Carlitos and the Search for the Golden Cascaron: Continuing a Cultural Tradition

Manuel F. Medrano, University of Texas-Rio Grande Valley

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It was Easter Sunday, 1964, in Brownsville, Texas – one of the holiest and happiest days of the year. Today was our annual Easter egg hunt at my brother Joe's house. Soon, the Battle of the Cascarones (confetti-filled eggs) waged in the backyard. Plotting, pursuing, and surprise were key components of the battle strategy, and victory and recognition were its rewards. When it was over, the new Cascaron King and Queen would reign.

"Mommy! Mommy! Alex quebro un cascaron en mi cabeza. Me asusto, y me duele." (Alex broke a confetti-filled egg on my head. He scared me, and it hurts). His mother remembered her own mother's words and replied, "Carlitos, mijito, un abrazo te cura. Acercate. Sana! Sana! Colita de rana!" (Carlitos, my son, a hug will heal you. Come closer. Heal! Heal! Little tail of a frog!"). Carlitos then asked, "Mommy! Mommy! "De donde vienen los cascarones?" (Where do confetti-filled eggs come from?) His mother replied, "Pues, mijo, las historias de cascarones son ancianas y misteriosas. Hasta hay una de un cascaron de oro;" (Mommy! Mommy! Where do confetti-filled eggs come from?" His mother thought and answered, "Well, son, the stories of the confetti-filled eggs tradition are ancient and mysterious. There is even a story about a golden egg.) Carlitos then embraced his mother and said, "Ese es el que quiero hallar!" (That's the one I want to find!) Informally, A spontaneous mother-son exchange continues the oral transmission of a revered cultural tradition in a place called South Texas.

I'll admit that I am not a cascaronologist (confetti-filled eggshell expert), but then, few people are. What follows is an essay based on historical/folkloric accounts of cascaron origins and traditions. As with other cultural practices, its continuation is as crucial as its genesis.

What is a cascaron? It is an eggshell.[1] Over time, it has become an eggshell not filled with a yoke, but with other ingredients.

How does a huevos (egg) become a cascaron? First, a one-inch hole is made on the top of the egg before it is drained. The shell is then washed out and dried, painted, and filled with small pieces of colored confetti. Finally, the opening is covered with a small square of tissue paper and sealed with paste or flour.[2]

After the eggs are prepared, they are hidden in bushes, on branches, or behind the doghouse. When the children find them, they look for unsuspecting cascaron victims and crack open the cascarones above the heads of family and friends. Sometimes, cascaron battles occur with leftover eggs. Over time, as with other cultural traditions, it has evolved and remained the same.

What the original cascaron was, where it emerged and travelled, and how it arrived in the United States is based on conjecture and history. For example, there is the often-repeated story of Marco Polo travelling to China during the late thirteenth century. Supposedly, he saw colorful hollowed-out eggshells, filled with talcum powder or perfume that were given as gifts.[3] The tale is usually prefaced by phrases like "it is believed," "it appears," or "it is said." Historical/archeological research about the late 1200s, however, indicates that "eggs associated with silk

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perfume or talcum were uncommon." In early China, talcum, incense, and perfumes were used to freshen homes and clothing, but they were not in eggshells. Silk spice bags and bamboo boxes were the containers of choice.[4] Polo, however, seemed intrigued with some chickens with fur-like feathers he saw in Kenjanfu. His description of the fowl reads, "You must know they have a kind of fowls which have no feathers, but hair only, like a cat's fur," like today's Silky Chicken.[5] What Polo did bring back were items and information about Chinese life, cuisine, and inventions. Paper money, spices, gunpowder, and an efficient postal system are included in these. His accounts soon migrated to other European countries, including Spain. From there, they travelled to Spain's New World colonies, including Mexico.[6]

No historical documentation exists about Emperor Maximilian I and Carlota bringing cascarones to Mexico. These are cuentos (stories)/legends handed down as part of the tradition. Professor Norma Cantu writes that the cascaron observance is "an ancient practice rooted in Europe… The Spanish settlers likely brought the tradition… to Nuevo Santander." She adds that colorful, painted eggshells eggs also appeared in countries such as Germany and Austria where some were considered valuable.[7] Rene Ballesteros of the Museum of South Texas agrees, saying that Spanish monks and colonists brought it to northern Mexico and south Texas.[8]

References to cascarones have also been made to nineteenth century Carnavales in Mazatlan, Mexico. Festivities called Papaqui, simulated battles between rival labor groups, including throwing cascarones at the opposition. This expression is also used to describe a type of unbridled confetti egg pelting in traditional wedding receptions around Lake Chapala in Jalisco/Michoacan.[9]

Regardless of where the custom originated and how it got here, its popularity persists. Some associate it with springtime, Easter, and a time of rebirth. Sister Rosa Maria Icaza from the Mexican American Cultural Center in San Antonio once spoke about its religious significance. To her, the tomb of Jesus was symbolized in the eggshell and the confetti was symbolic of a joyful resurrection.[10]

Today, many cascarones are bought in Mexico or in cardboard crates along the backroads of the Rio Grande Valley. Part of the tradition of preparing and coloring eggs has disappeared. Some eggs are even plastic. These factory-made cascarones are comparable to tamales from the Highspanic (Hispanic) aisle at H.E.B. Furthermore, both are sold on the internet. Perdoname, abuelita (Forgive me, Grandma).

In an age of Google Pixel 9 phones and Artificial Intelligence, cascarones remain a family ritual of sharing – stories, folklore, and each other. Chasing cousins, cracking eggshells on their heads, hearing squeals of laughter, are all part of the fun.[11] Of course, there are awards for finding the most eggs and the gold-colored money egg. The day ends with a cross-ethnic comida (meal) of Tejano grilled fajitas (beef skirts) and ranchero beans, German potato salad, and pre-Columbian pico de gallo (beak of the rooster salsa).

Regrettably, Carlitos was not crowned King of the Cascarones. His seventeen-year-old cousin, Lance Gutierrez, who should have been excluded from the competition because of his age, found fourteen cascarones and the golden egg. And Carlitos, well, he and his family were well-fed, happy, and cognizant of a tradition that still brings families together under a frontera (border) sky - the celebration of the cascarones.

Endnotes

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