

## **The *Gritería* in Miami: A Nicaraguan Home-based Festival**

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Although Nicaraguans have migrated to Miami in significant numbers only in the last thirteen years, they have already begun to make their mark on the city. Catholic Nicaraguans, for instance, have organized at least seven different patronal festivals, including those of *San Sebastian*, *San Marcos*, *Santiago*, *Santa Ana*, *San Jerónimo*, and the *Purísima* and *Gritería* to the Virgin of the Assumption. These festivals, which have been elaborated to differing degrees, provide the context for a display of a variety of folklore forms, affirm ethnic identity, and express religious devotion.

In this brief review I will describe the various festivals of Catholic Nicaraguans in Miami in order to distinguish between two types: town-based festivals and the home-based festival represented by the *Purísima* and *Gritería*. I will argue that the traditional organizational forms of these two types of festivals have implications for how a home country festival is recreated within the new context of the immigrant ethnic community. My point is quite simple. While town festivals have become important markers of *Nicaragüanidad* or "Nicaraguaness" in Miami, home festivals are less rooted to place and less dependent on the social organization of the original community. Therefore, the home-based festival can more easily be reproduced in a new social environment, and, in the case of Nicaraguan Miami, it forms the strongest, most public expression of ethnic identity.

Let me begin by describing the common features of town festivals in Nicaragua and how these are modified when Miami Nicaraguans reproduce them. Nicaragua is a predominantly Catholic country. Patronal festivals for each town constitute the major folk expression of this religiosity and of local cultural identity as well. In Nicaragua, these festivals are organized by traditional *mayordomías* and *cofradías*, which are charged with shouldering the expense of festival celebrations. A *mayordomía* usually consists of a leadership group of under twenty people called *mayordomos*, but it may

embrace hundreds of members who donate money, materials, or voluntary service. Members have usually made a promise to the patron Saint of the festival to join a *mayordomía* after having been granted a favor by the Saint; for instance, *mayordomía* members often join the festival organization in order to "pay a promise" for a family member's or farm animal's miraculous recovery from a serious illness.<sup>1</sup>

Patronal festivals are processional in nature. After a mass, the Saint is paraded through the streets of his town accompanied by brass bands called *chicheros*, dancers, fireworks and devoted followers. After the processions *mayordomos* host public and private feasts, often giving out food and drink to festival participants. Individual families who own their own image of the Saint may also host parallel processions and feasts as well.

Dancing and masquerading, two particularly developed forms of expressing religious devotion and cultural identity in Nicaragua, precede, accompany or follow the processions of the Saints. Although the *baile de la marimba* (dance of the marimba) has become the national folk dance and is performed at most patrons' festivals throughout Nicaragua, each town typically has its own set of traditional festival dances as well. Traveling carnivals, big social dances, crafts fairs, fireworks and traditional games such as a *corrido de toros* (bullfight) or the *palo lucio* (a greased tree trunk that teams of contestants attempt to scale) provide additional entertainment during the festival season. Moreover, in recent years, elite groups have introduced horse shows at these festivals, a development that has led to the decline of an earlier popular *tope* in which community members of all classes decorated and rode their animals through the city in honor of the patron saint. Thus, the patronal festival involves a series of activities that span from eight days to, in the case of Masaya's *San Jerónimo* festival, over three months.<sup>2</sup>

The Miami Nicaraguans continue to celebrate many of their patronal festivals but with some differences. Small businesses and professional organizations have taken an important role in fostering and organizing the festivals in the absence of *mayordomías*. Given the more rigid North American work schedule, festivals are held on the Sunday closest to the actual saint's day, and all festival activities occur in a single day.

As recently arrived immigrants, Nicaraguans are intimidated by Miami laws requiring parade permits for street activities. Additionally, the former residents of any one town tend not to be concentrated in a single area. Therefore, celebrations are located in rented park areas or halls and their processional character has been modified to fit these new spaces.

Finally, the prohibition against fireworks in Miami has fostered some creative adaptations. At the *Fiesta de San Sebastian* and at many home *Purísimas* multitudes of balloons are strung overhead. At a certain moment

in the festival when firecrackers would be set off in Nicaragua, a signal is given, and adults and children furiously pop the balloons, simulating this important festival sound.

Cultural activities are also reduced in the Miami celebrations. While a mass and modified procession are usually performed, the variety of dancing and masking traditions that adorn any Nicaraguan town festival are represented by just one or two symbolic enactments. Which cultural traditions are chosen often depends on the availability of practitioners. For instance, a single *marimbero* (marimba player), Alonso Montalvan, lives in Miami, and is likely to be called on to perform traditional *sones de marimba* at the Masaya *San Jerónimo* Festival. The Silva family in nearby Fort Lauderdale has brought the traditional Diriamba dance of the *Toro Huaco* to the United States and performs it at the Festival of San Sebastian.<sup>3</sup> Without these cultural specialists, it is unlikely that the traditions would be performed in Miami. Some festivals have included horse shows, but the *palo lucio* and *corridos de toros* games appear impracticable in a city where both wood and bulls are in short supply.

One of the prime features of Nicaraguan town festivals, however, is the demonstrations of largesse and generosity that *mayordomías* enact by hosting a public feast. The economic difficulties of Miami residents prevents festival committee members from assuming this role, bringing charges of commercialization and bawdlerization from critics within the Nicaraguan community. These critics complain that admission is usually charged upon entry into the now closed festival space. Once inside, traditional foods and drink are offered for sale, rather than being distributed freely as they are in Nicaragua. Festival organizers argue that these fees are necessary to defray the expenses of renting the festival grounds, the sound system and other costs associated with mounting the festival. Yet the suspicion that someone is making money from the festival persists among some community members.

Another criticism lodged against the Miami organizers of Nicaraguan town-festivals points to a fundamental change in the focus of these festival enactments. In Nicaragua, the festivals form a context for cultural activities but they are primarily organized around religious symbols and are profoundly religious in character. In Miami, critics charge, the festivals have become secularized, sometimes even failing to provide a representation of the saint in whose name to festival is held. While organizers argue that the occasional absence of a religious icon is due to their inability to locate a suitable statue, they acknowledge that the festivals serve primarily as occasions for a dispersed community to come together, socialize and celebrate their Nicaraguan identity.

The *Purísima* and the *Gritería* are quite different both in organization and tone from the patronal festivals of particular towns. Of all the patronal

festivals, that of the Virgin of the Assumption or "the *Purísima*", patroness of Nicaragua, is the most widely and most traditionally celebrated in Miami. The Virgin of the Assumption is honored from the 26th of November (the first day of the *novenario* of the Virgin) through January, with private *Purísima* parties. At *Purísima* parties individual households invite guests to recite the rosary and sing *villancicos* (songs to honor the virgin). The guests are then thanked for their participation by being given traditional foods and presents, called "*el paquete*". Most of these parties are held in the early evening on the host's lawn during *Purísima* season. On December 7th (the final day of the *novenario*), the *Gritería*, the celebration in honor of the Virgin that is most visible to outsiders, is held. In Miami the *Purísimas* are usually hosted weekend nights, and the *Gritería* falls on the Sunday closest to December 7th.

On *Gritería* night, altars are set up outside homes, churches and stores throughout working class Little Havana and the more middle class neighborhood of Sweetwater. People, especially children, roam from one to the other singing snatches of *villancicos* to the Virgin, "shouting" the traditional phrase: "*¿Quién causa tanta alegría? ¡La Concepción de María!*" (Who causes so much joy? María's Conception!), and receiving a *paquete* in return.<sup>4</sup>

Doña Elvia Vega, an ardent celebrator of the *Gritería*, claims she hosted the first family-sponsored *Gritería* in Miami in 1982. After being disappointed that friends, busy with work, didn't attend her *Purísima*, she decided to move her altar onto the street and reward passers-by who would sing. From that time on, more and more of her neighbors on 103rd Avenue began setting up altars, until this street became a major focus of *Gritería* activity.

Another cluster of *Griterías* are held in the residential neighborhood around 95th Place. One young hostess, Gloria Ortiz, emphasized that she held a party every year *por promesa* after the virgin helped cure her son of a serious illness. Doña Socorro Castro de Sevilla, on the other hand, who hosts a yearly *Gritería* in Little Havana, said she does so because she enjoys the custom. Centro Comercial Managua and the Holiday and Laguna Plazas in Sweetwater provide a concentration of *Griterías*, as shop and restaurant owners host their own festivities. Moreover, San Juan Bosco Church and the Church of the Divina Providencia erect large platforms on their grounds with altars for an outside mass and group singing. At some of these locations the crowds of carolers number in the hundreds. To assist carolers and the curious in locating *Gritería* altars throughout the city, Miami Nicaraguan newspapers, *La Estrella de Nicaragua* and *La Prensa Centroamericana* publish lists of *Gritería* sites the week before the celebration. While the *Gritería* includes no organized procession of the

Saint, the movement of festival participants throughout city neighborhoods from one altar to the next provides a processional character to the event.

The statues of *La Purísima* that hosts display in their homes are small, painted, plaster of Paris models showing the virgin either with hands held in prayer or spread wide in an anticipated ascent to heaven. Many hosts remark on the great age of their statues, indicating that they are family heirlooms. Doña Elvia Vega even narrated with great emotion how she carried the virgin in her arms on the trip out of Nicaragua, defying the ridicule of airport guards.<sup>5</sup>

*Gritería* altars in Miami are relatively simple compared to those erected in Nicaragua. For instance, Chony Gutierrez, a specialist in paper and festival arts, remembers designing a model of an active volcano for one particularly elaborate altar in Managua. Churches in Nicaragua often contract professional altar decorators to paint *telones* or backdrops with nativity scenes painted against a background of Jerusalem or Nicaragua. While some Miami residents have painted *telones* in Nicaragua, until now, the space required for such a project has prevented them from practicing this art in Miami.<sup>6</sup>

Instead, private home altars in Miami often display the virgin surrounded by potted plants and flowers or cleverly nestled in an existing tree or shrub on the host family's lawn. Christmas lights and balloons provide additional decorative elements. Storefront and Church altars may be somewhat more elaborate. For instance, in 1991 Fritanga Monimbó on North 12th Avenue displayed the virgin in a skyscape of blue and white tissue paper. "Los Comales" bar in Sweetwater displayed a very interesting model of a grotto made out of crumpled brown paper bags. Both these altars were constructed by staff working in the restaurants. Rincon Nica and Nicaraguan Grocery, two stores in Little Havana, contracted Douglas Barrios, a Nicaraguan specialist in altars and religious floats, to construct altars in which the virgin stood on a tin foil-wrapped crescent moon among painted styrofoam clouds.

Fine artists have also been inspired by the *Purísima* theme. In 1991, Donald Estrada, a noted primitivist painter, depicted the virgin against the Miami skyline with a logo thanking the United States for its hospitality to Nicaraguans. Like much of his other work, this painting reflects a unique blending of the traditional and the new that strikes a chord with the Nicaraguan community in Miami.<sup>7</sup> Petronio Caldera, a painter and world renowned caricaturist, has painted the virgin surrounded by angels, each of whom wears the face of one of his nine grandchildren. This very personal work, he explained, was intended for his daughter's *Purísima* party.

*Purísima* food specialties include the *gofio* or *alfajor* (a crumbly bar made of ground corn, ginger and sugar), *ayote en miel* (autumn squash cooked in honey), and *espumillas* (meringues). Sweet lemons, the traditional

fruit gift in Nicaragua, have been replaced by the more prestigious and more readily available apple. Yet, *banderillas*, little colored origami or plastic flags with cut-out designs, are stuck in the fruit to make it festive. Many Miami families purchase these decorations either from local paper arts specialist Chony Gutierrez or from the dime store, rather than making them themselves. As in Nicaragua today, the traditional foods and crafts of the *paquete* have been augmented by inexpensive plastic toys and dishes. Moreover, in Miami, some hosts have even introduced tee-shirts printed with images of the Virgin of the Assumption into the repertoire of gifts given at *Purísima* and *Gritería* celebrations.

Unlike the town festivals that have been organized in Miami, the *Gritería* appears to have evolved without any overall planning or promotion. While business owners in the Nicaraguan shopping centers have organized to some degree to publicize their activities and make them more elaborate, the festival emerges essentially through a combination of numerous private efforts. The festival also retains the religious character and opportunities for generosity that mark most traditional popular festivals in Nicaragua.

Indeed, of all the Nicaraguan festivals, the *Purísimas* and the *Gritería* are those that have most been exported. Residents of Nicaragua who had spent time working in Costa Rica and Guatemala remembered that the Nicaraguan communities in these countries also held *Purísima* festivities. These customs were admired by non-Nicaraguans, some of whom began to practice them as well. In Miami, many Cubans now participate in the *Gritería* and *Purísima* celebrations, and the Miami church hierarchy has even officially honored the Nicaraguan Patron Saint. In New York City, *Purísima* parties are held by Nicaraguans, though the community there has not developed a public *Gritería*.

Why are the *Purísima* and *Gritería* so reproducible outside Nicaragua? Several reasons exist. First, these home-based festivities require no community-wide organizational structure. Unlike town festivals, the activities involved do not require, although they might include, the work of cultural specialists. Anyone can decorate an altar, say the rosary, sing the *villancicos*, and make traditional foods for distribution among guests.

Second, the *Purísima* and *Gritería* are celebrated throughout Nicaragua by Catholics of all classes in very much the same way. Town festivals, on the other hand, exhibit social differentiation in participation, sometimes even evolving into parallel festivals, where the upper and lower classes engage in separate and distinct activities, while the middle classes assume the role of observers.<sup>8</sup>

Finally, the development of the *Purísima* and *Gritería* as the principal festivals of the Nicaraguan community outside Nicaragua indicates a change in the community's relationship to its surroundings and a corresponding

change in identity. In Nicaragua, the town festival represents the most elaborated and important festival for any particular community. Through it, the community expresses its special identity vis-à-vis the larger community of the nation. In Miami, the need to identify oneself culturally is not so much a matter of being Masayan, Managuan or Leonese. Rather, one is Nicaraguan in a sea of competing ethnic groups. What greater symbol of unity in values and customs than the celebration in honor of the Patron Saint of Nicaragua?

Folklore research in the United States has always identified home-based food ways as an important and continuing marker of identity for ethnic communities.<sup>9</sup> Research into more public forms of cultural identity, however, has recently focused on the ways in which separate traditions blend as culture groups make new alliances or express competitive or conflictive relationships within the unifying frame of pan-ethnic festival.<sup>10</sup> The *Gritería* appears to be one illustration of how home-based folklore is expressed in a public form, embracing its new community as it is embraced by it, while still retaining its distinctly Nicaraguan identity. The festival is new to Miami, and it will be interesting to watch how it develops and is elaborated as the Nicaraguan community settles in.<sup>11</sup>

### Notes

1 The *cofradía* and *mayordomía* systems of festival production are common to both Spain and Latin America. For an in-depth description of common Latin American patronal festival elements and activities, see Smith (1975).

2 For descriptions of the various Nicaraguan town festivals, see Peña Hernandez (1986).

3 The *Toro Huaco* is a large group, masked dance, performed to traditional flute and drum music, that depicts a mock battle between colonial soldiers and a bull figure. While this dance is performed by adult men in Diriamba, the Silva family has taught young boys and girls, mostly family members, to perform the dance. For more on the unique features of the Festival of San Sebastian in Diriamba, see Gutierrez Serrano (1960).

4 For a description of these activities in Nicaragua, see Buitrago (1959). A small pamphlet on the origins and traditions of the *Gritería* in León has also been put together by María Engracia and Emma Fonseca and can be purchased in their Miami shops, El Mercadito Nicaragüense, located on Flagler St. in Little Havana and in the Centro Comercial Managua shopping center in Sweetwater.

5 In 1991, the majority of Nicaraguans in Miami identified with conservative political sectors. Wealthier Nicaraguans who fled the revolution were the first to

arrive and establish themselves in Miami. By the mid-1980s, however, large numbers of poor and working class Nicaraguans, fleeing the economic and military disruptions of the Contra war swelled the Miami-Nicaraguan community. By 1991, Sandinista-identified Nicaraguans began emigrating to Miami in reaction to the political backlash brought on by the 1990 election of the conservative UNO party in Nicaragua. While conservatives claim to be the true defenders of the faith and while they identify Sandinistas as anti-religious and anti-Catholic, almost all Nicaraguans are devout Catholics.

6 Nery Moreno owns a small art gallery and frame shop in the Centro Comercial Managua in Sweetwater, where the work of several Nicaraguan fine artists is displayed. She explained that she formerly painted telones for *Purísima* altars in her home town of Managua. In Miami, however, not only does she lack space, but her long hours as a small business owner prevent her from engaging in such projects.

7 For an illustration of this work, see *La Prensa Centroamericana* (November, 29, 1991):7.

8 This is the case of the Managua festival of Santo Domingo, and the division between upper and lower class festivities seems also to have arisen in the Miami celebration of the Santo Domingo festival. For more on differential participation in festival, see Turner (1986), pp. 123-138; Vogt (1955); and Rozenzweig (1983), pp. 65-92. In other patronal festivals throughout Nicaragua, class affiliation can be linked to level or type of festival participation as well.

9 See, for example, Toelken (1979), pp. 72-82.

10 One interesting example of a cooperative display of festival traditions among Latino groups of differing nationalities can be found in Cadaval (1985).

11 Research conducted in Miami in the Fall of 1991 and in Nicaragua from September 1990 to October 1991 has formed the basis of this paper. Materials on the folklore of the Nicaraguan community in Miami can be found in the archives of The Historical Museum of Southern Florida. My thanks to Brent Cantrell and Laurie Sommers for their assistance in conducting the research and to the National Endowment for the Arts for financial support.

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