"Mi Gauchito Gil": Musical Reflections on a Folk Saint

A common feature of religious syncretism in the Americas are folk saints: figures venerated by believers that are not officially recognized by religious institutions. The northern Argentine Gaucho Gil, commonly known as *el Gauchito*, is one such folk saint. Gil worship has spread from Mercedes, Corrientes, across Argentina, and even into neighboring countries (Vieira Martins 21). This paper traces the origins of Gil worship, its current expression in the material and musical culture of Mercedes, and how the cumbia villera group La Piedra Urbana have adapted Gil worship music to a contemporary, urban genre, while maintaining the gauchito's counterhegemonic dichotomy between saint and bandit.

Who is Gauchito Gil?

Born Antonio Mamerto Gil, the man that would become Guachito Gil was one of many gauchos in the Argentine littoral that were conscripted into the country's bloody civil war between Juan Manuel de Rosa's *Federales* and the opposing *Unitarios*. He deserted, probably from the ranks of the *Unitarios*, and became a heroic outlaw, with supernatural abilities attributed to him during and after his lifetime (Graziano 130). These supernatural abilities, including a mind-controlling stare and invincibility, are often seen as the result of his devotion the Guaraní folk-saint San La Muerte. As Mauro Salvador notes, Gaucho Gil was one of many well-known gaucho bandits of his time:

> hubo centenares de gauchos que fueron perseguidos por ir en contra de las leyes y buenas costumbres. . . de seguir el camino de la libertad en una tierra que ya no lo era. Sin dudas va haber una diferencia de por qué los Bairoletos, Peralta, -alias Mate Cocido-, Moreira,

> Gato Moros . . . no terminaron en un nivel de adoración y aceptación religiosa al que Gil accedió. (Salvador 435)

The story of his martyrdom sets him apart from his gaucho outlaw peers. According to Catholic journalist Luis Santamaría, "Se cuenta que el 8 de enero de 1878, cuando volvía de la fiesta de otro "santo popular", san Baltasar, fue capturado por la policía y desangrado hasta la muerte" (Santamaría). The legend tells that the impatient police officers could not wait to bring Gil to the courts and instead chose to take justice in their own hands, tying him to a tree just outside of Mercedes and using his own knife to kill him. Just before they kill Gil, he promises to heal an officer's sick child; when the officer returns to his home, his child has been healed. This leads the officer to become a true believer in el Gauchito.

The circumstances of Gil's death bring him into the milieu of folk saints by directly tying him to San Baltazar and San La Muerte:

> Gil's invincibility was indebted to the San La Muerte amulet inserted under his skin, which protected his body from all harm. Devotees accordingly clarify that Gaucho Gil was not caught by the police; he surrendered. (Graziano 117)

This narrative creates a self-affirming network between these folk figures: Gil is powerful because San La Muerte gives him power, San La Muerte's power is proven by Gil's abilities, and Gil's miracle takes place on saint Balthazar's day, an act that legitimizes saint Balthazar while making way for Balthazar's celebration to be eclipsed by Gil's. Gaucho Gil, being born of the nation-defining Argentine civil war, is a popular amalgamation of religious fervor and saintly banditry.

The Church and Gil

The increasing popularity of Gil worship across Argentina has brought folk-worship into contact with the wider mainstream church. As Enrique Flores notes, the festival day is becoming more accepted by religious and lay leaders in Corrientes: "Tras años de haber sido "mal vista", y aun reprobada, por los miembros de la jerarquía católica y las autoridades civiles, la fiesta goza hoy de reconocimiento casi universal" (263). The 8th of January festival day has become part of the official religious and social calendar of the region, and takes place just before Corrientes hosts the annual National Chamamé Festival. Gil worship has spread beyond the littoral: "the highways of Argentina, from one end of the country to the other. . . are spotted with roadside shrines to Gaucho Gil" (Graziano 130). In spite of being less inclined to worship non-official saints (Salvador 436), the worship of Gil is acceptable in Argentina to the church and lay Catholics because it is associated with a cross (Graziano 119). It is not a surprise, since Pope Francis is Argentine, that the Holy See has opined on Gil worship. The bishop of Goya, monseñor Adolfo Canecín, reports a conversation with the mate-drinking pope:

> El Papa me recordó que cuando él era cardenal ya existía una novena. . . en honor a este gaucho correntino. . . Puntualmente me pidió que la reeditáramos y la pusiéramos a disposición de los fieles para que la pudieran rezar. . . [enfocándose] en la cruz de Nuestro Señor Jesucristo y no en el difunto. (Pittaro)

It would seem that for the Pope, the Guachito question is a closed book; the church needs to update their prayers to channel the worship into line with official doctrine, making devotees on his behalf instead of to him. While these are perfectly logical steps to be suggested by the Pope, the subculture that has arisen around Gil is counter-hegemonic: "el culto al Gauchito reviste un carácter contrahegemónico, opuesto en muchos aspectos al culto de los santos reconocidos

oficialmente por la Iglesia católica. Representa una reapropiación simbólica del modo de vida de aquellos *'mozos vagos y mal entretenidos'* (Vieira Martins 231). To worship Gil, then, is a way of affirming the right to live like a gaucho, a cattle rustler, and a man who finds his freedom deserting military service.

Gaucho Gil worship as subculture

The tension with the hegemonic church is an important factor in the formation of the Gil subculture. In *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, Dick Hebdige explores the relationship between hegemony, ideology, and signs. For Hebdige, "Style in subculture is. . . pregnant with significance. Its transformations go 'against nature', interrupting the process of 'normalization' (18). That is, subcultures distance themselves from the hegemony or prevailing ideology by subverting, appropriating and reworking the signs of the prevailing culture or of other cultures. Hebdige argues that "[subcultures] display their own codes (e.g. the punk's ripped T-shirt) or at least demonstrate that the codes are theirs to be used and abused" and thereby "go against the grain of a mainstream culture whose principal defining characteristic, according to Barthes, is a tendency to masquerade as nature" (102). For Hebdige, subcultures are defined relationally with the dominant culture and each other, and they actively use 'style' to mark their differences and similarities.

Cultural syncretism in the cult of Gil takes various forms. The founding myth of Gil worship is an expression that is similar to but also opposed to the hegemonic expression of faith. In one version of the story, Gil decides to desert the army because he is visited by the Guaraní god, Ñandyara, who tells him not to kill other gauchos, but rather to fight against the wealthy elites (Graziano 121). Through connections with Ñandyara and San La Muerte, Gaucho Gil repackages indigenous spiritual expression into a Catholic mold. The cross is another important

signifier that is both "used and abused" (to borrow Hebdige's phrasing) in Gil worship. Gil's association with the cross is one reason that the mainstream Catholic church has largely tolerated the phenomenon. However, Graziano complicates the use of the cross: "Gil stands in front of the cross—or more accurately, is attached to it at his back—with his head proudly uplifted rather than bowed in agony like that of the crucified Christ" (119–20). Graziano adds that in some sense, Gil's Christlike attributes make him into a sort of "second Christ, a regional Christ" (121).

The visual depiction of Gil also uses sartorial signifiers to make a political statement. The red and blue color scheme of Gil – his red bandana and head band, and his blue shirt – represent a conciliation between the *Federales* (red) and *Unitarios* (blue). Graziano makes note blue shirt that he wears represents a uniform: "His was blue by recruitment but had a red heart" (130). Today, the color red most associated with Gil; the roadside shrines, crosses, pilgrim's clothing are all red. The sartorial signifiers are accompanied by "tatuajes, pegatinas en automóviles, figuras algunas diminutas y otras más grandes" (Pittaro). These material expressions all mark the devotees' membership to this subculture.

This subculture coalesces around the pilgrimage to his shrine. On January 8, 2019 more than 200,000 pilgrims arrived at the shrine ("Te contamos"). These pilgrims frequently travel to the shrine as compensation for some miracle or favor performed by Gil. The pilgrims often dress as gauchos. This shared gaucho style, and the use of the color red in the form of bandanas, flags, and t-shirts constitutes an aesthetic around which a subcultural identity is formed. As *El Tribuno de Salta* records "Muchos de los devotos como agradecimiento prometen ir a bailar chamamé o compartir un asado y un vino frente a su tumba". These performative and sharing-based acts of devotion bring the community together through the mutual expression of identity. The *asado* and the chamamé express the devotees' connection to the gaucho past.

Worship by CD-R

In *Noise: The Political Economy of Music,* Jacques Attali frames music within René Girard's understanding of ritual sacrifice as "channeler of and substitute for the general violence" (26). Music is an organization of noise's violence and thereby a simulacrum of sacrifice, though dissonance and the restoration of harmony. This pleasure in harmony is "the essential function of ritual sacrifice in all religious processes: reconciling people with social order" (30). Gil veneration complicates this idea of music as ritual sacrifice because the production of the music itself is a sacrifice. As Enrique Flores documents, "en esa feria anual, convertida en una especie de Mercado y en espacio festivo. . . de intercambio de 'dones' y ofrenda de *exvotos* por parte de los 'promeseros' del Gauchito Gil, es posible encontrar. . . las canciones ofrecidas al santo, grabados en discos piratas" (263–64). These songs are created as ex-votos, and they form part of the popular market that springs up around the pilgrimage site. Their status as ex-votos blurs the line between music as ritual sacrifice and music as actual sacrifice. The musicians are 'promeseros,' sacrificing the "time and place of their labor" to Gil by writing hagiographic chamamés.

That this music is not only performed live in the festive economy of the pilgrimage site, but is also available on CD-R implies a stockpileablity of the music. Attali sees 20th-century music as being driven by the stockpiling made possible by recording technology. For Atalli, music is no longer to be enjoyed in the "time and place of its labor", but rather as "consumption of replications" (88). Easy access to ripping and burning technology makes This compilation of chamamés possible. Compiling chamamés onto pirated discs creates a bootlegged trove of hagiographic and venerative materials, displacing worship in the mainstream Church. This

tension between popular tradition and the power of the hegemonic Church sets the stage for a reading of the lyrical and musical expressions of these chamamés and Piedra Urbana's cumbia.

Why Chamamé?

Chamamé is the regional popular music of the Littoral. Bands typically consist of accordion, guitar, bandoneon and double bass. Like Gil, its popularity is marked by the civil war between the *Federales* and the *Unitarios*:

> The origins of chamamé date back to the civil war between the litoraleños (*Litoral* residents), who supported territorial autonomy, and the supporters of central administration by Buenos Aires. There are stories about chamamés being played by military bands on both sides after battles, and until a few decades ago there were certain chamamés which couldn't be played during elections because they aroused violent passions in militants of the political parties that emerged in the mid-nineteenth century in the context of this confrontation between Corrientes and Buenos Aires. (Monjeau 38)

The chamamé's political resonances echo those of the Gauchito.

Gil's chamamés tend to take the form of a musical hagiography or a description of the worship of Gil itself. In both cases, the songs emphasize the importance of Corrientes and chamamé. For example, "Al Gaucho Gil" by Coco Diaz, which tells the story of the inspiration and creation of the shrine at Mercedes, ties the use of red in his worship to Gil's violent end:

> Y en un paraje cercano
> a la ciudad de Mercedes,
> como gran mancha de sangre,
> todo rojo embanderado,
> se venera a Antonio Gil,

allí donde fue inmolado. (“Al Gaucho Gil” in Flores 22–27)

The last verse of the song further makes the connection between Gil and the littoral region:

Como un Cristo del *Payubre*

con mi canto te venero,

porque sos, Gauchito Gil,

santo laico, milagrero. (“Al Gaucho Gil” in Flores 40–44)

Graziano’s claim that Gil becomes a regional Christ is reflected in Coco Diaz’s chamamé.

The last verse of “Promesero de Gaucho Gil” by Los Hermanos Riveros emphasizes the chamamés vital role in Gil Worship. This song is a first-person narration of a ‘promesero’ traveling to Mercedes on January 8th “con emotion y con fe”:

Ese día, ante su tumba,

es una fiesta de fé;

se llegan los musiqueros

con ritmo de *chamamé,*

y con dulces melodías (“Promesero de Gaucho Gil” in Flores 17–21)

These lyrics work self-referentially in order to justify the existence of the song itself. It is a chamamé about worshipping the Gauchito in which the *dulces melodías* of chamamé are seen as essential to Gauchito worship.

Why Cumbia?

In “Mi Gauchito Gil” by La Piedra Urbana, cumbia villera subculture intersects with Gauchito subculture. Pablo Vila defines cumbia villera as:

one of the most popular dance genres in contemporary Buenos Aires. . . cumbia villera, a more electric variant of cumbia in which keyboards usually replace the traditional

> accordion and an electric drum set replaces acoustic percussion, developed in the 1990s. Thus, cumbia villera developed from a genre that had already been hybridized in Colombia, its country of origin. (2)

This is an urbanized folk music, whose original instrumentation is not terribly distinct from the chamamé. La Piedra Urbana is brothers Gonzalo and Hugo Argüello from the southern suburbs of Buenos Aires. While they do not sing Christian music, they got their start with support from their local priest: "Sus comienzos fueron en la Iglesia del barrio donde vivían, donde el Padre Juan José, fue el encargado de prestarle el sonido, el micrófono y el lugar para que fueran ensayando" ("Biografía"). As of December of 2019, the band garnered 217,973 monthly listeners on Spotify, concentrated in Buenos Aires, Santiago, Córdoba, Montevideo, and Rosario ("La Piedra Urbana"). They have upwards of 10,600 followers on Instagram ("@La.Piedra.Urbana"). While not a supergroup, the band has made a name in the cumbia scene.

In "Mi Gauchito Gil" the brothers reflect the bandit/saint dichotomy musically. The song, like many cumbias villeras, relies heavily on the minor key and starts with a sample of a nefarious, digitally-effected laugh. The recording also has some simulated crowd banter: "Con mucho respecto para todos los devotos al Gauchito Antonio Gil buen amor de toda la piedra urbana / palmas arriba, palmas en alto, la piedra sonando" and in the bridge: "¿Gonza, te gusta los Simpson?" ("Mi Gauchito"). The question about the Simpsons and the lines about "palmas" are present most of the band's songs, but the invocation to Gil's devotees is unique. Where the chamamés are careful to set Gil veneration in Corrientes, the verse of this song is set in the urban "barrio":

> Caminando por mi barrio
>
> no me importa nada

que pelen los fierros que

me tiren balas, son mis

adversarios yo no tengo miedo

porque el que me cuida lo llevo tatuado

Él cuida mi espalda, camina conmigo

si se pone feo le rezo y le pido

cuando llego a casa le prendo una vela

le pongo un cigarro y un vaso de vino ("Mi Gauchito")

In addition to relocating the center of worship from the rural to the urban, this song emphasizes the quid pro quo nature of the devotee/saint relationship: I have his tattoo, so he helps me, and he helps me so I give him a cigar and a glass of wine. The chorus digs deeper into the quid pro quo nature of the relationship, emphasizing how Gil "no me discrimina porque ando ganando". The chorus also emphasizes the stakes of Gil worship:

Mi Gauchito Gil me cuida y me guía

no me discrimina porque ando ganando

camino en las noches camino de día

y mis adversarios me andan buscando

Para acabar mi vida ("Mi Gauchito")

Just a Gil gains invincibility from San La Muerte, the speaker of this chorus gains invincibility from Gil. That there are enemies trying to take the speaker's life dissolves the line between where Gil's legend ends and the speaker's legend begins. Notably, "para acabar mi vida", is repeated three times; this ending focuses the listener the speakers' dangerous environment, not Gil's miracles. Though tonally and geographically distinct from the chamamés, this song shares

in their sacrificial aims. In a final spoken line, Hugo says “Promesa cumplida, Gonza”; They are *promeseros*, and the song is an ex-voto.

Conclusion

Considering that Gil is “Medio bandolero, medio vaquero, . . . Con seguridad formaba parte de los estratos más bajos de la sociedad argentina” (Vieira Martins 213–14), cumbia villera is a logical venerative expression. The music of the “estratos más bajos de la sociedad argentina” of 21st-century Argentina is cumbia villera. This musical expression the syncretization of cultures, villera and correntino, celebrates the counter-hegemony of Gil, modernizing and urbanizing him. Gil is a religious manifestation of the heroization of the gaucho, and as such, brings a syncretistic mysticism to the pantheon of Argentine gaucho-heroes. Gil’s mystic figure, as we have seen, can be easily mapped onto the correntino countryside or the urban villa.

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