

Holger Hoffmann

2 SERIES:
**SEMANA SANTA IN ANTIGUA
& THE GEREWOL OF THE WODAABE**

Semana Santa
in Antigua
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Semana Santa in Antigua

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La Semana Santa (Holy Week) is the Catholic commemoration of the Passion of Christ. In Guatemala, where Spanish missionaries introduced this festival during colonial times and subsequently, Christian customs and those of the Maya influenced each other, it is the most important celebration in the entire church year. The former capital Antigua, surrounded by three volcanoes, some of which are still active, with its Baroque-influenced architecture, provides a perfect backdrop for this spectacular celebration, which was only added to the UNESCO Cultural Heritage List in 2022.

In the days before the celebrations, residents begin to decorate their houses along the procession routes and to start preparations for the "alfombras". These are gorgeous large-scale carpets of flowers, fruits, pine needles, and sawdust of different colors that are lovingly laid out on the cobblestones by the residents in communal minutiae just before a procession.



To create these ephemeral offerings, often several long houseblocks of Christian and Mayan symbols are combined in bright colors, which then get trampled by the processions. The purpose is to remind people of the transience of life and the beauty of earthly things. Within hours, the residents have created a new alfombras for the next procession. The processions are the most important part of Semana Santa and are organized by religious brotherhoods, the "Hermandades." We were able to attend those of Good Friday and Holy Saturday amid thousands of devotees and onlookers. During the processions, the devotees carry on their shoulders huge "pasos," wooden, richly decorated "altar stages" on

which life-size Madonnas, statues of Christ, or groups of figures of a station of Christ's Way of the Cross are artfully arranged. The largest ones can be up to 18 meters long and weigh 2.5 tons, requiring 140 bearers, which are detached after a certain period of time. The carriers are believers who have volunteered for this arduous task to honor God, to do penance or both. Those who think only men are capable of this are mistaken. Especially on Holy Saturday, women ("las devotas") dressed all in black, often with veils of lace and high heels, shoulder the pasos dedicated to the Virgin Mary ("La virgen dolorosa"). The men ("Los cucuruchos") are dressed in white, purple, or black robes.





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Each procession consists of at least two pasos, one dedicated to Christ and the other to Virgin Mary. The members of the Hermandad in charge precede the pasos, sometimes wearing round, pointed hats, presenting a cross studded with silver or gold, and brandishing incense burners. The incense-suffused air, the moderate steps of the carriers making the pasos undulate, the dissolving patterns of the alfombras, and the melancholy sound of the brass band accompanying the procession create a devotional mood by which we, too, get touched. During the nightly processions, we experience - wrapped in a dense veil of incense - this atmosphere is particularly intense.



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Only the Roman soldiers accompanying the procession appear irritating. But they, too, and the condemnation of Jesus by Pontius Pilate, depicted in a street theater, are important components of Semana Santa to recall the suffering of Christ. The processions move through narrow cobblestone streets on a route that leads them back to the church from which they started. The route varies from procession to procession and can sometimes take up to 12 hours. However, each one stops at the plaza in front of the magnificent Cathedral of Antigua. In this festively decorated church and all the other churches of the city, the devotees congregate again and again for masses or to witness the crucifixion on Golgotha performed there.



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