1980s for example, such messages began to appear as “The hour has come to end the centralization of power,” the Monkey Dance was being used to comment on the national debate over whether to popularly elect governors and municipal officials.

column. On one side the monkey is smiling while on the other he is frowning. Sculpted into the concrete column are the dance's most emblematic symbols —the instruments, the belts, the cans of indigo paint, handprints, the number 28. While many Caicareños have expressed disappointment with the statue, insisting it is either too phallic or looks too much like an ape instead of an indigenous monkey or simply was too expensive, the monument remains a source of pride, an affirmation once again of Caicara's specialness as the only place in Venezuela where this festival takes place. It is also an important passage into what Hobsbawm claims is one of the principal ingredients in the invention of new traditions. For the establishment of "an alternative 'civic religion' " demands the creation of new sacred spaces in the form of public monuments (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983: 269).<sup>31</sup>

While the billboard, murals, and monument were generated from within the community, or at least in collaboration with its members, there are many forms of legitimation that come from without. Such recognition has been extremely important in confirming claims of authenticity. The fact that radio stations regularly transmit the holiday throughout the state or that television and film crews come to record it, is proof that the Mono exists as a unique folkloric entity. Similar importance is attached to both national and regional folklore festivals in which parrandas from Caicara have occasionally participated. To be invited to perform beside such well-established groups as the Sanjuaneros of Curiepe or the Tamunangueros of Lara is recognition in itself of the special status of the Mono tradition. Members of the community are conscious of this and can easily cite the events at which *moneros* have danced and even won awards. They also cite with mixed pride the names of performers, both national and international, who have adopted the Monkey Dance for commercial use: the Orquesta Típica de Venezuela, Billo Frómata and his Caracas Boys, the Dominican *merengue* star Wilfrido Vargas, and Yolanda Moreno, the dancer who Guevara claims is now a "capitana" (1974: 26). Each of these is but

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<sup>31</sup> Hobsbawm claims that in addition to monuments, public education and public ceremonies are the other features critical to the invented traditions of the new nation state (1983: 271). It should also be noted that Caicara's "Monument to the Dance of the Monkey" is not the only one dedicated to a folkloric celebration in Venezuela. In 1993, the town of San Francisco de Yare erected a statue to the Diablos of Yare, famous for the special devil dance performed during Corpus Christi.



one more demonstration of the undisputed place of the Mono as “a national folkloric dance.” Even my own presence as an anthropologist was converted into a symbol of authentication. If it was worth being studied it must be real. Singers would frequently comment on my presence in their quatrains. And announcers, whom quite often I had never met, would repeatedly acknowledge me from the stage:

Welcome to the anthropologists from everywhere. Because today we have an anthropologist with us from the United States ... forgive me if I can't remember from where ... An anthropologist who has come all this way to be here for the great folkloric expression of the Mono.

This modern sense of authenticity as bestowed by either the media or academic recognition is regularly parodied by a group of performers dressed as a television crew. Despite the fact that their camera is made of cardboard and their microphone an inverted beer bottle, it is difficult to tell at first glance that the three men dressed in blue coveralls with official identification tags are not from a national television network. As they move through the crowd conducting mock interviews, they never once break character. Although comic, their message is also very serious. It announces that the Mono is a momentous folkloric and cultural event and hence must be documented and studied. For those participating in the festival it dramatizes precisely those elements which the Mono is performed to evoke. Here play is put in the service of the real work of creating an identity which only the weight of authenticity will sustain. It is an identity where symbols are collapsed together and the construction of ethnicity so tightly wound around the town of Caicara that to be “Indian” and Caicareño are the same. For in the end it is neither race nor work nor ethnicity that unites these dancers but rather a sense of place. And while it is this sense that distinguishes the Monkey dancers, if just for an instant, from a larger national identity, it is only by linking the festival to this greater reality that such sentiments can be achieved.

The “Indianness” of the Mono, however, is not simply an oppositional strategy used to distinguish one group of *mestizos* from another. It is also a powerful symbol of subversion which, when joined to the anti-social character of the monkey, succeeds in redefining the Día de los Inocentes in a way which is indeed unique to Caicara. Like

every Feast of Fools celebration, it maintains inversion as its most important element, mocking all symbols of authority and power with equal abandon. Yet it does so in a way that evokes Caicara's own history. Now, more than 260 years after its founding, the Indians succeed in overwhelming the city. They finally triumph over Santo Domingo and the power of the Church he represents. And what is most significant is that they do so in a way that is indeed Carib, that celebrates the triumph of nature over culture and elevates above all that most enduring symbol of anti-culture, the monkey.

The anti-clerical nature of the Día del Mono is clear of course to many of the celebrants as well as to the Church itself. However, if the Church was able to suppress the holiday in Europe, it has been unable to in Caicara. Instead it has tried to appropriate it as best it could and has instituted a special open-air mass to "*los moneros difuntos*," "the dead monkey-dancers." But the transparency of this strategy has fooled few. And as one *monero* stated:

The Monkey's a challenge to the Catholic Church, and if they say a mass to the departed dancers ... Look, the Catholic Church with all its stuff, with its intrigues, may accept the Monkey. But what is the Monkey? The Monkey is a manifestation of before ... a manifestation so great that the people just overwhelmed the church. And so the church realized this. Okay, and they used that old saying, "If you can't beat them, join them."

It is here that Caicara's history of Spanish-Indian conflict is wed to the traditional ecclesiastical subversion common to all Feast of Fools celebrations. Yet the inversion is not that derived from Europe's rigid monastic orders or courtly aristocracies, inversions characterized by the weak and disenfranchised being given temporary power. Instead it is the inversion of a world where hierarchies are barely visible and festive reversals are signalled not by parodying political or class distinctions but rather by turning culture itself on its head and allowing nature to overrun it. Such celebrations can still be found today among Carib groups in Venezuela. In the *Wasai yadi ademi hidi* festival of the Yekuana, for example, travellers who have been away for long periods of time indicate their inverted status by dressing as forest spirits. Clothed in palm skirts and headdresses, they dance into the community

only to be attacked by those who have remained behind. Similar costumes are also worn by the Pemon as they perform the *Parishira* ritual in order to summon the wild boar. Here dancers are transformed into wild and dangerous animals who suddenly pounce on those who sit apart holding bows and arrows (Guss 1977, 1985, 1989). It is in traditions such as these perhaps that the true Indianness of the Day of the Monkey is to be found. Not in the long line of dancers clinging to one another's shirttails nor in the memory of some long lost simian diety, but in the specter of chaos which only the monkey, with all his anti-social pandemonium, is able to conjure.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> For a discussion of the role of the monkey as a Carib symbol of anti-culture par excellence, see Guss 1989. For an interesting comparative view of the monkey's symbolism in another cultural context, see Ohnuki-Tierney 1987. One should also consult Abreu (1984: 124) and Guevara (1974: 10) for further evidence of the strong anti-clerical sentiments to be found in the Día del Mono celebration. And finally, an interesting study of the manner in which inversions are determined by social structure is to be found in DaMatta's comparison of Carnival in Rio de Janeiro and Mardi Gras in New Orleans (1991).



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