

Lesson Two B

MASK TRADITIONS OF MEXICO

Introduction **Organizing Question:** *What is the role of grandparents in rural communities in Mexico and how do they contribute to the transmission of cultural and historical knowledge in their communities?*

- Objectives** **Knowledge, Skills, Attitudes**
- to learn about the role of the elderly in the local governance and transmission of culture in rural Mexico
 - to study masked dance traditions of Guerrero
 - to translate a story into a drama
 - to develop cooperative skills
 - to practice making choices: deciding what age group the student would like to belong to

Spanish Language

- to learn the following vocabulary in Spanish: tiger, caiman, father, mother, parents

- Materials**
- copies of Handout 3, Age symbols
 - copies of Handout 5, Dance Masks
 - for older children, copies of Handout 6, Mask Descriptions
 - "Dedos de Luna" video
 - drawing materials
 - paper plates
 - rubber bands
 - butcher paper
 - stapler
 - paints
 - yarn
 - scissors
 - paper clips
 - videos cassette player
 - Festival Preparation Activity 1, Costumes

**Pronunciation
Guide**

el caimán (crocodile) (el kigh-MAHN)
el Consejo de ancianos (council of elders)

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<i>la madre</i>	(el kohn-SEH-ho deh ahn-S'YAHN-ohs)
<i>el muerciélago</i>	(mother) (lah MAH-dreh)
	(bat)
<i>el padre/los padres</i>	(el moor-see-EH-lah-goh)
	(parents)
<i>el pedidor de lluvias</i>	(el PAH-dreh/lohs PAH-drehs)
	(the rain petitioner)
<i>el perro maravilla</i>	(el peh-dee-DOHR deh U-vee-ahs)
	(the wonder dog)
<i>la sirena</i>	(el PEH-roh mah-rah-VEE-yah)
<i>el tigre</i>	(the mermaid) (lah see-REH-nah)
	(tiger) (el TEE-greh)

Background

Masks

Masks are worn in Mexico during festival dances, parades, and ritual celebrations. Many of the mask-making traditions of Guerrero, with their rich symbolism and elaborate techniques, have roots in pre-Hispanic civilizations, going back thousands of years. These traditions include the use of materials such as bone, leather, wax, clay, wood, clay, and stone; and precious materials like gold, jade, and turquoise—attesting to the enormous importance placed on mask-making prior to the arrival of the *conquistadores*. As pointed out by Furst, the inspiration for mask-making in Mexico has a connection to “the sacred transformational pageantry of pre-Hispanic native civilization and, earlier still, the masked dances and propitiatory magic of the shaman as transformer and mediator between the complementary and interdependent worlds of gods, ancestors, animals, plants, and man.” (Cordry, p. ix)

While the creation and use of masks in Mexico dates back to this pre-Hispanic period, there are some mask-making traditions which were introduced by the Spanish priests as a vehicle for converting the native population to Catholicism. Still others derive from mask-making traditions of the African slaves brought to Mexico during the colonial period.

Some scholars believe that Mexican masks still have a deep spiritual meaning to their wearers, who use them to express religious devotion or to personify supernatural forces. In some regions of Mexico, certain trees such as the *zompantle*—which is believed to contain powerful spirits—are still especially selected for mask making. Their wood is obtained in ritualistic ways to ensure that the spirits continue to reside in the masks, and the wearer purifies himself by bathing, fasting, and meditating before and after using a mask.

Guerrero, populated predominately by Nahua Indians, is unique for the diversity and high quality of its masks, and for the references to a pre-Hispanic heritage in its masked dances.

Masked Dances

Mexico is recognized as having one of the world's most varied and ingenious traditions of mask making. Some of the most popular of these involve the mysterious melding of animal and human representations, an adaptation of the pre-Hispanic notion of the mystical unity of humans and animals. In the dances in which these masks are used, animals are transformed from threats to human survival into powers of fertility. Two such dances are those of the *Tigre* and of the *Caimán*.

The *Tigre*, or jaguar (see mask descriptions), traditionally symbolized war in the central and southern regions of Mexico. In this dance, a wild cat that has been terrorizing the community is hunted and captured with the aid of other spirits, such as the corn man, the chile pepper, and the wind. The negative power of the *tigre* is neutralized and turned into a positive power, ensuring the fertility of crops.

The *Caimán*, or crocodile, is one of the oldest symbols in Mexico, believed by the Aztecs to hold the earth on its back. In a dance similar to the *Tigre* dance in meaning, the *caimán*, is transformed from a creature which threatens the lives and livelihood of the villagers into a symbol of abundance and good fishing.

Another festival in which masks are used is the Day of the Dead on November 1 and 2, which honors the deceased members of the community with altars and offerings. On these days, people come to terms with their own mortality, making fun of death and embracing it in a lively celebration. The festival is also a tribute to life, with prayers said for the safe birth of children and dances performed to ensure the fertility of crops.

For more information on the content of Mexico's masked dances, consult books suggested in the resource list, especially Cordry's *Mexican Masks*. Or write to Folk Art International in San Francisco for lending materials and mask-making kits.

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Procedure

Part I: Values Lines of Age

For Younger and Older Children

1. Have students think about what age-group they would like to belong to (a child, a teenager, an adult, or a grandparent/*un/a niño/a, un/a joven, un padre/una madre, or un/a abuelo/abuela*) and write it down on a piece of paper without showing anyone. Based on their choices, form a line-up by age-group, using a line of tape on the floor which is divided into the four categories (eldest on the left and youngest on the right). Discuss with them why they chose that age group, and what would be some of the roles that age group might play in the family and community.
2. Now tell students that you are going to form age-groups roughly corresponding to the age-group they had chosen, but that some of them might not end up in the same age-group as before. Form the age-groups as follows: Divide the line in half. Then divide these lines in half again to form four lines. You now have four short lines, each with more or less the same number of students.
3. Having the lines correspond to age-groups—eldest age-group on the left and youngest age-group on the right—tell the students which age-group they belong to, and give each person in each line a symbol of that age-group (provided in Handout 3, Age Symbols). Indicate a place where students can store their age symbols when they're through, explaining that they will reuse the symbols in a later activity (Lesson Five B).
4. Tell students in each line to count-off; make sure to tell them to remember their numbers. Once students have numbered themselves, have them form teams of four by joining with the people from the other lines who share their number: i.e., all the number ones form a team, all the twos form another team, etc. Each team should contain one *abuelo/a*, one *padre/madre*, one *joven*, and one *niño/a*.

Part II: Creating a Masked Dance

Note to the Teacher

Councils of elders are social arrangements that have pre-Hispanic roots. They are powerful bodies which rule indirectly in some indigenous communities of Mexico. The relationship between the council of elders and the community is one of utmost respect. The elders discuss the problems of the community and propose alternatives for solving them. They are also the ones who systematize and transmit the knowledge of the group's history and traditions, as well as the spiritual and symbolic heritage of the community.

For Younger Children

1. Chose four mask cut-forms from Handout 5, Dance Masks, making sure that the tiger (or jaguar) , the caiman, and the dog are included. Copy equal numbers of each dance mask so that there are enough masks for the entire class.
2. Tell each group to determine who the *abuelo* is in their group. Call all of *los abuelos* to the front of the class. Tell the students to imagine that they have elected these individuals to form a "Council of Elders" (*Consejo de Ancianos*), which is the governing body of the village, similar to a city council.
3. Give the tiger masks to the *Consejo de Ancianos*. Tell the *Consejo* that it is in charge of passing out that mask to each *niño/a* in the class. They should determine who the *niños/as* are (each child should display his or her age symbol), call them by name and give each one the mask form. They should work as a group to remember the names of each child. Follow the same procedure for *los jóvenes* And *los padres/las madres*, and then pass out a caiman mask to each *abuelo/a* in the *Consejo*.
4. Invite the children to color their masks. They should also make a headband with paper strips or rubber bands to hold the mask in place. Tell the class that by groups, *los niños/as*, *los jóvenes*, *los padres/las madres*, and *los abuelos* they are going to perform a dance that corresponds to the mask they have colored.
5. Read the Mask Descriptions sheet (Handout 6) and discuss with the class the meaning of each mask. Call a student to the front of the class to show each mask as it is being discussed. Ask the students to remain there until all the masks are displayed.
6. On butcher paper, generate a web, semantic map, or other type of graphic to discuss the characteristics of each mask and the kind of dance that is associated with each. The objective of this exercise is for students to recognize that there are two types of dances possible using these masks:
 - the *tlacololero* or farmer's dance, involving the dog and tiger masks;
 - the rain-petitioning dance, involving combinations of masks related to rain, water, and abundance: the mermaid, the caimán, the bat, and the rain dancer.

It might be helpful at this point to use children with each of the four masks to demonstrate the two categories (two masks per category). This will help them organize their dance.

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7. Have the class create a simple scenario for two dances, based on the information you have analyzed as a group. Write the scenario on butcher paper, as students dictate it to you. First, they should decide who dances with whom (this will already have been demonstrated in step 6), then what each dance will consist of.

Encourage the students to imagine themselves in the village where the dance originated and to elaborate on the information so as to create a little story for their dance. An example could be:

"One day the farmer went out to his field to find that a tiger had been there menacing the farm laborers and eating the town's chickens. So he gathered a group of men with their dogs to go in search of the tiger. . ." etc.

8. When both dance scenarios have been written, reread them aloud so that all the students are clear about what will happen. Give a title to each dance.

9. Announce the title of the dance. The children will decide who is involved in that dance, put on their masks, and come to the performing space. Start the video which contains music for the dances. The dancers perform their dance, which will consist of a dramatization of the story together with body movement, while the teacher, or a student, narrates the story written collectively by the class.

For Older Children

1. Call all of *los abuelos* to the front of the class. Tell the students to imagine that they have elected these individuals to form a "Council of Elders" (*Consejo de Ancianos*), which is the governing body of the village, similar to a city council. Give each member of the *Consejo* a different "Dance Mask" (Handout 5) and corresponding "Mask Description" (Handout 6) which contains the information needed for the dances. Make sure to include the tiger, the caimán, and the dog. The *Consejo* calls one *niño/a* at a time to come forward, gives the *niño/a* a mask, and relates the information from the mask description: they should not give the description to the *niño/a*. Each *niño/a* then returns to his or her group and shares the information with the group.

2. After all *niños/as* have received their information from the elders, the elders break up their council and return to their group with the description corresponding to the mask given their group. The elders review with their group the information that the *niños/as* shared.

3. Each group colors its mask, cuts out the form, and makes a headband with paper strips or rubber bands to hold the mask in place. Tell the class that each group is going to perform one of two types of dances that correspond to the masks they have colored. Each group then discusses the information presented in the mask description: the different animals or people whose roles the students might play, the purpose or meaning of the dance, where it takes place, when, etc.

4. The reporter (role assigned to the *adulto*) of each group should then present their ideas to the class. The *joven* should go to the front of the class to show that mask as it is being discussed. Ask the *jovenes* to remain there until all the masks are displayed.

5. On butcher paper, generate a web, a semantic map, or some other type of graphic to discuss the characteristics of each mask and the kind of dance that is associated with each. The object of this exercise is for students to recognize that there are two or three combinations of dances possible, using these masks:

- the tlacololero or farmer's dance, involving the dog and tiger masks;
- the rain-petitioning dance, involving combinations of masks related to rain, water and abundance: the mermaid, the caiman, the bat, and the rain dancer. Students might also decide to create a subcategory of this dance, containing the mermaid and the caiman, which according to regional mythology, both live in rivers.

6. The groups go over what was discussed with the class and make any necessary changes in their short scenarios. They should send their investigator (the *adulto*) out to share the group's ideas with the other groups who will be participating in the same or a similar dance.

The *joven* will wear the mask and play the part of the animal, person or thing that the mask represents. The *padre/madre* will play the role of the narrator who relates the group's script for the dance. If there are other characters in the skit, *el niño/la niña* and *el abuelo /la abuela* will play those parts, for example, students may want to include the farmer in the tiger dance. Other roles could include a field of corn, a chicken, the people in the village, the dwarf rain gods who live in caves, fish, etc. The students are free to create additional masks if they so chose.

7. Each group presents its dance accompanied by music from the video. The dance steps themselves should be choreographed to the music in the video, found at the end of the first part of the story (the title of the song is "*La Viborita*"). Keep in mind that the aim is not to duplicate the actual Mexican dances, but for students to create their

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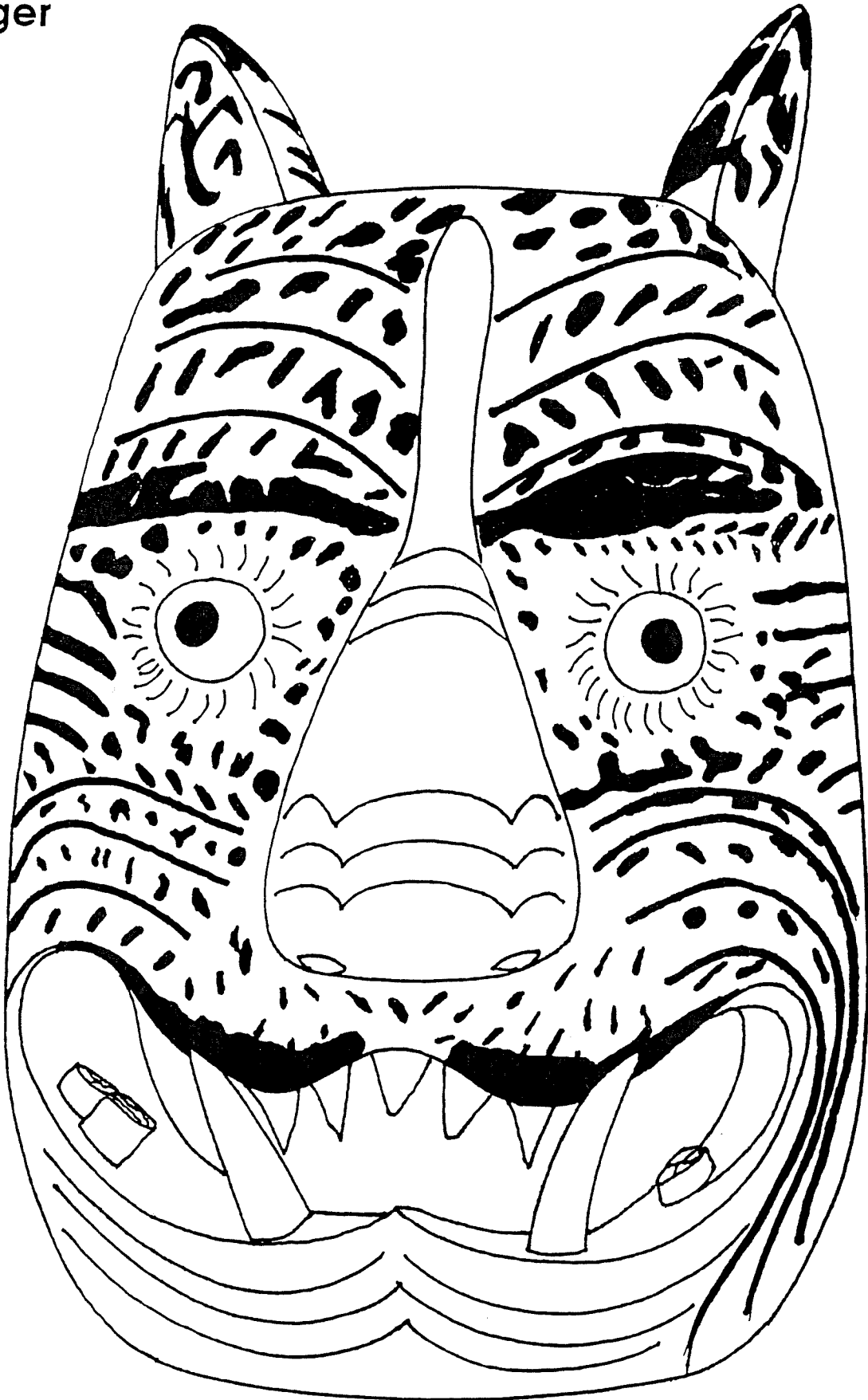
own steps and sequences. This can be done by instructing each group to develop a sequence and then putting all the sequences together. The only thing to keep in mind is that the steps should be performed rhythmically, and the story of the dance should be relayed with dignity and respect for the tradition on which it is based. This will help students develop a sense of appreciation for their own dance and for Mexican culture. Moreover, the creation of the dance steps by the students will make it possible to question any stereotypes they might hold of Mexican dance traditions, as well as to incorporate the different dance movements they may know from their own cultural traditions.

8. After each dance, discuss with the class what the meaning of the dance was, in what season they think the festival would take place, and what techniques were successful in conveying the meanings of the dance.

Festival Preparation Activity

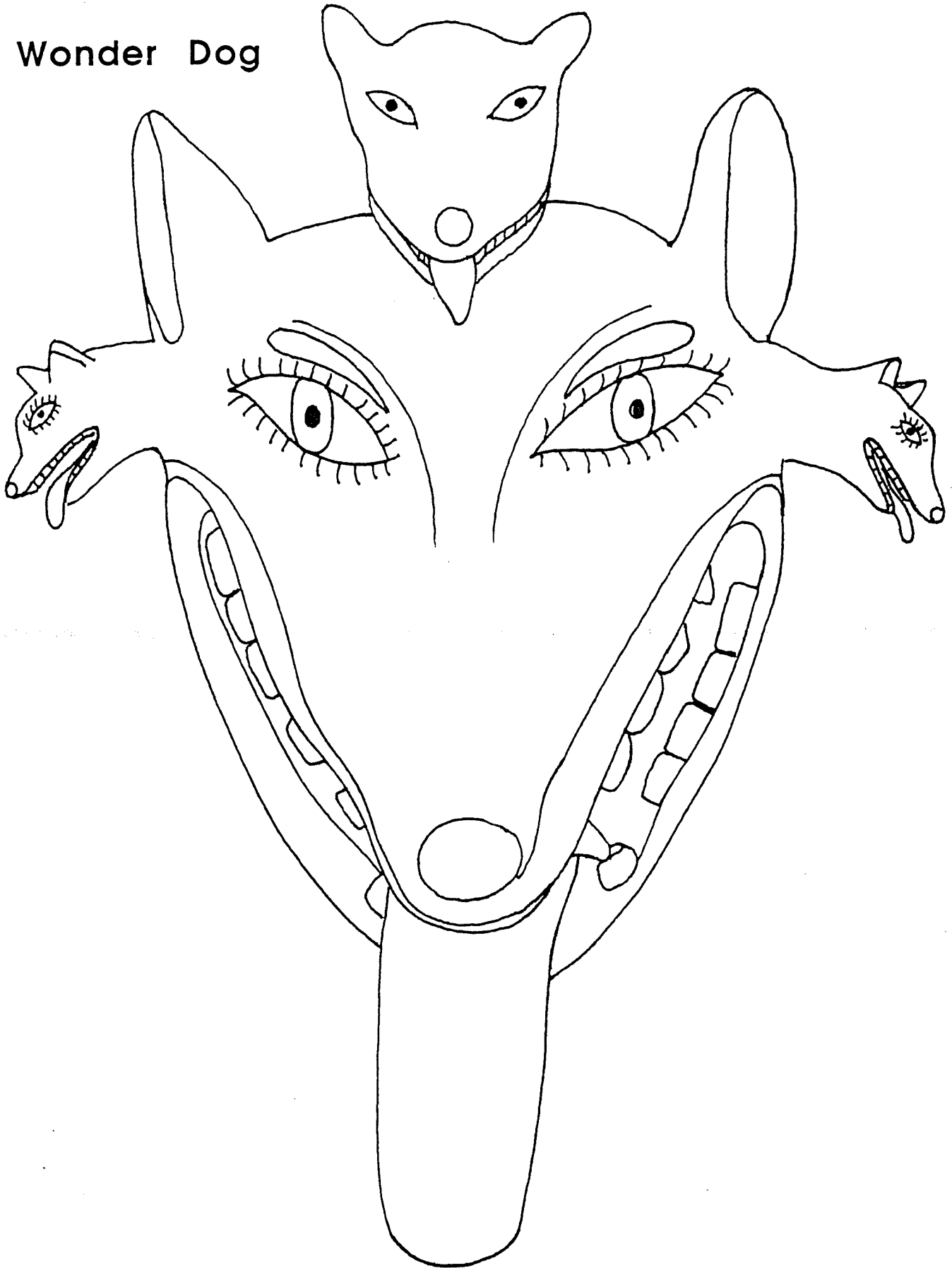
Students make costumes in preparation for the final festival, using Festival Preparation Activity 1.

The Tiger

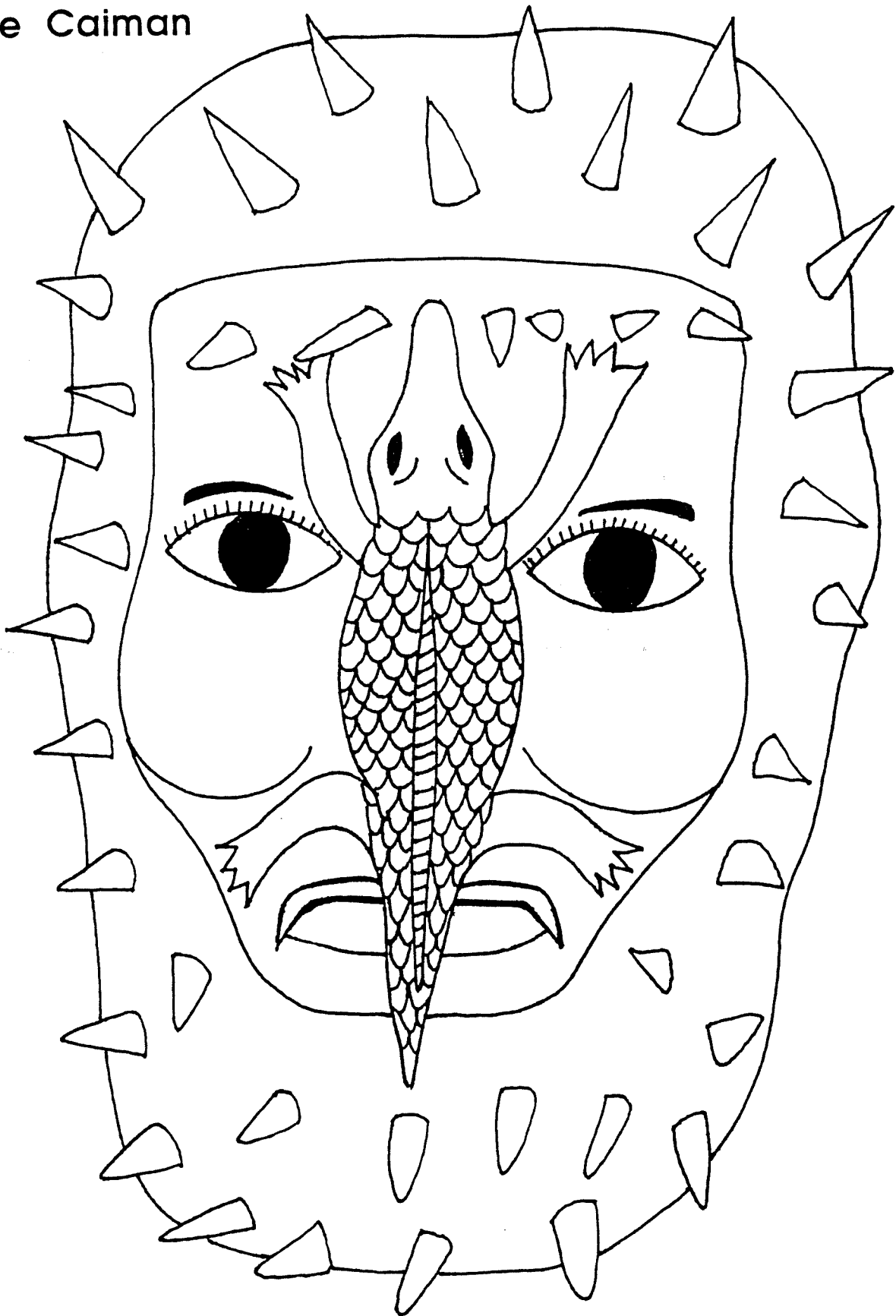


Handout 5

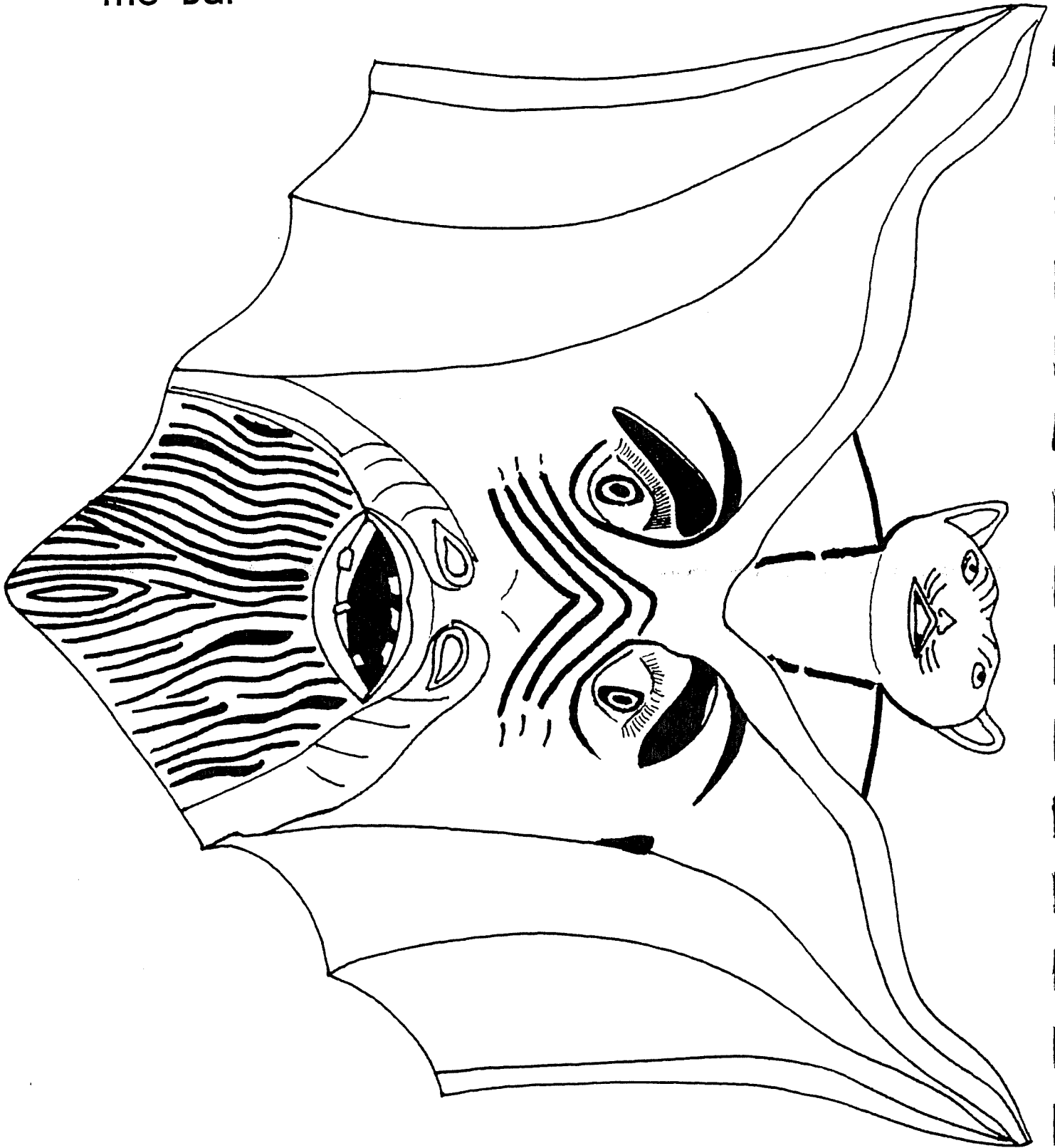
Wonder Dog



The Caiman



The Bat



The Mermaid



Rain Dancer



MASK DESCRIPTIONS

To pass out to older children with their masks, or to read to younger children



The Tiger

The tiger dance may have originated in the pre-Columbian age. It shows the trouble farmers had in protecting their fields and animals from the wild cats which lived in nearby jungles. The "tiger" in this dance is really a jaguar or ocelot. In the tiger or *tlacololero* (farmer) dance, the tiger threatens the village. A "boss" gathers a group of farmers with ropes and sticks; everyone sets off to hunt the tiger. After several adventures, and with the help of the dog, the tiger is finally caught and brought back to the village. When the tiger is killed, it is transformed into a positive (good) force that gives the community abundant crops.



The Bat

The bat symbolizes supernatural forces because it lives in caves. In pre-Columbian mythology, caves were thought to be openings to the underworld. The bat symbolizes water and rain, because the caves in which bats live are often wet, and springs originate in them. In the past, it was believed that rain gods (dwarfs called "*Tlaloques*") lived in the caves. The bat is used in rain-petitioning ceremonies.



Wonder Dog

In the ancient Indian civilizations, people believed that dogs guided the dead to the underworld. Thus, dogs were seen as protectors. The dog mask is used in the *tlacololero* dance, and is often called "*maravilla*," or "Wonder Dog." In this dance, the dog guides people to where a threatening tiger is hiding and helps them to capture it. In the end the tiger is killed and transformed into a positive force that brings abundant crops to the community. The dog is seen as a hero.

Handout 6

The Caiman

The caiman, or crocodile, is one of the oldest symbols in Mexico. The Aztecs believed that it held the earth on its back. The river people of Guerrero see the caiman as a threat because it eats people and fish, which the people need to eat to survive. The caiman is generally associated with water, and the mask is used in rain-petitioning ceremonies. In the caiman dance, fishermen use a net to chase and catch the caiman. The caiman is transformed into a positive force that brings good fishing.



The Mermaid

Like the bat and the caiman (or crocodile), the mermaid symbolizes water. In some indigenous communities, it is believed to be the water goddess. The mermaid mask is used in caiman dances, where she helps the fishermen, and in rain-petitioning ceremonies to bring rain for crops. She is also used to pray for good fishing.



Rain Dancer

Rain dance masks often combine human and animal symbols associated with water. Human hair is associated with water because, like water, it appears to flow. In addition, the ancient sign for hair was "rain" or "water." The lizard is also an important element of the mask because it symbolizes abundance. By combining these symbols in the mask, people hope that there will be much rain.

