



# Exploring Culture and Identity through Folk Dance Costume

by Susan Eleuterio

Knowledge about folk dance costume in the United States exists within an odd juxtaposition. On the one hand, these costumes seem very familiar to many teachers, students, and families because of cultural heritage days at schools, multicultural festivals, and stage extravaganzas such as “River Dance.” Yet, there exist few research studies or work that specifically acknowledges costumes or their explicit role in the culture and identity of those who design, make, and wear dance costumes.

For decades, historians, ethnographers, and folklorists, along with representatives of cultural groups themselves, have used folk dance costume as a symbol of identity, while neglecting to look past its beauty and sometime “exotic” appearance. An exception is Don Yoder, who wrote: “Folk costume is that form of dress which (1) outwardly symbolizes the identity of a folk community and (2) expresses the individuals’ manifold relationship to and within the community” (1972:296). Examining the materials, designs, symbols, colors, patterns, along with the goals of the makers, and the beliefs of those who wear it, can provide a methodology for exploring history and folk culture.



## In the Classroom

The first step in this exploration of folk dance costume is to examine symbols, design, colors, sewing techniques (such as embroidery), hairstyles, and accessories. What clues do these provide to cultural history and beliefs?

Next, students will want to dig even deeper into how the dancer feels, what the seamstress or tailor thinks, and how the costume fits into larger issues of representation. What would thoughts and feelings tell us about cultural identity?

*How could you and your students learn more about the answers to these questions?*

The two examples provided next are snapshots of two hyphenated American cultures: Irish and Mexican, which together make up nearly 30 percent of Americans.<sup>1</sup> In both dance traditions, there are solo dresses as well as company dresses (and for males, outfits). Studying these costumes reveals that every decade has its own unique history, and there are continuing changes in how costume is designed, who makes it, who wears it, and what accessories, hairstyles, and makeup accompany it. Thousands of young people all over the United States study Irish, Mexican, and other folk dance genres, so the study of costume may tap local knowledge and highlight students’ traditions.

## Irish American Step Dance



Photo courtesy Sandy Campbell

This dress, worn by Brigid Campbell (Comer) in 1997 as a member of the Trinity Irish Dance Company in Chicago, is a traditional Irish American step dance costume design based on the *brat* and *leine* style costume with Kells/Celtic embroidery (Robb 1998:9). This costume dates to the Gaelic revival in Ireland, when after years of British rule, the Irish began to bring back old traditions and patterns that had been banned such as the *Book of Kells*, an illuminated manuscript of the Christian gospels. In addition to the designs from the *Book of Kells*, certain colors such as saffron and green had been banned as well (Robb 1998:35).

Brigid's mother, Sandy Campbell, sent the dressmaker a photo of the stained glass windows (based on the *Book of Kells* and designed by Thomas O'Shaughnessy) from Old St. Patrick's Church in Chicago as inspiration and the colors of the dress reflect traditional Irish colors of green, blue, and white. The *brat*, which looks like a cape here, was a cloak, typically worn by peasants in the countryside. The *leine* was a tunic (like a dress) worn to the knees.

Brigid is also wearing a headpiece and her hair in curls, which became a tradition in Irish step dance costume in the 1960s in Ireland and the United States. Today, most Irish step dancers wear wigs rather than having to set their hair in curlers or use curling irons. Her black hard shoes, like a tap dancing shoe, are designed to make a sound like drum when she dances. In the old days, dancers would hammer nails into their shoes to add to the sound. These days, the shoes are made from fiberglass and imported from Ireland.

## Mexican Folk Dance Jalisco Dress



Mexican Folkloric Dance Company of Chicago, photo courtesy of Pepe Ovalle

These dresses, worn by dancers with the Mexican Folkloric Dance Company of Chicago (MFDC), are based on clothing traditionally worn in the state of Jalisco, on Mexico's western coast. The design of the costume reflects the influence of the Spanish and other Europeans on Mexico's traditional culture, especially the lace and ruffles. Other than the crisscrossed braids, not much reflects the indigenous Native culture. Referred to by Mexican Americans as a "modern costume," the Jalisco costume "dates from the mid-1800s to about 1910, when the female dress (in Jalisco) took on early 20<sup>th</sup>-century European fashions, mainly French" (Ovalle 2002). The Jalisco style, including the hairstyle, demonstrates the *ranchero* (rural) origins of this dress. Dona Amparo Gonzalez de Ovalle, a professional seamstress and the mother of artistic director Jose Ovalle made these costumes. While some costumes are purchased in Mexico, she still sews many of the costumes for the company.

The Jalisco dress style, with its bright colors and mix of European and some indigenous elements, is used by a number of Mexican American Midwestern *ballet folklórico* companies. Dancers use the wide skirt and ruffles to emphasize the movements of the dance steps and courtship rituals between men and women. <sup>2</sup>

MFDC founder Henry Roa, wrote: "The Company strives to promote the Mexican culture through dance and music that reflects Mexican history" (1997:np). Ballet folklórico developed as Mexico was establishing its independence and a national identity separate from Spain. In the 1950s, Amalia Hernandez founded *Ballet Folklórico Mexico*, which has influenced troupes across the United States in both its staged presentations of dance as well as in focusing on a wide range of Mexico's regional



dances and costumes. Olga Najera-Ramirez has described the efforts of Hernandez and contemporary Mexican folklorico companies such as MFDC to interpret traditional culture as residing “in where they place their emphasis along the continuum of *public spectacle* at one extreme and *preservation* of expressive cultural forms at the other” (2009:286, italics in original). MFDC continues to conduct research and purchase clothing in Mexico in their quest to present traditional forms as well as using some costumes that have become symbolic of certain regions.<sup>3</sup>



Mexican Folkloric Dance Company of Chicago, photo courtesy of Pepe Ovalle



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### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>In 2013, 11percent of Americans reported Mexican ancestry and nearly 19 percent of Americans reported Irish ancestry in 2008. “Irish American” [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Irish\\_American](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Irish_American). “Mexican American” [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mexican\\_American](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mexican_American).

<sup>2</sup> Various interviews with Hank Roa and Jose Ovalle over past ten years.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.