

Notes from the Field

CARNAVAL MIXTECO



Cover (crop): Carnaval Mixteco in a parade for Mexican Independence Day on Staten Island.
Below: Mother and Daughter Carnvaleras wearing traditional braids and face coverings.



*Text by Folklorist Violeta Palchik
informed by conversations with members of
Ñani Migrantes and Barranca Salada*

*Photography by
Cinthya Santos-Briones*

Our Folklife Program is currently working with community members to document traditions of the Carnaval Mixteco. This project, known as El Por Qué Del Carnaval (The Why of the Carnaval), aims to represent the diverse and varied explanations for the Carnaval Mixteco's rituals and customs as a reference for future Mixtec generations here in the US and to increase awareness for outsiders. These traditions were strong and thriving on Staten Island before the pandemic, when this project was

conceived of. Unfortunately, the social nature of the Carnaval has made it difficult to continue during the pandemic, but the community looks forward to continuing these traditions again soon. In the meantime, let us give you a sneak peak into the work we have been doing and tell you a bit about these traditions.

Mixteco is both a language and a people known as Ñuu Savi, or People of the Rain. They are the third largest indigenous group in Mexico, with many traditions based around the natural environment, herbology and



Putting in traditional Mixtec braids.

agricultural customs. The Carnaval Mixteco is an expression of the traditions of the Mixtec people in conversation with Catholicism, colonialism, migration, and the sociopolitical climate of their hometowns.

Carnaval Mixteco is a celebration based on ridicule. Carnavaleros are free, on this day, to express things they would not normally express. Hence, face coverings and costumes allow the participants a kind of social freedom. Traditions came about from the travels of migrant workers to port towns where new music, dress, and goods were



discovered and tongue-in-cheek customs of ridiculing Colonial masters were developed. The dances mimic those of the colonists, with bows and curtsies. Men wear formal suits that have been redecorated. Women wear their traditional Mixtec braids. A Rooster is sacrificed. Some revelers dress as the Pope. Others as political figures. It is social commentary in an artistic fashion.

Above: Many men redecorate old dress clothes to create their personalized costume.

On Staten Island, much of the Mixtec community comes from the town of San Jeronimo in Puebla, Mexico, where every year Carnaval celebrations take place not only in each neighborhood, but also in the central plaza. Each neighborhood has its own distinctive style of dress, song (known as Sones) and dance. On Staten Island, some of these styles have merged as members have come together from different neighborhoods to recreate the festivities of home. Currently there are about 3 larger Carnaval celebrations on Staten Island, taking place in public gardens and recreation halls. Each celebration is an amalgam of traditions of various San Jeronimo neighborhoods.



Scary costumes and trickery are essential components of the Carnaval.

Many of the Carnaval participants were not the primary tradition bearers back home. There were others, many of them say, that *really* knew the dances, the rituals, etc. on a deeper level. However, upon arriving in the

United States and finding that those leaders of the Carnaval were not present, they realized they would have to teach themselves how to continue the traditions.



Carnaval has its roots in mockery of Spanish colonists. Below: Bowing in traditional Carnaval style.



As a group, piecing together the memories of the Carnival traditions, calling family and relatives, community members began to create a new version of the Carnival here on Staten Island.



This is an ever-evolving project of re-connecting with cultural heritage and ancestral knowledge whilst utilizing the resources available in this new home and passing it all on to the next generation. This project will continue to document this communal knowledge as it continues to unfold.



Above: The Carnaval band plays the songs for dancing.



Staten Island Arts Folklife is supported, in part, through public funds from the New York State Council on the Arts with the support of Governor Andrew M. Cuomo and the New York State Legislature, the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs in partnership with City Council, the National Endowment for the Arts, and Con Edison.

