

Anthropology 212  
R. Hames

Book Report On  
"Santa Eulalia's People"  
By  
Francisco Enrique Aguilera



April 26, 1996

As part of his doctoral dissertation, Francisco Enrique Aguilera conducted an ethnographic study of the multicomunity of Almonaster in Spain from December 1967 to August 1969. Originally, he had planned to study a rural agrarian community in Spain and one in Columbia, and, by comparing the two field studies, gain an idea of the Spanish influence on intra- and inter- community organization in Latin America. However, after beginning his field work, Aguilera changed the focus of his research. The central theme became the social organization of the community and multicomunity of Almonaster and the essential role ritual life played in this organization. Aguilera wanted to examine how the communities maintained their identities individually and collectively as a multicomunity. He also sought to understand the three main paradoxes he felt existed in the culture of Almonaster. The first paradox was Almonaster's ability to forgo the depressed condition of surrounding regions. The second paradox was that people in Almonaster saw their society as both egalitarian and hierarchial. The final paradox examined by Aguilera was the people of Almonaster's adherence to a strict moral code called formalidad, that discourages conflict, when tensions "must" exist between individuals.

Aguilera did not explain the methods he employed in obtaining the data. ✓

The multicomunity of Almonaster consists of a town with a population of about 800, also called Almonaster, and sixteen smaller villages referred to as the aldeas. The aldeas each have a sense of individual identity, but they also maintain their

identity as members of the multicommmunity, due to shared culture and a reliance on one another.

All the Almunenses, the people of Almonaster, share the Catholic religion, and this appears to be instrumental in maintaining the group identity that defines their multicommmunity. In the first section of the book, Aguilera explains the rituals of the life cycle that unite the people of Almunenses through shared experiences. Among these rituals are baptism, first communion, La Quinta (the draft), marriage, and death.

Not only do these rituals unify individuals through shared experience, they also serve as a means for establishing culturally defined proper behavior. After children have taken their first communion, between the ages of eight to twelve, they are expected to assume more responsible, adult-like behavior and begin working toward displaying the ideals of formalidad.

Males who have entered La Quinta, a time of compulsory military service, assume adult status. As such they are expected to display formalidad and are allowed adult male privileges such as drinking and smoking in public. It is interesting that the ritual beginning a young man's status as a Quinto is characterized by intoxication and boisterous behavior, both of which conflict with the principles of formalidad. This acceptance of the violation of formalidad is characteristic of many of Almonaster's rituals.

A woman obtains adulthood through marriage, and if never married, a woman remains socially immature. Therefore it is in the young woman's best interest to marry. Although the young

woman is able to choose her own novio, or potential husband, the community plays a role in the success or failure of the relationship by sending anonymous poison pen letters to a novio they feel is not acceptable. If a number of the girl's novio relationships end -- even if the termination was the result of pressure by the community -- the girl's reputation will suffer and she will have great difficulty marrying. As a result, the girl often chooses a suitor who will be accepted by the community. Therefore, as for the Kpelle, romantic love may not play a large role in a young woman's choice of a marriage partner. ✓

The rituals of the life cycle also contribute to the group identity the community by tying individuals together in patron-client relationships. Every ritual contains both a religious and a secular portion. It is the secular portion of the rituals that enhances these interpersonal networks. Members of poorer families receive "favors" from the wealthier families but are unable to repay them. This leaves the poorer families indebted to their wealthy patrons. An example of the appearance of patron-client relationships in life cycle rituals may be found in the first communion ritual. The patrons are normally invited to the reception following the first communion as honored guests, in the form of informal godparents, as a sign of the client's respect for them. → Do the Kpelle have a similar practice

In the second section, Aguilera examines the effects of the festival cycle that includes Semana Santa, The Crosses of May, and Santa Eulalia in the town of Almonaster. Aguilera feels that

the culmination of these rituals serves as a means of: emphasizing culturally unity, venting the frustrations that could threaten that unity, demonstrating both egalitarianism and hierarchial organization, and creating a sense of community for the people of Almonaster.

The first festival in the cycle is Semana Santa. This festival begins the Saturday before Palm Sunday and lasts until two days after Easter. The first portion of this festival involves a procession and the carrying of a life sized image of Christ. All members of the community participate in this event, and the community is united by the shared status as members of the Catholic Church. Another key part of Semana Santa is communion. Those who do not participate in communion are gossiped about by their peers and regarded as not living up to the expectations placed upon the Catholic members of the community. To avoid this scorn, most individuals participate in communion and, by doing so, again reinforce the group's shared identity as members of the Catholic church.

The second festival of the cycle, The Crosses of May, is part of the folk religion of the area. During this festival the community is separated into two factions of equal status. The wealthier members of the society do not play an active role in this ritual, and therefore, according to Aguilera, it serves to stress the egalitarian nature of the community. In addition, The Crosses of May festival encourages competition between the two groups. Aguilera feels that this competition acts as a safety valve for the natural tensions that build up over the course of

the year but are suppressed because formalidad prevents their expression.

Each of these groups decorates one of the two crosses in the town. Separate meetings known as Las Flores occur for each of the groups to prepare decorations for the crosses. During these meetings religious and secular songs are sung, and occasionally derisive songs are sung about the other group. According to Aguilera, hostility among children and young unmarried adults remains low during this period, but it may become a problem for some adults. Comparison of the crosses may lead angry friends from opposing sides to stop talking during this period, and therefore, individuals attempt to avoid the topic of the opposing group's activities in conversation with its members.

Hostility mounts over the course of the festival, as each group becomes more segregated from the other. On the Sunday of the Cross, the decoration of the crosses is complete. Each group has a procession that begins at its cross, passes the other cross, and visits the church. To avoid confrontation between the groups, their processions are separated -- with one in the morning and the other in the afternoon. The group that is not holding its procession is located at its own cross during the time of the opposing group's processional. Often the group in procession aims light-heartedly negative compositions at the other group or one of its members, as the procession makes its way from the other group's cross. Often the compositions are taken in jest, but they may result in some hostility.

Aguilera states that the lack of a clear-cut victory by one

of the groups results in the continuation of the competition. The competition and fission of the community is resolved in the next phase of the festival cycle -- Santa Eulalia.

In the festival of Santa Eulalia, the community is reunited into a single group, and its boundary as a separate community within the multicomunity is emphasized. In addition, the wealthy play a much larger role in this festival, emphasizing the hierarchial features of social organization in Almonaster. The wealthy organize the activities of the festival and serve as the primary active members of the hermandad of Santa Eulalia, the brotherhood associated with the festival.

The most important part of this festival is the Romeria, a pilgrimage to Santa Eulalia, which is located in the countryside about twelve miles away from the town of Almonaster. Most individuals have only a vicarious participation in this ritual, unable to make the trek for health or financial reasons. Those who actively participate in the Romeria travel to Santa Eulalia on horseback or in cars and remain there for a two day celebration. This celebration also attracts a few members of the aldeas, giving them a shared sense of identity in their mutual reverence for Santa Eulalia and reinforcing the ties of multicomunity.

It is during this festival at Santa Eulalia that the divisions within the town of Almonaster are dissolved, and the town is united with an identity distinct from that of the aldeas. As in many festivals, formalidad is relaxed, so drunkenness and uncontrolled behavior is common. There is also a bullfight,

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sponsored by the wealthier members of the society, that the adult males at the festival take part in. Aguilera feels that these events are physically cathartic and rid the community of the tensions that have been allowed to surface during The Crosses of May. This catharcism, along with the cooperation necessary during the bullfight and a procession of the Saint's image, reunites Almonaster. In addition, the citizens of Almonaster distinguish themselves from the members of the aldeas that come to the festival. This distinction is made on the basis of the more active role played by those from Almonaster than those from the aldeas. The subsequent sense of community identity is a further unifier of the members of the town of Almonaster.

The aldeas are also unified by the festival of Santa Eulalia. Only members of the multicomunity may be members of the hermandad of Santa Eulalia. People who are not a part of the multicomunity, or "forasteros", may come enjoy the entertainment at the festival but do not participate in the activities. This distinction between the multicomunity and those outside it expresses a sense of relatedness felt by members of the aldeas. Their special veneration of Santa Eulalia is a cultural bond that enables them to define themselves as part of the multicomunity.

The aldeas also have distinct community identities within the multicomunity. Aguilera feels that competition between the aldeas in the form of Patron Saint festivals emphasizes community identity for the aldeas. Each aldea holds a festival for its Patron Saint. During this festival, the community holds a celebration and dance that attract members of the other aldeas.

The goal is to try to hold the best celebration, with the most visitors, best entertainment, and best food. Although, as in The Crosses of May, there are no clear cut victors, the Patron Saint festival creates group distinctions between aldeas. In addition, members of an aldea must cooperate to have a successful festival. This in-group cooperation and competition with other aldeas allows members of an aldea to define their community.

The final portion of the book was added after Aguilera returned to Almonaster in 1978. Many of the behaviors had changed as the community became more modernized. Some aspects of formalidad had changed. An acceptance of women smoking and drinking in public had begun. Wealthy and poor friends now conversed freely in public. In earlier years this was avoided because it was feared people would believe the poor individual was gaining a special advantage that the other poor individuals did not have. This taboo reflects the importance of patron-client relationships in the past. However, these relationships are waning as salaried jobs for the poor create less reliance by them on the wealthy.

The festivals had also changed somewhat. Attendance of Santa Eulalia had risen as more people were able to travel by car. In addition, more forasteros have begun to attend the festival. Although this brought revenue to the community, many individuals felt the economic gain was offset by a loss in the quality of the ritual.

Aguilera bases his conclusions on Gregory Bateson's Schismogenesis Model. This model contains symmetrical

schismogenesis, "competition between culturally defined like units", and complementary schismogenesis, "cooperation between culturally defined unequal units". The festival cycle mirrors this model, with The Crosses of May (or the Patron Saint festivals in the aldeas) representing symmetrical schismogenesis and Santa Eulalia representing complementary schismogenesis.

Aguilera makes a convincing argument for shared group identity as a unifier and definer of a community or multicomunity. However, I find his argument of the festival cycle as a catharsis for relieving community tensions less convincing. This proposal seems to share qualities with Lorenz's Hydraulic Discharge Theory. ✓ Lorenz's theory asserts that aggressive energy builds in an organism and must be released to reestablish equilibrium in the individual. ✓ Aguilera seems to propose this same mechanism on the level of community.

Perhaps tensions are expressed during this festival period because such an expression serves a purpose instrumental to the individual. It is impossible to soundly draw this sort of conclusion from Aguilera's data, however aggressive behavior is, cross-culturally, generally the result of weighing the costs and benefits of such behavior. When the benefits of aggression outweigh the costs, aggression will occur. It is obvious that the relaxation of formalidad during the festival cycle does decrease the cost of aggressive behavior. (An individual does not run the risk of being the subject of malicious gossip if his behavior defies formalidad at this time.) However, it is not apparent what the possible individual benefits from this

expressed hostility could be. An investigation of the actors who displayed hostile behavior and their possible motives is necessary to truly address this problem.

This ethnography gave me a clear-cut picture of the ritual life in Almonaster. It also made me look at the important unifying role rituals are able to play. By doing so, it made me think of some of the rural festivals, such as county fairs, that I have experienced in my own life and the similarities these rituals share with those in Almonaster.

*Good Analysis  
and  
integration of  
class material*