

Gigantonas, Nicaragua's Giants

One of the most colourful and engaging traditions of Nicaragua exists in the city 'León Santiago de los Caballeros', a colonial city founded by the Spanish on the North west pacific coast of that country. There can be found Gigantonas (female giants) and Enanos Cabezones (Big-headed Dwarves), processional figures that are a result of the mixing of indigenous and Spanish cultures.

In November and December of each year the Gigantona emerges onto the streets accompanied by its retinue of Enanos, magician raconteurs of couplets, drummers and lantern bearers. In May of each year the Enanos Cabezone has a day of its own to celebrate when teams of youngsters compete to see whose team of Enanos and magicians can perform the best and with the aim of winning one of the prizes on offer.

The Gigantona is a giant puppet figure representing the Spanish lady in all her power and splendour and majesty, her imposing stature demonstrating the power of the Spanish over the indigenous peoples. The Enano Cabezón in turn represents the indigenous people, short in stature, it's large head signifying that despite the imposition of foreign power by colonisers that the local people are intelligent, capable of developing themselves as individuals as well as their country.

In construction the Gigantona has a carved wooden head mounted on a substantial cross beam from which wooden struts radiate downwards leaving space for the gigantonero. By comparison the Enano is made with a 3 foot diameter head formed from bamboo or willow covered in painted cloth. Below the head comes a short body and legs where a shoulder frame and suit disguise the bearer.

Typical of the groups engaged in supporting this tradition is the youth group Viva León Jodido. The youth group celebrates the cultural traditions of the city through processions of the Gigantona. Children participating in these events create their own dance routines and prepare couplets which can be recited on the day of a public performance. Typical of these couplets is the following prepared by Gema Perez Gómez on behalf of her Enano called Paquito:

Muy buenas tardes señores
Les presento a Paquito
Al más galán y al más bonito
Es del barrio el Laborío y les
Baila con mucho cariño
Complaciendoles a los presentes
Y la risa de todos los niños.

A very good afternoon sirs
I'd like to present Paquito
At once the most galant and best looking
Of the barrio of El Laborio and who
Dances with great care
Pleasing all those present
And a smile to all the children.

Yo quisiera ser un dios
De esa que aman la Naturaleza
Para adorarla eternamente
Con amor y mucha fuerza
Para admirarla todas las noches
Del oriente al occidente
Para contarles a los presentes
De la importancia del medio
ambiente.

I would like to be a god
Of those who love nature
So to adore eternally
With a love of great intensity
To admire every night
From the East to the West
To tell those present
The importance of the environment.

The work with children participating in these events has demonstrated the need to source funds from outside Nicaragua since local and national government is unwilling or unable to provide the necessary funds to enable these events to take place. In response to this need the organisation Nicaragua Education Culture and Arts Trust was founded. The group doesn't limit itself just to cultural work but aims to offer a programme of projects for the children, helping them to develop in terms of their self-esteem, human relationships and education as well as helping them to occupy their free time in sport, art, music etc. Every weekday afternoon in two barrios in León groups of children have met to reinforce their learning at school and to develop their skills as artists and pupeteers. There the children are supervised by suitably qualified teachers and are supported by volunteers from Nicaragua, the USA and UK.

Funding for the gigantona processions and learning reinforcement program is thanks to the solidarity and support of individuals and groups, in the US and Europe, who have raised the necessary finance for the work to be done. By undertaking sponsored events, through individual donations and by seeking support from philanthropic trusts it becomes possible to support the children in gaining the experience of their national culture and folklore whilst developing themselves as educated and self-sufficient individuals.

Those who wish to support the work should contact the Nicaragua Education Culture and Arts Trust representative in León, Gioconda Pérez Arosteguí at leonlink@ibw.com.ni . Viva León have a web presence at www.ciag.org/nicaragua.