

## SENSITIVE CONNECTIONS: FOLLOWING THE ETHNOBIOGRAPHIC TRAIL OF A CHACOAN MUSICIAN

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### ABSTRACT

The text deals with the production of the ethnobiographic video *Pascual Toro, flautero (flute player)*. I refer, first, to the theoretical and methodological proposal of the Argentine filmmaker and anthropologist Jorge Prelorán (1933-2009), who inspired the work. In a second moment, I describe the characteristics of the repertoire and the genre performed by the protagonist of the film in the *arete guasu* ritual to explain the reasons that guided the organization of the editing project. In turn, I discuss the value of individuality in the scope of *arete guasu* flute music, arguing that the ethnobiographic method is a fruitful way to understand the connections that sustain the skills to be a good flute player in this universe.

### KEYWORDS:

Ethnobiography;  
Musical  
knowledge; Ritual;  
Guarani; Chaco.

## INTRODUCTION

Ethnobiography, as conceived by the Argentine filmmaker and anthropologist Jorge Prelorán (1933-2009), is a research modality that connects art and anthropology. This text intends to follow the path opened by Prelorán, first addressing some aspects of the methodology he developed. Much has been done and written about the relationship between art and anthropology since the time when Prelorán presented his proposal. It would be impossible to describe here the numerous studies that sought to transcend this border and, in this effort, made it tenuous.

In some cases, ethnographic practice implied the immersion of ethnographers in the arts (visual, musical, performative etc.) they researched; in others, ethnography used several languages to communicate in a sensitive way the aesthetic dimension of the ethnographic experience.<sup>1</sup> The option to accompany the proposal of an already classical author, as is the case with Jorge Prelorán, is linked to the interest in recognising the value of works that, although adding a few decades - and even for this reason - are still fertile invitations to experimentation.

Secondly, we present some considerations on the production of the ethnographic video *Pascual Toro, flautero*,<sup>2</sup> a project I have worked on in the last four years (2016-2019). It is an ethnobiographic documentary that integrates a series of written and audio-visual works in which I sought to translate into different languages some of the knowledge acquired with Chacoan musicians over these years of research. In this series of videos and texts<sup>3</sup> I present some traces of the knowledge of indigenous musicians - Chané and Guaraní - who play the flute in the *arete guasu* ritual.

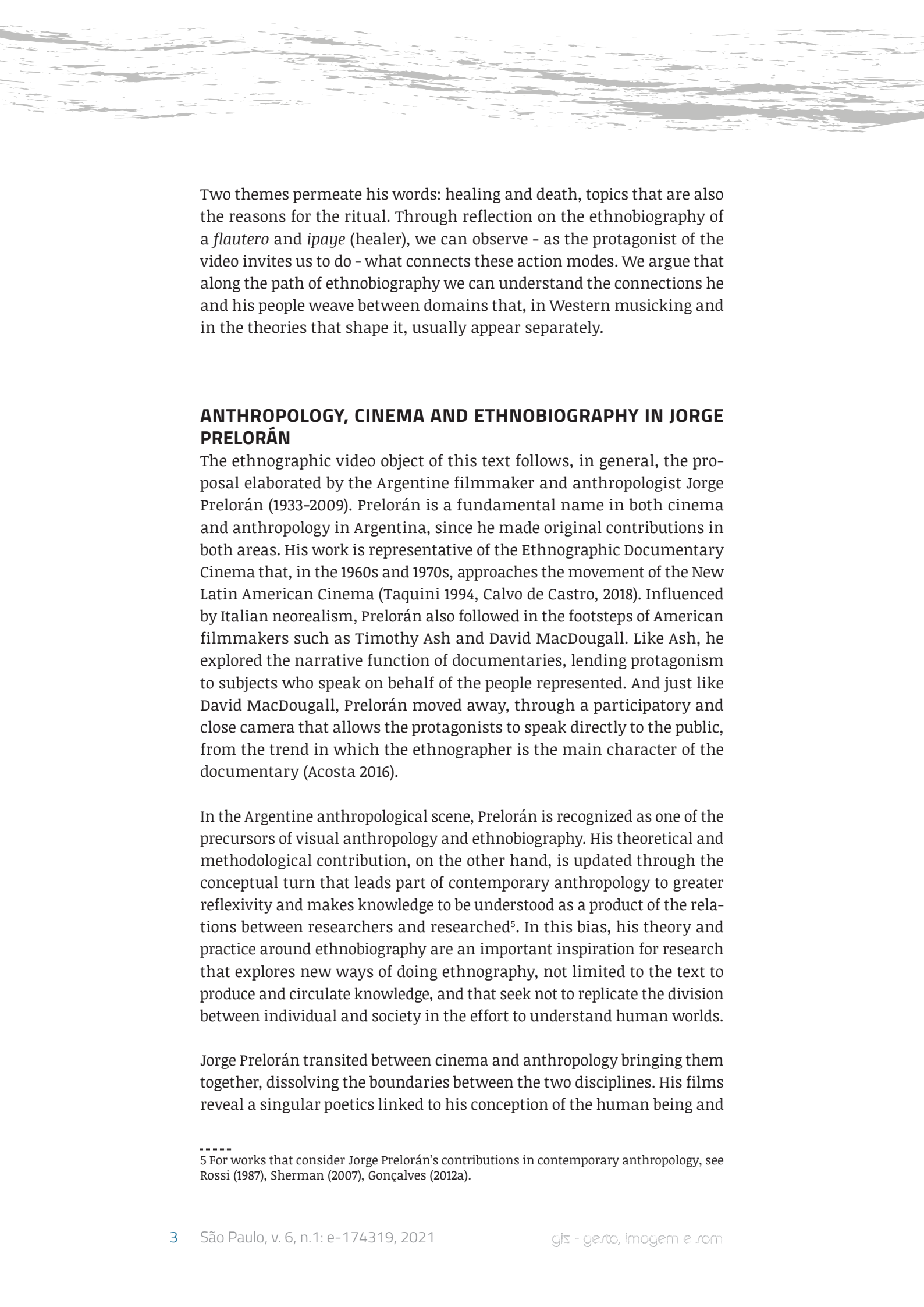
*Arete* is a feast celebrated annually at the time of carnival in many communities of these two ethnic groups in southeastern Bolivia, northern Argentina, and western Paraguay. The musical knowledge associated with it can be thought of as a *língua franca*<sup>4</sup> shared in the Guaraní and Chané communities of the region and that, as it could not but be, relates to the history and cosmology of those peoples. In this video, and through the voice of the indigenous musician Pascual Toro (Guaraní resident of the community of Santa Teresita, Boquerón, Paraguay), we learned part of the history of his people, the importance of the *arete guasu* ritual in his community, and the nature of his skills to be a good *flautero* (flute player). Pascual's narrative describes the long journey that led him to be a *flautero* in the main Guaraní ritual of the Paraguayan boreal Chaco.

1 See, for example, Schneider (2007, 2017); Caiuby Novaes (2008, 2015); Ingold (2013).

2 Domínguez (2019).

3 Domínguez (2018a, 2018b, 2019, 2020, 2021).

4 The formulation is inspired by studies on the Upper Xingu that identify in the ritual a powerful means to weave relations in this complex multi-ethnic and multilingual scenario (Menezes Bastos 1978/1999a; Fausto, Franchetto & Montagnani 2011).



Two themes permeate his words: healing and death, topics that are also the reasons for the ritual. Through reflection on the ethnobiography of a *flautero* and *ipaye* (healer), we can observe - as the protagonist of the video invites us to do - what connects these action modes. We argue that along the path of ethnobiography we can understand the connections he and his people weave between domains that, in Western musicking and in the theories that shape it, usually appear separately.

### **ANTHROPOLOGY, CINEMA AND ETHNOBIOGRAPHY IN JORGE PRELORÁN**

The ethnographic video object of this text follows, in general, the proposal elaborated by the Argentine filmmaker and anthropologist Jorge Prelorán (1933-2009). Prelorán is a fundamental name in both cinema and anthropology in Argentina, since he made original contributions in both areas. His work is representative of the Ethnographic Documentary Cinema that, in the 1960s and 1970s, approaches the movement of the New Latin American Cinema (Taquini 1994, Calvo de Castro, 2018). Influenced by Italian neorealism, Prelorán also followed in the footsteps of American filmmakers such as Timothy Ash and David MacDougall. Like Ash, he explored the narrative function of documentaries, lending protagonism to subjects who speak on behalf of the people represented. And just like David MacDougall, Prelorán moved away, through a participatory and close camera that allows the protagonists to speak directly to the public, from the trend in which the ethnographer is the main character of the documentary (Acosta 2016).

In the Argentine anthropological scene, Prelorán is recognized as one of the precursors of visual anthropology and ethnobiography. His theoretical and methodological contribution, on the other hand, is updated through the conceptual turn that leads part of contemporary anthropology to greater reflexivity and makes knowledge to be understood as a product of the relations between researchers and researched<sup>5</sup>. In this bias, his theory and practice around ethnobiography are an important inspiration for research that explores new ways of doing ethnography, not limited to the text to produce and circulate knowledge, and that seek not to replicate the division between individual and society in the effort to understand human worlds.

Jorge Prelorán transited between cinema and anthropology bringing them together, dissolving the boundaries between the two disciplines. His films reveal a singular poetics linked to his conception of the human being and

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<sup>5</sup> For works that consider Jorge Prelorán's contributions in contemporary anthropology, see Rossi (1987), Sherman (2007), Gonçalves (2012a).

anthropological practice. For him, the main value of the ethnobiographic film is the possibility of understanding the life and philosophy of real people who have a name, surname, opinions and problems with which we can identify, abandoning notions – such as ‘communities’ or ‘societies’ – that could result in generalisations (Prelorán 1987; 2006). At the time he developed such a line of work (1960s and 1970s) initiatives of this kind were uncommon, and his works, based on unconventional methods for the time, reveal a search for ways of knowing that would not abandon the sensitive aspects of ethnographic practice or human life.

Prelorán was a filmmaker long before he became an anthropologist. His passion for cinema led him to the documentary and, along this path, to seek to depict the worlds he met through the voice and narratives of their inhabitants. Instead of dealing with generic collectives where there is no room for individualities, as was customary in anthropology at the time, he sensibly observed the connection between people, environments, and social worlds. In this way, he bequeathed us beautiful portraits of artists quite different from each other, from different regions of South America (he worked from Patagonia to Venezuela), describing their worlds through the voices of the subjects portrayed in the films, showing them in their tasks, in many cases dedicated to artistic works.

Although he produced several films during the 1960s, criticism points out *Hermógenes Cayo, imaginero* (the image maker), released in 1969, as a turning point in his career, because there he launched what would become his personal style (Rossi 1987).<sup>6</sup> Among the new characteristics that marked his work in the 1970s, Prelorán emphasizes in interviews the way he began to treat voices and sound design, by using non-synchronous sound to introduce a narration in which the main character tells his own story. This voice is no longer that of an omniscient narrator, as in previous films. And as we listen to the voices of the protagonists talking about their lives and the places they inhabit, and mentioning their fears and longings, we see them dealing with their environments’ elements and shaping their aesthetic skills.

The hallmark that characterizes Prelorán’s ethnobiographic documentaries is, therefore, the unique way he produced the sounds and images used in the montage and editing process. In most of his productions, he first recorded the sounds of the environment, the sounds produced by human

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<sup>6</sup> For a complete list and description of the films made by Jorge Prelorán, available in the archives of the Smithsonian Institution (Washington, USA) to which he donated his work, see Foley (2011).

action, and the protagonists' first-person narratives. Then he captured the images he would use in the montage.<sup>7</sup>

In Prelorán's unmistakable poetics, sound is as important as image. The soundscapes of his films include voices and sounds that fill the audio-visual plot – whether from human activities, animals, or other sound elements. In this context, characterized by asynchronous sound, the images offer a record of inhabited landscapes that do not rely on direct sound. Both narrative elements – images and sounds – are located at the same level of referentiality. Prelorán thus anticipated more recent approaches that emphasize the importance of sound in audio-visual (Chion 1994; 1999, Gorbman 1987) and in the ways in which we imagine places and their inhabitants (Feld 1996, Menezes Bastos 1999b, Ingold 2000, Sterne 2012).

The ethnobiographic video *Pascual Toro, flautero* was assembled based on the dialogue that took place in his home, when he invited us to watch a documentary that he helped to produce about the *arete guasu*<sup>8</sup>. On this occasion, he presented ideas on various topics referred to in the film and introduced others. We can say that the documentary triggered another film, which further opened the range of topics considered when we think of the complex of knowledges associated with *arete guasu*. The conversation we had (which I recorded with the small camera I carried in my backpack, in precarious technological conditions, which reveals a little of the magic of ethnography, giving us with invaluable opportunities when least expected) was complemented by several others, which allowed me to better understand his words that day. For the assembly of the video I also used recordings made over the next four years, when I followed his performance in the ritual.

The editing project of *Pascual Toro, flautero* followed Jorge Prelorán's proposal around ethnobiography, especially by presenting the protagonist Pascual Toro telling his story, with his voice, manner and words, and covering the events that give meaning to his trajectory. Some themes in the narrative stand out when he talks about the skills to be a good instrumentalist in *arete guasu*, as well as the reasons for the feast. In this bias, ethnobiography recovers that basic premise of the ethnographic interview, allowing the protagonist to draw the script of his speech instead of directing it with a questionnaire. Thus, Pascual Toro relates topics that give meaning to his narrative and the phenomena he describes, allowing

7 This is related to the type of technology Prelorán used at the time. The capture of images allowed only short shots. The sound recording allowed to register more extensive narratives, where people, in their speech rhythm, describe their lives.

8 The invitation took place at the 2016 carnival, when, together with anthropologist Graciela Chamorro, I visited the Guaraní community of Santa Teresita (Boquerón, Paraguay) to participate in their *arete guasu*. The film we watched at Don Pascual's home in this opportunity is "Arete Guasu. El tiempo escindido", directed by Dea Pompa and Lia Colombino in 2012.

us to glimpse connections between aspects of his life and his world that we would hardly relate.

I also agree with Prelorán's proposal to give centrality to sounds, although I do so differently from what he used to do. I did not use the feature of asynchronous sound in all of Don Pascual's statements during the edition, because I consider profoundly significant the gesturality of the musician when he mentions certain subjects and expresses his emotions. This choice is related to the intention to share with those who watch the video some of the emotions of the musicians I worked with and the way they manifest themselves, because, as mentioned below, emotion is a central element in the way I interpret the effectiveness of the musical knowledge I seek to describe. The objective is to elicit the effect described by Marco Antônio Gonçalves (2012b) when he suggests that cinematic images allow a change of perspective so that the viewer approaches the emotions of the characters and experiences the perspective of the other. Likewise, I chose to keep the sound synchronous when the protagonist appears playing his instrument, so as not to neglect the association between the person of Don Pascual Toro and the sounds he composes and plays in the ritual. I also understand that this audio-visual material, which shows the musician and his gesture when playing – and not just the sound of the flute – is important as a register of his performance as a whole, either out of respect for his memory, or because of the value this material can have for *arete guasu* musicians who recover the ways of playing from other *flauteros* when developing their own style.

## REPETITION AND DIFFERENCE IN *ARETE GUASU* MUSIC

Classical ethnographic studies often describe indigenous music as monotonous and repetitive, without addressing its aesthetic complexity in detail. This trend sometimes appears explicitly and sometimes between the lines in works dealing with *arete guasu*, especially in the late nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century. Among such works, is also characteristic the perception that the feast and its musicality, as well as the culture of the Chacoan *Chané* and Guaraní, were in frank dissolution due to the “acculturation” driven by the modernizing forces in the region<sup>9</sup>.

From the 1980s, some authors researching *arete guasu* turned detailed attention to musical instruments and sequences of themes that characterize the rite. Moreover, they began to do this without the pessimism typical of their predecessors regarding the future of the indigenous peoples

9 In this trend that considered the changes as loss or cultural dissolution – despite the valuable information they add about the past of the ceremony – we can include the works of Giannecchini (1898/1996), Nordenskiöld (1912/2002; 1920; 1924/2001), Métraux (1942, 1946); Palavecino (1949), Rocca and Newbery (1976), and Magrassi (1981).



who celebrate *arete*, as well as their art. Examples of this new bias are the works of Pérez Bugallo (1982), Sánchez (1998), and Perez Bugallo (2012). Authors such as Miguel Angel García (2015) and Anthony Seeger (2015) have already looked into the first trend mentioned above, offering some clues to better understand these forms of listening and the evaluations that accompany them. They certainly have different reasons. In some cases they are explained by the non-availability of a technology that would allow longer recordings and subsequent analyses by scholars who followed musical rituals in the first decades of the last century. In other cases, they are due to prejudice on the part of ethnologists, who negatively evaluated the sonority of indigenous rituals, whose aesthetics little resembled the standards of modern Western music.

The ethnomusicology of the last decades, however, has endeavored to reveal the complexity of musical systems that have remained little known for a long time. Seeking to insert this study in such a perspective, one of the purposes that guided my research with *Chané* and Guaraní musicians was to identify the particular relation between difference and repetition in the *arete guasu* repertoire. Based on a series of records of the musical themes interpreted by the *flauteros* in several locations during the feast – in listening, transcribing and comparing these themes – we can say that there is a musical sequence that repeats and guides the ritual script, which is the same in the many communities in which *arete* is celebrated. The sequence of musical themes performed during the festival determines the structure of the rite.<sup>10</sup> The participants easily identify the differences between themes – and what they should do when they are played. In other words, the music of *arete guasu* is not all the same; different themes are played at certain moments of the ceremony, organizing its development and prescribing what people do at each moment.

However, despite the differences between the themes of the *arete* repertoire, they have a repetitive formal structure. Here we have, therefore, a particular relation between repetition and difference that relates to the temporality of the rite on two levels. On the one hand, the different themes organized in sequence create the linear time of the rite, from beginning to end; on the other, the repetitive structure of the musical genre played in the event, combined with the repetition present in the other languages that make up the aesthetics of the ritual – fundamentally dance<sup>11</sup> – allows the experience of an extraordinary temporality. The potential of sounds to promote different time-related experiences was exemplarily analyzed by Richard Middleton when dealing with repetition productivity. In *arete*

10 On the importance of musical sequences in the indigenous rituals of the South American lowlands, see Menezes Bastos (2017).

11 See Domínguez (2021).

*guasu* music, we perceive the same dialectic he described when dealing with musematic and discursive repetitions:

*Sequence composes time (rather than marking time or obliterating it, as straight repetition, especially if musematic, seems to do); it makes us aware of rise-and-fall, a discursive hierarchy, and thus refers to irreversible experiences; into the ontology of repetition, it introduces a teleological directedness.* (Middleton 1983, 244)

In *arete* music, the repetition of short phrases is predominant. Such repetition often includes variations. In general terms, the themes are formed by two-part phrases of the same duration, but whose sound details are not identical. Each *flautero*, depending on experience and ability, can introduce more or less variations, as the case may be. Variations almost always fit a symmetrical pattern, forming a parallelism between the first part of the phrase and its repetition, with variation only in the second part of the phrase. This gives a particular rhythm to the *arete guasu* musical genre.

When analyzing indigenous art, Franz Boas already mentioned this very common aspect in narratives, songs, or other musical forms: “*The repetitions discussed so far are rythmic in form, varied in contents. They may be compared to an orderly succession of decorative motives that agree in the plan of the unit but vary in details.*” (1927/1955, 314) As he himself warns, symmetry in the strict sense does not exist in temporal arts such as music, but the successive repetition of brief phrases that have the same structure can leave this impression.

*A reversion of time sequence is not felt as symmetry in the same way as a reversion of space sequence where every point has its equivalent point. In time sequences we have a feeling for symmetry only for the order of repetition and structural phrases.* (Boas 1927/1955, 320)

It is important to note that this course of action operates musically as an effective means when adjusting to formal standards established by convention, i.e., because it is widely used throughout the large area in which the *arete guasu* is celebrated. It is part of a historically settled knowledge in western Chaco, because although the *flauteros* never reported a theory that determines this way of playing, they all play in the same way. Far from considering this characteristic a low aesthetic quality index, it is key in the performance of music in the ritual. It is, in fact, a kind of productive repetition (Middleton 1983), because this sound organization plays a fundamental role in generating the specific experience of the *arete* and the extraordinary time that the rite introduces into the flow of social life.



The video *Pascual Toro, flautero* presents a register of the repertoire that the protagonist performs at the feast, revealing the differences between the themes that organize the structure of the rite. Based on this audio-visual material, we could identify the characteristics mentioned above when describing the musical genre played in the event. In the video assembly, I interspersed segments of about three minutes where the protagonist narrates his life story and his knowledge, and segments of the same duration in which Pascual interprets themes from his repertoire, amusing people who dance. By selecting the scenes and defining their duration in the editing project, we sought to evoke the form that characterizes the musical genre played in *arete guasu*, by the succession of segments of equal duration that translate a parallelism between verbal discourse and musical discourse. The proposal refers once again to the ideas of Franz Boas, for whom rhythm is an essential part of all the arts: painting, sculpture, dance, music, and poetry (Caiuby Novaes 2015, 11) - and, why not, the audio-visual.

As observed, musicians are responsible, through the sequence of themes interpreted and the duration they print at each moment of the rite, for the good development of the feast. This allows us to conclude that their knowledge is not reduced to knowing how to play, but extends to the very structure of the ritual and to the knowledge necessary for the development of the *arete* from beginning to end. Thus, musicians and music have a prominent role among the aesthetic languages that make up the ceremony. In another work (Domínguez 2018a) I stated that, despite providing multisensory experiences, *arete guasu* is essentially a musical ritual, due to the centrality of sound in its organization. Not that music is more important than other languages when they occur in combination, but, unlike the others, musical language is indispensable in this ritual. In the *arete* season, they may even be short of masked people or dancers, but there will always be a group of instrumentalists. Most of the participants in the encounter may not know the myths associated with the *arete*, and the masks may not be present, but as long as there is music, the party is guaranteed. Therefore, we observe a kind of structural hierarchy in which the different languages that make up the rite have different degrees of dispensability, with music being the only essential one.

In turn, the *flautero* has a unique role in the group of musicians - who use, in addition to the flute, snare drums in variable number, and a bass drum. It is the flute's tune that commands the dancers' movements. Through a high and long sound, for example, the flute signals when the dance rounds change the direction of the turn or when - with the theme called *oguata pegua* (to walk) - the group of musicians and dancers must

move from one point to another in the community<sup>12</sup>. It also determines the pauses of a few minutes to then resume the dance and the entrance on stage, in the ritual arena, of some characters. The *flautero* performs different themes to announce the arrival and follow the performance of the *kuchi* (pigs - boys and young people with their bodies covered in mud); of the *aña* (masked men who evoke the souls of the dead); of the bull, who attacks and marks the *aña* on the forehead with a cross (the bull is a man with a painted body that, in the exegesis of the participants, evokes the non-indigenous colonizer and the cattle introduced by him into the *Chiriguano* or Guaraní territory of the lowlands of Bolivia), and of the tiger (man with a painted body that evokes the figure of the jaguar).

The sound of the flute, while playing *koya-koya*, announces that the *kuchi* are coming to muddy the participants - a moment of great anticipation and bustling. Through a specific tune, the flute warns the masked that the ritual combat with the bulls is approaching. When playing the theme known as “the bull and the tiger”, the instrument also accompanies the struggle between those characters. At this moment, which can be described as an adage, the ties of the drums are loosened, producing a more muffled sound than when the dance circles turn merrily, and the music plays at a much slower pace, creating a low sound for this point of climax in the dramaticity of the rite.

Of course, percussion is not less important. It marks the overall pace of the event and is decisive in the experience of the party. This does not preclude, however, that the functions of the snare drums, bass drum, and flute are different in performances. The melodic function of the flute is leader. As much as musicians claim that all instruments are equally important in the *arete*, the flute has a unique role in conducting the group. As the soloist, the *flautero* is the one who defines the *tempo*, the pace of the song. A political reading of this characteristic can be made to the extent that the action of the flute player determines that of the other musicians and even that of the other participants of the *arete*. This leads us – as Jorge Prelorán invites us to do – to resize the space granted to individualities when we approach the indigenous arts.

As already established in the anthropology of South American indigenous art, the existence of traditional, collective styles that distinguish certain societies does not prevent them from identifying individual styles related to the particular practices of some people. In the case of *arete guasu*

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<sup>12</sup> On the importance of the movements and the itinerant character of *arete guasu*, see Domínguez (2021). In this text I describe the dialectic between dance in circles, at the same point in the space of communities, and the displacements through different houses of communities that the group of participants performs, observing the pragmatics of the ritual, i.e., what happens socially through these two types of movements.

musical tradition, one can easily perceive the value of the individuality of some *flauteros* recognized as unique musicians by the community. Not only are they recognized by the themes they interpret – and that their peers often understand to be exclusive of a *flautero*'s repertoire – but also by the characteristic way of playing certain themes considered standards of the *arete* music.

One possible explanation for the existence of individual styles that singularize some of the musicians is the way they learn to play. Flute music is not taught or transmitted from one musician to another, which could favour the similarity of the tune of the learner and his master. Each *flautero* learns to play by listening to others and practicing – in other words, self-teaching is the norm. Each *flautero* learns to play through a sole process. Although some recognize that this or that old flute player has taught him something, there is no master-apprentice relationship. Depending on the case, during the carnival children can play drums with the adult musicians. This is the way to approach *arete* music and develop the perceptual and motor competence that allows to join the action of musicians, elaborating their own gestures in the search for specific sounds. In fact, all *flauteros* also play the drum, but the reverse does not happen.

In the carnival season, when musicians and dancers rest or sleep in their breaks, it is possible to find groups of children playing the drums and a flute. That's how they learn, playing with their peers and practicing together<sup>13</sup>. The necessary skills are not acquired through an “oral transmission” process, following the classifications of the oldest ethnomusicology. There's actually neither transmission nor orality here. There is listening, observation, and much practice. There is a rhythm that permeates the gestures through the perception of the others' tunes, the memories that evoke the melodies heard and the possibilities offered by the material and the shape of the flute that is available. In summary, the learning of *flauteros* does not result from systematic training directed by a master, but from hours and hours of group practice that apparently has no other purpose than fun.

As each *flautero* plays only his flute, which he himself prepared, or someone he trusts prepared for him, his tune can also be identified by the particular timbre of the instrument, which is an important element of his personal style. In a parenthesis, I have been warned several times about the great risk of playing another person's flute because the person

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<sup>13</sup> Evidently, Tim Ingold's ideas resonate in this interpretation. He states, following Jean Lave, that learning is more a question of understanding in practice than acquiring culture through the transmission of others. (Ingold 2000, 416; Ingold 2013, 13)

may be a victim of sorcery – for the same reason, a *flautero* hardly lends his instrument and it is part of the etiquette not to borrow flutes.

The flutes used in *arete guasu* belong to two major groups: the *temimbi* and the *pinguyos*. Both are vertical flutes – the *temimbi* is a quena, the *pinguyo* is a flute with a block at the mouthpiece – and each *flautero* specializes in the execution of one or the other type<sup>14</sup>. In both cases, they are handcrafted and the variety of sounds among them is enormous. They are crafted with tubes of various materials – *taquara*, *sacharosa* (*Pereskia sacharosa*), bronze, aluminium, steel or polyvinyl chloride (PVC) – of different diameters and lengths, with different distances between the holes, as well as in the number and size thereof, and even in the type of embouchure. Some *pinguyos* also bring a smaller tube tied laterally to the main tube that emits a single very high tone, accompanying the melody performed in the main tube. As a result, and as much as flutes integrate these two groups, the individual differences are quite wide, and the particularities in the timbre of the flute that each *flautero* plays, as already mentioned, are one more aspect to define his individual style.

These particularities allow the recognition and differentiated valuation of the singular styles of each *flautero*. In other words, although the music of *arete guasu* is a musical genre with well-established characteristics in the area where the ritual is celebrated, although there is a characteristic repertoire of the ritual, with *standard* themes of the genre, and although the flutes are of only two types (*temimbi* and *pinguyo*), there is room for individual styles linked to the characteristics of the instrument and, no less important, to the skills of each musician.

With this brief description of the musical genre characteristic of *arete guasu*, I tried to situate the specific role of flute sound and skills of the *flautero* in the universe under analysis. The shooting of the ethnobiographic video, as cited before, was the path through which this understanding became accessible. Thus, ethnobiography proved fruitful as an ethnographic research method, allowing us to sew different planes of knowledge that we approach – such as the individual and the collective. Also, because it was through a talk about his life that Don Pascual found the way to communicate the relationships that shape his knowledge, showing that this is not reducible to a strictly ‘musical’ knowledge.

14 The ways in which the two flutes are played are different. In the first case (*temimbi*, quena) the *flautero* directs the blow to the bevel. In the case of the *pinguyo*, the blow is directed through the mouthpiece of the block.

## MUSIC, HEALING AND DEATH

The main criteria among the participants of the *arete* when evaluating the aesthetic quality of the execution of a *flautero* is the efficacy of his tune, either to cheer people to participate in the dance, or in the sense of evoking certain memories, affections, and emotions. Although no one denies that a good *flautero* is the one whose flute has a beautiful sound, the reasons for his tune to have a singular appeal are most likely associated with the *secrets* he dominates. Such *secrets* refer directly to his partnership with some assistants or masters (*iya reta*) who accompany him when playing, helping him to have a powerful sound. Those skills are not, therefore, only the result of what Western musical tradition would qualify as a 'technical' training. Although any *flautero* recognizes that playing well requires a lot of practice, the skill is not explained solely on this basis. As Don Pascual says in the video, flute playing skills also relate to the experiences that made him an *ipaye* (healer), and these are based on a series of relationships with masters or other assistants such as *Saramaca* or *Salamanca*. Such relationships are based on reciprocity, because to count on their collaboration, the *flautero* must give them something in return.

Most of the *flauteros* I have known over the years researching the *arete guasu* musical tradition are individuals with healing skills. It is not difficult to imagine, therefore, that there is a connection between these two skills – musical and healing. Although not all *flauteros* I have known are *ipayes* recognized as such, in all cases they are people to whom possession of *secrets* is attributed, a term used to refer to the formulas by which people can communicate with the masters (*iya reta*) of the things of this world. Nevertheless, in many cases, *flauteros* are individuals who are publicly dedicated to healing and to whom the residents of the communities turn when they need to eliminate a malaise, change an adverse situation, or achieve a goal they set. The action of healing in the Guarani and Chané context, where the knowledge associated with *arete guasu* prevails, encompasses procedures that go beyond what Western biomedicine understands by healing – that is, the restoration of the patient's organic health.

Although for the Guarani healing means, in some cases, alleviating one's physical ills, it also means performing some type of procedure that, through action on the will or intention of a third party, causes a person to achieve their purposes or change an unfavourable situation. In the video, Don Pascual explains the connection between healing and flute playing skills. The aid of forces such as *Saramaca* or *Salamanca* can cause a large number of people to be attracted by the sound of the flute to the dance circles – and a party where many people dance is a successful party indeed.

Besides being a musician and *ipaye*, Dom Pascual is a *reikian*. As shown by the diplomas he proudly exhibits in the video, he graduated from



the *Asociación de Reiki de la República Argentina*, although he took the courses in Asunción, Paraguay. The description of the techniques he uses shows an interesting translation of his knowledge, combining the Guaraní healing tradition learned from his people and the Reiki techniques taught by the “*orientales*”, as he says. Here, as in other narratives about his knowledge, Pascual Toro connects modes of action through an integrative shamanism that assimilates ideas and practices from every origin. His explanation invites us to abandon rigid divisions between the traditional and the modern, between the local and the outside, and even between the indigenous and the non-indigenous, because the experience that Don Pascual describes, like that of many other Guaraní people in western Chaco, transits between these worlds and bind them in the same plot of stories and knowledge.



Figure 1.  
Pascual Toro playing his *temimbi* at the *arete guasu* of Santa Teresita, Boquerón, Paraguay. February 2019. Photo by the author.

Besides mastering the indigenous *arete guasu* musical tradition, being an *ipaye* and a *reikian*, Dom Pascual acted for many years as a musician of the military band in the fort of his locality. In 1965, when he was 13, he began studying Western music theory with the military of the fort, joining the army band as a trumpeter, an activity in which he remained until the 1990s and thanks to which he was promoted to sergeant. In the army, he also learned to play trombone, bombardino, and saxophone. He also loves playing Paraguayan polka on his accordion. And when friends meet, he also plays the guitar to cheer their gatherings.



Don Pascual inherited the flute from his father and kept it with special affection. As he explains, he will know to whom he should give his flute only when the recipient appears to him in his dreams. For now he waits, although he is touched by the subject: “No one knows the day or time of his death.” The *flautero* cries when he evokes the memory of his father and, at the same time, when he thinks of death or refers to the finitude of life.

It is not unusual for a person to cry when listing the reasons for playing the flute in *arete guasu*. On the one hand, everyone recognizes that flute is played to amuse the public, but there is also a close association between playing *arete* music and the memory of their ancestors. The *arete guasu*, as well as the conversations held with the musicians for the research, inevitably evoke the theme of death or the finitude of life. The ritual itself deals with death, and music – as well as masking – plays a key role in the process. In *arete guasu*, a diversity of techniques is placed at the service of this collective reflection on the place of the dead and death among the living. The masks made for the feast by the Guarani of the Paraguayan boreal Chaco – called *aña-aña* or *aguëros* – are a good example of the kind of aesthetic elaboration that provides this reflection.<sup>15</sup>

The *aguëros* (a term that for many is a variation of *abuelos*, ‘grandparents’ in Spanish) represent, according to the exegesis of the Guarani, the wandering souls of the dead; they are the *aña*, we are told. They are masks that can be described as chimeric figurations<sup>16</sup>, because they make up a being that is composed of the union of parts or pieces of different animals. Thus, a hybrid figure is elaborated, made of animals of different species, but that brings together the animal and the human who wears it, the living and the dead. This technique of figuration evokes, in my view, the transformation of the human into an animal, from the living into the dead, and vice versa – it is worth remembering that when one dies one can, in the Guarani cosmology of the Paraguayan Chaco, become an animal.

To understand the role of music in this process it is important to emphasize that the *aguëros* do not remain all the time in the ritual arena. Their appearance and participation in the party only happens when there is music. When the musicians stop to rest and silence their instruments, the *aguëros* disappear into the nearby woods. Music adds to the texture of the ritual the element that enables their presence; without the tune of flutes and drums, the *aguëros* do not appear. Therefore, music has a conductive role that brings to the ritual arena the aesthetic force that

<sup>15</sup> See the text by Diego Villar and Federico Bossert (2011), which inspired me for this topic, for an analysis of the association between masking in the *arete guasu* of the *Chané* of Argentina and the theme of death.

<sup>16</sup> Chimeric figurations, following the proposal of Severi and Lagrou (2013), bring together the contradictory and thus operate as indexes of transformation.

enables this reflection on life and death. The *arete guasu* musicians know that, even if they do not express it in words. Their tears reveal the role that music plays in this context: its meaning does not refer to semantic content, but to the affection that it is capable of generating. Here as in other contexts, the meaning of music is performative and is associated precisely with the action, which can be observed in the ritual, of sounds on bodies and gestures. This is how the *flauteros* and other participants in the *arete* understand its efficacy, which becomes evident in the emotional way they refer to the affections that music evokes. This is also the understanding of the anthropology of art and ethnomusicology, at least since the 1970s. For example, in *A musicológica Kamayurá* (1978/1999, 247), Rafael Menezes Bastos suggests that music cannot be thought of as a projection of a culture, as it was thought in ethnomusicology until then<sup>17</sup>. He thus proposed a critique of the dualistic positions that separate musical expression and content (or form and meaning). In this study, the author states that musical significance is affective and psychomotor, more performative than referential. This praxiological approach allows us to follow processes in which the musical meaning gains contours of action or, as Tim Ingold proposes, of “affective presence”: “The musical sound, on the contrary, delineates its own meaning: it is significant not by what it represents, but simply by its affective presence in the listener’s environment.” (Ingold 2000, 408)

The *arete guasu* music, without necessarily indicating a referential meaning, evokes memories and affections that make it effective to create an environment where masked people can dance and, by extension, where the theme of death can be present. The skills required to generate this space-time<sup>18</sup> through music relate to the competence to affect the emotions and actions of others—that is, to healing. Don Pascual, through a narrative that includes the history of the Guaraní of the Paraguayan Chaco, the importance that the *arete guasu* has for them, the memory of the deceased father and the responsibility that it means to be a *flautero* of the *arete guasu*, offers evidence of the ineffable relationship between music, healing, and death. It is through ethnobiographic connections that we approach them.

17 Examples of ethnomusicological works of the 1950s and 1960s in which music is analyzed in two planes – one phonological-grammatical and the other semantic, without connection between them (Menezes Bastos 1978/1999, 42) – can be Alan Merriam’s classic (1964) *The Anthropology of Music; Music in Primitive Culture*, by Bruno Nettl (1956); and *Ethnomusicology*, by Jaap Kunst (1957).

18 In Domínguez (2020a) I argue that music and ritual contribute to the elaboration of a Guaraní place (in the sense of lived, practiced space) in the Paraguayan boreal Chaco. The approach accompanies studies that in the last two decades have examined *place making* processes where musical practices or musicking (Small 1998) are vital. See, for example, the works gathered in Stokes (1994); Feld and Basso (1996); Brucher and Reilly (2018) and in Vilella et al. (2019).

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

In the narrative presented by Don Pascual in the video described here, he mentions the forced displacement of his people from Bolivia to Paraguay after the Chaco War (1932-1935)<sup>19</sup>, remembering that during the march someone made marks on his belt with the measurements of a flute so that the instrument could be produced later. Pascual evokes the memory of his father, also a *flautero* (and who gave him the flute he plays to this day) and the uncertainty about who he will give the instrument to before he dies, which must be revealed to him in a dream. These themes are linked to his skills as a healer, a subject to which he himself expertly directs his speech, creating his own script and argument for the film.

The production of the video *Pascual Toro, flautero* allowed me to not only know Don Pascual, but to understand aspects of the cosmology and history of the Guaraní people of western Chaco. The materials I registered in the ethnographic research remembered me, due to the importance of some individual characters, what I knew of Jorge Prelorán's ethnobiographic proposal, although my recordings did not have the same technical quality of those of the Argentine filmmaker. However, I decided to experiment with the possibility of putting together a work that could communicate the aesthetic dimension that links form and emotion in the experiences lived during the years of research with Chacoan musicians.

In this exercise, Prelorán's work served as an inspiration in the effort to understand the logical paths of individuals whose knowledge was not immediately understandable to me. Connections between unrelated domains in my way of understanding reality became evident by following the trails through which they offered me maps of their rationality.

It is the protagonist of the film, in this ethnobiographic exercise, who tells the story, who narrates his life. It is not, however, a solitary speech – it is explicitly a dialogue, it has an addressee and an intention, that is to make specific aspects of a reality known. This dialogue creates a relationship and makes ethnographic research possible. Just as the ethnographer ceases to be the omniscient narrator to describe a world she believes she knows, she also does not hold the reins that define the course of ethnography. The video ends at the moment Don Pascual shows being aware that he has said enough and with the same words that we ended our conversation that day. After many hours of talking about his life and his knowledge, he concludes, smiling: “The Guaraní know many things, but do not want to tell.”<sup>20</sup>

**TRANSLATION:**  
Maria Isabel de  
Castro Lima

<sup>19</sup> For a description of the history of the communities founded by the Guaraní in Paraguay after the Chaco War and the importance of the *arete guasu* in this process, see Domínguez (2020a).

<sup>20</sup> This text was written during the post-doctoral period held at Department of Anthropology of the Faculty of Philosophy, Letters and Human Sciences of the Universidade

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