

# Cultural Knowledge in the Traditional Dances of Las Ánimas, Guerrero: A Perspective on Symbolic and Community Transmission

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## Abstract

*This article analyzes the cultural knowledge expressed and symbolically transmitted through the traditional dances Los Gallitos and Los Diablos Rojos in the community of Las Ánimas, Guerrero. Using a qualitative and ethnographic approach, the study examines how these ritual expressions contribute to socialization, collective identity, and community education. Through semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and visual documentation, four key analytical axes were identified. The results reveal that the dances not only preserve ancestral elements but also function as pedagogical, political, and social tools in contexts of cultural transformation driven by hegemonic globalization. The three groups studied maintain a strong relationship of identity, harmonization, socialization, and connection with their ancestors. It is concluded that these dances represent living spaces of symbolic resistance, strengthening the social fabric and reinforcing the sense of belonging, making their preservation fundamental for sustainable development and the cultural continuity of rural communities.*

**Keywords:** *cultural knowledge, traditional dances, identity, community education, worldview.*

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## INTRODUCTION

Culture constitutes a dynamic set of knowledge, practices, symbols, values, and forms of organization that enable different social groups to establish a shared identity and actively participate in their community [1, 2]. It is expressed not only in social codes but also in material objects and symbolic creations that people recognize as their own [3, 4].

Among the multiple forms of cultural expression, traditional dances stand out as aesthetic manifestations that also fulfill essential functions in socialization, community education, identity affirmation, respect, and the reproduction of the social fabric [5]. These practices not only transmit historical narratives but also embody values, beliefs, and collective norms that structure everyday life [6].

In rural and indigenous communities, dances acquire particular importance as a means of narrating the past, projecting the present, and constructing a collective future [7]. They serve as mechanisms of non-verbal communication, in which the body, gesture, rhythm, masks, and costumes become vehicles for intergenerational transmission of knowledge, worldviews, and systems of coexistence [6].

As Bonfil [8], points out, dances originating from subordinated cultures, such as Indigenous and Afro-mestizo groups, are the result of a complex ritual and magical elaboration, embedded in different belief systems that are updated in festive contexts. This perspective contrasts with the hegemonic Western view, which has historically relegated these practices to a secondary or merely folkloric plane [9].

Furthermore, these practices reinforce the sense of belonging and loyalty to the group, consolidating historical memory and territorial rootedness—factors that are essential in contexts of increasing globalizing pressures [10]. Orality, gesture, and bodily expression play a key role in this symbolic reproduction of identity [8].

Dance thus becomes a privileged space where communities communicate their worldview, build social bonds, educate younger generations, and preserve their intangible heritage [11]. At the local level, these practices allow communities to cohere around shared symbols, generating belonging and cultural continuity [12].

Therefore, the study of traditional dances not only contributes to their documentation and valorization but also to their recognition as living heritage, informal pedagogical agents, and drivers of community development [6]. In the current context, their analysis becomes urgent in light of the challenges posed by cultural homogenization and the loss of ancestral practices [8].

Consequently, the aim of this article is to analyze the cultural knowledge expressed and symbolically transmitted through the traditional dances Los Gallitos and Los Diablos Rojos in the community of Las Ánimas, Guerrero, recognizing their role in processes of socialization, collective identity, and community education.

## **MATERIALS AND METHODS**

The research was conducted using a qualitative approach based on the ethnographic method, since the objective was to understand the symbolic forms of transmission of cultural knowledge within festive-ritual contexts. This method made it possible to directly observe, interpret, and record the cultural practices that bring traditional dances to life in their original context, paying attention both to their material expressions and to the meanings shared by the community.

For this purpose, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 26 key members of the community: (a) Dance masters (maistros): cultural leaders responsible for organizing and directing the dances, regarded as central bearers of ritual knowledge. (b) Active dancers: participants who embody symbolic characters within the dances and reproduce collective knowledge through body movement, gestures, and attire. (c) Observing community members: individuals with long-standing presence and roots in the community, whose perspectives provide insights into the evolution, appreciation, and meaning of the dances over time.

To understand the preparation of the dance prior to its performance, participant observation was carried out during rehearsals and during the staging of the dances at local festivities, recording key aspects such as intergenerational interaction, non-formal teaching-learning processes, organizational rituals, and the bodily expression of the characters.

Finally, a visual and field record was carried out to document elements such as costumes, masks, musical instruments, and symbolic scenes, complementing the narrative and discursive information with photographic records and descriptive notes.

All the information collected was analyzed through thematic coding of the testimonies and field notes, organized into four main axes: Symbolic transmission of cultural knowledge, which encompasses the implicit knowledge embedded in gestures, costumes, choreographies, and characters, as well as their relationship with the collective imaginary.

Rituality and worldview, which examines how the dances express conceptions of the world, good and evil, the sacred and the everyday, within a ritualized narrative structure. Collective identity and historical memory, which analyzes the role of the dances as a vehicle for cultural affirmation, community belonging, and generational continuity.

Community education and socialization, which explores how the dances function as traditional pedagogical mechanisms that teach social roles, values, norms of coexistence, and a sense of rootedness. This methodology reveals that the traditional dances of Las Ánimas are more than festive representations: they are living spaces of cultural knowledge transmission that articulate identity, education, and symbolic resistance to processes of sociocultural change.

## **RESULTS**

The dancers and the maestros unite for a common purpose, performing their roles according to the characters they are meant to represent through their image and the spectacles they deliver while dancing. The characters form the structure and defining features of the dances for their performance (Figures 1 and 2).



**Figure 1.** Members of the dance “Los Gallitos” or “Pollitos”.



**Figure 2.** Participation in the dance “Los Diablos Rojos los Traviesos.”

The analysis of interviews and ethnographic records revealed that the traditional dances of Los Gallitos and Los Diablos Rojos play an essential role as devices of symbolic transmission, deeply rooted in the worldview, values, and collective memory of the community of Las Ánimas, Guerrero.

### **1. Symbolic Transmission and Cultural Socialization.**

The data show that dance constitutes a living means of intergenerational communication where knowledge is transmitted not only verbally, but also symbolically and performatively. Gestures, costumes,

music, dialogues, and choreographic movements express historical and communal knowledge that has

Dances	Responses
<b>They like the dances performed</b>	They help celebrate the community's existence; they provide entertainment for young people; they reflect rural and social life; they teach organization; they convey positive messages and contribute to social integration.
<b>What they like the most</b>	Costumes and musical pieces, organization, coordination, jokes during dancing or resting (atmosphere of companionship), costumes, ornaments, instruments that belong to the community, acceptance, and representation of rural and community life.
<b>Feeling part of the community when watching a dance</b>	Yes, because there is identification when dancing; people integrate with all their senses, share tastes, give acceptance and support to the dance and dancers; the dances come from the ancestors, preserving culture whenever they are performed.

not been codified in documents but circulates as oral and bodily heritage. The participation of children and young people in rehearsals and performances demonstrates the socializing function of the dances, as informal pedagogical mechanisms that teach roles, norms, and values.

This dimension is reflected in the responses presented in Table 1, where the community expresses how the dances reinforce the sense of belonging, social cohesion, and appreciation of traditional values.

**Table 1.** Relationship and attitudes of the population regarding the dances.

## 2. Construction of Identity and Cultural Citizenship.

Interviewees pointed out that the dances allow them to reaffirm their belonging to the community while functioning as a ritual of collective recognition. Symbolic characters such as La Malincha, El Diablo Mayor, or El Negrito not only represent traditional roles (housewife, head of household, authority figure) but also serve as archetypes through which participants interpret and update cultural narratives of gender, hierarchy, resistance, and everyday life.

This symbolic appropriation is documented in Table 2, which highlights the personal and collective identifications that dancers and spectators establish with the characters represented in the dances.

**Table 2.** Identification of the characters of the dances with the population.

Character/Element	Cultural Significance
<b>Black Devil</b>	She represents power, transgression, and historical resistance. She is a central figure thanks to her costume and lines.
<b>Devil Alone</b>	Striking female character, associated with public attention and the role of women in society.
<b>La Malinche</b>	A maternal figure, a caregiver. She symbolizes the role of women in the rural household.
<b>The little black boy</b>	Father of a family, he represents the protective role in the rural environment.
<b>Symbolism</b>	The dances reflect the duality between good and evil, and convey social norms and values.

## 3. Ritual Function, Worldview, and Historical Memory.

In their ritual dimension, the dances allow for a deeper reading of the local worldview. The narrative of Los Diablos Rojos, for example, incorporates elements of moral duality (good/evil), subordination, and redemption, which refer both to popular religiosity and symbolic representations of oppression and resistance. On the other hand, the dance of Los Gallitos revalorizes rural life, communal work, and family organization. Both rituals serve as living archives of historical memory, as evidenced in the narratives collected in Table 3.

**Cuadro 3. Identificación de los personajes de las danzas con la población.**

Dances	Responses
<b>Meaning of Los Diablos Rojos</b>	The dance is a ritual dedicated to the spirit of the god Ruja, represented by the Black Devil, to whom they prayed for help to free themselves from harsh working conditions;

	hence, he is invoked with respect and reverence at the beginning of the dance.
<b>Meaning of Los Gallitos</b>	It represents the purity of children participating in the dance, symbolizing livestock rearing and its care, represented by a couple: El Negrito (the father) and La Malincha (the housewife), both protecting against the hawk and the fox.
<b>Preferred characters in Los Diablos Rojos</b>	The Black Devil, as he is the main figure, with striking costume and speeches; also La Diabla Sola, the center of attention with casual clothing; and the Diablo Raso, who plays pranks on the people.
<b>Preferred characters in Los Gallitos</b>	La Malincha, represented by a woman as the housewife, a character reflecting daily life.

#### 4. Dances as Agents of Cultural Development and Social Cohesion.

The testimonies collected highlight the role of dances in reproducing social values such as respect, teamwork, solidarity, discipline, and intergenerational integration. These aspects are manifested during rehearsals, the organization of festivities, and interactions between dancers and spectators. The dances act as mechanisms of cohesion that stimulate citizen participation.

Moreover, the continuity of these practices positively influences local development by offering young people identity-based and recreational alternatives, as reflected in Table 4. The loss of these expressions would entail a rupture in the transmission of customs, weakening community ties and diminishing the cultural richness of traditional celebrations.

**Table 4.** Dances and their relationship with ancestors and culture.

<b>Dances</b>	<b>Responses</b>
<b>Do the dances say something about the ancestors?</b>	Yes, because they represent the life of the ancestors—their organization, concerns, and celebrations. They show that both elders and youth danced and shared through the dances.
<b>The loss it would cause</b>	There would be a disconnection with ancestors; authorities would lose ties with villagers; new generations would not know ancestral customs; festivities would become boring; people would seek other forms of identification.
<b>Preserving the dances</b>	Important for the continuity of customs; they represent traditions lived in festivities; they provide enjoyment for the population; they are representative of regional narratives; they are ancestral practices that transmit joy and convey social messages.
<b>Contribution to local development</b>	They transmit values of togetherness, integration, and identity; when performed elsewhere, they create reciprocity and strengthen relationships with neighboring towns; they provide recreation and prevent young people from falling into drugs or alcohol.



## DISCUSSION

The findings of this research reaffirm that the traditional dances of Las Ánimas, Guerrero, operate as complex symbolic systems that condense and transmit cultural knowledge in a performative, communal, and intergenerational manner [6]. From an anthropological and educational perspective, these practices are not only festive-ritual aesthetic expressions but also function as true devices of socialization, memory, and cultural resistance in the face of modernization and globalization processes [13, 14].

To understand these processes, it is necessary to distinguish between the concepts of culture and identity [15, 16]. While culture constitutes a structure of meanings embodied in symbolic forms through which individuals communicate [17], identity is a socially constructed narrative formed through recognition and identification with those meanings. As Anderson [18], points out, both culture and identity have a spatial representation that enables the socialization and revalorization of local customs and traditions.

In this sense, Leyva (2010) affirms that culture has defined who we are and where we come from, constituting a way of life that gives meaning to collective development [19]. Identity is thus an active process of loyalty, reciprocity, and belonging, as Bonfil [8], stresses when noting that peoples have the right to decide over their own culture. Dances, as collective symbolic expressions, materialize this capacity for decision-making and individual reproduction [20].

One of the main contributions of this research is the recognition that dance acts as an alternative cultural language through which knowledge about local history, social roles, norms of coexistence, and worldview is transmitted [8]. As Sarka Munsí [20], suggests, symbolic actions such as dance should not be viewed as a mere reflection of culture but as cultural texts that can be read and interpreted to understand social structures [21].

Furthermore, the organization of the dances and their intergenerational transmission demonstrate an educational model based on situated learning [22], where knowledge is not formally transmitted but rather through shared experience, observation, and active participation in meaningful cultural contexts [23]. The figure of the maestro or dance leader, for example, serves as a symbolic mediator between generations, ensuring the continuity of cultural knowledge [6].

Another relevant aspect is the role of these expressions in affirming cultural citizenship [24]. The dances allow individuals not only to recognize themselves as part of a community but also to exercise cultural agency through the recreation of traditions, the reinterpretation of characters, and the updating of symbolic content [25].

The ritual dimension of the dances, particularly Los Diablos Rojos, refers to symbolic structures of resistance that can be interpreted as mechanisms of historical reinterpretation [16]. The character of the Diablo Mayor, for instance, represents a form of symbolic inversion of power, in which oppression is satirized and exorcized, constituting a clear process of cultural re-signification [6]. This not only strengthens identity but also contributes to the collective construction of historical memory [26].

On the other hand, dances such as Los Gallitos reveal an affective pedagogy that brings into play values such as care, respect, cooperation, and rootedness [6]. These elements are fundamental for the reproduction of the social fabric in rural contexts, where collective spaces of coexistence are increasingly threatened by migration, urbanization, and cultural homogenization [27, 28]. The family representations in this dance reinforce the symbolic transmission of social roles [6].

Finally, the results also show that dances have a tangible impact on local development [29, 30]. By acting as mechanisms of social integration, risk prevention (such as addictions or loss of belonging), and the promotion of emotional well-being, the dances contribute to strengthening community cohesion [31]. This perspective is linked to the approach of sustainable cultural development, which recognizes culture as a transversal axis in transformation processes [32].

In sum, this research demonstrates that traditional dances should not be considered isolated folkloric elements but rather living spaces of symbolic resistance, educational transmission, and identity affirmation that must be recognized, documented, and strengthened from an intercultural, critical, and participatory perspective [6]. Safeguarding these expressions implies a collective responsibility involving both community actors and institutional spaces [16].

## CONCLUSIONS

The analysis of the cultural knowledge transmitted through the traditional dances Los Gallitos and Los Diablos Rojos in the community of Las Ánimas, Guerrero, allows us to affirm that these manifestations are not mere folkloric expressions, but complex symbolic systems that fulfill essential functions in community life.

The dances function as mechanisms of intergenerational transmission of knowledge, values, and worldviews that enable the cultural reproduction of the community. Through their bodily, musical, and ritual language, ancestral practices are preserved, strengthening collective identity and reinforcing the sense of belonging.

It was also demonstrated that the dances constitute spaces of non-formal learning, where social norms, family roles, gender relations, and hierarchical structures are taught. The active participation of children, youth, adults, and elders evidences their role as an articulating axis of community socialization.

In a context increasingly threatened by cultural homogenization, migration, and the loss of traditions, these dances emerge as acts of symbolic resistance that revitalize intergenerational bonds, historical memory, and the right of communities to preserve, recreate, and decide over their own culture.

From a local development perspective, the dances contribute to strengthening social and cultural capital, fostering community cohesion, healthy recreation, and the prevention of social risks. Therefore, their preservation must be considered a key strategy for the sustainable development of rural communities.

Finally, it is concluded that the institutional and academic recognition of these cultural expressions is fundamental to ensure their continuity, strengthen the cultural autonomy of communities, and highlight their symbolic richness within the national and intercultural framework of the country.

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