

The Sound of Semana Santa

The Meaning of Music for the Religious Experience of Participants of the Processions during Semana Santa in Antigua, Guatemala

Jip Lensink

Utrecht University

j.d.t.lensink@students.uu.nl

ABSTRACT

This anthropological research gives insight in the meaning of music for the religious experience of participants of the processions in Antigua, Guatemala. By placing the theories of lived religion, material religion and aesthetics at the central stage, the process whereby the *marchas fúnebres*, the music played in the processions, mediate religious experience for the participants is explained. The material-sensorial elements of the processions, the practice of carrying, and the emotional effect of the music which refers to extra-musical memories, all provide the context for and strengthen the communication of the participants with God.

Keywords

Semana Santa, Antigua, Music, *Marcha Fúnebre*, Religious Experience.

INTRODUCTION

*It is dark, it is cold and it is quiet. Slowly, very slowly, in the archway of the classical, yellow-white decorated church La Merced, a bundle of light appears. Shuffling forward, flanked by symmetrical placed saints and columns against the facade, a sober adorned, wooden platform with the icon of the Jesús Nazareno becomes visible. A noise that resembles a school bell cuts through the cold, quiet air, marking the moment whereupon this illuminated anda with the notable icon of Jesus Christ is raised. At the same time the square is filled by the first tones of the *marcha 'La Granadera'* and the warm, bright sounds of the trumpets and percussion cause a wave of motion: a sea of purple dressed *cucuruchos* kneels down on the uneven stones and strikes a cross.*

Cradling, the anda moves forward on the rhythm of the music. Against the dark-brown wood lie the cheeks of seventy men, their eyes closed, their faces pained, determined and full of resentment. Placing their feet sideways forward, as the first this night they carry the weight on their shoulder.

The cross on the left shoulder, dressed in the red, modest tunic with merely a rope around the waist, the Jesús Nazareno comes closer. In the light of the moon he pervades the hearts of everyone with his gaze. Suffering, accusingly but loving, he looks me in the eyes.

*Nervous, expectant and trembling of the cold I am waiting on the side of the road, my striking blonde hair covered by the black *madrileña*. After having seen passing by the cradling anda, the gracefully moving conductor and the blowing musicians, the second illuminated wooden platform with the icon of Mary comes to a halt before me. Together with the row of women around me I step forward, under the guidance of the drum roll of the *timpanist*. I place my hand on the right shoulder of number nineteen and place my own left*

*shoulder underneath the leathern notch in the garnished wood. Slowly we start moving back and forth. I feel the soft alfombra beneath my feet, I smell the smoke of the *incienso* and I hear the music setting in behind me. The weight presses my shoulder. The warmth flows through me. I close my eyes.*

This experience marks the most special, intense, emotional and beautiful moment of my anthropological fieldwork in Antigua, Guatemala. During eight weeks I immersed myself into the world of Semana Santa, the religious processions and the holy music, the *música sacra*. Semana Santa, the holy week, the most important week of the year for many devote, catholic *Antigüeños*, attracts half a million visitors. The city transforms itself, is filled to the point of collapsing, surrounded by an atmosphere of tense expectation. Families reunite, people don't sleep and the heavy, slow, strong sounds of the *marchas* played by the music bands form the sonic landscape during this time. Ten thousand purple and black dressed participants carry the icons of Jesus and Mary on eighteen meters long wooden, decorated platforms in the twelve to nineteen hour processions, commemorating the Passion of Christ. As the *Antigüeños* tend to say: "todo tiene su color, olor y sabor" (everything has its color, smell and taste), denoting the many beautiful ingredients that characterize this religious tradition. The devotion towards the icons, the air filled with smoke, the ground covered with *alfombras*, the melancholic sound of the wind instruments; the feelings and experiences of the participants of the processions are described through those essential elements of Semana Santa. This experience and the specific role of the *música sacra* are the focal points of interest in this anthropological research, giving insight in the meaning of music for the religious experience of participants of the processions in Semana Santa in Antigua, Guatemala.

RELEVANCE

There are several reasons that emphasize the scientific and social relevance of the research. Firstly, by studying the place of music within religion, this research contributes to the theoretical relevance of linking the phenomena and concepts of music and religion, which has not been given a lot of attention in anthropological literature, although there exists a clear connection between music and religion and a significance in studying their relation. Rudolf Otto (in Laack 2015, 223) wrote that feelings associated with music are very similar to feelings of the holy itself and Gerardus van der Leeuw (in Beck 2006, 9) stated: "it is impossible to effectively penetrate a religious tradition without the musical dimension". Moreover, music and religion both rely on intellect and emotions, sensations and the body (Laack 2015, 242). Secondly, this research contributes to the recently developed field of material religion, with an important role to play for aesthetics (*aisthêsis*, meaning sensory perception). Material religion refers to the material culture of religion which is the total range of objects and practices that engage the human body in acts of belief, involving sensations, feelings and experiences (Brown 2013, 486): "the material culture of lived religion is the

practice of engaging the human body in the configuration of the sacred” (Morgan 2010, 15). In this light music must be seen as a performative practice engaging objects, the body, senses, feelings and experiences and is therefore generally considered as a material (and lived) dimension of religion. Aesthetics refers to the process whereby practices, objects and for example music organize sensational forms through the senses, mediating perception and emotion, resulting in religious experience (Meyer 2012). By focusing on music as an integral material part within religion, mediating experience and involving emotion and the senses, this research thus places the theory of material religion at the central stage. Until now little anthropological literature has been published about the link between recent developed concepts within the anthropology of religion (material religion) and music. Thirdly, although some literature has been written about Semana Santa in general, this world famous phenomenon has been given surprisingly little academic attention, especially concerning the specific role of music. This research fills the academic disparity about the music and its meaning during Semana Santa. Finally, the more experiential and materially oriented definition of religion used in this research is based on a Catholic perspective, which makes it the perfect working definition in a Catholic research context. Besides that, the study of Catholicism within the theory of material religion occupies a special place with respect to the relevance of this research. The ‘Protestant bias’, whereby religion was equated with Protestantism, has been countered by the ‘material turn’, whereby the neglect of the material dimension of religion is addressed. However, according to Meyer (2017), this shift in perspective cannot be completed without a focus on Catholicism using the same framework: ‘turning to Catholicism as an alternative archive, using the theory of material religion, is a much needed corrective and allows for a critique of the Protestant legacy and offers fresh insights for the study of religion from a material angle’ (Meyer 2017, 311). Accordingly, this research exactly occupies this theoretical place, using material concepts of religion in a Catholic context. Focusing on the social relevance, the Antigüenos themselves find it important to introduce outsiders or foreigners to their tradition. Little academic attention has been given to this famous tradition and this research will introduce Semana Santa and her beautiful events to a broader, foreign public. Moreover, because Semana Santa has such a mayor meaning for and forms part of the identity of the Antigüenos, the research is an articulation of respect for and recognition of the Antigüenos’ ‘being’.

RESEARCH METHODS

The research is based on anthropological fieldwork in Antigua, Guatemala, the place where Semana Santa manifests itself most strongly of whole Latin-America. This fieldwork period (29th of February – 21st of April) covered the entire time under study from the beginning of Cuaresma (1st of March) to the end of Semana Santa (16th of April). Several qualitative research methods were used to collect the data. The fieldwork itself is based on the idea of ‘being there’: for eight weeks I lived in the research context, built close contacts with key informants, used Spanish as the local language and had access to and participated in activities with people who are fully participants in that context. Participant observation concerned the main method, although more than a method it is a way of approaching the fieldwork experience.

Participant observation was mainly used for obtaining information about the course of events during Cuaresma (forty days before Semana Santa) and Semana Santa. By attending almost all the events possible, observing the proceedings and describing in a highly detailed way the characteristics (through the writing of field notes), elaborate information was gained about all the important activities. Moreover, I participated myself both by being a member of the public which attended certain core events, as well as by four times actively participating as a carrier in the processions. Besides that, through my close contacts with the hermandad La Merced (the fraternity of a church that organizes activities during Cuaresma and Semana Santa), I was able to attend several private, closed events. A second main method used during the research was informal, semi-structural and non-structural interviewing. In total, 22 in-depth interviews of varying hours and at least 42 informal conversations were carried out. In this way contextual knowledge about the meaning and characteristics of the events and important parts of Semana Santa, the processions and music was collected, as well as in-depth information about the experience of the processions and music of the participants and musicians themselves. A third method concerned document analysis. A list of all the documents received was made and the documents have been analyzed. The last method used was the method of the life story. One life story was carried out, which focused on the themes family (role, meaning, past, growing up), cultural settings and traditions (Semana Santa) and inner life and conscience (experience and feeling). The data analysis was carried out through a process of coding all textual data (field notes, documents and fully transcribed interviews), using the software of ‘NVivo’. This coding process resulted in nine thematic main codes and 95 sub-codes. Finally, the research population consisted of participants of the processions in the form of cucuruchos (carriers), musicians and conductors (who played in the bandas accompanying the processions), one artist and members of the hermandad La Merced who organize two important processions and many activities during Cuaresma and Semana Santa (and who as well often are participants).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Two major concepts were developed in the theoretical framework: religion and music. This scholarly review formed the basis for the empirical context and empirical findings. The exploration of the definitions of religion showed a movement away from religion as an ideology, scripture or doctrine towards a dynamic lived and material religion. Exemplary is the definition of Robert Orsi (in Meyer 2012, 24; in McGuire 2008, 13): ‘religion is the practice of making the invisible visible, of concretizing the order of the universe, the nature of human life and its destiny, and the various possibilities of human interiority itself (...) in order to render them visible and tangible, present to the senses and in the circumstances of everyday life (...). This happens by offering multiple media for materializing the sacred’. Lived religion (Morgan 2010; McGuire 2008; Chidester 2008, 2012; Brown 2013; Tallon in Corrigan 2008) involves practices and experiences and is connected to material religion. Materiality (Kieschnick in Corrigan 2008; Brown 2013; Morgan 2010; Meyer 2010; Webb 2008) is inextricable from religion and involves an aesthetic mediation of religious lived experience via the body, perception and emotion (Bowie 2005; McGuire 2008; Segal 2015, Meyer 2012, Plate 2012). Consequently the concept of music was defined as ‘humanly organized

sound” (Blacking 1969, 71) and connected to emotion. Music has emotional and experiential meaning and has the ability to represent something beyond the music itself, through the combination of socio-cultural context, body states, thoughts and perception (Rice 2014; Brown in Corrigan 2008; Blacking 1969). Finally the previous concepts were combined in order to explore music in religion. Music is capable of evoking emotions and therefore concerns a material means for mediating religious experience (Blacking 1969, Brown in Corrigan 2008, Beck 2006).

THE PROCESSIONS OF SEMANA SANTA

The subject of this fieldwork-based anthropological research is the meaning of music (*marchas fúnebres*) for the religious experience of participants (*cucuruchos*) in the processions during Cuaresma and Semana Santa (holy week) in Antigua, Guatemala. Semana Santa commemorates the Passion, Death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is preceded by Cuaresma, a period of forty days meant for change, ayuno (abstention) and reflection. The tradition of Cuaresma and Semana Santa in Antigua is characterized by many practices connected to all events that take place during this time: Miercoles de Ceniza, *via crucis*, child activities, *velaciones*, services, concerts, the *acto de Traslado y Unición*, and, most importantly, the twelve to nineteen hours processions which concern the main expression of Cuaresma and Semana Santa. During this time the carrying in the elaborate processions therefore is the central practice of the devote Antiguëños. A procession consists of carrying the icons of Jesus and Mary on large, wooden, decorated platforms (the *andas*) through the streets of Antigua. Participating men carry the icon of Jesus, participating women carry Mary. On each street corner the carriers are alternated with new *cucuruchos*. The meaning of the processions in Semana Santa coincide with the day and meaning in the story of the Pasion, and the devotional essence of a procession concerns an *acercamiento*, a coming closer, to God.

LIVED AND MATERIAL RELIGION

The processions comprise many material aspects, such as the processional parts and the sensorial elements: the Bible-referring, evangelizing, decorated *andas* with the icon of Jesus or Mary; the instruments of the *tsjolaj* (flute) and *tambor* (drum) which symbolize the beginning of the procession; men dressed as Roman soldiers; the *pasos*, images that depict passages of the way of the cross of Jesus Christ; the people who incense with the *incienso*, waving an iron instrument back and forth, hereby dispersing the scented smoke; the *filas* consisting of the *cucuruchos* dressed in their purple or black-white tunics who accompany the procession and walk in rows on both sides of the street; the *adorno*, the decoration of the *anda*; the *alfombras*, colorful carpets made of sawdust, flowers and vegetables, covering the processional streets as an offering for the icon that will pass over; and the *banda*, the marching band that accompanies the procession by playing *marchas fúnebres*. The meaning of the *marchas fúnebres* for the religious experience of the *cucuruchos* places material culture and experiential aspects at the center of religion.

The practices form the experiences of the *cucuruchos*, experiences influenced by the above described material culture of the processions. Participation in the processions results in emotional and religious experience, and the centrality of materiality, practices and experience therefore defines the tradition of Cuaresma and Semana Santa as an expression of lived and material religion, concepts explained among others by Morgan (2010), McGuire (2008), Brown (2013), Meyer (2010) and Kieschnick (in Corrigan 2008).

MARCHAS FÚNEBRES

The music constitutes a fundamental component within the lived and material tradition of Cuaresma and Semana Santa. As one of the material-sensorial aspects, it addresses the senses and mediates religious lived experience. This musical effect exists by various characteristics of the *marchas fúnebres*: the specific style, the religious meaning and the capability of evoking emotions. Firstly, the style is characterized by minor scales, the *cuadratura* (the counting in four), a solemn rhythm and a mournful, heavy, melancholic sound. The *marchas* are played by percussion and wind instruments: the *timpani*, *bombos*, *redoblante*, *platos*, *lira*, *piccolo*, *clarinets*, *trumpets*, *euphoniums*, *trombones* and *sousaphones*. Secondly, the *marchas* have an important meaning in the lives of the Antiguëños. The music is associated with the religious time of Cuaresma and Semana Santa and the meaning of *música sacra* is of a religious nature because *marchas* are connected to life passages of Jesus Christ and dedicated to icons or religious experiences. Thirdly, the style of the music and its religious meaning are connected to the practice of carrying, which results in the evocation and strengthening of emotions. The ability of the *marchas* to move the *cucuruchos* emotionally is based on an extra-musical reference to memories (Rice 2014; Brown in Corrigan 2008). Every *cucurucho* has his/her favorite *marcha*, which can be related to official *marchas* of churches and to memories of past experiences of Semana Santa, often connected to family members. Many *cucuruchos* have been *cucuruchos* almost their whole life, by having been raised with the tradition. The *marcha* played by the *banda* for the *cucurucho* carrying in the street of his *turno* (turn) evokes personal and family memories, which lead to strong emotions. This combination of memories, emotions and music forms part of the religious experience.

MUSIC AND EXPERIENCE

The experience of *cucuruchos* is characterized by various elements. The reason of participation is based on devotion, conviction and identification with the procession and icon, and has the central purpose of penitence. The experience, although physically challenging, is considered beautiful, because the experience is defined as a religious experience. On the moment of carrying a communication with God is established and in this devotional feeling and moment, while carrying the *anda* as if it were the cross of Jesus, confessions, prayers, gratitude and penitence are expressed. Within the experience of *cucuruchos*, the

music plays several roles aimed at several effects. The marches provide the solemn character of a procession, with the optical effect of Jesus walking with the cross and a facilitation of advancement for the cucuruchos. Moreover, the music supports the evangelizing message and transmits, evokes and strengthens emotions, which causes spiritual states of mind (reflection, identification, inspiration, contemplation) in the cucuruchos. Ultimately, the marches are a spiritual guidance which moves the cucuruchos closer inside the participation of the religious activity. The music strengthens the religious experience (Blacking 1969; Brown in Corrigan 2008; Beck 2006) through the acercamiento towards the communication with God.

THE MEDIATION OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

This acercamiento functions by the process of aesthetic mediation (Meyer 2012). The marchas fúnebres, as one of the fundamental material-sensorial elements and processional parts, address the senses of the cucuruchos on the moment of carrying, thereby mediating and intensifying divine communication. In this process a mix of profound emotions and feelings is aroused. While the nature of emotions depends on life situations, many cucuruchos feel peace, love, tranquility, serenity, inspiration, gratefulness, satisfaction, devotion and most importantly alegría (joy/happiness). In conclusion: as one of the sensorial elements and processional parts, the music concerns the material culture that by the engagement of the senses mediates emotions and lived religious experience.

ROLE OF THE STUDENT

Jip Lensink was an undergraduate cultural anthropology student at Utrecht University, working under the supervision of Gerdien Steenbeek, when the research in this report was performed. The topic was developed by both the student and the supervisor. The theoretical framework, the research proposal, the anthropological fieldwork and the writing of the thesis were all made and carried out by Jip Lensink.

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