

# Venezuela Dances to Devilish Beat to Promote Tourism

The New York Times  
June 12, 2007

SAN FRANCISCO DE YARE, [Venezuela](#), June 7 — Wearing blood-colored costumes and devilish papier-mâché masks that would make a gargoyle grimace, hundreds of worshipers disguised as demons danced through the streets here Thursday in one of Venezuela's most exalted religious rituals.

An Afro-Venezuelan tradition in parishes near the country's Caribbean coast since the late 18th century, the "Dancing Devils" have received support from President [Hugo Chávez](#)'s government as they seek to raise awareness about Venezuelan folklore and promote new forms of tourism.

This small town, founded in 1718 by slaveholders who controlled nearby cacao and sugarcane plantations, now attracts thousands of visitors each year on the Roman Catholic feast day of Corpus Christi. They watch the devils writhe to drumbeats in a ritual described by residents here as a dance of cultural resistance.

"There are many stories of how this originated, but we know it was above all a way for our ancestors to take part in the life of the church," said Pablo Azuaje, 57, the "capataz," or overseer, of the dance.

Historians and [anthropologists](#) who have studied the Dancing Devils said similar traditions existed in medieval Europe and could still be found in countries like Bolivia and Mexico. In small Venezuelan parishes, and even in Caracas until the end of the 19th century, the Dancing Devils evolved into symbols in the struggle of good versus evil.

Here in Yare, as this town south of Caracas is commonly known, the devils dance around the plaza before resting at the entrance to the whitewashed church. After morning Mass, they succumb in an act of submission before the Eucharist, the representation of the body and blood of Christ in wafer and wine, before dancing throughout the town with stops for prayer at dozens of altars.

Rafael Strauss, a historian who has studied the Dancing Devils in several Venezuelan communities, said they had their roots in efforts by slaves, ostracized by a rigid colonial caste system, to have an important role in religious life. Once reprimanded by church officials, the devils have come to be tolerated and eventually celebrated.

“The Dancing Devils of the 18th century differed little from the reggaetón performers of today,” said Mr. Strauss, author of the book “The Devil in Venezuela,” referring to contemporary dance [music](#) with explicit sexual overtones that was popularized in Puerto Rico before spreading elsewhere in Latin America and the United States.

While a prohibition against men and women dancing together has persisted in the Dancing Devils, continuing a tradition which began when the ritual was considered overly sensual, Mr. Strauss said the dance had evolved since Venezuela outlawed slavery in 1854. Though only blacks take part in some small villages, people of varying ethnicities dance in the larger towns like Yare, which boasts the most prominent Dancing Devils ritual.

By promoting the devils, largely through advertising, Mr. Chávez’s government is following the example set by Rómulo Gallegos, the novelist who was Venezuela’s president in 1948 before his overthrow in a coup. The devils gained national renown when Mr. Gallegos’s government brought them to perform in Caracas, part of an effort to call attention to folkloric traditions at a time when climbing oil revenues were modernizing the country.

“Now we’re trying to create a tourism of inclusion,” said Teorgeena Pérez, the tourism coordinator for Yare, explaining how encouraging visitors to sleep in the homes of the dancers and the town’s other residents fits within Mr. Chávez’s push of “endogenous development,” a poverty-eradication effort intended in part to foster economic growth in neglected communities.

Indeed, red is not only the color of the devils’ clothing, but also of the hats and T-shirts, decorated with pro-Chávez slogans and the initials of his Socialist party, worn by many of the people who came here to watch the dance and sell their wares to other visitors.

“This is a beautiful day for us to do business and see something new,” said Irma Romero, 55, a member of the Pioneers of the Resurrection Cooperative, a Caracas-based group that manufactures clothing and receives financing from the Communal Economy Ministry to market its products at cultural events around the country.

Officials with the state of Miranda, which encompasses Yare and is governed by a close ally of Mr. Chávez, handed out pamphlets that listed the surnames of the families that once owned slaves here and described in detail the origins and characteristics of the Dancing Devils.

Those taking part in the ritual seemed blissfully oblivious, at least for a day, of the polarizing political changes sweeping Venezuela, like Mr. Chavez’s creation of a single Socialist party for his followers. Others dressed in red were employees of Brahma, the brewer that sold copious amounts of beer on Thursday to visitors from Caracas and other cities.

With small crosses made from palm fronds pinned to their shirts, the devils sweated and danced into a trancelike state before resting at midday for a meal of mondongo, a soup made with slow-cooked beef tripe and pigs’ feet. Then they continued their dance into the afternoon.

“I’ve spent all my life devoted to the devils,” Juan Vicente Morgado, 53, one of Yare’s leading mask makers, said in his workshop, where dozens of masks hung on the walls. “It’s one of those things in life in which we look into the grotesque in order to find something positive.”