

Visitors from beyond the Grave

Ghosts in World Literature

Dámaris Romero-González, Israel Muñoz-
Gallarte, Gabriel Laguna-Mariscal (eds.)

**PURGATORY IN LOS PEDROCHES. AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL
APPROACH FROM THE ETHNOGRAPHIC ANALYSIS OF A
CEREMONY: *ÁNIMAS BENDITAS* IN CHRISTMAS EVE IN DOS
TORRES**

IGNACIO ALCALDE SÁNCHEZ
University of Córdoba
(orcid.org/0000-0003-0299-7265)

ABSTRACT: This chapter presents an anthropological analysis of purgatory and its souls through the ethnographic research of a local ceremony in a small village of Andalusia. We observe the rite as a tool in the group link and a mirror of its cultural values, inside the religious approach. Therefore, it will cover an analysis about anthropology, religion and supernatural world from an ethnographic point of view.

KEYWORDS: Purgatory, anthropology, religion, souls, ethnography, Los Pedroches.

“People said dead people came to see them. They appeared. I believe it was because we were so hungry that hunger made them appear” (field research)

Here, we carry out a brief anthropological research on the approach of the soul and purgatory from an ethnographic work in a specific local ceremony. To introduce our objective, we will go over social anthropology through religion, beliefs and spirits, to arrive to group identity and the group link tools. We revolve around these main concepts in our ethnographic analysis to think about the world of death and its human conception from an anthropological point of view. The analysis focuses on the celebration of a rite in a placed festivity: Blessed Souls (*Ánimas Benditas*) on Christmas Eve in a small village, Dos Torres, inside Los Pedroches, in the province of Córdoba.

To begin with, our ethnographic research deals with Dos Torres, a small village with about 2500 inhabitants in the north of Córdoba (Andalusia), surrounded by similar small villages with a country way of life, which, all together, form an official region of Andalusia, Los Pedroches, a natural border among Andalusia, Castilla-León and Extremadura. They all celebrate a specific ceremony related to purgatory and its souls. In this celebration, people organize collections, give alms, sing, and pray for the souls to help them in the last step before the eternal rest. December 24th, Christmas Eve, is when this ceremony takes place, in which the souls of purgatory are the central character.

These ceremonies —rather similar to the purgatory conception to other ones found in other parts of the Andalusian geography, as the researches of

Muñoz Jiménez in Granada¹, Matarín Guil in Almería² or Sigüenza Martín and Collantes González in Cádiz³ have already explained— show a very particular structure. The rite is widely rich and meaningful to represent the cultural concept hidden behind it, summarizing the main cultural aspects of this community. Here is the reason of its interest as an ethnographic object, as a tool for the analyses and comprehension of this community, especially in relation to religion and the group beliefs.

In that way, in our research, in the first part, we will introduce the general framework: the anthropology and the relation to religion, to the culture as a bridge. Then, we will analyse some of the main concepts of this relation. After that, in the second part, we will present some of the main ethnographic aspects to, finally, generate some conclusions.

ANTHROPOLOGY AND RELIGION

From an anthropological point of view, we define religion as the whole of beliefs related to supernatural aspects and facts of the non-natural power or entities. All these explanations of non-rational causes establish the different beliefs into religion, placed by this last one as a general frame that includes all these beliefs. We are aware that it is a limited vision and not an universal definition because in all cultures this binary distinction of natural and supernatural does not appear or, at least, it does not have the same meaning. However, we use it as a starting point to lay the foundations for the study and to establish the borders between religious and non-religious fields. In this way, we could analyse our object and show a study about the importance of the rites and the beliefs in the communal links (bonds).

Based on this primary definition, we can understand how a lot of explanations, narrations and practices are made around the supernatural events to have power over them, to manage or, at least, to internalize them. In anthropology, we observe it as an attempt to culturally subdue through the conceptualization of the events, to understand the incomprehensible. We name and subdue the unknown facts with words, rites and shared beliefs, trying to domesticate all the occurrences around us; in short, we dress with a cultural suit all the unknown events in order to face them.

In this way, religion would be considered as a socio-cultural institution that assembles these beliefs and stories and will provide the guidelines for the behaviour of the people who follow them. It sets itself up as one of the most important institutions inside the cultural communities, it increases its influence

¹ Muñoz Jiménez 2015.

² Matarín Guil 1996.

³ Sigüenza Martín - Collantes González 2014.

to other aspects and, logically, it has been embedded in other important cultural spheres such as economy, politics or kinship systems.

Moreover, from anthropology —and avoiding a simple materialist point of view to find an only functionalist explanation of the cultural process, leaving other more effective analysis about the cultural phenomena as a complex perspective—, we can see that religion has some elemental social functions. Thereon, following some general definitions, we place religion as a safety tool in front of the unknown events, as a quiet place in front of anxiety, as an explanation of the incomprehensible of death or as a way to get over different internal conflicts⁴. Here, we will also remark on other group functions in which religion appears as social values in school, controller of taboos and shaper of the different relations (power, marriage, social roles...) within the members of the group. From this point of view, religion will become a whole element of identity and a link tool. Its rites, symbols and beliefs articulate an amalgam to build the *we* in opposite to the *others*. And in the same vein, in the pain about the family member's death, religion configures a *communitas*'s feeling that let the people dissolve their pain in the group fondness, strengthening the solidarity link in the group.

Here is where we can start to guess the usefulness of the rites and these ceremonies for anthropology and the ethnographic research, in order to understand the culture where they are covered. Religion and popular rites, as tools, link group cultural values. The rites and the religious ceremonies are configured as a group demonstration of shared cultural values and a mirror of the group identity.

On the other hand, from the anthropological study of religion, there are other two important aspects to remark for our study: the processes through which people manipulate this supernatural world and the importance of the intermediary, as an essential figure in the ceremonies.

The way we get these powers to act in our own interests, the mechanism to communicate with them or the mediation between the two worlds configure a continuum in the religious practices, from the most simple activities, as lucky charms or easy taboos, to complex communal traditions, as making time or places sacred, offerings, dogmas, sacred writings or some rites ceremonies. At the same time, this complex process also appears in the intermediary figures, from the non-permanent characters and specific roles (as magicians or healers) to the specialized intermediaries with a recognized social status, exclusive knowledge, an initial passage rite and a full time dedication.

This is the way magic and magical rites arise, and people participate in the process in which both worlds make contact. At this point, we can understand

⁴ Jung 1938.

how the popular rites and ceremonies are inside official religious dogmas and beliefs, providing the last one with official meaning and ruling their development. At the same time, these rites are configured as the answers for the environmental questions, a shared answer highly embedded in their thoughts and in their culture.

In this context, and if we go closer to our research object, another capital concept will appear: purgatory. It is necessary to understand the main aspects of this idea because it is one of the most important elements in these ceremonies.

Purgatory was defined by J. Le Goff⁵ as the third place of the Catholic tradition. It was a place created in the Middle Age as a crossing state in which the souls are in torment during an expiation trance of their sins. From this place, as Vigna Vilches⁶ says, the souls come back to the living world to be in contact with the living, to send messages or to settle a debt, so they can leave their temporary state —as the liminal stage studied by A. Van Gennep in his rites of passage's analysis— and to come indefinitely into heaven and eternal rest.

Consequently, this place is configured as an intermediate platform between life and death, worlds in which we can communicate and intercede on them. It works as a consolation tool for the living because it can help them to get a better eternal rest and at the same time is used to stay in touch.

This purgatory, as Cuchet⁷ described, is a painful and temporary suffering place that must be soothed by the living's mediation. It represents the last liminal step to finish this farewell rite. In this way, purgatory appears as a very important cultural creation. It is an intermediate platform made to exchange actions with the souls and to configure the death world in this culture. The way we configure it, in the group imagination, helps us, as anthropologists, understand the cultural approach in this community about the environment and the unknown events, as we said above.

Although this place was erased by the official history in the Catholic Church⁸, few decades ago, it is still prevailing in a lot of areas. As we show here, purgatory is still in the popular beliefs and practices, shaping a specific place where they can turn to face the death of a community member. The official religion and unofficial religion do not always walk together, as we will show in the next section.

Finally, there is another key concept in this previous framework: the vocabulary used to name the souls and the different meanings around them. There are some words around this world that have not quite similar meanings and they need some explanation. Some of them are souls, revenants, ghosts, energies,

⁵ Le Goff 1989.

⁶ Vigna Vilches 2015.

⁷ Cuchet 2005.

⁸ Walsh Pasulka 2014.

spirits, saints, and so on. In this way, we use the same and usual Spanish word to refer to the souls in purgatory as the ethnography observation does: *ánimas*, like blessed souls, a word from the Catholic culture to represent this non-embodied spirit matched to a human being. This word let us stray away from other similar words which evocate different meanings. So, other words associated to non-dead people like ghosts, revenants or zombies, scare, or cultural constructions around the tragedy or some social breakups do not represent these souls neither the ceremonies about them, although the community know it. In the same vein, there are also other words used by them in other similar contexts. These are associated to non-natural events which are not named, some incomprehensible powers far away from the *ánimas*, that are very well known.

Thus, they use the *ánimas* concept in a similar way to saints or blessed souls. In that way they provide the dead souls with Catholic meaning, so too are they moving away from other aspects like scare or magic, usual representation like human shapes with human troubles or necessities and matching these souls to the dead people. In this way, they distinguish from other concepts that they can use as well although they do not do in these ceremonies, “the spirits or ghosts will be non natural powers, the *ánimas* are our deads, with name and surname”⁹.

ETHNOGRAPHY

Within this theoretic context we can analyse the different practices developed in Dos Torres, in Los Pedroches (Córdoba), related to death and purgatory. We can include these ceremonies in the popular religion, which has been so well studied by Rodríguez Becerra¹⁰ in his research about the conception of death and the different rites of passage in Andalusia. Following this research, we can observe that there are some rites about death related to the farewell process (shroud process, funeral vigil, funeral, condolences, eight days mass, one year mass...) but there are also other specific separated rites to reinforce these ones on specific days. In this village it specifically occurs on October 31st and November 1st (All Saints Day) and December 24th (Christmas Eve). We have chosen only the last one which is currently active with a very specific meaning and has an interesting procedure.

As we said above, the village is placed in a border land that confers the main aspects of its identity; as Hernández León¹¹ says, it is a recognized region composed by seventeen small villages with an economy based on agriculture and with a strong identity and character, due to the historic isolation that this area has been suffering along the last centuries.

⁹ Extracted from fieldwork interviews.

¹⁰ Rodríguez Becerra 2011.

¹¹ Hernández León 2014: 27.

Following Agudo¹² in his analysis about this countryside area, we see they keep a noticeable religious character which is shown in several popular parties, where the sacred meaning of the land and this farm profile will be clear, similar to other Spanish countryside areas, with unambiguous cultural and social functions.

In this social and historical frame, in spite of the great external pressure that provokes that some of these ceremonies are disappearing or being replaced, some of them still survive in a way that, far away to represent a static tradition consigned to oblivion, they are alive, shared and changed, adapting to the real and current demands, keeping the essential meanings and staying useful for the neighbours. Among them we will focus on one ceremony related to purgatory and the souls in it, the *Ánimas Benditas* in Christmas Eve, which remains a healthy tradition.

In Christmas Eve, groups of children walk around the village, singing the traditional carols and asking for the Christmas tips, and there are together with them some adult groups with a different yet typical song. These groups are called the *Ánimas Benditas*, like Blessed Souls or Saints, and they are the purpose of this ceremony: they walk around the whole village asking for an invitation for singing or praying. In this way, they get alms to pay the masses for the “blessed souls in purgatory”, as Moreno Valero¹³ says. Depending on the number of volunteers, there will be one or more groups to share the different neighbourhoods and go over the whole village. They are known as *Ánimas Benditas* and everybody opens their doors to let them pray or sing. These people raise funds and when they finish, they come back to the sacristy, where they put together all the money collected and it is given to the priest for “a fee in favour of the souls of purgatory”¹⁴.

These groups always act in a ruled way. Firstly, they arrive to the houses with the typical shout “Blessed souls, to pray or to sing?” and the family take the choice. If they have suffered the death of a relative in the last years, and they are still keeping the established mourning, they will choose to pray the Lord’s prayer and a *requiem*, otherwise, they ask for singing the typical song, which goes this way¹⁵:

¹² Agudo Torrico 1990.

¹³ Moreno Valero 1995: 1.

¹⁴ Moreno Valero 1995: 1.

¹⁵ Translation by the author.

Esta noche celebra la Iglesia del Verbo divino la Natividad. Y también lo celebran las almas que salen de pena para descansar.	Tonight, the Church celebrates the Nativity of the Holy Word. As well, the souls, which get out of the torment, celebrate it to rest.
Venid y escuchad. Apliquemos todos el oído y oigamos los gritos que las almas dan.	Come and listen. Let all bring the ear and hear the shouts that the souls are shouting.
Supliquemos con humildes rezos y escuche los ruegos la divinidad.	Let us plead with humble prayer and so may the deity hear our pleadings.
Que las almas de nuestros hermanos alcancen el gozo de la eternidad.	May our brothers' souls get the joys of eternity.
Pedid e implorad. Por si alguno se encuentra penando, salga del tormento en la Navidad.	Plead and implore. If anyone is suffering, let he get out of torment during Christmas' times.
Celebremos gozosas las fiestas, tengamos presente esta gran verdad.	Let us celebrate with pleasure our party, and keep in mind this great truth.
Que el Mesías, nacido en Belén, logró redimirnos de nuestra maldad.	That the Messiah, who was born in Bethlehem, has redeemed us from our sins.
En su navidad, por la gracia del Verbo divino las almas que penan gocen libertad.	And in Christmas, for the Holy Word's grace, may souls which are in torment enjoy the liberty.

These lyrics, as Moreno Valero says¹⁶, are sung in a typical southern choral rhythm and it is played with different traditional instruments, added by the neighbours, like guitars, wind instruments (trumpet, trombone, etc.) and percussions instruments (tambourines, small bells, triangles, etc.).

In that way, the family meets with the traditional act and they add some alms for the masses and the different helps to the soul in torment in purgatory, while they recognize the support of the group in this trance and the solidarity in that moment. The singing or the praying, sometimes both of them, complete these ceremonies so they remember their relatives on this day (Christmas).

Once we have described the general aspects about the ceremony, we can cross examine it with the main theoretic concepts exposed above. So, as we will explain in the last section, we can see clearly how the rite is used as a group tool for reinforcing group links and for promoting solidarity for each other. At the same time, they introduce a festive perspective to purgatory, singing about

¹⁶ Moreno Valero 1995: 2.

this condition, similar to the way to intercede for the souls in it, giving alms or participating as an intermediary agent, to sing and get money for them.

We can see through this ceremony that neighbours make up the group, designating themselves as the intermediaries and the foremen of the souls in purgatory. It is especially interesting that the rest of neighbours are waiting for this group, with the rest of carols children group, to achieve this tradition, making a big difference between children and adults. So, they want to pay homage to their dead relatives, with the alms or the respectful prayer, especially where there have been a recent death – in that case the pray is an obligatory stop. In the same way, in other houses, where the song is repeated time after time with a festive approach, it means an homage and intermediary action involved in the festive character of that day. It is very different to the rest of the carols or groups with an external tradition. In the same vein, we can observe how this ceremony is far away from that meaning, the only lyrics, the adult singers and the formal pray in some situations transfer to this rite an absolutely different roll in the village.

To the end of the journey, the priest will be the one who takes care of the money and manage it for the next mass and different events (All Saints Day, candles maintenance, etc.), so it is a free activity that the neighbours want to realize for the rest of the community, like a shared tradition which is organized in a spontaneous way.

Last, in this brief ethnographic research, we must focus as well on an ethno-literary approach, so from this perspective we can see the utility of the usage of these popular lyrics, frequently used in Andalusia, in a typical rhythm taken from the *flamenco* culture and the choral groups. On one hand, it helps them to memorize the lyrics and teach it and, on the other hand, it helps to fit this death rite into a very merry and charming day; a very tragic situation as the *liminal* state of the souls, mainly, some family members in torment in Purgatory, is dealt with in a festive way. In this way, some expressions as “the shouts of the souls” or “if anyone is suffering, get out of the torment in Christmas” appear as usual expressions and they send a message about purgatory far from tragic meaning.

Following Moreno Valero¹⁷, this conceptualization of purgatory is very similar than other nearby villages, where there are similar lyrics too, used in other ceremonies. So, in Villanueva de Córdoba, a closer village, the Blessed Souls brotherhood recites a prayer, like an announcement, in this way¹⁸:

¹⁷ Moreno Valero 1995.

¹⁸ Moreno Valero 1995: 3. Translation by the author.

<p>Con pregones atentos piadosos estimamos la gran devoción, por las ansias, tormentos y fatigas que están padeciendo, por amor de Dios</p> <p>Si te quemas una mano, no digas “¡Dios, que me quemo!”. ¿Qué será de aquellas almas que están en el fuego ardiendo?</p> <p>San Jerónimo bendito vinieras para explicar lo que padecen las almas que en el Purgatorio están. (...)</p> <p>A las ánimas benditas no se les cierra la puerta, en diciendo que perdonen se van ellas tan contentas.</p>	<p>With attentive merciful proclamations we appreciate the great devotion to the anxiety, torments and annoyance that they are suffering, for the love of God.</p> <p>If your hand gets burned, do not say “Oh, my God, I am burning!”. What will it be about those souls burning in the fire?</p> <p>Blessed Saint Jerome, we wish you would come to explain how much the souls suffer in purgatory (...)</p> <p>Do not close the door to the blessed souls, just say “Forgive” and they will go away happy.</p>
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Here as well, we can observe how the relation between the spirits and the Blessed Souls’ conception is normalized, madding a process to intermediate with them and help them in the eternal life searching.

In this vein, from the perspective of the countryside life and the different ceremonies that C. Lisón describes in his research about farm people in Galicia¹⁹, we can understand as well how the ceremony is just the excuse to show and to link, through the cultural rules (as a cultural code of conduct), the whole community, such as the intermediary people and the affected families, the ceremony lets them shape the border of the pain, the way to express it, and even the relationship with the other dead community members.

CONCLUSIONS

As Muñoz Jiménez says, following Cuchet²⁰, the soul devotion is written inside an usual functional materialism without any complex, whose effect in the people is classified into three types: protection of the prayer’s life, financial and legal interests and missing objects. And we could add to this list a fourth type: the relief and the individual satisfaction to help a dear (family) dead soul.

In that way, we see the structure of these functions in several rites, which let us know a procedure to help them. These rites combine, inside them, the knowledge and the way to use it to intercede on the souls’ behalf. Inside the complex system that religion is, the rites are like the instructions to follow in our behaviour and the bridge between dead and alive world. In that rite, the lyrics, the choral group and the date configure the stage where the families can help the

¹⁹ Lisón Tolosana 2004a, Lisón Tolosana 2004b.

²⁰ Muñoz Jiménez 2015: 2.

Ánimas Benditas, and at the same time, they meet the role of these souls inside the community, like non scaring or tragic entities or like community members who they must still help. The dead and living share a common place during this ceremony.

According to that, and as one of the most important conclusions, the rite has a very highly complex meaning and it will be developed in two parallel planes at the same time, with a feedback process, like two sides of a coin. In one way, following the official religion, the rite is celebrated according to the dogmas, rules and general structure (although nowadays it is not a formal stage, it is still a current concept for many people, specially to develop this kind of ceremony); on the other hand, following the *popular religion*, the rite will answer to the people demands, with a spontaneous tradition and non regular way. With such practices, at the beginning it appears as unconnected with the official religion but they are provided the meaning and rules from this last one. Nobody cares whether purgatory is or is not an official place, for them the ceremony holds meaning in a different way.

The popular ceremonies or rituals are regularized by the rules of the official religion. These popular ceremonies were, mostly, born in separated places of these religions but they are supplied with meaning and acculturated inside this big beliefs framework.

In that way we can observe how purgatory, a concept erased from official religion, is still alive in the popular tradition as a useful tool. Sometimes official and unofficial religion bear some differences, and in this way, it does not seem to be a big problem to fix one in another, in spite of this lack of formal feedback from the Catholic church.

Thus, these rites can fit inside the dogmas of the official religion. As Martínez Shaw²¹ said, the popular culture mechanisms keep its traditional traditions where the official religion contents endanger its survival.

With respect to the specific ethnographic ceremony, we can observe some of the functions we analysed at the beginning, consoling the neighbourhood at the family member's lost, establishing solidarity link with the group members or just reinforcing the *communitas* feeling in the whole community within the participation of a group rite. At the same time, it achieves other secondary functions as involving a festive approach to this situation, playing the drama down to the death with songs and the group uproar, or expressing the solidarity and respect of the group in these specific homes with a deceased, with the formal and respectful group prayer, inside this special date as Christmas Eve.

At this point, the ceremony helps also to support the expense for the masses and the different fees that every family cannot afford. Cohesion, intergroup

²¹ Martínez Shaw 1985.

solidarity and acknowledgement of the group symbols are displayed in these ceremonies.

The neighbours, constituted as the *Ánimas Benditas* group, are named as temporary intermediaries, without magic roles (like other ceremonies with healers or expiation), only as mediators with specific functions inside the ceremony. And they are cut off from other characters with religious meaning like the priest or similar ones. It is important to note that this is a non-official ceremony, so the actors are not the official religious people.

Because of that, this ceremony is close to popular belief and it is shared with everyone in the community, far away from the sacred meaning of other ceremonies related to purgatory, as the mass, that in this case, is the last step in this process, in the next days or weeks.

From this approach, we can see how purgatory is established like a platform where all the meanings and practices by the living people are made for the dead souls. It gives a shelter to the pain, at the same time it also articulates the way to help them or, at least, to place them in a located place, in a comprehensible place for the living. Purgatory will be like a socio-cultural institution inside the community where they can place the dead souls, it will get closer to the living world, especially with this kind of ceremony, and give meaning to the pain and homage practices in the community.

As we said above, the conceptualization of the spirits as *Ánimas Benditas* strays away from other words, almost similar but totally different in the treatment of the dead and beliefs, like ghosts or spirits. So, the teaching of these ceremonies to the next generations is done without important changes of meaning respect to these new concepts, with different approach from the cinema or the new ceremonies (like Halloween or similar ones). In fact, they share both ceremonies without any trouble; even they are playing in both of them. They can feel afraid from the stories in one of the ceremonies and then they can participate in the other ones in an usual way, establishing a totally different meaning between ghost, spirits and *ánimas*.

Every society has the spirits it ought to, the spirits according to its beliefs, environment and social and historical development. So, the spirits are like a mirror of the cultural values, conceptualized in several ceremonies, rites, beliefs and so on. From the Anthropology, we do not evaluate the truth of their conceptualization; in no one stage we are interested in it; however, we focus on the collective imagination, on the narrative explanation of them and the way people express it and practice it. The interesting aim in the ceremony is its history, the beliefs, its meanings, definitely, the social fact that it symbolizes, mainly when this rite is located in a capital place into the group identity.

Similar to the ethno-literature, we plan the anthropological analyses from the literary work of a community, as a starting point, walking in an opposite way that ethnographic science says, from imaginative world to the real world. Here

Purgatory in Los Pedroches. An anthropological approach from the ethnographic analysis of a ceremony: *Ánimas Benditas* in Christmas Eve in Dos Torres

we can also pose the way from non-natural world to the natural one, so we will understand the manifestations like cultural metaphors, the *Ánimas Benditas* as a symbolic ceremony which illustrates the way of life of the group, in summary, the culture of this group.