

## New and Changing Performance Contexts for the Dominican *Fiesta de Palos*

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### Abstract

*Palo* (long drum) music is an essential element of the rituals of the Afro-Dominican religion, *La Veintiuna División*. During these healing and divination rituals, *palo* music facilitates communication between devotees and their *misterios* (saints), sometimes via spirit possession. Recently, *palo* musicians have also moved into secular settings, performing in non-liturgical contexts like cultural centers and discos. In these new performance contexts, some *palo* ensembles have added new instruments to their music, which are not accepted in the sacred context. Nonetheless, the repertoire they perform—songs about the *misterios*, and also profane themes—stays the same in both contexts. This paper, based on two months of ethnographic field research in Santiago, Dominican Republic, explores the ways that *palo* musicians navigate these new professional contexts without alienating believers (and potential employers) who maintain traditional beliefs. As performers have moved among sacred and secular contexts, performing for believers and nonbelievers alike, they have developed discursive strategies and metaphors for their participation that allows them to generate these flexible identities as performers. Following Timothy Rice's model for "subject-centered" ethnography, I (first person) argue that these flexible metaphors and identities for *palo* music and *palo* musicians have developed in response to the specific socio-historic context of the Dominican Republic, where until quite recently expressions of African cultural ancestry were systematically denied or controlled by intellectuals and politicians alike. As a result, practitioners of *la Veintiuna División* have developed a flexible and pragmatic approach to music in ritual context, and *palo* musicians have developed different discursive strategies to frame their professional activity to serve the demands of the particular contexts in which they appear (music as spiritual practice, as national identity/folklore, as entertainment and as commodity).

**Keywords:** Palos, Afro-Dominican, Vodú

### 1. Introduction:

*La Veintiuna División* is a Dominican folk religion that is derived from African and Haitian practices. It is found throughout the country, although the specific practices vary according to the region. Many scholars call it "Dominican *vodú*", but practitioners prefer to call it *La Veintiuna División* because "*vodú*" "is associated with Haiti and connotes "black magic."<sup>1</sup> This religion is based on the devotion to *misterios* (deities), which are syncretically represented by Catholic saints, which originated when the African slaves of the Santo Domingo colony were not allowed to freely practice their religions or play their music. This led practitioners to camouflage their deities with images of Catholic saints in order for them to be able to practice their religious rituals.

Today, rituals involving *La Veintiuna División* serve mainly for healing and divination through devotion to the *misterios*. Practitioners consider themselves Catholics who believe in God, who communicates with them through the *misterios*. In order for practitioners to be healed, they consult with the *misterios* through a *servidor(a)* who serves as an intermediary between people and the *misterios*. The *servidor* owns an altar, which revolves around a

saint/*misterio* to whom the *servidor* holds more devotion than the rest. The two main activities of *La Veintina División* are private consultations and public celebrations, called *fiestas de misterios*. The latter can be a *fiesta* offered to a deity following healing, for the initiation of a new *servidor* or in honor of the altar's deity on his or her saint's day. The *fiesta* in honor of a deity is characterized mainly by spirit possession, food, drink, dance, and music. The music performed at these *fiestas* can be *palo* music depending on the region and altar.<sup>2</sup>

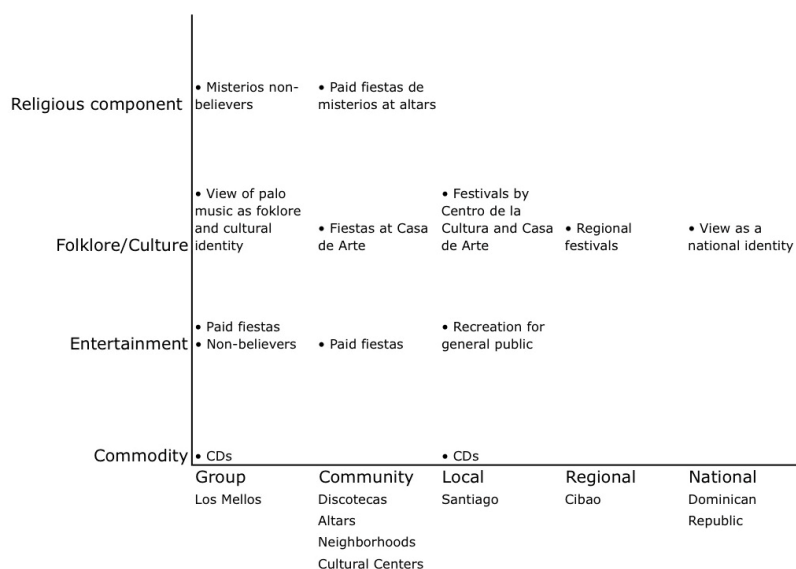
In the northern region of the country, *palo* music is the most common music used in the *fiestas*. Music serves as a stimulus for the *misterios* to “come down” and “posses” the *servidor*, which consists of an ensemble of three *palo* drums (*palo mayor*, *alcahuete* and *chivita*), a *güira*, sometimes a *pandero* or maracas, a singer who plays one of the drums, and a responsorial chorus (usually the rest of the musicians). These musicians perform saint-themed songs, which share very similar rhythms, but vary in text and melody.

I (personal pronoun here and fairly frequently throughout the paper) conducted field research around Santiago City in 2012, documenting contemporary *palo* music contexts. For this research several *fiestas de misterios* were documented that for the most part show the traditional practices illustrated by scholars like Martha Ellen Davis. The fieldwork for this project, however, exhibits different practices that are not present in the description of practices by Davis. Fieldwork research in Santiago and Navarrete, showed groups and practices extending beyond the traditional liturgical context by playing at *fiestas* without the practices of *misterios* and adding new instruments to the music. I observed and interviewed three *palo* groups for this project who perform at traditional *fiestas de misterios*, but who also participate in other contexts that do not involve the religious aspects of *La Veintiuna División*. These contexts include *fiestas* at *discotecas* (night clubs) and bars; cultural and folkloric events; any other venues/events for which they get hired and paid; and on recordings.

Following Timothy Rice's<sup>3</sup> subject-centered approach to understanding ways musicians move in between cultural contexts and meanings, this project focuses on the music, discursive framing and activities of Los Mellos group. Los Mellos, directed by Don Hector Turbí, are indicative of these changes because they have unique ways of moving back and forth from traditional *fiestas de misterios* to non-liturgical *fiestas*. Besides the traditional instrumentation of the *palo* ensemble Hector Turbí adds non-traditional instruments that are not considered appropriate to use in *fiestas de misterios*. These “extra” instruments are only used at non-liturgical *fiestas* at *discotecas* and other venues.

Timothy Rice provides an useful model for making sense of the ways these *palo* musicians, especially Hector Turbí and Los Mellos, view and think of *palo* music, and their roles as musicians in these different performing contexts. This model calls for a “subject-centered ethnography” and is based on plotting together three factors in a three-dimensional graph: time, metaphor and place.<sup>4</sup> The model consists of an x-y graph where “location” goes on the ‘x’ axis; “metaphor” on the ‘y’ and time is represented by an imaginary third axis that goes diagonally across the graph. Place or location refers to the physical places and venues where the music is performed and experienced by both the musicians and the audience. These locations range from the individual self of a musician or a group to the actual place where music is experienced, which can be a venue, and also a city, a region, or a country. Time refers to both the chronological concept of time and “...the way the experience of music changes as the subject moves through time and the way music gives us its own experience...”<sup>5</sup> Finally, metaphor is the ideas about the music that people and musicians have about it and the role it should play sonically. (awkward sentence) (the use and discussion here of Rice's model is not fully developed, and is therefore hard to follow. Would benefit from more integration into discussion of the fieldwork in the later sections of the paper. Graph is hard to follow.

In this project, the metaphors that *palo* musicians deploy are: *palo* music as a component of their religious practice, as folklore and culture, as popular entertainment and as a commodity. Nodes along the place axis are groups, community and local, regional, and national identities. These nodes allow me (personal pronoun) to “see” how these musicians would look at these two categories plotting ‘x-y’ nodes according the findings of the research.



Musicians like Hector Turbí, who move from religious contexts to secular ones, may seem to be in contradiction with the practices where they perform and only linearly moving from one context to the next putting the religious practices and its practitioners at odds. My research suggests, however, that this is not the case. Los Mellos have not abandoned or alienated traditional practices. Rather, *La Veintiuna División* has developed a flexibility that has allowed its practices, like *palo* music, to be translated into other contexts and at the same time to move back and forth among them, avoiding conflicts between these contexts or with its participants.

Throughout Dominican history many political leaders have proclaimed a Hispanicist ideology rejecting the African heritage in the Dominican Republic. The Hispanic ideology has its origins in the political relationship of the Dominican Republic and Haiti since they were European colonies. Since then, “a national cultural prejudice against ‘French’ culture and civilization...topped by a racial prejudice against the non-European [black slaves] population of the west” was common among the inhabitants of the Santo Domingo colony.<sup>6</sup> Since Haiti is a predominately “black” nation, the Dominican Republic used to self-identify as a “white” nation in order to distinguish itself from Haiti. Later events in history, like the “horrors of the Haitian Revolution and the brutal campaign of Dessalines against Santo Domingo in 1805” and the Haitian domination of Santo Domingo (1822-44) left many Dominicans with feelings of anti-Haitian resentment and discrimination towards Haitians.<sup>7</sup>

The Hispanicist ideology has been expressed and perpetuated by scholars who have portrayed Dominican culture as one that has little or nothing to do with the African slaves, as well as writers, poets, journalists, historians and intellectuals.<sup>8</sup> Dominican elites saw popular religious practices in the Dominican Republic, including those of the *La Veintiuna División*, as something completely Haitian, and rejected them. This led to several policies and orders by different Dominican political leaders prohibiting popular dances, and popular religious practices. The rejection of anything that depicted Haitian or African influence by the authorities of the Dominican Republic suggests that these are important circumstances that led the practices of *La Veintiuna División* to change and be flexible in order for it to persist. The flexibility that the *misterios* practices developed allowed the incorporation and parallel practices of *palo* music performance in new contexts like staging, non-liturgical performances, and the distribution of music recordings.

How do these flexible beliefs/practices work? In order to answer this question and to better understand the ways these flexible practices work I (personal pronoun) explored the different metaphors that Los Mellos and Unión San Miguel express, and the contexts where these groups participate in.

## 2. Contemporary Liturgical Contexts

On Thursday July 26th the *servidora* Blasina hosted a *fiesta* dedicated to Anaísa (St. Anne) at her house in the outskirts of Santiago. The *palo* group Unión San Miguel performed. Before the music, one of Blasina’s assistants distributed food to all the attendees. Shortly after, the *palo* group went into the altar room with the *servidora* and her

assistants, and performed four songs. After that, the *palo* group took a break and brought out their instruments and placed them out in the *enramada*.<sup>9</sup> During the break an assistant played Dominican traditional dance music (*palos* and *salves*) as well as secular, popular dance style (*merengue típico* and *bachata*) with a stereo system. At about 10:20pm, they were done playing the second set and shortly after left the *fiesta*.

The audience that attends these *fiestas* displays a wide range of reasons and motives. Because these kinds of *fiestas* are free and open to anyone it is expected to see people there for many different reasons. There are people who go there either because they are devoted to the *misterios*, or are clients of the *servidora*, or live in the neighborhood, or know someone who is there, or just want to go because of the live music and the party environment. This is true for all the *fiestas de misterios* I (first person) attended.

### 3. Contemporary Non-liturgical Contexts This Section Has A Number Of Grammatical Issues And Uses Some Overly Casual Language

On Wednesday June 23<sup>rd</sup> Los Mellos performed at a *fiesta* at the house of a neighbor that did not involved any religious practices. Because their neighbor had gone to New York City and successfully returned after working and saving money she wanted to throw a *fiesta de palos* to celebrate. Using the front sidewalk as a stage and using amplification, Los Mellos started their set. Few people were dancing to the music, but not in very serious way. Kids were also dancing and playing around. Los Mellos performed a 10-songs set followed by a 30-minutes break, and finished the *fiesta* with another shorter set.

This *fiesta* is an example of a non-liturgical *fiesta* that is not related to *La Veintiuna División* or any other religious practice. The audience in these *fiestas* is similar to that of the *fiestas de misterios* in the way that people attend these for many different reasons and with different backgrounds. In these *fiestas* people are not expected to know what *palo* music is, from where it comes, or what it is traditionally used for. This *fiesta* at the neighbor's house is similar to that of the *fiestas* at *discotecas*, and popular music venues in regard of the audience's expectations. In these *fiestas* there might be practitioners of *La Veintiuna División* as well as people who has never heard about it. According to Don Hector, if they perform at a *discoteca*, there is people who go because they know that Los Mellos are performing—who might know the group because of *fiestas de misterios*—and people who just happened to be there that night who do not necessarily know about *misterios* or *palo* music.

When Los Mellos play at these non-liturgical fiestas, besides the traditional instrumentation of the *palo* music they add new instruments to their ensemble, such as a pair of congas, a *bambú*, an electric drum-pad, and an electric bass. These additional instruments, however, are usually considered not to be proper for a *fiesta de misterios*. According to Don Hector,<sup>10</sup> all the *fiestas de misterios* where they perform are only done with the 'traditional' instruments because "that it what the *servidores* ask for."<sup>11</sup> For Don Hector, the main purposes of adding extra instruments to the *palo* ensemble are related to making the music more appealing to a cosmopolitan public. Don Hector was thinking more commercially, explaining that he wanted to satisfy the audience in the non-liturgical *fiestas*. He compares his music to that of Kinito Méndez (a *merengue* musician who in the 90's made famous several *merengue* songs combined with *palo* drums, and popularized a recording of the song "Suero de Amor"). Don Hector says that the drum-pad, the congas and the bass, "are needed for those songs which are already popular. For example, Kinito's songs, Ogún Balenyó [Suero de Amor]...when I [Los Mellos] go to [perform for] a fiesta and people ask for the song, we perform it as I think of the [Kinito's] song."<sup>12</sup>

Another reason for Don Hector to add a pair of congas, the drum-pad and electric bass is to make the group louder. He says that, "Las congas are two drums which have more sound that the *atabal* [*palo*], because the *atabal* is touching the ground; the congas are risen." Don Hector uses a metal structure that raises the congas about a foot from the ground leaving a space between the floor and the drums that allows them, "to resonate more."<sup>13</sup> Nonetheless, for Don Hector, the important "core" of Los Mellos is within the traditional instrumentation (not including the maracas or *pandero*). He says that he tries to make sure that Pachecho (the *chivita* drum player) and Dady (his brother and the *alcahuete* drum player) are present in all of the performances and rehearsals. He explained to me that regardless of who plays the rest of the instruments (*güira*, maracas and *pandero*), as long as the vocalists stay consistent, it is fine for him.

When Los Mellos, and the other *palo* groups perform at a *discoteca*, bar or other popular music venue, amplification is needed. In *fiestas de misterios*, however, amplification is not seen as appropriate. Heriberto, husband of *servidora* Juana who has an altar in Los Tocones, Santiago, told me that "*palo* music is for the *misterios*, and because of that *paleros* here do not perform with amplification, because it should be *música criolla*, for the *misterios*, traditional."<sup>14</sup> This is also true for all *fiestas de misterios* documented for this project where musicians did

not perform with amplification. Because of the non-liturgical venues' characteristics and audience's expectations, amplification is likely to be required. If the instruments or vocals are not amplified—because of the size of some *discotecas* and bars and the amount of people who attend—the audience will not effectively hear the music. Moreover, just as in popular dance music, where the effective balance among instruments is achieved through the use of amplification, in order to fulfill audience's expectations of being able to clearly hear all of the parts *palo* groups amplify their instruments.

#### 4. Commodity

*Palo* groups have also taken advantage of recorded music media. It is not uncommon these days to see *palo* groups who have recorded themselves either live or at recording studios. All of the groups interviewed for this project—except one—had already recorded themselves either for self-purposes or for selling. As a way of promoting themselves and in order for more people outside of *fiestas* of any kind to know them Los Mellos recorded a 12-track CD album. This is an informal recording made live at a *discoteca*, which they reproduce and distribute themselves. The CD is sold in a paper envelope with their name and phone number written in the front with marker on both the disc and the envelope at a price of \$150 Dominican pesos (US\$3.75). Unión San Miguel made their first official audio and video recording on August of 2012 both audio and video recording. Don Fermín, asked me to do him the favor of recording them with the equipment I used for the fieldwork.

These recordings made and sold by Los Mellos and Unión San Miguel provide a new context for experiencing *palo* music that might have not been as common 20 years ago. Just as people listen to live *palo* music in *fiestas de misterios* and non-liturgical contexts, prerecorded audio makes the listener experience the music in a different way where the physical place or the presence of the musicians do not play a relevant role. This context gives these groups the opportunity to have an extra source of money and a way to expand their audience. Because of this, these two factors constantly lead the musicians to record their music. *La Veintiuna división's* music is not only heard at *fiestas de misterios* but now in many other places.

#### 5. Staging of Folklore: “Folkloricization” first person; typos in this and next 2 sections

Music traditions like *palo* music have been elevated to national identity in the Dominican Republic. These attempts have been enforced by scholars who started to point out the “African-ness” of traditional musics in the Dominican Republic, and also by the staging done by cultural centers that promote culture and arts. Key organizations that have influenced in the spread the spread of the *palo* music and other folkloric musics in Santiago are Casa de Arte, Inc. and Centro de la Cultura, the former widely known for presenting music performances, dance performances, plays, and projecting movies. The latter one, a state-administrated institution, has an arts school, and a medium-sized concert hall that hosts all kinds of performances.

Since the mid 80's Casa de Arte has been responsible for organizing several folkloric and cultural events involving music performances of several folkloric traditions from the Dominican Republic. These have been national and regional cultural festivals that gathered musicians and groups of *palo* music, *salve* music, *merengue típico*, among others. In addition to folkloric festivals, Casa de Arte has been organizing monthly *fiestas* on Friday nights since the mid 80's, which serve as a cultural/folkloric event open to the general public with the purpose of “introducing” *palo* music into the urban context of Santiago. During these *fiestas*, groups perform traditional *palo* music, and images and objects related to *misterios* practices are as display.<sup>15</sup> Since early 2000s, Los Mellos have been performing in the Friday night *fiestas* as the featured *palo* group of the night performing with only the traditional instrumentation. These festivals and Friday night *fiestas* have been important pushers of the staging of folkloric music and dance traditions scene in Santiago and the Republic. By means of staging, these traditions have been “borrowed” and moved from their “traditional” contexts and taken to new ones that require new meanings, practices and purposes.

It was not until the 1970s when “the country enjoyed a cultural renaissance” that scholars and folklorist started to conduct Afro-Dominican research on music and dance traditions.<sup>16</sup> Scholars' acknowledgement of the African influence in Dominican music also shaped the views of practitioners and non-practitioners of *La Veintiuna División* and other popular religious practices. “Africa” was now part of the Dominican heritage. Eventually this idea began to spread through the country, which facilitated and enhanced the “folkloricization” of *palo* music.

An example of how *palo* music can be used was a folkloric symbol separate from any *misterios* practice is the group Los Indios de Caonabo, led by Radhamés Nuñez, who originally started solely as a “cultural” group. Nuñez

was born and raised in Navarrete not familiarized with *palo* music or practices of *La Veintiuna División*. A man from San Cristobal, Rafael López, who moved to Navarrete, brought with him a set of *palo* drums and founded a *palo* group in 1982 at a cultural club. Núñez and the rest of the musicians learned to play the *palos* in the group. This group in the beginning only performed at cultural events and other non-liturgical *fiestas*, like birthday parties, that had no connection to *vodú* practices. It was not until several years later that López introduced the musicians to *fiestas de misterios*. Up until that point, Núñez and the other musicians were not aware of *La Veintiuna División*. Eventually, the group started to perform at *fiestas de misterios* in Navarrete and surrounding towns and have continued to perform at non-liturgical *fiestas* as well. From then on, Núñez also started his devotion to the *misterios* and has continued to the present day.<sup>17</sup>

Don Hector is another example of someone who views *palo* music as both an expression of cultural identity and as an African-descendant practice. He says that, “*palo* music is culture, is folklore.”<sup>18</sup> For Don Hector, *palo* music performance as a folkloric performance is more important than as a religious practice. He says that one of the main purposes of being the leader of Los Mellos and performing *palo* music is to, “maintain the [Dominican] culture, so it is not lost.”<sup>19</sup> His siblings, Anita and Dady (members of Los Mellos), also share very similar opinions of *palo* music as a Dominican folkloric element and as an African-descendant tradition.

Moreover, traditionally *palo* musicians have been believers and practitioners of *La Veintiuna División*. This is not true for Hector Turbí or his siblings. Even though Hector Turbí started to learn how to play *palos* at age 5, attending religious ceremonies that involved *palo* music; and that their mother was a practitioner of *Liborismo*,<sup>20</sup> Don Hector says that he does not believe in the *misterios* or any practice of *vodú*. He believes, “in God and in His word,” but he does not follow any church in particular. For him, “the Church is not what saves you, but your actions in Earth do.”

Don Hector many times expressed to me how people who are not familiarized with *palo* music or *La Veintiuna División*, label *palos* as “satanic and bad things.” Since he does not believe in *misterios* or other spirits cults, he says, “that is not true, that is not true, that [*palo* music] is folkloric music, is roots music, music that comes from long time ago.” Overall, for Don Hector *palo* music seem to be a musical tradition which is at the same time both music for the *misterios* (useful for those who believe in *misterios*) and a national cultural identity that should be kept alive. These two ideas do not conflict with one another, but coexist.

## 6. Conclusion

*Palo* music has been influenced by a long series of occurrences and ideologies, which could be traced back to the times of the colony of Santo Domingo. The political strains between the two colonies sharing one island that eventually turned into Haiti and the Dominican Republic created and spread through the Dominican Republic prejudices against the “black” neighbor nation. These eventually turned against Dominicans’ very own African-descendant practices, which eventually, in order to remain alive, had to allow change from within their organizations. The new performance contexts of *palo* music are a living example of altered traditions of the Dominican Republic. *Palo* musicians who are actively involved in the new contexts of this music might seem to be at odds with the more traditional contexts, however, the factors that have changed practices venerating the *misterios* are the same factors that have allowed these practices to move to new performance contexts, and at the same time allowed musicians to travel back and forth between these contexts and metaphors with ease without creating conflicts among those involved in each context.

Even though scholars and folklorists have recognized the presence of African influence in Dominican culture and traditional practices, and have yield a great number of new, thorough and less-biased-than-50-years-ago studies, there is a lot more left in the Dominican Republic to be documented and studied. There are many more traditions, regions, and practices that—if already looked at by scholars—are still in need of more in-depth study. A popular saying among some Dominican researchers—and also some *palo* musicians—“there are as many *palo* rhythms as there are *paleros*” (trans. mine) suggests that *palo* music has an endless basket full of different characteristics, practices and cultural traits that are still unknown by researchers. Research projects like this will hopefully contribute to the research of the Dominican folkloric traditions, encourage future projects, and provide new ways of understanding *palo* music traditions.

## 7. Reference

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2. Martha Ellen Davis, Jovanny Guzmán, and Norma Urraca de Martinez, "Vodú of the Dominican Republic: Devotion to 'La Veintiuna División'." *Afro-Hispanic Review* 26, no. 1 (2007): 85.
3. Timothy Rice, "Time, Place, and Metaphor in Musical Experience and Ethnography." *Ethnomusicology: Journal of the Society for Ethnomusicology* (2003).
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid., 163.
6. Ernesto Sagás, *Race and Politics in the Dominican Republic* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2000), 24.
7. Ibid.
8. Carlos Esteban Deive, *Vodú Y Magia En Santo Domingo* (Santo Domingo: Museo del Hombre Dominicano, 1979), 163.
9. A shed made with a roof typically made of tree branches or sometimes with tin, and supported by a wooden structure.
10. All translations of all interviews made for this project including Turbí's are mine.
11. Hector Turbí, Interview conducted at his home in Santiago, Dominican Republic, August 4, 2012.
12. Ibid.
13. Ibid.
14. Heriberto, Interview conducted at his house in Los Tocones, Santiago, Dominican Republic, August 14, 2012.
15. Rafael Almánzar, Interview conducted in Casa de Arte, Santiago, Dominican Republic, August 3, 2012.
16. Martha Ellen Davis, "Music and Black Ethnicity: The Caribbean and South America," in *Music and black ethnicity: The Caribbean and South America*, ed. Gerald Béhague (Coral Gables: North-South Center Press, 1994), 130.
17. Radhamés Núñez, Interview conducted at Ignacio El Curandero's altar, Navarrete, Dominican Republic, July 23, 2012.
18. Turbí, interview.
19. Ibid.
20. This is a folk religious practice with messianic roots based on the devotion to Olivorio Mateo (1876-1922) known as "Papá Liborio" who was a famous healer from La Maguana, San Juan Province.