

Digital storytelling of the perote, a traditional festivity held in Panama

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Abstract: The perote is a non-religious, day-long, pilgrimage from the Panamanian town of Santo Domingo de Las Tablas to the Uverito Beach and then back. It includes many intangible cultural heritage manifestations such as traditional music, songs, dances and pranks. Despite being a unique tradition in the region and having a significant cultural tourism potential, the perote has not been extensively researched and is not well known outside of its home province.

While digital maps are a common tool for storytelling tours of tangible cultural heritage sites, they are less common in the realm of intangible cultural heritage assets such as the perote. Thus, the goal of this work is to use a digital map in a creative way to increase awareness of this festivity, in order to help its preservation and to increase its value as a cultural tourism attraction.

The methodology followed in this project began with an initial research stage that included interviews with organizers of the perote, in order to establish important information such as the origin of the festivity, its seasonality and frequency, and the activities that take place during the celebration.

A second stage consisted of mapping the main locations involved in the celebration. This was done by using an online application for creating and publishing maps. This process involved attending several perotes and observing each activity in the field, while recording geographic coordinates, schedules, and multimedia content of the festivity.

The result of this work is an online representation of the perote, in which each activity's location and schedule is marked at a map and linked to explanatory texts, pictures, videos and/or audio files. The maps are presented both in Spanish, the official language of Panama, and in English, in order to make it accessible for an international audience.

Keywords: cultural heritage, traditional festivity, digital storytelling, Panama, digital map.

Introduction

Santo Domingo is a small town located in the province of Los Santos, in south central Panama, on the Pacific Coast. It is easily accessible from the provincial capital of Las Tablas and has an estimated population of 2187 (INEC 2013). The town is widely acknowledged as a place where Panamanian cultural heritage is kept alive, as many residents have become nationally recognized folk musicians and makers of traditional crafts (JAÉN SÁNCHEZ 2008). This area of Panama features a cultural mix with heavy Spanish influence in addition to African and Indigenous heritage.

A very representative example of the cultural heritage of Santo Domingo is the festivity known as the perote. It is a non-religious, day-long, pilgrimage from the town to the Uverito Beach and then back (JAÉN ESPINOSA 2003). This is done several times a year and has become a tradition well known in the surrounding area, but not in the rest of Panama.

The perote is strongly associated with tamborito, a subgenre of Panamanian traditional music that features African-style drums, a double-headed European-style drum and singing by a lead voice, usually female, and a chorus. This type of music is very widespread in Panama, featuring many local variations.

In addition to tamborito music, the perote features other traditional activities such as pranks and games that make it a unique celebration in Panama. As a festivity that prominently features tamborito music in a beach setting, the perote has the potential to attract tourists interested in cultural heritage and natural sceneries.

Goals of the project

The creation of a digital map as a storytelling tool for documenting and promoting the perote has many goals:

- The first goal is to initiate the formal documentation of the perote, as there is very few written material dealing with this traditional celebration.
- The second goal is to increase awareness of the perote among a broader audience in Panama and outside of the country. As stated before, this celebration is not well known outside of Los Santos province.
- The third goal is to help promote the perote as a cultural tourism attraction offered by the town of Santo Domingo. The richness of the cultural heritage items present in this celebration could easily draw many tourists if the details of the perote were better known.
- Finally, the fourth goal of this project is to explore creative ways of applying digital maps and storytelling techniques to an intangible cultural heritage item such as the perote, as usually maps and storytelling are mainly used to describe cities, buildings, monuments and other tangible cultural heritage sites.

Methodology

This work has been done under the scope of the activities performed by PanamaTipico.com, a grassroots, web-based, independent initiative that pursues objectives such as researching, digitally preserving, publishing and teaching about Panama's rich cultural heritage (JAÉN ESPINOSA, 2014). Due the difficulties of obtaining funding in Panama for the virtually non-existent field of digital heritage in the country, a suitably inexpensive methodology had to be devised for this project. The main steps for this research work were:

Review of the literature on the perote

As stated before, it seems that there are no formal scientific articles describing the perote. Most of the material written about this festivity consists of news items that add very few information to the knowledge of the perote already mentioned in the introduction of this work. A notable exception is a historical novel that includes a witness narration of a perote held during the mid-20th century and places the origin of the tradition in 1900-1903. (GONZÁLEZ 2013).

Interviews with organizers and participants

An important component of the methodology used for this project was the conduct of informal interviews with organizers and participants of the perote. This process was greatly facilitated by a key advantage held by the researcher: its family connections as the son of a man born and raised in the town of Santo Domingo. This meant that most of the subjects who needed to be interviewed were relatives, friends or acquaintances of the interviewer, and thus, very open to provide key details about the perote as the needed trust relationship was already established and also because the aforementioned goals of the project were clearly explained to them. Interviewees included organizers of individual perotes, musicians, singers and frequent perote attendees. Significantly, perotes remembered by the interviewees span from the late 1920s to 2015. As a result, our research only missed first-person reports for the first twenty-five years of the history of the event.

Observation of the perote in situ and GPS data collection

Several perotes were attended in order to observe the activities that take place during the festivity. This allowed a verification of the data collected during the interviews with organizers and participants, as well as comparisons between the perotes of decades ago and the recent ones. Pictures and audio clips were recorded in order to add multimedia content to the storytelling application being built. As in the case of the interviews, this process was greatly facilitated by the aforementioned family relations and social connections of the researcher with the people of Santo Domingo.

A key component of this fieldwork was the data collection of geographic coordinates for all important locations of the perote, which included the starting point at Santo Domingo, the seaside spot at Uverito Beach and the traditional road stops on the way back to the town. This process was performed by using a free Android app named My GPS Coordinate. The choice of this app was determined by the funding issues stated at the beginning of the Methodology section. The app is available for download at:

<https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.gpscoordinatesandlocation>

Creation of the storytelling application

The last step of this project was the creation of the storytelling application. In order to achieve that, a free account was created on Mapbox, a web-based software for displaying data on digital maps. The selection of this particular software had to do with its ease of use, as well as the already stated budget limitations for the project. Mapbox is available at: <https://www.mapbox.com/>

Markers were created for all main locations involved in the perote. Also, media content such as pictures and audio clips were uploaded to the map, in order to better aid the storytelling process.

Finally, versions of the application were created in Spanish, the official language of Panama, and in English, in order to attract a broader, more international audience.

Results

Seasonality, frequency and general aspects of the perote

The perote takes place during a specific time of the year, from mid-August to late-October. This time window corresponds with the peak of the rainy season in Los Santos province and has clear starting and ending dates. Perotes must be held after August 4th, which is the Festivity of Santo Domingo de Guzmán, the Patron Saint of the town. Also, perotes must be held before November 3rd, when Panama celebrates its independence from Colombia. Every year there are three or four perotes. Their dates are planned so that they always happen on a Saturday falling on, or right after, the 15th or the 30th of the month, because those are the payday days in Panama.

The fact that perotes fall on payday days is very important, because perotes are organized as fundraisers. Organizers fall in three categories. The first one are the two local competing carnival groups known as Calle Arriba and Calle Abajo. However, Calle Arriba is more active and holds a perote every year, while Calle Abajo currently does not. That accounts for the number of perotes varying from year to year. In the case of these carnival organizations, the money raised by selling alcoholic beverages, soft drinks and food goes into funding the carnival decorations and other expenses of the group. The second organizer of perotes is a civic committee in charge of putting together the yearly anniversary of the town. In this case, the money collected is used for partially covering the expenses of the celebration. Finally, the third category of organizers is made up of a family whose members are folk musicians who play on all traditional celebrations of the town. In this case, they use the collected money for supporting their musical activities. While some perotes are organized by competing carnival groups, it is not uncommon that people belonging to one group often attend the other group's perote.

Observed activities

The warming-up

While the perote always takes place on Saturday, on the eve (Friday), people congregate in a corner of Santo Domingo's Square for a tamborito. This celebration serves as a warming-up for the perote that actually starts on the following morning. The selling of alcoholic beverages, soft drinks and foods as a fundraising activity begins at this point. Tamboritos sung in this activity, as well as during the perote proper, are special songs related to the perote and to the sea, although in recent years, more general tamboritos are sung, too. This activity starts around 6:00p.m. It could go on until well after midnight.

Towards the beach

Traditionally, between 7:00 and 8:00a.m., the perote departs for Uverito Beach. This is signaled by the launching of firecrackers as a way to announce the start of the perote. While the tradition calls for the participants to walk the 8.5 kilometers to the beach while singing and dancing tamboritos without making any stop, the recently observed perotes have not featured this walk due to the high temperatures that have affected the area during the last few years. Nowadays, the organizers and a core of perote participants

board a large cattle truck and head to the beach. During the remaining of the morning, more people join them on the beach.

Afternoon at the beach

The better part of the day of the perote is spent in a front of the sea at Uverito Beach. Years ago, participants used to congregate at the foot of a centenary uvero tree. Sadly, it was cut down around 1995. For several years, the meeting place was the stump of the tree until conflicts about ownership of that plot of land arose. As a result, the gathering point of the perote moved a few meters in the direction of the sea (Fig. 1).

During the whole day participants bathe in the sea while others participate in the tamborito singing and dancing. Since many locals are skilled musicians, they replace each other as often as needed. Organizers sell alcoholic beverages, soft drinks and food. There are other traditional activities that nowadays are less common. One of them is the mock burial of some perote participants in the wet sand.

At this point, it is important to mention some pranks and games that used to take place during the walk towards or from the beach, as well as during the stay at Uverito Beach. However, since the walk to the beach is not done anymore, these activities first take place at the beach. The first such a prank is the smearing of the participants of the perote with mud as a way of signaling their participation in the festivity. Most of the time this is accepted in good humor and even as a badge of pride. But, occasionally, a person resists the smearing. This causes a small crowd to form and playfully force the resisting person in a mud puddle. Sadly, this tradition is not very common anymore due to the lack of rain and to the paving of the road in recent decades. As a result, there is not a lot of mud to smear people.

Another tradition that used to be seen during the walk towards the beach, but now starts while at the Uverito Beach is the presence of a character named El Toro, which means The Bull. This is a man who wears a band of vines diagonally around his torso. He represents a bull and playfully rams perote participants. The distinction of representing the bull is reserved for an older man who has participated in perotes for decades.

The way back to Santo Domingo

At around 4:30p.m., the organizers of the perote arise from their seating places at the beachfront and start walking towards Santo Domingo. The crowd follows them mostly on foot, even though many of them have arrived in their family cars during the day. All the walking is done to the tunes of tamboritos. El Toro keeps ramming participants (Fig. 2) and people smear each other with mud, when possible. The perote is followed by a long line of cars.

An interesting feature of the return trip of the perote is the several stops it makes on the way back to Santo Domingo. These stops take place at fixed spots dictated by tradition. The stops are not really for resting, but for giving the organizers more time and opportunities to sell their products before the perote, and the fundraising, ends.

The perote reaches Santo Domingo at around 8:00p.m. However, a core of participants takes a few laps around the square while singing tamboritos. After a while, people start to leave. Around midnight, the last holdouts finally let the perote go.



Fig. 1 – Perote at the Uverito Beach in its new location (Copyright: Marino Jaén Espinosa / PanamaTipico.com)



Fig. 2 – El Toro rams a participant, as the stragglers of the perote head back to Santo Domingo (Copyright: Marino Jaén Espinosa / PanamaTipico.com)

Important locations of the perote

Santo Domingo's Square, at the corner of Pundún and Córdoba's streets

This location is the site of the warming-up tamborito on the eve of the perote. It also serves at the starting and ending point of the pilgrimage.

Recorded latitude and longitude for this point: 7,74919 (7° 44' 57,08" N) and -80,24168 (80° 14' 30,06" W)

Perote site at Uverito Beach

This is the location where the perote spends the whole day in front of the sea, amid tamborito music.

Recorded latitude and longitude for this point: 7,77063 (7° 46' 14,28" N) and -80,17657 (80° 10' 35,64" W)

First stop: Chente

This stop is located at an intersection between the main road to the beach and a backroad to nearby agricultural fields. The location is named after the person who owned the surrounding land decades ago.

Recorded latitude and longitude for this point: 7,76638 (7° 45' 58,95" N) and -80,19088 (80° 11' 27,17" W)

Second stop: El Bajo

The name of this location means The Lowlands. It is a very flat area used for pasture and growing crops.

Recorded latitude and longitude for this point: 7,76423 (7° 45' 51,25" N) and -80,20256 (80° 12' 9,2" W)

Third stop: La Condená

This is a very special stop. It is named after a small creek. Decades ago, it was prone to flash floods that sometimes blocked the perote from moving. This had the effect of making everybody happier, as they had to wait for the waters to recede and, thus, the festivity lasted for a longer time. This does not happen anymore due to the building of a modern bridge over the creek and the lack of rain even during the rainy season.

Recorded latitude and longitude for this point: 7,76461 (7° 45' 52,6" N) and -80,21072 (80° 12' 38,58" W)

Fourth stop: Palma Chiquita

The name of this stop means small palm tree. This area takes its name from nearby pasture lands.

Recorded latitude and longitude for this point: 7,76432 (7° 45' 51,54" N) and -80,21985 (80° 13' 11,45" W)

Fifth stop: Cerro La Teta

This a very symbolic stop in terms of the identity of the people from Santo Domingo. Cerro La Teta means Tit Hill. It is named after a hill allegedly shaped as a woman's breast. Even the town of Santo Domingo was named La Teta until the first decade of the 20th century. Nowadays, the name is still used informally and "being from The Tit" is an endearing name and an identity badge for locals. This is the last traditional stop of the perote.

Recorded latitude and longitude for this point: 7,75589 (7° 45' 21,19" N) and -80,23401 (80° 14' 2,45" W)

Sixth, and recently introduced, stop: Cerrito de las Iguanas

This stop has been introduced recently. Its name means Little Hill of the Iguanas. This location is already on the outskirts of the town of Santo Domingo.

Recorded latitude and longitude for this point: 7,75339 (7° 45' 12,2" N) and -80,23901 (80° 14' 20,42" W)

Evolution of the festivity

After interviewing organizers and participants and observing recent perotes, some changes are evident in the way the festivity takes place. Some examples of this changes are:

- The way towards the beach is not undertaken by foot due to the very high morning temperatures,
- Lack of rain and building of modern roads have minimized the traditional mud smearing of perote participants and the stoppage caused by the creek on the way back to town.
- Loss of the traditional mock burials in the sand.
- Changes of the meeting point at the beach due to the cutting down of the uvero tree and land ownership conflicts.
- Introduction of general tamborito songs, and even accordion music, as opposed to perote-specific tamboritos.
- Creation of a new stop of the perote.

Virtual Perote

The resulting web application for the storytelling of the perote (Fig. 3) is online and accessible at the following web addresses:

- <http://virtualperote.panamatipico.com> (English version)
- <http://perotevirtual.panamatipico.com> (Spanish version)



Fig. 3 – Virtual Perote (Copyright: Marino Jaén Espinosa / PanamaTipico.com) features perote location data and multimedia content displayed on a map provided by © Mapbox, © OpenStreetMap

Conclusions

Lessons learned

The experience of creating a digital map for showcasing an intangible cultural heritage item by using storytelling techniques resulted in many lessons learned:

- The most important one is that digital storytelling, if used in a creative way, becomes a valuable tool for documenting and helping to preserve intangible cultural heritage items.
- In the absence of written references, the focus must be on the people involved in keeping the tradition alive. They are the main sources of knowledge. In this case, building a trust relationship with the organizers and participants of the perote was a key step towards the success of this work.
- While state-of-the-art, expensive tools will be nice additions for any project, in the absence of adequate funding, free tools could allow the continuation of the project and the presentation of valid results.

The future of the project

While Virtual Perote has not been made available to the public yet, several of the organizers and participants have seen the application. As the result of their feedback, we can foresee further development of the project, including the following actions:

- Presentation, in a town hall style, of Virtual Perote at Santo Domingo.
- Creation of a calendar showing the dates of upcoming perotes.
- Addition of more multimedia content, such as video clips, to the application.
- Live tweeting of a perote, when reliable wireless service becomes available in the area.

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