

## **Santa Libertad: Teatro del Milenio and the Debate Over Music and Social Consciousness in the Afroperuvian Community**

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What is the relationship between music and political involvement? How exactly is it that social action is enacted musically? Or, conversely, how is it that music can constitute a type social action? The answers to these questions are varied, ongoing, and in many cases complicated by a variety of factors like the dissemination of such music through the mass media, its potential commodification by capitalist interests, its co-optation as a strategy for social control, its repression by an authoritarian regime, or its institutionalization by a populist regime, to name a few. To the noted Marxist scholar José Carlos Mariátegui the answer seemed fairly self-evident. “There are two souls that exist in the contemporary world, those of revolution and decadence...the consciousness of the artist is the agonizing circus of struggle between the two spirits” (Mariátegui 1981, 47). For Mariátegui, like other Marxists, the question was about the dialectic between needs and desires of the individual and the sacrifice of the same for the greater collective. Over the history Marxist thought many, often contradictory alternatives have been posited in regards to this question. However, this is not an appropriate forum for a lengthy theoretical discussion such as this. Today, I would like to address some of these same general questions, but not from the vantage point of theory, philosophy or aesthetics, but from the perspective of how the issue is perceived and articulated by a particular group of Afroperuvian musicians, Grupo Teatro del Milenio.

On Thursday, July 27, 2000, some of the members of Grupo Teatro del Milenio decided to attend the *Marcha de los Cuatro Suyos* (March of the Four Suyos), a massive protest organized by former presidential candidate Alejandro Toledo and members of the opposition that was designed to bring attention to what many felt was the fraudulent inauguration of Alberto Fujimori into a third presidential term. Only a few days earlier the collective of actors, dancers and musicians had premiered a play entitled *Callejón* which sought to critique the continued marginalization of Afroperuvians, not only by external socio-economic forces but also from within the community, by what the members of Milenio felt was a lack of personal engagement with one’s identity. For some of the members of the group, the issues addressed in *Callejón* were interrelated with the political situation of the day. In both cases they saw a need for the emergence of critical voices from within marginalized communities and grassroots organizations that would challenge the status quo. Milenio had been trying to be such a voice, bringing their brand of social commentary and criticism through music and dance members of their own community. Attending the *Marcha de los Cuatro Suyos*, was a way of adding their voice to what they saw as a similar project although of a much larger scope.

Despite these good intentions, Milenio’s participation in the march was met by a number of challenges. To emphasize the notion that people from all four corners of Peru had come together in protest, the organizers of the march created four delegations that gathered in different parts of the city and then marched into the downtown area. Each

group represented one of the Inca suyos, and attendees were encouraged to select whichever *suyo* best represented the part of the country they came from and/or the regional cultural heritage with which they identified. As descendants of Africans in Peru, this was not an easy task for the members of Milenio. Some of those present had relatives of Andean or mestizo origin but did not feel sufficiently identified with this heritage. Some Afroperuvian activist groups were going to be present at the march, but what was at most a contingency of thirty or forty individuals was impossible to find in a crowd estimated to have reached one hundred thousand people. The parallels with everyday life, where members of the Afroperuvian community have to routinely deal with their social invisibility, were clear to everyone. Eventually, Milenio settled for marching along side the Collasuyo delegation largely because there were a number of human rights organizations and groups of performers that had been invited to join in, but feeling unable to integrate fully into the event, the performers left the march several hours before the eruption of riots and fires that would act as a backdrop for Fujimori's inauguration in the morning of July 28.

In some ways, the experience that the members of Milenio had with the Marcha de los Cuatro Suyos points towards some of the particular challenges that Afroperuvian musicians have had in making their musical practices recognized by the whole of Peruvian society. Unlike the very visible marginal majority of mestizo and indigenous groups with which the Peruvian State and the dominant classes have been perennially engaged, the Afroperuvian population, currently estimated to be less than one percent of the total population of Peru, has largely remained invisible when it comes to matters of national representation. Yet, over the past fifty years, Afroperuvian music has become amongst the most compelling forms artistic expression associated with the Peruvian coast, particularly among non-Afroperuvian audiences. Part of this success was the result a revival movement that successfully introduced Afroperuvian musical practices as unique and distinct to the Afroperuvian experience, rather than as a mere subset of musical practices associated with a supposedly ethnically heterogeneous but culturally homogenous coastal region.

This success however, has presented other challenges, this time between these professional musicians and other members of the Afroperuvian community. Musical practices that in decades and centuries past were associated primarily with the everyday life of various communities became a professional endeavor that was largely subsidized by a culture industry with a different agenda than that pursued by the first leaders of the revival movement. In an environment dominated by the nightclub circuit, folklore schools, the tourism industry and largely middle class and upper middle class criollo audiences, some Afroperuvian musicians like the members of Milenio feel that what may have initially been positive symbols of a re-emerging Afroperuvian identity, became fetishized commodities often inaccessible to those members of the Afroperuvian community who were not performers themselves. Furthermore, the status of celebrity afforded to successful professional musicians, much as is the case with some Afroperuvian athletes, has become in the opinion of the members of Milenio, not only one of the few avenues for social advancement in the Afroperuvian community, but a means to leave that community behind, at least temporarily. This is the theme addressed

in “Callejón”, where turmoil is produced amongst a group of neighbors when a former resident that had been living abroad returns to taunts his friends and relatives for being little more than “pobres negros de callejón”.

For Milenio this is a serious concern. From their perspective, musicians, as prominent and visible members of the Afroperuvian community, should be not only ambassadors of music and culture to countries and segment of Peruvian society, but also role models that with a vested commitment to the communities from which they come. To this end, the group has made a point of carving out alternative performance spaces where they can more actively reach those who otherwise would not have the opportunity to see them, such as giving free special performances of their plays to prominent members of the Afroperuvian community to raise awareness of these issues, offer music and dance workshops for underprivileged children in Lima, and donating public performances in support of various causes that the members deem important. While there is a consensus at this level of political involvement amongst the members of the group, the situation is far more contested when it comes to deciding what constitutes a politically committed performance both in terms of content and technique.

A week after the Marcha de los Cuatro Suyos, somewhat disappointed by the events that had transpired at the march, Milenio decided to donate a performance for a political rally in a *poblado menor*<sup>1</sup> in Ventanilla just outside of Lima. A relative of one of the group members was running for mayor of this community and Milenio wanted to support her because she could become one more of, quite literally, a handful of elected officials that would hopefully be an advocate for the interest of the Afroperuvian community. The performance, which took place on a portable stage in front of the candidate’s partially built home, started without incident. But, in the wake of the events of the previous week, emotions were running high amongst some of the members of the group, and there was a sense of urgency in regards to how Milenio could be a force for social change. After five or six songs, a quiet confrontation between different members of the group began to develop. As a number of the dancers were waiting off stage for the cue to enter, one of the musicians on stage decided to address the audience. On behalf of Milenio, he said that they were very proud of attending the rally not only because they wanted to show their support for an outstanding candidate but also because this was an opportunity for Milenio to show their commitment to community involvement.

The audience was attentive and polite, but the dancers waiting in the wings found the timing inappropriate. Rather than waiting for the speaker to finish, they took advantage of a momentary pause by the speaker to rush the stage playing their *cajitas*<sup>2</sup> effectively ending the impromptu speech. The controversy did not end there. A few songs later, the same musician took advantage of another costume change by the dancers to alter the set order. Next on the list was a festejo, a lively dance with a quick pace that is a favorite of most audiences. Instead, he introduced an original composition by Milenio’s music director Roberto Arguedas, a *lamento* called “Santa libertad”, with the explanation that

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<sup>1</sup> Literally, “small settlement.” It is a legal term applied to small communities that are in the process of becoming recognized by local authorities as an official subdivision of the a particular city, town or district.

<sup>2</sup> A percussion instrument that hangs from the neck of the player

although this was a festive occasion that they could not just perform music that was fun; there was also a need share an important message with the audience. This time the performers waiting off stage did not have enough time to react.

Negro libre,  
vamos a trabajar  
negro libre,  
vamos a vivir

Free black [man],  
let's get to work  
free black [man]  
let's get to living

El trabajo y la vida enseñan  
y el que no lo hace  
no se gana el pan

Work and life teach us,  
and he who does not do it  
will not earn his bread

Negro libre,  
vamos a trabajar  
negro libre,  
vamos a vivir

Free black [man],  
let's get to work  
free black [man]  
let's get to living

El trabajo y la vida enseñan  
tendrás lo que quieras:  
santa libertad

Work and life teach us,  
you'll have what you want:  
sacred freedom

In some ways, the lyrics of “Santa libertad” can be seen as an allegory for the type of social action to which the members of Milenio are committed. The song, which was one of the features of Callejón, encapsulates the moral of the play, the notion that freedom does not reside in the trappings of wealth, celebrity and the denial of one’s social and cultural origins but rather in the type of hard work and social responsibility that can help improve the social condition of the entire Afroperuvian community. The song was well received, and afterwards the performance resumed without further incidents.

On the ride back to Lima after the rally, the leaders of each camp began to discuss what had happened. One believed that there was a need for an explicit engagement with those present; otherwise, the performance quickly degenerated into little more than a contrived political advertisement. From his perspective, if Milenio was donating their performance as a show of support of one of a mere handful of black community leaders in Peru, they needed to be make this clear to all attending the performance. Otherwise, people might assume that they were merely entertainers hired to attract people to the event who could care less about the welfare of this particular community. The other argued that actions spoke louder than words and that their performance, as an art form, was most effective when left to speak in its own terms. Spelling things out or “dummying down” the message for the audience by voicing an explicit political agenda not only robbed their art of such power but also interrupted the flow of the performance and made them look like amateurs rather than the potential role models that they were trying to be for other Afroperuvians. Eventually, the argument came to a frustrating halt stemming out of the realization that neither group would succeed in convincing the other.

The incident in Ventanilla was a manifestation of a deeper debate in which the members of Milenio continue to be engaged. Some members of the group believe that the most important aspect of what they do lies at the level of content and that, like nueva canción performers, or other types of politically minded singer-songwriters their job is to give voice to some of the issues that concern their own communities. This is particularly the case for music director Roberto Arguedas who has been one of the major forces behind Milenio devoting a significant portion of their repertoire to original compositions, rather than to the more or less standard canon that was popularized in the 1970s and that is usually insisted upon by audiences when performing the professional nightclub circuit. For Roberto, new compositions are important, not only because it allows younger generations of performers to stretch their legs creatively, but because they can offer the type of social commentary that he finds lacking in the traditional repertoire, which more generally waxes romantically about the harshness of rural life before Emancipation or heralds the need to celebrate because those days are long gone.

For other members of Milenio, this explicitness is potentially dangerous because they see a certain proselytizing character in the idea of conveying a clear message, particularly through song text, that may compromise an audience's ability to remain critically engaged with what they are experiencing, rather than being passive receptors. In this sense they share this concern with a number of Marxist theorists who, according to Lydia Goehr, stems from the desire "to pre-empt the reductionist view that music is always and only in service as a form of ideological expression, a 'prostituted' endorsement of reigning 'interests'" (1994: 101-102). In other words, concerns over simplifying the content of artistic production in an effort to make it more accessible to large groups of people often overlap with the fear that such mainstreaming will also make that artistic production more easily trivialized or commodified.

This, however, is not a philosophical or academic debate for the members of Milenio but rather a tangible issue that they have to confront every time the group steps onto a performance stage. While the multiple viewpoints expressed by the members of the group and their apparent lack of reconciliation stem from the existence of different conceptions of what it means for music to be political, to assume that Milenio is actively pursuing a means of resolving this tension is to miss the point. The musicians, dancers, and actors of this collective are quite conscious of the fact that they do not have, and perhaps should not have, all the answers in regards to their own music or its potential for social change within the Afroperuvian community. After all, it is this unresolved tension that continues to fuel Milenio's creative work which, as the members of the groups like to point out, it is about bringing to light "life's contradictions". In the end, this process is ongoing much like the way not only Milenio but a number of other Afroperuvian artists continue to devise different ways of critiquing a Peruvian society that in large part continues to regard them as invisible.

## References Cited

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