

**Revolutionary Quisqueya from Caonabo to Liborio:  
Presentation and Excerpts from the Documentary,  
“Papa Liborio: el santo vivo de Maguana” (2003)**

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Resistance and rebellion are born of injustice. Acts of collective violence, past and present --from the Taíno and African rebels and *cimarrones* in the early phase of the conquest of Quisqueya to today’s “terrorists”—must be considered in this light in order to understand them. The grand-nephew of Anacaona, *cacique* Enriquillo, literate and Christianized, responded violently in 1519 when Andrés de Valenzuela, son of his late *encomendero*, seized his horse and his wife, Mencía, to whom he was married by the Church. These injustices turned him against the conquerors into whose culture he had made an effort to assimilate.

Among Africans in Quisqueya, resistance in the form of flight from bondage reached such proportions throughout the island in the 1520s, that the insular authorities worried that “the blacks would take over the island.” This is exactly what they did ultimately accomplish with the Haitian Revolution whose bicentenary we celebrate this year.

Resistance and rebellion born of injustice, of external and internal origins, of descendants of Taínos, Africans, and Europeans, are themes throughout the island’s colonial and republican histories. In colonial times, they range from the incursions or attempted incursions of pirates and foreign conquerors to the Devastaciones of the early 1600s, in which the Crown destroyed towns in Western Hispaniola where merchants traded with foreigners, thus snuffing out the entrepreneurial flame and throwing the island into poverty. Rebellion against the injustices of the European colonists of the divided island initiated

The revolutionary movements in St.-Domingue and later Santo Domingo, intended to rid the island of colonialism and slavery, led to the republican period and the instability of its struggles against other injustices and inequities bred of avarice within.

I would argue that independence movements require two phases: the first, liberation from colonial domination, the second, equitable restructuring of society so as not to replicate in the new republic the injustices of Europe nor the European colonial system. One could say that in the Thirteen Colonies, the second phase was worked out peacefully in the Continental Congress. But in many countries of Latin America, the second phase has required further violence against injustice, often repeated many times. Father Las Casas, who spoke out against the suffering of the enslaved Taínos in Quisqueya, saw the same in Chiapas, born of injustice still unresolved, so reconfronted, almost 500 years later. Where the second phase of liberation has been furthered peacefully, such as through the election of Arbenz in Guatemala or Allende in Chile, the

Colossus of the North has covertly intervened because of its own political, economic, or military interests.

The heritage of the initial *repartimientos* was perpetuated into the 20<sup>th</sup> century in the Dominican Republic through the regional caudillos. The Dominican late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries was a time not only of unstable, self-serving central governments, but also incipient economic development entailing a transition from precapitalistic to capitalistic society, very much felt at the local level. The formerly communal lands of this eminently cattle-based society began to be surveyed, ascribed value, and bought and sold. Peasants sold out or were dispossessed of their lands by savvy caudillos and businessmen. They became physically marginalized and their way of life, as herders and subsistence agriculturalists on communal lands, changed radically.

At the same time, presidents such as Ulises Heureaux “Lilís” took out loans for public works projects such as railroads and ports, and could not pay. This legitimized the U.S. receivership of the customs houses around 1905 and, given the growing political instability, occupation of the country itself from 1916-24, paralleled by the even lengthier occupation of Haiti.

Four simultaneous peasant movements arose on both sides of the island against the U.S. violation of national sovereignty: the movement of the “cacos” led by Charlemagne Peralte of Haiti, and *caudillo* Desiderio Arias and his followers in the Dominican northwest. On the Dominican side, there were simultaneous peasant protests against the economic inequities by the so-called *gavilleros* in the East, and Olivorio Mateo and his followers in the southwest, in the Province of San Juan.

Different from the other movements, however, Olivorio’s was initially and fundamentally religious. Affectionately called “Papá Liborio,” Olivorio Mateo of La Maguana was a great traditional healer, the greatest the country has known. He became a messianic leader whose way offered hopes of a return to the idyllic life and communal harmony of yesteryear.

His religious leadership became politicized because it coincided with the American occupation, which actually began ten years earlier with the occupation of the customs houses and closing of the border. The region had traditionally traded cattle for dry goods with Port-au-Prince; the border closing favored the businesses of the local elites. But the *modus vivendi* of the peasantry had been blocked by the Americans, and Liborio represented them in opposition

Following his five-year persecution and eventual assassination in 1922 at the hand of the Dominican army, the devotion to Liborio continued. Today, *Liborismo* can be considered the southwestern variant of Dominican folk Catholicism. Liborio’s followers viewed and still view him as an incarnation of Christ.

*Liborismo* became active again forty years after his death in the Movement of Palma Sola (“Lone Palm”), led by the so-called Mellizos de Palma Sola (“Twins of Lone

Palm”) in the same region. (They were actually brothers but were construed as twins, given the African-attributed power to twins.) The movement arose during another tumultuous time following the assassination of Trujillo in 1961. Palma Sola was actually a Christian commune and site of pilgrimage for healing. But again, politics became intertwined with religion; the growing concentration of peasants was misinterpreted by the Dominican army, which conducted a massacre in December, 1962. The survivors and the heirs of the congregants recall this injustice with great pain.

*Liborismo* is still a very active regional variant of Dominican folk Catholicism. And it could be said that, if the marginalization of the peasantry continues unaddressed, its latent force could develop into a third messianic response to injustice.

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In 2001, the minister of the newly-created Dominican ministry of culture, Tony Raful, visited the main pilgrimage site, the sacred spring called “La Agüita de Liborio.” He was impressed with the fervor of the devotees and created an initiative to do justice to Liborio and his followers. This initiative represents a radical change in the State, from persecutor to protector. Mr. Raful appointed professor Lusitania Martínez coordinator of an ambitious project, entitled “La Ruta hacia Liborio” (“The Road to Liborio” – or “In search of Liborio”). She is the author of the extraordinary book on Palma Sola, *Palma Sola: opresión y esperanza...*, recently republished by the Dominican Academy of Sciences (2003). She designed the multifaceted project, secured funding from the IDB, UNESCO, and local business sources, and carried it out with hardly any personnel. It included a national pilgrimage to “La Agüita,” nine workshops with talks by local experts and testimonials by liberistas in various sites in the Province of San Juan, drumming and literary contests, an international seminar, and two documentary videos: one about Olivorio and the other about the religious culture of the Southwest to frame Olivorio, each 56 minutes long, for which I served as director, and finally a book which gathered the seminar papers and transcriptions of some of the workshops, entitled *La ruta hacia Liborio: mesianismo en el Sur Profundo dominicano*, published by UNESCO, for which I served as editor.

The documentary about Liborio, “Papá Liborio: el santo vivo de Maguana” views Olivorio historically, from his origins to the present, including the Movement of Palma Sola and contemporary *Liborismo*. Olivorio’s followers were illiterate, so their view was unknown beyond their domain, while his adversaries published critical works against him. Therefore, the purpose of the documentary and book has been to give voice to the voiceless. The work is based on statements from his descendants and followers, as well as the one surviving companion of his years as fugitive in the Central Mountain Range, to whom the documentary is dedicated. The work includes music associated with the devotion to Olivorio (*salves, palos*), and the *comarca* with which Olivorio performed his healings.

Excerpts from the video illustrate the historical and contemporary dimensions of *liborismo* as well as elements of the *Liborista* expressive culture.

## DISTRIBUTION

### Videos

- (1) “Papá Liborio: el santo vivo de Maguana” (2003, 56:16). Spanish only.
- (2a) “El Suroeste dominicano: encrucijada de Quisqueya...” (2004, 56:32). Spanish.
- (2b) “The Dominican Southwest: crossroads of Quisqueya...” (2004: 56:40). English narration and subtitles.

All available in DVD or VHS (NTSC unless PAL or other format specified—surcharge).

Individuals: VHS: \$50, DVD \$65

Institutions: VHS \$95, DVD \$135

+ \$5 shipping up to five items

Make checks payable to “Martha Ellen Davis”

Ethnica Publications, 1621 NW 11<sup>th</sup> Road, Gainesville, FL 32605-5319

<ethnica2003@yahoo.com>, (352) 262-3957.

### Book

*La ruta hacia Liborio: mesianismo en el Sur Profundo dominicano*. Santo Domingo: UNESCO, 2004, paperback, 315 pp.

Distributed by: Museo del Hombre Dominicano, Santo Domingo. (809) 682-3622, price unavailable.

Starting January, 2005: Also available from Ethnica Publications. Approx. US\$22.

### **SUMMARY AND TRANSLATED CONTENTS OF DOCUMENTARY VIDEO: “Papá Liborio: el santo vivo de Maguana” (2003, 56:16)**

“Liborism” is a form of folk Catholicism which developed in the interior southwest region of the Dominican Republic during the early twentieth century. It is based on the devotion to Olivorio Mateo “Liborio” (1876-1922), a miraculous folk healer whose leadership arose at the time of transition between pre-capitalistic and capitalistic society and who became the most important messianic leader in Dominican history. His devotees consider Liborio an incarnation of Jesus Christ.

The video documentary situates the rise of a messianic leader in the area which, not coincidentally, was the political and spiritual center of the island during pre-conquest Taíno times. It traces the development of “Liborism” from both socioeconomic and spiritual perspectives. The work includes its resurgence in the Palma Sola Movement during the early 1960s, a rural Christian commune which developed at another tumultuous time in Dominican history: following the assassination of Rafael Leónidas Trujillo and the end of his 31-year dictatorship. Like Liborio and his followers in the 1920s, the Palma Sola Movement came to a tragic end at the hands of the military. The

work features testimonials from family, friends, and devotees of Liborio about his life, death, and practices. These include statements from a daughter and from the living remaining leader of the Palma Sola Movement.

The work also includes extensive examples of the music associated with “Liberism,” past and present: *Salves* (the sung *Salve Regina* prayer), *palos* (long-drums), and the *Comarca*—the accordion music (a derivative of the *carabiné* social-dance music) with which Liborio performed his healing.

The documentary suggests that the persecution by both Church and state has lessened today due to a greater respect for this homegrown folk religion and its tenacious followers. In fact, the production itself of the video is an initiative of the Dominican minister of culture. But the work concludes by arguing that, since the marginalization of the peasantry of the southwest has still not been rectified, active, militant “Liberism” could well resurge again.

The video is directed by anthropologist/ethnomusicologist Martha Ellen Davis, produced by Miguel Fernández, and edited by Arturo Guzmán. It was premièred at the Cinemateca Nacional in Santo Domingo on June 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2003.

## **Video content in order**

### Introduction:

Don José Mateo, great nephew of Liborio and custodian of “La Agüita de Liborio” (Liborio’s Spring) in El Naranjo, above Maguana Arriba, San Juan de la Maguana, says: “Liborio was the chosen one to speak the word of Christ”

### I.

Music: Drums of the Holy Spirit (of the largest Afro-Dominican religious brotherhood in the country), whose center is the rural area of El Batey, about 18 kms. northeast of the town of San Juan de la Maguana. This drumming style was central to Liborio’s musical milieu. Views of drum dance, El Batey, the doll representing the patron saint (Holy Spirit). Drummer: Don Andrés Medina, folk “missionary” of Liborio.

History of La Maguana as the political and ceremonial center of the island during pre-conquest Taíno times. It was also the area of the first Native-American opposition to the European conquest in the New World and likewise of the first African opposition.

Conclusion: “Thus we know that this land of Maguana had natural richness, religiosity and rebelliousness since the time of the Taínos.”

Expert: Dr. Jan Lundius, Swedish expert in religious studies, author of two books on the folk religion of the San Juan Valley and specifically Liberism. Reviews the historical background of the rise of Liberism during the early days of the Conquest.

The role of religious devotion in sustaining dwellers of the San Juan Valley. Includes three signs of the coming of a messiah: Halley's Comet in 1910, an earthquake in 1911, and a civil war in 1912.

## II.

Mythology: St. John the Baptist (San Juan Bautista) was believed to have appeared in Liborio's Spring (*i.e.*, is the religious milieu in which he was raised), as king of the Indian deities who inhabit this sacred spring.

Narrator: Rise of religious leader: It is no surprise that a religious and rebel leader would arise in this same spot, an incarnation of Caonabo (the first Taíno rebel leader) and St. John the Baptist: a miraculous healer, the most important messianic leader of Dominican history.

Mythology: Selection of Liborio as incarnation of God/Christ: Don José Mateo, custodian of "La Agüita": "God asked St. Anthony to go to earth and find someone in whom he could 'put his word' (encarnate). St. Anthony looked the whole world over and found no one. God said: 'Look for him in the Middle of the World; that's where he is. In our opinion, he chose Liborio.'"

Expert: Liborism: Prof. Lusitania Martínez, author of most important book on the Palma Sola Movement: *Palma Sola: opresión y esperanza* (opression and hope). Definition of Liborism.

Expert: Messianism: Prof. Lusitania Martínez. Definition of messianism.

Historical milieu: Liborism coincided with peasant rebel movements elsewhere in the island: los Gavilleros of the East, Desiderio Arias in the North, and Carlemagne Pèralte of the Cacos guerrilla movement in Haiti.

Liborio as messianic leader: Liborio offered a return to the idyllic state of equality, peace, and brotherly love.

Expert: Prof. Lusitania Martínez. Definition of the "natural state" desired.

Opposition to Liborio and his movement by the local business and intellectual elite of the time, as a threat to their interests.

Testimonies of the illiterate followers who, until now, have not had a voice:

- 1) Don Andrés Medina, "missionary" and drummer: Liborio was Christ himself. Everybody went to him and supported him because of his enlightenment.
- 2) Don Antonio Mateo, Liborist of Maguana Arriba: A lot of people went to him because he performed miracles.
- 3) Don Hermelio Luciano Encarnación, Protestant Liborist of Maguana Arriba: Liborio had great wisdom but we do not know whether human or divine.

Some of today's local elite who give voice and do justice to Liborio:

Expert: Dr. Leopoldo Figuereo (lawyer, assistant District Attorney, San Juan de la Maguana, author: *De Liborio a Palma Sola* [From Liborio to Palma Sola]). Says that Liborio was the Dominican folkloric figure of the twentieth century because he was a pioneer in confronting injustices by the local elite who deceived the peasantry to get their land, and in opposing the First U.S. Occupation, 1916-22. Yet he was accused of promoting free love, while there are others who accused him who were local studs.

III.

At El Calvario, Maguana Arriba (upper Maguana), where Liborio was born: The custodian, Doña Reina, raises the flag with the national anthem, as she does every morning. Final part, translated: “And if we were to be enslaved a thousand times, we then must be free the same amount of times.”

Pilgrims arriving at the site to honor Liborio as a living saint. Received by Doña Reina, as their first sacred stop before proceeding to the sacred bath at the spring, La Agüita.

Personal history of Liborio, from unknown, uneducated agricultural laborer to spiritual leader:

He was lost in the mountains (Cordillera Central, Central Mountain Range – the highest in the Caribbean) during a storm for 3 or 7 days (testimonials vary), and thought dead. He reappeared speaking of prophecies and with powers of healing. People thought he was mad until they saw he had returned with a gift of healing and clairvoyance.

Testimonials of his disappearance and reappearance.

- Don José Mateo
- Doña Ventura Agramonte
- Don Marcos Mateo

Miracles when he returned:

- Don José Mateo: He was taken to the hills, and offered the power of “destroying the world and creating it again.” But he had to agree to the same Via Crucis of Christ: he had to be crucified too. He agreed to it all.
- His daughter, Carmela Mateo Valdez: He returned during the wake of his mother-in-law. He was going to revive her from the dead as his first miracle, had a relative followed his orders re: certain preparations. But since he did not, she could not be revived, and tears ran down the face of the dead woman. [Represents mythology developed in just one generation]

Miracles of healing the crippled and the blind.

His healing procedures and how people came from everywhere on mountain paths to reach him: Don Félix Caamaño, local Liborist researcher, San Juan de la Maguana

Prohibited from charging: Don José Mateo says that he was prohibited from making money for his services, and he warned his apostles of the same: “Everything of God is done for love, nothing for profit.”

Don Andrés Medina says that God is unhappy with the poor distribution of wealth today in the world. This must be clarified to the wealth, who “have the solution of the world in their hands”.

Liborio’s healing procedures illustrated at the sanctuary of Doña Reina at El Calvario; with his concluding statement: “Salga el mal y entre el bien” (Out with evil and in with good)

Music at El Calvario: “La Comarca”—the music with which Liborio healed (he had his own accordion); probably derived from the Carabiné (social dance music of the Southwest). Refrain: “Long live God and down with Evil.”

The assassination of Liborio (by the U.S. with Dominican army after some 5 years of tracking him)

The wake (taped: of Liborio’s last living friend) – as if of Liborio himself.

The economic scenario which led to his development as a peasant leader and threat to the powers-that-be, causing him to be killed.

Expert: Reasons for Liborio’s murder: Dr. Jan Lundius. The transition from a pre-capitalistic to capitalistic economy, represented by the measuring and fencing off lands which used to be communal, by the local elite, and the marginalization of the peasantry from the land. At the same time, the loans taken out by national president Ulises Heareaux (“Lilís”) to build railroads and ports, which could not be repaid, leading to the U.S. occupation of the Dominican custom houses and closing off of the Haitian border. This was distasteful to the peasantry of the central southwest, which traded with Haiti (Port-au-Prince was much closer and more accessible than was Santo Domingo). But the measure was supported by the local businessmen because the peasantry would then have to buy from them rather than from Haiti. Liborio and the peasantry violated the closed border.

The U.S. occupation of the customs houses, ca. 1905

Commerce by peasantry between San Juan and Haiti: Don Félix Caamaño, local researcher, San Juan de la Maguana

Support of Liborio by the peasantry: How Don Pedrito de los Santos, the last living friend of Liborio, was recruited to join and help him.



## The First U.S. Intervention, 1916-22.

How Liborio got arms: from the local *caudillo*, Wenceslao Ramírez during the 1912 Civil War when Ramírez challenged the central government. Don Félix Caamaño.

How Liborio was persecuted—such as an effort to poison women with him. Don Félix Caamaño.

## The last days of Liborio

Liborio's assassination at the Hoyo del Infierno (Hell Hole)

- Don Félix Caamaño – States date of assassination as July 29, 1922 [error re: day]
- Statement by Don Mateo about the final entrapment where Liborio's son was shot first and when Liborio returned for him, he was hunted down by the army sharpshooters.

## IV.

Question: Was Liborio a rebel or a healer, or all of this and more?

Continued mystical manifestation of Liborio:

Scene of the Bosque de Liborio (Liborio's Woods), a patch of virgen forest in the denuded mountains that cannot be cut down or injury, illness, or bad luck will disgrace whoever attempts to do so. Reverence of local guide at cross in the woods.

Devotion at La Agüita de Liborio (Liborio's Spring), La Maguana Arriba – with its many activities: cleansing by holy waters, drum dancing, blessings.

- Blessing by Don Ernesto Manuel Jiménez – “missionary” at La Agüita
- Declaration in trance by Hernández, “missionary” and accordionist at El Calvario

Continued debate about the meaning of Liborio:

- The continued celebration of Liborio's birthday in La Maguana, April 19<sup>th</sup>
- Don José Mateo: What does it mean that his tomb was empty the day after his burial? “If he had lived during the era of Christ, he would have been one of the greatest prophets.”
- Da. Ventura Agramonte: “Liborio is not dead; he is alive—he was sanctified by Christ and is alive!”
- Don Antonio Mateo - testimonial (well known) of Carmito Ramírez, surveyor and son of local *caudillo* Wenceslao Ramírez, about 1940 to the men in Maguana Arriba: that Carmito had placed a handkerchief on Liborio's face at the time of burial, and that night Liborio appeared to him to return the handkerchief.
- Don Marcos Mateo - a couple of months ago a woman came to his door to deliver a message from Liborio: that he still lives; Marcos responds: “Tell Liborio that I am waiting for him.”

The Movement of Palma Sola (1961-62): A delegation from Media Luna, Las Matas de Farfán, sings a Salve Regina with a concluding stanza about Liborio. Among them: the “Mellizo,” the surviving “twin,” of two leaders of the Palma Sola Movement. As they sing, a sequence of historical photographs of arrivals to and devotion in that Christian commune, and its destruction by the Dominican army in December, 1962.

Statement by the Mellizo, Don León Ventura: “I am Liborist since I was in my mother’s belly...” About all he and his family suffered. That the men of power (elite) hold the solution to poverty.

Second statement: Speaking with the voice of Liborio: calls for brotherly love “because we are all children of Adam and Eve.”

Third statement: Re: the authorities today are different (respect them) [although have not solved problem of poverty!]

He embraces the minister of culture, who arrives at El Calvario for a visit during the time of St. John the Baptist (June, 2002).

Expert: Could Liborism arise again? Prof. Lusitania Martínez: The division between formal and folk Catholicism has softened; there is more receptiveness by formal Catholicism.

But if the marginalization of the peasantry is not addressed, Liborism could rise again!

Musicians at La Agüita spring: Don “Américo the Musician” sings to long-drums: “In the Dominican nation...when Liborio returns, we don’t know how many followers there will be!...”

A return to Liborio’s wake (actually Liborio’s friend, Don Pedrito):

His spirit, possessing a family member, calls for “water!” (which blesses and spiritually cleanses)

Message for all, Liborio’s statement upon concluding a healing:  
“Salga el mal y entre el bien” (Out with evil and in with good).

Music: Concluding drumming: The “guaracha de Liborio”:

“They say Liborio is dead, but he is not dead at all...”\*

Singer/drummer: Don Andrés Medina

[\* Made commercially known by Luis Dias, who arranged it and changed the text]

Following credits (after coming out of trancelike state), singer/drummer Don Andrés reiterates Liborio’s messages of peace with justice: “Let’s love each other as brethren” and “Give bread to the hungry!”