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From Bulls to Music: Social, Religious, and Economic Aspects of a Pilgrimage to *Nuestra Señora, La Virgen de Altagracia*

By Angelina Tallaj | CUNY

Every August 10th, about 800,000 pilgrims begin a five-day pilgrimage to the Basilica of the Virgin of Altagracia in Higüey, Dominican Republic. In this paper, I will show some interesting aspects of this pilgrimage's economy that, while not unique to this pilgrimage, become much more tangible because of the presence of bulls as alms. I will continue, through the study of the music making and ritual, to show the role that music (and especially improvisation) plays in the social and devotional aspects of this pilgrimage. By examining the complex web of assumptions and expressions that contains the acts of music production, we can gain some insight into the significance of the pilgrimage as a whole.

Every August 10th, about 800,000 pilgrims begin a five-day pilgrimage to the Basilica of the Virgin of Altagracia in Higüey, Dominican Republic. From the central part of the island to the basilica on the eastern tip, pilgrims bring alms, and gather hundreds of bulls as an offering to the Virgin of Altagracia, the patroness Virgin of the Dominican Republic. This devotion to Altagracia which was brought by the Spaniards, is still alive in the Dominican Republic where one in every twelve Dominicans is named after the Virgin. While walking through rural countryside, small villages, and isolated roads, sleeping on the ground and on dirt floor churches, the pilgrims talk, play games, drink, dance, and rejoice in the gifts that *la Virgen* will give them in return for their efforts. The five-day journey culminates a four-month season during which leaders of the *Hermandad de los Toros de la Virgen de Altagracia* collect bulls and alms for the Virgin. Throughout the pilgrimage, the bulls are a constant source of attention, spectacle, and praise. What is unique about this pilgrimage besides the central presence of the bulls is a lack of tourist attention, involvement, and influence.

As the journey starts, the pilgrims scream feverously,

Qué viva la Virgen de Altagracia! Qué viva el Cristo Rey! Qué vivan los toreros! Qué vivan los peregrinos! Qué vivan los visitantes! Qué viva la fe católica! Qué viva la patria libre! Qué viva la fe! Qué viva la fe! Qué viva la fe! y que muera el pecado

The pilgrims' words reveal the religious, devotional, social, and patriotic dimensions of this pilgrimage;— elements that, as we shall see, work both together and in contradiction to each other. In this paper, I will discuss some interesting aspects of this pilgrimage's economy that, while not unique to this pilgrimage, become much more tangible because of the presence of bulls as alms. Through the study of the music making and ritual, I will show the role that music (and especially improvisation) plays in the social and devotional aspects of this pilgrimage. I have attended the pilgrimage for three consecutive years and while walking, sleeping, and bathing with the pilgrims, I have had multiple conversations with them and the leaders of the hermandad as well as recorded and transcribed the music performed both on the road and at the camping places.

The trip, while involving much suffering and sweating in the unrelenting Caribbean humidity, is characterized by the pilgrims praying rosaries, singing, carrying images of the Virgin, socializing, celebrating, and, above all, having faith that the Virgin will help ease their difficult lives. But, like all pilgrimages and religious rituals, this pilgrimage has its secular side as well. Pilgrimage and ritual, as defined by contemporary anthropology, do more than just express or enact cultural beliefs. No longer can we see pilgrimage as purely action, rather it needs to be seen as part of the construction of cultural meaning, both religious and social. Although the pilgrimage is defined by its emphasis on *La Virgen de Altagracia*, and while many pilgrims dress in burlap clothes or white attire and bring alms in fulfillment of a promise to the Virgin, there are also many youngsters, less motivated by their faith, who do the trip as a way of getting in shape or because it is a family tradition. Furthermore, for many adult pilgrims, gambling and drinking are as common as devotional songs and prayers. For all participants, though, the pilgrimage is a way of separating themselves from their routine, offering them a space away from their everyday lives.

Music is an important part of marking the significance of this experience. There are three types of music present at the pilgrimage: *salves*, *palos*, and *tonadas de toro*. Salves and tonadas are sung a capella while palos uses drums. The texts of the salves refer to the Virgin while palos and tonadas have, for the most part, secular lyrics. During these five days, the pilgrims walk about ten hours a day while singing salves to the Virgin; in the evenings, at the camp-out places, the (mostly) women sing salves, the (mostly) men sing tonadas de toros, and others (men and women) play or dance to palo music. All these activities help build the expectation of kissing and giving La Virgen de Altagracia offerings in the basilica on August 15th. By examining the complex web of assumptions and expressions that contains the acts of music production, we can gain some insight into the significance of the pilgrimage as a whole.

What does the Virgin have to do with it? Money, Politics, and Status Quo

The devotion to Altagracia has been traced to the sixth and seventh centuries in Spain. It is thought that Governor Frey Nicolás de Ovando introduced the devotion to the island of Hispaniola around 1502. Christians in twenty-one countries practice the devotion to Alta Gracia or Altagracia, including Kenya and Lebanon, but it is in the Dominican Republic that the Virgen de Altagracia is recognized as patroness of the country.

Nowadays the pilgrimage, especially the donation of the bulls, is organized by the Hermandad de los Toros de la Virgen de Altagracia. While there are several theories about how and when the hermandad started and whether it was initiated by the Church or by lay people, it is the Church which currently presides over the members' catechism courses, supervises over hermandad matters, and watches for any possible transgression of its members. It is said that Priest Tomas Núñez Cordero (1868-1957) organized the bull donation which already existed, and gave the hermandad its hierarchical structure in the first decades of the 20th century. Others think that the beginning of the hermandad is related to the first American intervention in the Dominican Republic (1916-1924) when the cattle were suffering from a plague, and there was a terrible drought in the area. The cowboys of the region promised La Virgen de Altagracia that they would donate bulls if she helped them defeat the US soldiers and cure their cattle.

Martha Ellen Davis, in her dissertation *Afro-Dominican Religious Brotherhoods: Structure, Ritual and Music*, grapples with the possible origins of the hermandad and the unique phenomenon of the bull donation. While she states that certainly the association of either pilgrimage or bulls with *cofradías* in the Dominican Republic is not documented at all before about the turn of the 20th century, bulls may have been donated to the Church on and off for centuries. She suggests that the incorporation of bulls during pilgrimage could be related to the *primicia* practice in Spain where there was a "custom of donating the first fruits of the harvest, including animals, to the Church," and this area of the country's main product is indeed cattle. Davis also points to a possible syncretism with Central African practices since "in the Congolese region, the bull or ox sometimes serves as a totemic symbol" (1976: 89). There is some evidence for this theory as the Dominican Republic did have a Congolese migration, and Congolese traces can be found in drumming patterns in the country.

Each year, about 300 bulls get collected and later auctioned for about 5000-7000 pesos each (about US \$150-210), and pilgrims and hermandad leaders bring in additional alms as well. Thus, the profit for the Catholic Church is substantial, probably over two million pesos (US \$60,600). Although bulls appeared to have been donated to the Church since before the formation of the hermandad, bulls are the most important and magical aspect of this pilgrimage, and people from all over the central and east regions of the Dominican Republic come out to the pilgrimage road to watch the bulls go by and look at their number and quality. Hundreds of men, women, and children come on horses or foot from neighboring towns to accompany the bulls and pilgrims for part of the way. It is so important for people in these towns to see the bulls walking on the road that if the bulls are too tired, they are put on a truck so they have the energy to make the entrance into important towns and, on the last day, the entrance to Higüey. These bulls are special since when a bull is received as a donation, it is stamped with the stamp of the Virgin. Days after the pilgrimage, an auction is held where these bulls are sold, and the money collected goes to the Catholic Church's "good deeds."

Ironically, most pilgrims, while they think that the pilgrimage is growing in size and importance, do not know what is being done with the money donated. Although there are no definitive numbers, it is doubtful that the

pilgrimage is growing in size since, as most of the pilgrims agreed, their children do not want to participate in the pilgrimage and the conversion of Catholics to evangelical Christianity is eroding Catholicism in the Dominican Republic. Aurelio Pérez, a middle-aged pilgrim, mentioned how evangelists make fun of him because he is so stupid as to give his money to the priests. He responded that his parents told him that the Catholic Church is the truthful one because it was there from “the beginnings of time.”(1) The pilgrims, not concerned with the tradition ending, continue to donate what they have to the Virgin while enjoying the pilgrimage as a celebration and a few days of relief. These primarily poor people give all they have to the Catholic Church. Some pilgrims beg because they run out of money, and others can only go part of the way because they do not have enough food to eat.

Whether the bulls are donated because they are the most valuable thing these people have or because it is the only thing they have to give La Virgen, bulls are a crucial part of this pilgrimage. Although the presence and importance of the bulls is what make this pilgrimage unique, when their economic and ritualistic role is examined, there are confusing and contradictory elements. Although both pilgrims and observers tend to be fascinated by the bulls, arguably the bulls on this pilgrimage represent more than anything devotion in the shape of money. When the bulls are donated to the Virgin they are stamped, but that does not necessarily mean that they are worth more money or that they are considered more sacred than other non-Virgin-bound animals.(2) What the stamp does mean is that these bulls will be auctioned a few days after the pilgrimage concludes. Many times a bull gets bought back by the same person who donated it, and sometimes that person pays more than the bull is worth. Why would someone buy his own bull instead of just donating the money directly to the Church? It might not make sense from the economic vantage point, but the donor/buyer wins prestige and he also adds one more bull to the spectacle of the pilgrimage procession.

There is a fine line between religiosity and concern for prestige which is negotiated through this pilgrimage, but in many ways the pilgrimage serves to maintain the social status of those who already have it. Economically, the Dominican Republic is very stratified, and this pilgrimage and the Church help keep it that way. Most *comisarios* [alms and bulls collectors] are among the wealthiest residents of the region, and this pilgrimage helps keep them there while also giving upper-classes an opportunity to buy more status through their donations. In fact, as Martha Ellen Davis points out, “the ability to collect a lot of alms, coupled with honesty, is the criteria by which one is named as comisario. Devotion itself is not important” (1976: 371). As a comisario remarked, “He who cheats La Virgen, cheats himself.” The comisarios, who are part of the hermandad’s hierarchy, spend months collecting bulls and alms, and during the pilgrimage they manage the transportation of the bulls, but regardless of their faith, they receive ten percent of what they collect while at the same time gain status. Many families and politicians, who do not participate in the pilgrimage, gain status (whether deliberately or not) and seek votes by donating either the meal of one day or else water or snacks for the pilgrims. It is always public knowledge who donated what.

Because it is thought that men handle cattle better than women do, the hermandad counts very few women as comisarios, thus reinforcing their socio-economic disadvantage. Even though there are female members of the hermandad, the hierarchical positions (Bishop, Priest, *Comisario Mayor Mayor*, *Comisarios Mayores*, *Comisarios Menores*, and *Comisarios Segundos* and their helpers) are mostly filled by men. While there is some redistribution of goods and some impact on the local economy, the pilgrimage generally benefits the wealthy—men over women, the Church over its members, and the upper classes over the lower ones—and in this pilgrimage, because donations are made in such tangible way (bulls), this socio-economic pyramid is very apparent. On the surface, all appears humble—the pilgrims, the people, the sleeping arrangements, the bulls (which sometimes are not that healthy looking)—but there can be more than two million pesos (\$60,600) collected during a single pilgrimage, and because of the festive aspects of the pilgrimage, the Catholic Church can win more converts as well as increase devotion and loyalty among the pilgrims.

The festive elements of the pilgrimage also serve to reinforce the hierarchical nature of the society by providing an outlet to the problems of everyday life. Everyday worries are symbolically suspended as the pilgrims enter, in Victor Turner’s words, their liminal state. As Beezley, Martin, and French state,

Not only do ceremonies and processions provide visual and aural dramas of the society's hierarchy, but they also afford elites an opportunity to reiterate—for their own edification and that of their subordinates—the moral values on which their authority rests. Such occasions also may shape interpretations of the society's past, mask social divisions by seeming to unite disparate groups in shared ritual, and provide opportunities for popular revelry that may defuse the potentially disruptive impulses of subordinate groups. (1994: xiii)

Furthermore, by emphasizing divine assistance and miracle, pilgrims conform to the system that oppresses them; rather than looking to improve the material conditions of their lives, the solution is looked for not on earth but through the divine assistance of La Virgen de Altagracia. From this perspective, the pilgrimage illustrates how faith can be manipulated for the political and economic ends of the higher classes and the Church. When the Church joined the hermandad, it gave it a hierarchical structure, religious leaders, catechism classes, rules for behavior; it made it a reflection of the dominant ideology; it co-opted it. The Church and the hermandad, rather than leveling wealth differences, help legitimize the already existing economic differences and stratification.

But while the Church exerts its control over the pilgrimage, the pilgrimage also changes the Church. Because pilgrimages emphasize not only social solidarity, but also individuals' direct relationship with the Virgin creating the kind of relationship that brings up disparate views of how to enact religiosity, the Church, instead of fighting against popular religiosity, joins it. The Catholic Church may not have founded this hermandad but it is to its advantage to join it, not only for profit, but also to keep pilgrims aligned in the rules of a "good Catholic"—which might include not stealing from the Church as well as being generous and obedient. As Martha Ellen Davis writes,

With the rising price of beef and the opportunity to manipulate folk beliefs and practices, the Church has taken an increasing interest in the cofradías and in the pilgrimages with which they are integrated. It is now the Church which formally appoints (and dismisses) cofradía members (comisarios) issuing official banners and cards. Their purpose in controlling membership is so that illegitimate brothers, as it were, do not discredit the Church by pocketing alms given in good faith. (1976: 96)

The Church furthermore gives catechism courses to comisarios to train them to be good Christians, and, as Davis points out, the Church controls membership. Whereas for the pilgrims, it does not make a difference whether one is a member of the hermandad or not since they are all devotees of Altagracia, for the Church, it does make a difference who is and who is not handling money in the name of the Church. The pilgrimage is also the only time when thousands of people gather in this sparsely populated area of the country, and the potentially subversive power of organized humanity has to be avoided. The people, despite the Church control and rules, find a good balance between spontaneity and dogma, a balance that is found in the musical practices of this pilgrimage.

Role of Music in the Pilgrimage

Each of the three types of music in this pilgrimage—salves, palos, and tonadas de toros—plays a different role. The tonadas de toros, while not the most religiously-themed of the three forms, is the genre of music sung during the singing nights (*serenatas*) of the four-month alms collection period prior to the pilgrimage. Tonadas de toro represent the hermandad, maybe because as opposed to salves and palo, this genre of music is unique to this area of the country and because it is sung by the leaders of the hermandad and their mostly male singer friends.(3) On the other hand, the other two types of music—salves and palo—are intended to be sung spontaneously by anyone who knows the tunes and can sing along.

The salves are sung antiphonally,(4) sometimes a capella (especially while walking), and sometimes accompanied by percussion instruments: *panderos*, *güiros*, clapping, palo drums or whatever can be found (one time an empty water gallon). The texts of the salves in this pilgrimage are mostly addressed to the Virgin Mary. The drumming music or palos is done with two long drums and one, two or three scrapers or *güiros*. The voice pattern is divided by call and response between a soloist who improvises verses and the crowd who responds.

It is the improvised parts of the palo music (mostly one line at a time followed by another line of response) and

the solo improvised verses of the tonadas that I am most interested in. The improvisation in palo music is easier than in the tonadas, which allows for a looser and more democratic participatory role for both musicians and pilgrims. But the tonadas, maybe due to the fact that their structure is much more complex than palos, are a bit more closed and organized. The improvised part of the tonadas is not one line at a time like in palo but three, four, five, and even six lines of octosyllabic verses (mostly), and tonadas can last for more than an hour on the same rhyming pattern. When someone feels tired of the same rhyme or feels that the singers are not been creative anymore, he asks for permission, through singing, to change the rhyming pattern, and the singing continues with the same refrain but a new rhyming pattern for the verses. The singers are for the most part always involved in listening to the rhyming pattern and in supporting the soloist with the intertwining refrain. In this way, the tonadas serve as a kind of cathartic mantra. While the salves have been pre-structured, it is through the improvisation of the palos and tonadas that the pilgrims enact their spontaneity and their individuality while also developing a more collective identity.

Whereas the salves are songs to the Virgin, the palos and tonadas are often secular in nature. It is important to understand the perceived functionality of these three types of music and what they mean to the pilgrims. Most pilgrims agreed that the tonadas were necessary not only in the serenatas, but also during the pilgrimage, even though pilgrims sometimes get so distracted with other festive activities or dancing to palo music, that very little tonada singing happens. The importance of the tonadas is more evident during the collection period than at the actual pilgrimage. During the serenatas, singers and composers of tonadas come and bring their newly-composed refrains to see if the others like them and want to use them on the upcoming pilgrimage. New tonadas are always being created but, as an informant said, "*las tonadas se rematan*," meaning that they take material from previously composed tonadas and rework it. Composers from different towns create their own tonadas and teach them to others in the serenatas, and then, as pilgrims from different towns unite at the pilgrimage, they all learn some of these tonadas.

Even though the Virgin or Christ could be mentioned in the tonadas, in general the themes are clearly secular and very diverse, ranging from philosophical themes to gossip. They can involve advice to others, everyday life events, and sexual advances to women, many times with double entendre. Several composers stated that their favorite theme for tonadas was praising women. "*Ay María Dolores / Que le pasa a la morena? / Con esta ropa tan linda / Que la trajo almidoná*," sings a *torero* while looking suggestively at a woman. This pilgrim then added that he likes to compliment women, and because he knows how to make tonadas and because he has a good voice, women fall for him. He said, "If I see a pretty woman, even if she is far from the singing area, I compliment her and I know that if she likes me, she will come and sit at the singing table. I get a lot of women because of my talent."

The lyrics to palo [drumming] music are also quite secular; even though the drums can also be used to accompany religiously-themed salves, most of the drumming music played at the pilgrimage is secular and is danced to. Interestingly, no one seems to think that salves are the most important music even though, as opposed to palos and tonadas, these songs are sung to the Virgin. To appreciate the complexity of the role of music and of the pilgrimage in general, it is important to think about how and why the tonadas and palos have acquired more importance than the seemingly more appropriate salves.

A possible answer is that the tonadas and palos are mostly performed by men while salves are mostly sung by women. The hermandad, because of its association with cattle management, is very male oriented even though about half of the pilgrims are women. As Martha Ellen Davis speculated, membership appeared to have been solely male at one time (1976: 98), and still today, as mentioned, there are few women comisarios. Palo music, because it involves drumming, is also mostly performed by men with a few women joining in the singing, but its dancing is done by both males and females. Salves and tonadas are a capella and not danced to.(5)

The tonadas are sung by the comisarios and by invited singers who might not be part of the hermandad but that come help the comisarios in singing and in return get good food and free alcohol. Like the comisarios, who are valued for their honesty more than their religiosity, the singers are appreciated more for their singing than their devotion. Singing well goes beyond just having a good voice; a good singer needs to be able to create rhymes on the spot while being funny, tricky, and playful. The tonadas represent the pilgrimage's balance between

spontaneity and dogma; a pre-composed refrain is repeated and alternated with the singers taking turns at improvising stanzas of octosyllabic verses and rhyming the last word of their last verse with the rhyme used by the previous singer.

SOLO 1:

*eh e e, Qué buena hembra!
Y eso no es lo que parece
Me dijo la tigerona
Y es un bienestar pa'mi*

GROUP:

Oh oh oh

SOLO 2:

*Eh e e mis amistades
Yo vine a pasar vergüenza
Manito vengo de lejos
Pa'montar esta serenata
Mire ahora esta tipa
Me ha dado un golpe mortal pa'mi*

A good rhyme as well as a playful response to what the previous singer said will gain the singer a wink of approval and a shake of the hand. Being a good tonada singer is one way of gaining not only interested women but status in this society; a good tonada singer is considered worth more than a good palo player or salve singer.

Although the refrains of the tonadas and palos reflect the dogmatic aspects of this pilgrimage and the structure supplied by the society, the Church, and the hermandad, the music, through its improvisation, is also continually in flux and malleable to each different singer and situation. This tension reflects the complex relationship of ritual and religion to the culture and society, and the constant negotiation of the individual within controlling social structures. In Victor Turner's words, "the mystery of choice resides in the individual, not in the group ... freedom of choice in itself negates the obligations of a life embedded in social structure" (1978: 8). The music represents the dialectical relationship between the individual's subjective state and the communal order; it is personal and collective; it is for the Virgin and themselves; and, like their relationship to the Virgin, it is dogmatic, but it also reflects the pilgrims' moods, pains, and suffering. The result is the channeling of conflict which results in social equilibrium.

No Alcohol, No Devotion

During the alms collection period and the pilgrimage, there are expenses for food and the handling of the bulls. During the pilgrimage, one big meal per day is provided, and this money is taken out of the alms collected, but probably a bigger expense is the alcohol consumed by the musicians who sing the tonadas de toros or play the drums. The singers of the tonadas usually do not get paid, but might not do it unless they get food and plenty of alcohol. The drummers usually get paid something, but getting good food and alcohol is an assumed part of the deal.

Payment for musicians is a tricky and personal matter. Comisario Mayor Don Milo said that he does not pay musicians, but he has to pay for their transportation, and the food and alcohol must be good and abundant. The singers and drummers always argue that alcohol is a necessary part of their music-making because "it clears the throat" and gives them stamina to continue singing for a longer time. To avoid the drinking getting out of hand, the Church issues ID cards to the members of the hermandad with behavior rules, and the first and most relevant one is to control the alcohol consumption. When asked, the priest in charge of the hermandad stated that drinking is not prohibited in the Catholic Church, and therefore cannot be banned on the pilgrimage.

Very few pilgrims or musicians question whether Altagracia wants them to drink. When asked, most of them gave an ironic smile and kept on drinking. Only one of the singers admitted that he used to drink too much until one day he questioned whether drinking excessively was something that the Virgin would approve of. He decided to stop participating in the singing so that he could better control his alcohol consumption. At that moment he was coming back to sing, but he said he was not going to drink. The alcohol can and does get out of hand sometimes, and robberies and other crimes do happen as well. There are usually members of the military present during the night stops, and one night, a man was taken and tied to a tree because he was stealing a wallet. Apparently, this was not the first time that it had happened. Also, one drummer got so drunk and out of control that every night he would harass me because in 2005, I had supposedly promised to bring him a recording machine when I returned in 2006.

The pilgrimage dramatizes the fine line between sacred and profane as well as suffering and pleasure. Certainly to have non-pilgrims (and maybe non-devout people) on their well-kept horses go see the bulls passing by creates a big festive celebration with elements not usually associated with religious pilgrimages. And for the pilgrims, the socializing with friends, the singing and dancing, and the fun found along the way are a big part of the pilgrimage. In addition to the sometimes excessive consumption of alcohol, the festive elements of the pilgrimage allow gambling and betting games at the night camping places. Disco lights with music are sometimes delivered to the vicinity of the pilgrimage, and no one seems to mind. In 2006, while the bishop was giving the pilgrims a blessing before they started the last stretch of walking from the town of Santana to Higüey, there was a loud car speaker playing *mariachi* music, and nobody seemed to find it inappropriate.

The conditions for the pilgrimage are rough, and there are those who take rides for part of the way when they are tired or as a way of getting ahead to claim the best places for sleeping. It is also not rare to find sexual encounters among lovers who live in different regions and reunite each year during the pilgrimage. An older man on the pilgrimage once asked me if I already had someone to “sleep with” that night. One day, after hours of sweating and walking, a group of women found a river and while bathing in this river which barely had enough water to cover our ankles, one pilgrim said: “The truth is that whoever says that we do not suffer on this pilgrimage is wrong. Look at us here with so little water after all this sweating.” But as she said these words, the women were laughing, and men were at the other end of the river trying to catch a glimpse of the naked women. But while these women were having fun, I was so uncomfortable that I could not even laugh. These pilgrims walk all day in the hottest month of the year, bath in rivers when they find one, and do not have bathroom facilities anywhere; nevertheless, they sing, socialize, and are reacquainted with friends.

Logistical arrangements also reflect the hierarchical nature of Dominican society, and those on top suffer less. Those that are *comisarios* and have more money get invited by neighboring houses to sleep and shower, and those without money pay their tribute to the Virgin not with money but with sacrifice, sleeping on the floor and bathing in rivers. The priest who oversees the *hermandad* does not even walk with the pilgrims, and the bishop only shows up on the last day to give the pilgrims a blessing and receive the alms. The *comisarios* and upper-classes achieve further status through their bull donation or management, and the musicians gain a bit of status when doing their job well, especially the singers of the *tonadas*. The Catholic Church provides next to nothing; the masses or activities presided by a priest are minimal and in fact, many priests along the way were quite unfriendly to the pilgrims when we stopped at their churches for blessing and some *salve* singing. Despite these separations, however, the music is the one part of the pilgrimage that bonds all pilgrims together especially *palo* since it is danced to by everyone regardless of who participates in the music making.

Theorizing Ritual and Improvisation

When singing *tonadas de toros*, singers have to concentrate deeply so that they can create rhymed responses on the spot. This concentration, with the help of the rum and the extended duration of the singing, helps them achieve a type of altered consciousness. There are *tonadas* which last more than an hour without a single interruption. And these performances come out full of the joking, trickery, festivity, and fantasy proper for a liminal state. Through singing, the pilgrims develop a better sense of collectivity while improvising their individuality, but also the news from one community is communicated to another, their sufferings are mocked, their lives examined, and their frustrations laid out. To listen to a round of *tonadas* is to hear them laugh at each

other's rhymes, work out differences between singers or people from the community, and interrupt the singing for fights, to greet someone, or simply because they lose concentration.

One palo singer, Lucía, is interesting when examining the function of improvisation in their lives. Lucía kept singing about her death with phrases like

When you leave [death], do not leave me alone
 If you do not love me, you do not love anyone
 The way of God it is the way we leave
 The day I die do not cry over me
 I am going to give you my name so you remember me
 If I die in an hour but in this celebration I would be ok with that
 If you do not love me alive, less when I die
 I will record this *plena* [song] so you remember me when I die
 So you remember the dead Lucía
 Please play back the recording to me when I die
 Then you will remember the dead Lucía

Lucía's improvised lyrics raise questions germane to all improvisations within ritual. Was she just using a stock of pre-thought phrases (a characteristic of almost all improvised music), or was Lucía really concerned about death at that moment and living through a cathartic moment? Was Lucía mad at her husband and letting her frustrations out, or was she talking about something not related to herself? There is no doubt that there was also some humor in Lucía's words, such as when she sang about playing the recording back to her after her death (and she did, in fact, show up with a recording machine on the following pilgrimage). The role of improvisation in a pilgrimage is interesting if we consider the liminal state where pilgrims are situated. Improvisation can be seen as a way of connecting to their life outside the pilgrimage or as a way of competing with their outside life, a form of resistance, of breaking away from their reality. Or improvisation can amplify the strangeness of the situation and new setting. But does liminality help the improvisation or does the improvisation help achieve the liminality?

Different scholars of ritual would answer these questions in different ways. Turner considered pilgrims to be in a liminal state, and saw pilgrimages as containing both the culture and the anti-structure of the society. In other words, Turner saw rituals and pilgrimages as not only a reflection of the society, but also as containing a critique of the social life they grow out of (1978). Pilgrimage, for Turner, is also an opportunity for the *communitas* experience, one in which distinctions of wealth and class are suspended in favor of equality, poverty, and homogeneity, since in many ways pilgrims become alike during this process, and the social differences between them in pilgrimage do not matter. According to Turner, "pilgrimage is too democratic, not sufficiently hierarchical" (1978:31), and pilgrimage has some of the attributes of liminality: "release from mundane structure, homogenization of status, simplicity of dress and behavior" (34).

The fact that any pilgrim could stand and start improvising lines during palo music reflects a bit of the homogeneity that Turner is talking about. But the fact that the tonadas are organized hierarchically (those with a good voice and ability to rhyme are invited to sing more often and have more status) and through gender and class makes me skeptical of Turner's idea that all pilgrims are homogeneous. Although Turner's idea of *communitas* depends on his depiction of ritual as "affirming community unity in contrast to the frictions, constraints and competitiveness of social life and organization" (Bell 20-21), yet, as we see in the improvised music, these disruptive elements are also contained within the enacting of ritual—it is not a pure autonomous presence, apart from everyday life, but also contains all of the messiness of living.

Turner also saw pilgrimages as allowing a ludic recombination of symbols, an unusual and even bizarre reconfiguration of things. The humor of Lucía's words could be considered a twist on the real feelings that she was releasing at that moment. It would seem to suggest that the pilgrims are in a more open space in which creativity and improvisation flourishes acutely and strange combination of words arise, so palos and tonadas de toros are in some ways perfect for this pilgrimage. And this ability to rhyme, which arises especially in

liminality, wins them a temporary status that creates an illusion of an inversion of social roles in society.

It is precisely Lucía's concern about her husband not loving her and the fact that it might stay like that until she dies that perhaps allowed her a playful twist during the improvisation. In other words, her life's disadvantages became her virtue during liminality, and through her improvisation she perhaps achieved a temporary release. Just as the pilgrims themselves must decide to attend a pilgrimage, the mystery of their choice of singing also resides in themselves, not in the group. There is potential in liminality for individuals to grapple with the factors of their daily existence, and this is perhaps what Lucía is doing. In Catherine Bell's words, according to Turner, "Rite affords a creative 'anti-structure' that is distinguished from the rigid maintenance of social orders, hierarchies, and traditional forms" (21). There is no doubt that palos and tonadas de toros serve to relax and entertain the singers and audience, but perhaps the anti-structure comes through in the rifts and gaps that are created through improvisation, or perhaps this anti-structure can never create a clean break from the dominant structure.

Whereas for Turner, ritual represents the area where social conflict is worked out, for some performance theorists the conflict is solved prior to the ritual, which only then enacts this pre-conceived resolution. Stanley Tambiah's performance theory advocates the idea that "ritual does not evoke feelings or express the mental orientation of individuals in any sort of direct and spontaneous way. Rather, he emphasizes the formalism of ritual as having a distancing effect that serves to articulate and communicate attitudes of institutionalized communication" (Bell 41). Performance theorists argue that what ritual communicates are prior conceptual ideas and values. This approach suggests that even Lucía's improvisation was a pre-conceived concept of death rather than her own feelings.

As always, the presence of a researcher changes the object being observed. The awareness that the singers had of the fact that they were creating something new, that now through recording technology they could perpetuate, raises questions about whether they wanted to record themselves in order to learn new phrases and remember the tonada or just to be able to remember the liminal state they were in during the pilgrimage—an attempt to possess this time and space when they were empowered through their singing, when their lives acquired meaning, their emotions were channeled, and they felt safe because the Virgin was protecting them. Does all this make singing festive, spiritual, devotional, political, or all of these together? Is the singing for themselves, for the Virgin, or for all? I had decided not to record most of the palo music and tonadas I heard in this pilgrimage because they were always aware of my little recording machine. My presence made the singers start singing about me, about my looks and about wanting me in an altar for them.

*Ay caballero
No le ¿? en serenata
Que a eso fue que vinimos
Como to 'el mundo lo sabe
Yo quiero que usted me diga
Si es un completar pa 'mi*

*Oh Papo eh!
Mira que hermosa muchacha
Que el Cristo me la acompañe
Y la Virgen de Altigracia
Ahora yo quiero ponerla
En un pedestal pa 'mi*

How much did this obsession with recording influence the pilgrimage? As I said in the beginning, one of the unique things about this pilgrimage is its lack of tourist presence, but perhaps I brought a little of that altering presence with me.

The questions that still intrigue me are: how did these music get ritualized, how did these forms get chosen over others, and what constitutes the tonadas privileged position over the other two genres? Does the fact that they

can not be lacking necessarily make the tonadas more sacred? Or am I instituting my own order of things, that because this is a religious pilgrimage, the music I am expecting to be more prominent is the one with the most “religious” lyrics? It is precisely here where conflict, contradiction, and meaning exist. Perhaps more than just reflecting a culture’s beliefs, it is through singing that societies’ values are actually internalized by the individual. However we read it, music is a microcosmic arena where the competing religious and secular discourses of this ritual take place, and where the diversity of perceptions and meanings about the pilgrimage and religious discourses arise.

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1. All conversations were held in Spanish and the translation to English is mine.
2. Even though some people no doubt do value them more highly, it is not stated as a dogmatic part of the hermandad or the Church.
3. By this I do not mean that if someone else joins in the singing, he or she will be ejected. What I do mean is that the tonadas are intended to be sung by some hermandad leaders and some other experienced singers.

4. This is when two contrasting choirs are answering each other.

5. Sometimes drums accompany salves, and salves can range from very sacred to secular. But, in this pilgrimage, all salves have Virgin-related topics. For a detailed study of the salve, see Martha Ellen Davis' *Voces del purgatorio: Estudio de la salve dominicana*. For a study of palo music, see Davis' dissertation *Afro-Dominican Religious Brotherhoods: Structure, Ritual and Music*.