

# THE FOLKLORE OF DEATH

## 'Cantos de angeles' and cultural syncretism on the island of Chiloé

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### Abstract

Chiloé has become well-known as a cultural tourism destination since its recognition as a World Heritage Site by UNESCO in 2000 on account of its distinctive wooden architecture. Similarly, the island's traditions of song, dance and instrumental performance have come to play a large role in summer season tourism in the region. While these two aspects of the island's 'patrimonio cultural' (cultural heritage) have established a high visibility in the island's branding as a tourism destination, a number of equally distinct cultural traditions continue – albeit 'below the radar' of tourism marketing. Amongst these are a number of elaborate syncreticisms that combine European colonial and Indigenous traditions in highly idiosyncratic ways. A prime example is the 'cantos de angeles', a particular song form used for the funerals of children under the age of five. While this ritual existed in other parts of Chile and Latin America, the isolation of Chiloé from the mainland has preserved it in distinct form. This particular ritual will be discussed with reference to the folklore surrounding death that exists on Chiloé.

### Keywords

Chiloé, music, funerals, 'cantos de angeles', ritual

### The distinctive culture of Chiloé

Chiloé Archipelago consists of several islands lying off the coast of Chile. The main island is Chiloé Island (*Isla Grande de Chiloé*). Chiloé Island (8,394 km<sup>2</sup>, 3241 sq m), is the second largest island in Chile, after the *Isla Grande de Tierra Del Fuego*. It is separated from mainland Chile by Chacao Channel in the north, the Sea of Chiloé in the east and the Gulf of Corcovado to the southeast. The island is 190 km (118 m) from north to south, and averages 55-65 km wide (35 to 40 m). Chiloé runs from 41-40's to about 45-45's latitude, and has a humid, cool temperate climate. The western side of the island is rainy and wild, home to the Valdivian temperate rain forests, one of the world's few temperate rain forests. The population is composed mainly of Indians, distantly related to the tribes of the mainland, and mestizos. The aim of this paper is to examine the unique culture of Chiloé which is a result of the fusion of both Indian and European influences. In particular it will consider an interesting example of this fusion: the 'cantos de angeles', a song form which is performed for the death of children under the age of five.

Chileans have always acknowledged Chiloé's uniqueness, but global recognition finally arrived in 2000, when the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) named 16 of the archipelago's churches a collective World Heritage Site. These buildings, made entirely of native timber, are an outstanding example of the fusion of European and Indigenous cultures which have produced a distinctive form of architecture which Chilean architects call the 'Chilote School of Religious Architecture in Wood'. The characteristic form and timber construction of the churches show virtually no variation over the four centuries of their existence (UNESCO). Thus, visiting Chiloé is like stepping back in time, with the people still making a living from agriculture and fishing as they have for centuries. The churches, along with the

unique shingled buildings and palafitos (houses built on stilts over the water) are an important tourist attraction. Tourists also enjoy the abundance of local seafood and performances of music and dance by local musicians.

The fusion of cultures on Chiloé has also produced a unique body of myths and legends, superstitions and their associated rituals. It would be nearly impossible to list all the superstitions of the Chilotes. According to Cardenas, Chilotes are coldly rational and practical in some aspects, but in others, emotional and strongly influenced by a tradition of religion, magic and myth (1997: 6). Perhaps it was the frigid climate, remarked upon by Charles Darwin in *The Voyage of the Beagle* (1839), that inspired the telling of chilling horror stories of witches, sirens and evil spirits. Darwin says:

*In winter the climate is detestable, and in summer it is only a little better. I should think there are few parts of the world, within the temperate regions, where so much rain falls. The winds are very boisterous, and the sky almost always clouded: to have a week of fine weather is something wonderful (Chapter XIII).*

One can imagine families gathering around the hearth during the cold evenings, spinning stories to the sound of knitting needles clicking and the crackling of the fire. Their sinister stories have grown through the years into an elaborate tapestry of horror. Today these legends are still accepted as true by a large number of islanders and they still indulge in complex rituals to keep evil at bay. All aspects of life and death are bound up in this complicated system of mystic belief.

The first known inhabitants of the island were the Chonos Indians. Little evidence remains of their beliefs although it is likely that traces of it remain in the culture even today. The fundamental root of Chilote mythology is the way of thinking of the archipelago's later inhabitants, the Mapuche Indians. Among the mythological creatures of the Mapuche are La Pincoya: a woman who lives in the sea with golden hair and a seaweed dress; and, El Trauco: a short man who lives in the woods and exerts a strange sexual power over women. In fact, it is said that if he even glances at a woman he can make her pregnant. Conversations with Chilote people even now are permeated with references to these mythological figures as well as to 'brujas' (witches), 'brujos' (wizards) and evil spirits. These witches are believed to be very powerful and can take on the shape of animals or birds, hypnotise people and put evil spells on them. The Mapuche also believed that witches can hook the soul of a person as it is leaving their body at death and that the dead person then becomes enslaved to the sorcerers and used to harm their enemies (Cardenas Alvarez, 1997).

When Christianity was introduced to the island many of the traditional legends just blended with Christian beliefs and rituals with little need for adjustment. Colonisation by the Spanish began in 1567 when Martin Ruiz de Gamboa founded the towns of Santiago de Castro and Chacao on Chiloé Island (UNESCO, 2000). Missionaries arrived with the first settlers from the Franciscan and Mercedarian orders. However it was the arrival of the Jesuit missionaries in 1608 that really began to shape the cultural features of Chiloé as we see it today including the building of the wooden chapels.

Many Indigenous people converted to Christianity while retaining belief in the divinities of their folk mythology (Leon Leon, 1999: 27). The evil characters of Indigenous mythology merged easily with the Christian belief in Satan and demon forces (Cardenas Alvarez and Hall, 1985: 7). Water and forest divinities coexisted without any problems alongside Catholic beliefs. Rituals to protect from evil by the machi (Mapuche shamans) were absorbed by Christian ceremonies using the cross and holy water to counteract the power of demons. The separate mythology formed by this hybridity flourished isolated from other beliefs and myths in Chile due to the separation of the archipelago from the

rest of the Spanish occupation in Chile. In fact the Indigenous 'cosmovision' was not only vividly preserved but somehow crystallised through its synthesis with Christianity, allowing the myths to spread to the diverse groups inhabiting the islands of Chiloé (Leon Leon, 1999: 31). Thus, these kinds of practices and beliefs persist until today, although less prominently.

### Death and Chilote folklore

Death was of prominent concern to the Mapuche people. This was only reinforced by Christianity (Cardenas Alvarez and Hall, 1985: 10). Both the Catholic and Mapuche traditions stressed the physical presence of ghosts and spirits after their death (Leon Leon, 1999: 49). Both also emphasised rituals and ceremonies associated with or focused upon the future possibility of death. The Mapuche conceived of death as being the result of injury from enemies or evil spirits. Strange or sudden deaths were attributed to mythical beings or to magic from sorcerers and witches. Thus rituals were concerned with preventing evil from entering the body from the influence of spirits or witches. An important rite was the Machitún, a healing ceremony carried out by a machi which invoked the dead ancestors of the patient and asked their help with diagnosing the cause of a patient's illness and the steps necessary to cure it. Christianity also had rituals involving the concept of decontamination from evil influences. A primary concern of Catholicism is purification from sin particularly in relation to preparation for death. Therefore baptism and extreme unction were important practices associated with death that the Jesuits brought to the people of Chiloé.

The symbiosis of these Mapuche and European beliefs created a culture of suspicion and mistrust and complex rituals of magic necessary to avoid the dangers of daily life as well as to avoid damnation and to assist the ascension to the celestial spheres after death (Leon Leon, 1999: 34). Nowadays, Chilote people still believe in the presence of evil forces which provoke illnesses, bad luck, and sometimes death, especially those who live in rural areas. Catholic priests in poor parishes are often called to perform exorcisms, particularly of demons thought to be afflicting sick children. In recent times the Pentecostal churches have become established in Chiloé. Their services also often focus on faith healing and ridding their followers of Satanic influences. Thus there are a multitude of rituals and customs associated with death in the tradition of Chiloé which are an important part of the people's identity and way of life (Leon Leon, 1999: 23).

Chilotes, like the ancient Egyptians, believe that the dead require the same comforts as the living (Lagos, 2006: 81). This belief obviously goes back in origin even further than the Mapuche, with some evidence that the Chonos practiced mummification (Leon Leon, 1999: 44). Chilotes believe that to be able to rest in peace, the dead need a known habitat, recognisable objects and roofs to protect them from the rain, the wind and the cold. Thus one of the customs associated with death with which a tourist would be most struck is that the cemeteries in Chiloé are filled with miniature houses, like dolls houses, which closely resemble the wooden architecture of typical Chilote homes. These vaults are filled with household objects and furniture – even an electric toaster in one cemetery (Lagos, 2006: 81) – in an attempt to imitate real dwellings. The cemeteries themselves are like miniature villages recreating the structure of local society. They are a tangible representation of the feeling of connection between the living and the dead which permeates Chilote culture.

### 'Cantos de angeles' (Songs of angels)

The cultural uniqueness of the insular territory of Chiloé is also reflected strongly in its music. The special condition of Chilote life throughout its history has made possible the

incorporation and the maintenance of genres that either have disappeared or that never existed in the rest of the country (Dannemann, 2007: 194).

Along with the gospel, Jesuit missionaries brought their music, which is still sung in churches today (Cardenas Alvarez and Hall, 1985). One particularly interesting example is that of the 'cantos de angeles' (songs of angels), a particular song form used for the funerals of very young children on the island of Chiloé (Dannemann, 2007: 194). While the funeral of an adult is unmistakably an occasion of mourning, sources from the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries indicate that wakes for 'angelitos' (little angels) in other parts of Chile were wild parties with "overtones of savagery and heresy" (Orellana, 1990: 191). In fact, in one of the earliest references to the 'velorio de angelito' (funeral of a little angel) in Chile by Foster Coffin (cited in Schechter 1994: 51), the funeral was at first mistaken for the celebration of a saint's festival. The death of the child was an occasion of festivity since it is believed that a child that died in a state of innocence becomes an angel. This is based upon the Catholic belief that baptism bestowed unconditionally promised salvation to a child dying in the untainted state of infancy (Schechter, 1994: 44).

Traditionally mothers of the deceased child are therefore not supposed to cry, but should rather be happy that her child will reach a status at death that on earth, surrounded by misery and daily vicissitudes, he would have never accomplished. In addition, it is believed that as an angel, the child will have divine grace and can become an intercessor for the family in heaven and a guide to his parents so that they themselves can reach heaven when the time comes. In the words of one of the verses: "Do pray to God for your father/And pray to God for your mother/and ask his blessing for them/Keep remembrance of us all/When you go in to your joy" (Orellana, 1990: 202).

In many ways, the funeral resembles a Catholic wake or vigil, a custom which itself has ancient origins (Schechter, 1994: 44). However, rather than being placed in a coffin, the corpse of the child is dressed and made-up so as to appear as alive as possible and seated in a chair as if to witness its own funeral. The child is dressed in a white 'tunica' or 'tunico' and wings are put upon it so that it looks like an angel. Singers known as 'cantores' are hired to sing the specialised verses (Orellana, 1990: 193). These songs are used exclusively for infant funerals because of the superstition that that if you sing the cantos de angeles without reason, a child will die (Orellana, 1990: 191).

These funeral practices are by no means unique to Chiloé. In fact in the 19<sup>th</sup> century it was found throughout much of Latin America and is still widely practiced (Schechter, 1983: 1) However, the ritual itself has acquired a special significance and unique features in Chile and Chiloé which remain largely unchanged to this day (Dannemann, 2007: 194). The 'cantos', in particular, are of special importance.

In Spain, for example, the music takes place outside the house as an accompaniment, while in Chile it occurs inside the house as an integral part of the ceremony and an essential element of the mourning (Orellana, 1990: 202). In addition to being a consolation to the parents, the songs are viewed as an important part of the child's transformation into an angelic state. The songs are of such importance that while other aspects of the wake, like the decoration of the room, or the clothes of the child could be omitted, the songs can not (Orellana, 1990: 78). While in Spain it is believed that the child goes straight away to heaven (Schechter, 1983: 3), in Chiloé, the 'cantos de angeles' are considered to be a sort of magic ritual in which music and words are used to penetrate the spirit world and bring about the actual conversion to spirit life. The songs are of such importance, that it is thought that if a child's wake does not include the 'cantos de angeles' or if the child's mother cries excessively, the child is not able to leave the earth and is doomed to wander in limbo (Orellana, 1990: 78).

The wake begins with 'verses of greeting' which are addressed to the 'angelito'. Other music not unique to the 'velorio de angelito' and not necessarily of spiritual significance may later be played, with some regions of Latin America also including dancing at some stage of the proceedings (Schechter, 1983). Then at dawn just before transporting the child to the cemetery for burial, farewell verses are sung. The farewell verses emphasise the culmination of the ritual where the child, now an angel, is about to go to heaven. In those verses the 'angelito' addresses the mourners as if present and takes leave of his family. The separation of the angelic soul from his body is believed to happen just before dawn, the peak of emotional intensity of the wake. It is the verses of greeting and farewell that are the 'cantos de angeles' and the latter especially that are considered instrumental in bringing about the desired transformation of the child to the state of an angel (Orellana, 1990: 95)<sup>1</sup>.

The music to which the verses are sung is slow and solemn and decorated with ornate melismas. While in other parts of Latin America guitars, violins and harps may be used (Schechter, 1983; Orellana, 1990), in Chiloé the voices are accompanied only by the 'bombo' (bass drum), gathering in intensity as the wake progresses (Dannemann, 2007: 194). There are two possible reasons for this difference in the Chilote form of the ritual. Firstly, in some cultures, the regular percussive effect of the bass drum is believed to drive out evil spirits (Schechter, 1994: 56). In addition, Chilotes hold a superstition regarding the association of the guitar with the devil, which may also be the reason for its omission (Cardenas Alvarez and Hall, 1985: 53).

While the traditional use of the 'cantos de angelito' and the 'velorio' practices are gradually being eroded in the archipelago of Chiloé, they are still found in rural areas. The decrease in popularity of the practice is no doubt due to the diminishing isolation of the island's population and the resulting increase in a secular perspective. Superstitions are still widespread in Chiloé, but as education levels rise there is less belief in the magically transformative power of the word that often exists in cultures where literacy rates are still low (Orellana, 1990: 195). The recording of such music for posterity is problematic given the sensitive nature of the topic and the superstitions that surround the misuse of the music. However, the grief and need for consolation that surround the death of an innocent young child is something that is unlikely to change. Many bereaved parents, no matter how secular in outlook, will likely continue to take comfort from the belief that their child now exists in a better place. Therefore, while the form of the ritual itself may become modified with time, a place will likely still exist for the music that has consoled for centuries. Thus, modern-day musicians such as Jaime Barria and Soledad Guarda from the band Bordemar are creating reversioned recordings suitable for use within a more contemporary setting, using modern instruments such as an electronic keyboard<sup>1</sup>.

## Conclusion

Thus the 'cantos de angeles' provides a fascinating example of how the isolated state of islands can result in cultural diversity and the preservation of cultural practices which are either non-existent or have slowly faded from existence in less secluded areas. Some aspects of this distinctive Chilote culture such as its architecture are preserved to some extent by recognition and protection by international bodies like UNESCO. However other aspects such as the 'cantos de angeles' which are less marketable to tourists, are slowly being lost in traditional form as education levels rise and the outlook of local inhabitants becomes increasingly secular. Nevertheless, one can hope that the knowledge of such practices and the musical form that accompanies them will be preserved through the efforts of local musicians.

## Endnotes

1. See the recording found at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7OmQAI-wknU&feature=youtu.be>

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