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# La Indita de San Luis Gonzaga

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**"LA INDITA DE SAN LUIS GONZAGA":  
HISTORY, FAITH, AND INTER-CULTURAL  
RELATIONS IN THE EVOLUTION OF A  
NEW MEXICAN SACRED BALLAD**

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# "LA INDITA DE SAN LUIS GONZAGA": HISTORY, FAITH, AND INTER-CULTURAL RELATIONS IN THE EVOLUTION OF A NEW MEXICAN SACRED BALLAD

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The distinctive indita ballads of the latter 19th century are New Mexico's unique contribution to the history of Hispanic balladry in the Southwest. Like the Iberian romances, their millennial root stock, and the greater Mexican corrido ballads to which they are closely related, the inditas share a thematic fascination with disasters, natural and historical, and the personal dimensions of human tragedy. The folk term "indita" can be translated as "little Indian girl or song," and is applied by mexicanos or Hispanic New Mexicans to narrative songs of historical, burlesque, and even spiritual themes. They are an excellent index of cultural relations, assimilation, and resistance in a turbulent and decisive time of New Mexican history, the Territorial Period from the United States occupation in 1846 to Statehood in 1912. As the term indita implies, there is usually some connection to Indians or Native American culture in the songs, both thematically and musically. As we shall see, increasing political and cultural pressure from Anglo-America is often a motivating factor in the ballads as well.

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Although long eclipsed by corridos, and only rarely performed at present, inditas are by no means an archaic form belonging solely to another time, but rather what Williams defines as a residual form, "effectively formed in the past, but is still active in the cultural process (Williams 1977:122)." Most musicians and singers who have inditas in their repertoires present them as, what Hymes and others have termed, "demonstrations" or "presentations (1981:138-141)," examples of what New Mexican singers themselves term "la música de antes," compositions from a bygone day.

"La indita de San Luis Gonzaga" (in English, the Saint Aloysius Gonzaga) is a curious exception within this tradition<sup>1</sup>. It is still sung regularly not by performers or musical specialists, but by devotees of the saint as part of yearly cycle of observances culminating in his fiesta on June 21, celebrated with processions, velorios de santos (prayer vigils dedicated to the saint), and devotional dancing. Although "La indita de San Luis Gonzaga" began as a ballad about the Spanish-American war, this historical memory has become obscured. After the war, it evolved into a sacred hymn sung while the devotees of the saint danced in his honor in their personal petitions for good health and the protection of youth.

There is artistic evidence that there was a popular devotion of San Luis Gonzaga by the early 19th century, since he is depicted in retablos from this period (Keleman 1983:25). With the arrival of the Jesuits in 1868, the order promoted the cult in its New Mexico missions since Aloysius was one of their own (McKevitt

1992:378). San Luis died at age 24 in 1591 in Rome while attending to the sick during an epidemic. Canonized in 1726, he became the patron saint of youth, and protector of soldiers, with special healing powers (Hoever 1959:235-37).<sup>2</sup>

In the folk tradition, he also became the patron saint of dance, which is somewhat ironic since the historical Aloysius spent several unhappy years in the court of Felipe II and was known to detest courtly pursuits and distractions such as dancing. The origins of devotional dancing for the saint are obscure, and seem to be localized in New Mexico.<sup>3</sup> The earliest reference to the existence of this tradition is a promise to dance for the saint in the text of the indita itself, composed in 1898 (Espinosa 1985:131-132). The first description of dancing at the June 21st Fiesta de San Luis (in Córdoba, New Mexico) was compiled by Lorin W. Brown in his 1939 report to the WPA survey on New Mexico folklore and folklife:

San Luis Gonzaga is the patron saint of the dance. His day falls on the 21st of June. In some places a vigil is held in his honor. This in itself is not so unusual, but the nature of the ceremony is different from the usual vigil in honor of any special saint. For since he is the patron saint of the dance, a dance is given in his honor.

The saint is seated between the musicians, usually a guitar and a violin player. San Luis's hymn is sung and, after praying the rosary, dancing is the order of the night. Instead of singing couplets in honor of the different dancers, the musicians dedicate their verses to San Luis Gonzaga, coupling his name with some one of the dancers on the floor. The individual so honored is expected to give the musicians a coin in acknowledgment of the honor. The dance lasts until daylight, when the saint is joyfully carried back to the church. (Brown 1978:187)

The "hymn" sung after the rosary is the "Indita de San Luis Gonzaga." Although Brown makes no particular reference to dancing

during the hymn itself, subsequent descriptions dating to the 1940s and 50s in the Albuquerque area emphasize the devotional dance performed to the singing of the indita (Pacheco 1988:4-15). Fiestas in recent years in Los Griegos, Bernalillo, and San Luis, New Mexico have also featured the devotional dancing, which follows the rosary, and precedes the social dance, when there is one (Lamadrid / Torres, Salazar 1991).

The concept of dance as devotion or holy exercise does not seem to be a particularly European introduction to New Mexico, given the local indigenous traditions of sacred dance (Ortiz 1979). Several verses in the indita attest to Native American participation in the cult to San Luis, specifically people from Mogollón, an Apache area in the southwest mountains of the state. Oral histories mention the regular visits of Pueblo Indians for feast days and prayer vigils to dance for San Luis (Sargeant and Davis 1986, and Lamadrid / Jaramillo 1991).

In 1898 the Spanish-American war was the occasion for a renewed devotion to San Luis. The war with Spain incited heated controversies in New Mexico. Since recruitment for the armed forces was not well organized and the hostilities lasted less than three months, only limited numbers of Hispanic New Mexicans were involved (Arellano 1985:56-60). Anglo controlled English language newspapers questioned their loyalty to the United States and criticized their continued use of the Spanish language as subversive and un-American. There were well over 30 Spanish language newspapers in the state at the time. Editorials and



popular poetry appeared in their pages to defend both the Spanish language as well as the loyalty of the New Mexicans, so thoroughly tested in the Civil War, in which the Federal militia in New Mexico was over 90% Hispanic (Chacón 1986). But the Spanish-American war was more problematic. The irony that the "sons of conquistadors" were now fighting Spaniards was not lost on the people of the day.

Popular poet Norberto M. Abeyta from Sabinal, New Mexico, was one of writers to participate in this public debate by defending the Spanish language in one of his poems. Soon after the war with Spain began on April 25, 1898 he also wrote a series of verses in a poetic petition to San Gonzaga de Abaranda and the Virgin to intercede for a merciful end to the conflict (Espinosa 1985:131-132). The reference to the "mes florido" (flowery month) historically places the narrator of the poem in May, 1898. The poet's source of inspiration was the report of a miracle on the high seas in which a ship of Nuevomexicano soldiers on the way to fight Spain is saved by San Gonzaga who quells a terrible storm.

<p>San Gonzaga de Abaranda, 1 aparecido en el mar, concédeme mi salud; luego te voy a bailar.</p>	<p>[Saint Gonzaga of Abaranda, who appeared on the high seas, grant me my good health; and later I will dance for you.</p>
<p>Ahora en tu mes florido, 3 en el que todos te claman, pídele, santo glorioso, por América y España.</p>	<p>Now in your flowery month (May) when all seek your blessing, intercede, oh glorious saint, for America and Spain.</p>
<p>Por esos pobres soldados, 4 que están en guerra peleando; pídele, santo glorioso, que la paz vaya triunfando.</p>	<p>For those poor soldiers who are fighting in the war; ask, oh glorious saint, that peace will be triumphant.</p>

Dicen que la golondrina	6	They say the swallow
de un volido pasa el mar.		in one flight crossed the sea.
En las Islas Filipinas		In the Philippine Islands
comenzaron a pelear.		they began fighting.]

(author's translation)

This initial literary text of the indita is the only version which retains any specific reference to the war and the suffering of its soldiers. Other poems commemorating the short but pivotal conflict appeared in the Spanish language press. The poem "A la Unión Americana" ("To the American Union") by Eleuterio Baca of Las Vegas is representative. The same poem was published once in 1898 and again in a revised version in 1899 with appropriate changes in wording and verb tense to reflect both the United States victory and the diplomatic consequences.

Magnífico astro de Imperio  
Que con tu luz iluminas  
El lóbrego cautiverio  
De Cuba y las Filipinas.

[Magnificent star of Empire  
Who with your light illuminates  
The lugubrious captivity  
Of Cuba and the Philippines.

Hoy felicitan mis voces  
A tu enseña victoriosa  
En la lengua magestuosa  
De los dones y los dioses.

Today my voice congratulates  
Your victorious ensign  
In the majestic language  
Of gentlemen and gods.

¡Oh Iberia, tu hidalgo trono  
Bamboleará en la impotencia  
Mientras no aprecies la ciencia  
Del siglo décimo-nono!

Oh Iberia, your noble throne  
Will bumble on in impotence  
As long as you don't appreciate  
The science of the 19th century.

Deja las quijoterías,  
Despierta a la realidad,  
Y ve aquí las maravillas  
Que ha obrado la libertad.

Leave your Quixotic ways,  
Wake up to reality,  
And see here the marvels  
That liberty has wrought.]

24 de junio de 1899 (Arellano 1976:87)

(author's translation)

Despite its lofty diction, the allusion to Don Quijote, and its aspiration to a more literary redondilla (abba) rhyme scheme, this poem uses the same popular octosyllabic meter as the indita. Besides the religious content and genre self-identification of Abeyta's verses as an indita, the major difference between the poems is the persistence of the ballad versus the instant literary oblivion of the patriotic poem.

The main reason the Spanish American War left such a limited impression in the popular imagination was its brevity and lack of military heroics. More narrativity would have surfaced in these poems and ballads had the war had been more momentous. The most dramatic single loss was the sabotaged battleship USS Maine, whose sailors died in their sleep. Yellow fever took many more lives than Spanish bullets. And the First Regiment of the US Cavalry, Teddy Roosevelt's famous "Rough Riders," in which New Mexican volunteers rode, arrived in Cuba without their horses. They were obliged to storm San Juan Hill on foot as infantería (infantry) rather than caballería (cavalry), not exactly an inspiring feat to a culture that associates warfare with equestrian prowess. In the mercifully short conflict, the enemy was quite simply overextended, undersupplied, and outgunned. The naval battles of Manila and Santiago de Cuba harbors were virtual "turkey shoots" (Britannica 21 1965:149-151). This was not the kind of gallantry which was commemorated in inditas or the corridos which would eventually replace them.

More than an occasion for action, the war was an opportunity for reflection on identity, on community, on loyalty, and on nationhood. The editorial debates and commemorative poems in the newspapers are ample evidence of this process. After an exhaustive and fruitless newspaper search for Norberto Abeyta's poem, we can only speculate that its fame and diffusion were due instead to its efficacy as a devotional text. Abeyta chose the right saint to end the war. The poem was undoubtedly recited or sung at the Fiesta of San Luis Gonzaga in the summer of 1898 as a prayer of hope and in the summer of 1899 as a prayer of thanksgiving. Word would spread in the communities of the Río Abajo (central and southern New Mexico) as the devotion to San Luis grew. This special power of the saint has been called on and danced for in every war since.

Within a few years, as Abeyta's poem entered the oral tradition, it and the dance which accompanies it became the principal vehicle of devotion in the popular cult to San Luis Gonzaga. After all, the poetic petition had succeeded and the miracle was granted. The boy saint and the Virgin had interceded to stop the bloodshed. The war came to a swift conclusion with minimal carnage. Because of this miracle, the poem itself achieved devotional status as its power grew to foment additional miracles.

The cries of the soldiers are only heard in the earliest versions of "La indita de San Luis." Since there was nothing memorable to narrate, the story of the war became a pilgrim's prayer for health, a parents' hopeful plea for their sons to return. The text itself becomes miraculous, a literary object of

devotion. Since the saint appreciates dancing, people offer their physical movements. Because Hispanic tradition has no sacred dances, Native American tradition supplies the steps and the vocable chorus.<sup>4</sup> Vocables are the non-lexical, non-referential syllable sequences sung or chanted in Native American music whose meaning resides on an associational and symbolic level. As they sing, the dancers join arms and step back and forth in unison before the image of the saint. In special vigils for the health of individuals, side steps in a circle around the saint and the ailing person are done in a style somewhat reminiscent of the Plains Indian round dance.

After the war, the verses which refer to the participation of Indians in the cult appeared, and several versions of the indita attributes its authorship to "an Indian from Mogollón." It is unknown, however, whether this is actually the case, or whether the word "Mogollón" was chosen simply because it rhymes with the verse that is matched to it "San Luis de mi corazón" (Saint Aloysius of my heart). As with other saints, the faithful make devout promesas or promises to the saint in return for favors and blessings and miracles which include everything from bringing rain to curing sickness and protecting soldiers. Again, the most unique feature of this cult is the fulfillment of promises by dancing for the saint on his feast day of June 21.

When the author first heard the 1950 John D. Robb recording of "La Indita de San Luis Gonzaga" in the John D. Robb Archive of Southwest Music, I was fascinated by the "yo heyana" chorus, but

had no clue of the continuing existence of the cult to this lesser known saint. However, within a year I made my first recording of the indita with the father of a student who told me her brother had been cured by San Luis when he was hopelessly ill with rheumatic fever as a child in the 1950s. In his account of the family miracle, Manuel Mirabal of San Luis, New Mexico told me that after all hope had been lost and the doctors had given up, and after a fruitless pilgrimage to the holy earth shrine of Chimayó (Kay 1987), he took his son back to the village of his birth so its patron saint could help. The child was placed on the ground in front of the saint and several singers danced around him in a circle to petition for the miracle. Of the 20 verses of Mr. Mirabal's version, two are identical to the 1898 Abeyta poem; the two mentioning the saint's appearance on the high seas and the swallow's flight to report. Another four verses share imagery and the promise to dance. Other religious personages, notably the Santo Niño de Atocha and the Guardian Angel, appear in this and other versions to accompany San Luis and the Virgin.

De mis casa he venido	1	[From my house I have come
a pasear este lugar,		to visit this place,
dénme razón de San Luis		tell me about Saint Aloysius
que le prometí bailar.		since I promised him a dance.
 Yana heya ho,		 Yana heya ho,
yana heya ho,		yana heya ho,
yana heya ho.	-coro-	yana heya ho. -chorus-
Yana heya ho,		Yana heya ho,
yana heya ho.		Yana heya ho,

En el marco de esta puerta	2	In this doorway
el pie derecho pondré,		I will put my right foot,
denme razón de San Luis		tell me about Saint Aloysius
y luego le bailaré.		and then I'll dance for him.

-coro-

-chorus-

San Luis Gonzaga de Amarante 5  
 aparecido en un puente,  
 esta indita te compuse  
 cuando mi hijo andaba ausente.

St. Aloysius Gonzaga of Amarante  
 appeared on a bridge,  
 I composed this indita for you  
 when my son was away from home.

-coro-

-chorus-

Dicen que la golondrina 8  
 de un volido pasó el mar,  
 de las Islas Filipinas  
 que acabaron de pelear.

They say the swallow  
 in one flight crossed the sea,  
 from the Philippine Islands  
 which they have just fought for.

-coro-

-chorus-

Santo Niñito de Atocha 14  
 tú solito no más sabes,  
 el corazón de cada uno  
 también todas sus necesidades.

Holy Child of Atocha  
 you and you only know  
 the heart of each of us  
 and all our needs.]

-coro-

-chorus-

(author's translation)

In his performance (as opposed to the written version in his hand) in stanza 8, Mirabal transposed the word "ausente" absent, to "inocente" innocent or helpless, to refer to the desperate physical state of his sick son. The word "ausente" is used for other petitions involving the absence of a son who has gone away to war or on a journey. Besides the Mirabal version, only a few other contemporary versions have also preserved the reference to the Philippines (stanza 8), and singers invariably assume that it dates from World War II. No one interviewed in this survey seemed to have any clue of its origins in the war with Spain. From oral historical accounts, the indita was heard frequently during World War II when families leaving their sons at the Army Depot in Albuquerque visited a private chapel of the Martínez family on

Teodoro Road in the nearby village of Los Griegos to sing and dance for San Luis (Lamadrid / Jaramillo 1993).

The musical style of this indita juxtaposes European style melodies with Native American choruses which although not strictly pentatonic, nevertheless emulate the Native style. There is no better musical demonstration of the unique New Mexican style of pluralistic mestizaje or cultural synthesis. This kind of code switching and cultural borrowing is typical of the descendants of the Iberian Peninsula who for centuries have tolerated each other's religions and cultures. The ancient jarcha, zéjel, and Mozambic haragat lyrics were sung bilingually with Arabic or Hebrew verses interspersed with refrains in the Ibero-Romance dialect (Hall 1974: 117). That the power of a miracle which saved New Mexican soldiers fighting Spain on behalf of the United States would come home to combine with mestizo spiritual healing traditions to heal the sick and bring rain to the desert is a tribute to the syncretic power of popular culture in New Mexico.

#### NOTES

1. The following collection of versions of "La Indita de San Luis Gonzaga," along with interviews and performances were compared and analyzed for this study.

1. 1898 - Sabinal - Norbeto Abeyta, poet (Espinosa 1985:131-132).
2. nd. - Sevilleta - Ernestina Armijo, family cuaderno.
3. 1938 - no place name - WPA - Manuel Berg - WPA Files, NM State History Library.



- 4.\*+ 1930s - Atarque, Gallup - Feliz Bustamante.
- 5. 1930s-40s - Los Duranes (Albuquerque area) - Cosme Trujillo.
- 6. 1940s - Ranchitos (Albuquerque area) - Consuelo Pacheco (1988:4-15).
- 7.\* 1950 - Tijeras - Helen Little, Elfego Sánchez, M. García (Robb: 1980).
- 8.\*+ 1991 - Los Griegos (Albuquerque area) - Juanita Jaramillo.
- 9.\*+ 1991 - San Luis, Bernalillo - Manuel Mirabal.
- 10.\* 1987 - Santa Fe - Elvira Montoya. Recorded by Lucy Narvaiz.

\*musical recordings                    +interviews

Video recordings of the San Luis Gonzaga Fiesta were made on June 21, 1991 at Los Griegos, by Felix Torres; and in San Luis, by Melissa Salazar. These and version numbers 2, 4, 5, 8, 9, and 10 are from the personal archives of Enrique Lamadrid.

2. There is an emerging contemporary devotion to San Luis Gonzaga as the patron saint of the victims of the late 20th century plague, the Auto Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS).

3. Mario Montaña (in a 1993 personal communication with author) reports that community dances for the Fiesta de San Luis were common in the towns of the lower Río Grande valley in south Texas in the 1950s, although he cannot recall seeing devotional dancing for the saint.

4. Another tradition of devotional dancing in greater Mexico similar to the cult of San Luis in its choreography can be found in San Juan Nuevo, Michoacán, where pilgrims fulfill promises to a miraculous Christ figure by dancing in shuffling backwards and forwards steps as they approach the altar (Plá 1989:269-287).