Are Isleño décimas really décimas? Tracking Media and Memory in Spanish Speaking Louisiana

JEANNE GILLESPIE

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According to Patricia Manning Lestrade

The décima, popular since its origin in sixteenth-century Spain, entered Louisiana with late eighteenth century settlers from the Canary Islands. These settlers, known as the Isleños, formed a closely-bound enclave that resisted all outsiders. Slowly, however, natural and economic factors forced them to leave behind their lifestyle of fishing and trapping and to join the adjacent English-speaking communities. Social change notwithstanding, they have worked as a community to preserve their heritage into the new millennium. One valued memento of their language and culture is the décima.

Mixing tradition with community experiences, the Isleños maintained traditional décimas, adopted others, and created their own. (Hispania 447)

From the early fifteenth century to the end of the eighteenth century, the Spanish colonial process involved the settling of vast tracks of land. From their first colonial experiment in the Canary Islands in 1402, the Spanish administration learned that it was sometimes more effective to import assimilated settlers from already established colonial possessions than to attempt massive conversion and cultural assimilation. In the Canary Islands, the indigenous Guanche population was colonized and assimilated fairly rapidly and the colonial success due to the bountiful sugar production there attracted settlers and merchants from Europe and North Africa. As the population grew and exploration pushed further east, the Spanish colonial enterprise employed similar techniques in enticing or conscripting settlers to relocate to areas like the mining centers of Saltillo and San Luis Potosi as
well as to New Mexico, Florida, and Texas.

Often, the Spanish colonial governors called up Canary Islanders to relocate to their region and to help populate areas with sympathetic colonists, but settlers were also recruited from various parts of Spain and from Tlaxcala, the seat of Cortes’s allies in the conquest of Mexico. To shore up the vast spaces of the northern Gulf Coast, particularly eastern Texas, the newly appointed governor of Coahuila and Texas, the Marqués de San Miguel de Aguayo, requested colonists from the Spanish administration in 1721. His request specifically mentioned sending groups of Gallegos, Nahuatl-speaking Tlaxcalans, and Canary Islanders. The Canary Islanders, who became known as “Isleños” settled outposts along the Red River, as well as in San Antonio, Texas and several areas in South Louisiana. These colonists helped establish the presidio de Los Adaes, the first capital of Texas, in what is today western Louisiana. Other waves of settlers from these regions would establish communities throughout the eighteenth century.

At the Los Adaes presidio, the soldiers and colonists settled and intermarried with the local Amerindian communities. Even today, vestiges of Spanish can be found in the lexicon of the tri-ethnic descendants of these colonists, known as the Adaeseños. John Lipski notes the presence of Nahuatl words in Adaeseño Spanish (118) and H. J. Gregory compiled a list of Nahuatl words, including plants, animals, and food-related terms, that he collected between 1962 and 1991 from in the western Louisiana communities of Ebarb, Grady Hill, Spanish Lake, Zwolle, and Sulphur Springs (89).

While Aguayo and the Spanish government originally established Los Adaes to retake Louisiana from the French, reports from Los Adaes indicate that the residents of the presidio and the missions established in the area survived the harsh winters of because
the French settlement in Natchitoches provided provisions for them (See “Glimpses of Life”). The very settlement the garrison was established to keep at bay sent support for the starving inhabitants. If we approach these colonial settlements as enclaves to be studied in isolation, whether it is academic isolation because the neighbors are not in our disciplinary milieu or as anomalies dotted across a colonial geography, we may miss that these groups must have had contact from the outside and it is possible that a significant amount of interaction occurred between these sites, despite attempts by the European powers to keep them apart.

In 1777, the governor of Louisiana, Bernardo de Galvez, a Spanish hero of the Revolutionary War, commissioned another group of Isleño settlers to come to Louisiana. This group settled along the Mississippi River to the south of New Orleans, in what was named St. Bernard Parish in honor of Galvez’s patron saint. Galvez’s success in the campaigns to take Baton Rouge, Natchez, Manchac, Pensacola, and Mobile from the British, and his support of the English-speaking American colonies in their quest for independence are better known than his effective techniques for building alliances with the indigenous populations and his work as Viceroy of Mexico in most circles. Nevertheless, the fact that his efforts and the multiethnic forces he commanded affected communities throughout the Gulf and Caribbean suggests that we need to think more carefully about how settlements had contact with each other, with outside interests and with their own families in their places of origin.

While the French had ceded Louisiana to the Spanish in 1760, the colonists that threatened Spanish rule in Louisiana were now British and American. South Louisiana saw communities of Philippine and Canary settlers settle along the rivers, lakes and
bayous of the region. By the late eighteenth century, the composition and singing of décimas had become a popular tradition throughout the Spanish empire and it was especially favored in the Canary Islands. It is probable that the idea of the décima did come to Louisiana with the original Canary Island settlers, but that is quite probably not the only instance that the décima traveled to Louisiana.

In its emergence as a popular oral form in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, the décima followed three different trajectories (See Armisted 80-83). The first was with religious themes and these laid the foundation for the villancico or Hispanic “Christmas Carol” (although they are popular at all major religious holidays). The second was as a container for local history, often composed to commemorate specific local events and the third was an improvisatory duel or corporate technique where singers, known as decimeros, composed responses for a specific theme or to a specific refrain known as a pie forzado (forced foot).

What I would like to explore in more detail is whether we can determine if the Louisiana décima is indeed a form that represents a three-hundred year tradition kept alive in an isolated pocket of Spanish speakers in rural Louisiana, or whether this was introduced as a result of later contact with other Spanish-speaking communities. First we will look at the décima as a subgenre of oral improvised poetry. The term décima refers to a composition of ten octosyllabic lines. According to sixteenth-century poet and playwright Lope de Vega, Vicente Espinel first recorded a décima with the rhyme pattern “abbaaccde” in the late sixteenth century. This pattern, called the espinela in the poet’s honor, was popular both in oral and written forms in that era. This specific décima
pattern can be identified and in fact is cultivated in Puerto Rico, Venezuela, Chile, and Colombia, as well as Cuba.

The décima practiced in the Caribbean basin is much more improvisatory and spontaneous than informants have described in Louisiana, but, while Isleño informants describe their compositions as “décimas,” Canary Islander scholar Maximiano Trapero discusses the development of the Cuban/Canarian décima tradition:

[L]a gran tradición actual de la décima en Canarias está vinculada a la emigración de finales del XIX y de principios de este siglo, sobre todo a Cuba, me parece a mí indudable. La manera de cantar hoy las décimas en Canarias no sólo es cubana, es que lo es incluso el nombre que lo designa: “el punto cubano”. Y lo son también infinidad de décimas que hablan de Camagüey, de Santiago, de La Habana, de Pinar del Rio... (Trapero 157. That the extensive tradition of the décima current in the Canaries is linked to the emigration at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of this [20th] century to Cuba, more than anywhere else, seems evident to me. The way that décimas are sung today in the Canaries is not only Cuban, it is even included in the name these are called “the Cuban point”. There are numerous décimas that tell of Camagüey, of Santiago, of Havana, of Pinar del Río)

In Trapero’s discussion of the Louisiana décima, he maintains that what Louisiana decimeros call “décima” is actually closer generically to the romance and the copla, supporting Paredes’s assertion. Louisiana décima are much different from the espinela
and also quite different from the \textit{décima} practiced in the Canary Islands and the Caribbean basin in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In the extant Isleño \textit{décimas} collected in Louisiana, the majority seem to reflect a composition to commemorate a local event, although informants explain that at least one popular \textit{décima} was composed by Isleño men in the back of a truck heading off to do PWA work (conversation from a video on the Isleño \textit{décima} recorded by parish historian Fran Fernandez in the early 1980’s). Structurally, the Isleño \textit{décimas} are not, in fact, consistent with the \textit{décima} pattern popularized as the \textit{espinela}. The Louisiana compositions are nearly always \textit{coplas} or \textit{romances} similar to those that were also popular in New Mexico and Texas.

Hispanic folklore scholar Americo Paredes suggests that the \textit{décima} in Louisiana better reflects the \textit{corrido} from the [Rio Grande] valley than the \textit{décima} popular in the Canary Islands and the Caribbean. In an analysis of the origins of the Mexican \textit{corrido}, Paredes suggests that the Spanish colonies were not as isolated as we once thought. Paredes offers that many settlers maintained ties with relatives in other communities and with their relatives in their places of origin. Residents of some of the settlements that were not successful retreated to other settlements and some returned to their homelands, taking stories and news with them.

In the vast territories of the “Interior Provinces” and Louisiana, the transport of provisions and reinforcements must have also included news of settlers from other communities and perhaps traders and goods from cosmopolitan ports. At the same time, oral narratives from Louisiana and the practice of similar cultural celebrations along the Texas and Mexican Gulf Coast suggest the possibility of more frequent cultural contact between the settlers of the Rio Grande Valley and
other ports in the Gulf and Caribbean, and the Louisiana parish of St. Bernard as well.

Paredes hypothesizes that in New Mexico romances and coplas still exist in the oral tradition, but not the décima because this form became popular after New Mexico was colonized. Nevertheless, fragments identified as décimas were collected in the New Mexican PWA projects (MacCurdy). Interestingly, those listed as décimas in that collection are religious in theme.

The extant Louisiana examples do not include a commitment to ten-line stanzas or any identifiable rhyme scheme typical of the espinela of Spain and Puerto Rico. Neither do they reflect the religious theme typical of the décimas of New Mexico, although occasionally two-line refrains appear after two sets of coplas. Louisiana décimas reflect other influences, though. One Louisiana décima that includes a refrain is the entertaining corporately-composed “Trabajo de welfare” that narrates the Isleños efforts to work “on land” in the PWA projects of the Depression. This décima uses the refrain “Eh li lo la a mi poco se me da/ Eh li lo la it really doesn't matter much to me” to punctuate two sets of coplas. Armistead indicates that this refrain was adapted from a popular Cajun French song (Pérez 32-33). This refrain is actually an endecasyllabic line instead of the two octosyllabic lines normally used in décima composition. Nevertheless, “Li lo lei” is a common device used to call the attention of the audience before a décima is “tossed out” in Puerto Rico, so this seems to be an Isleño example of a typical Caribbean technique with a French twist. Not surprisingly, some Louisiana French heritage has mixed into the composition.
This French heritage pops up in other, perhaps unexpected, areas of the coast, too. Interestingly, Norma Cantu has identified societal practices in the Rio Grande Valley that appear to be related to the celebrations of Carnival in New Orleans. What Cantu discovered is that the Tex-Mex elites in “the Valley” practice a tradition of debutante balls that are similar in structure and in nomenclature to those performed in New Orleans by the Mardi Gras “krewes.” While these balls have evolved into what is now known as the “quinceañeras,” the structure of the event as well as the nomenclature reflect a detailed construction that was popular along the Gulf Coast from Mobile possibly to Veracruz.

There seem to be other indications of a European origin; among these is the language used when talking about the fiesta. The vocabulary and the structure of the fiesta suggest a European connection. Words taken from royalty or at least the practices of the nobility, like paje, damas, chamberlan, and the elaborate choreographed dance that resembles a seventeenth-century court dance, appear to be remnants of earlier celebrations ... In addition, the French occupation of Mexico left its imprint in a variety of linguistic forms used, so we could likewise claim that the French reinforced the earlier Spanish practices and introduced words like chamberlan for the male escorts to the damas, the “ladies” (73).

Puebla, Mexico artist and cultural historian Antonio Alvarez Moran described a similar ball from which he painted a portrait of his mother as Puebla society’s last Carnival queen in the mid 1940’s (personal communication). As Cantu points out, this most French of all Mexican cities also celebrated carnaval with the vocabulary typical of
the New Orleans “krewes” using the terms “page,” “chamberlain” and “dama” as well as the other royalty. Cantu postulates that the legacy of this event is a result of the French occupation of Mexico. We do know that the earliest Mardi Gras balls began in the late eighteenth century in Mobile and New Orleans. While the Spanish government supposedly banned these types of events, they also banned interactions with neighboring colonies. This is not to say that the events did not take place. The city of Puebla bears close affiliation with the coast port of Veracruz as well, and a French Mexican connection would have also been aware of the cultural heritage of New Orleans and Mobile.

Cultural connections between the European settlements in Louisiana, Texas, Cuba, and Mexico can be identified as early as the late eighteenth century. We know the loop current connects Cuba to Veracruz and New Orleans. There have been significant interactions musically in those ports since New Orleans was established. In addition to Bernardo de Galvez who governed Louisiana from 1777 to 1783, we know that Benito Juarez spent his exile from 1833-1835 in New Orleans during the French occupation of Mexico. Sugar plantations in Louisiana and the Caribbean maintained contact and shared technology. West Indian residents from both the French and Spanish sides of the islands fleeing the Haitian Revolution in the late eighteenth century escaped to New Orleans and the Mexico. At the turn of the nineteenth century, the henequen industry flourished in the Yucatan and many prominent families from that region sent representatives to New Orleans in the hemp trade.

Returning to the oral tradition in search for Mexico-Louisiana connections. Paredes points out that the first peak in the production of Mexican corridos occurred in
the Mexican Revolution in 1910. The corrido tradition may also have been passed through various ports and been brought to Louisiana from Mexican shores. We can find evidence of three references to the “Mexicans” in the texts collected by Raymond MacCurdy in the 1940’s and Samuel Armistead in the 1970’s. MacCurdy and Armistead both found 1) the presence of *corridos* narrating the death of Mexican revolutionary Francisco Madero in the Louisiana Isleño repertoire, 2) the mention of the "*tejanos/ mexicanos*" in a décima that describes the "Trappers' War", an event orchestrated by Plaquemines Parish political boss Leander Pérez in the 1930's and 3) a reference in cultivating of a crew for wealthy Isleño entrepreneur Manuel “Boy” Molero’s gigantic boat.

I have discussed the Trappers’ War in previous papers. In this décima, the Isleño muskrat trappers faced off against Texas Rangers and immigrant workers identifies as *mexicanos* in the décima, who came to work the leases that the Isleño Trappers could not afford. I have also discussed previously the two possible fragments of *corridos* narrating Mexican president Francisco Madero’s death, although one replaces the name of the murdered leader “Madero” with “Molero,” perhaps indicating that the performer was unaware of the actual historical event and had substituted a local folk hero’s name since he was the topic of other décimas. This is quite possible since that fragment was collected by MacCurdy in the 1940’s nearly thirty years after the assassination of Madero. Nevertheless, that the corrido fragment exists in Louisiana at all indicates that the Isleño communities experienced some contact with other parts of the Spanish-speaking world. Someone either heard the corrido somewhere and brought it back home, or someone came into the Isleño community and performed the corrido enough times that it became
part of the repertoire.

Further examination of a décima composed about the local entrepreneur Manuel “Boy” Molero, mention is made again of Mexican connections with the Isleño community. The composition weaves an entertaining commentary on the massive size of Molero’s boat. According to the décima, the boat was so big that it has a bell and telegraph equipment to alert the stern when the bow reached land.

I would like to examine here are the first four coplas of this décima, in which Molero is recruiting for his crew.

_Boy Molero vino hasta la Isla,_  
_un hombre con su razón;_  
_vino buscando gente_  
_pa la pesca ’l camarón._

_En la Isla alcantró vente,_  
_en Bencheque veinte uno;_  
_solamente qu’en el Torno,_  
_no pudo ’lcontrar ninguno._

_Tengo veinte en el Canal,_  
_que me dieron la palabra._

_A las cuatro la mañana,_  
_la compañía Boy se presentó;_  
_a otro día hasta las seis_  
_no habían yuntá ’l barcará la gente._

_When Boy Molero came to town,_  
_he’s right about what he says;_  
_he’s looking around for people_  
_to go out fishing for shrimp._

_He found twenty at Delacroix;_  
_at Reggio twenty-one;_  
_and only at the Bend_  
_he didn’t find a single one._

_“I have twenty from the Canal [Violet],_  
_who promised me they’d go._

_I have twenty who come from Spain_  
_and twenty from Mexico._  
_So now I think I’ve got_  
_enough people for my crew.”_  

_It was four in the morning;_  
_all Boy’s crew standing by;_  
_at six the next day,_  
_they still weren’t all on board. (Pérez, 26-27)_

In the second stanza, Molero goes to the community of Delacroix to recruit. This is a community of Isleños. He proceeds to Reggio, known to the Isleños as Bencheque—sanother Isleño community that literally “one-ups” their neighbors in Delacroix providing
twenty-one sailors. In the next two lines he travels on to “El Torno” (English Turn) where he did not recruit anyone.

Interestingly, the next two lines represent a break in the copla structure. The first two coplas each comprise a four-line stanza rhyming abcb. The next two lines “Tengo veinte en el Canal, que me dieron la palabra.” I have twenty from the Canal [Violet,] who promised me they’d go” do not rhyme with any others and do not form a complete copla. If we examine the first two stanzas and these two lines we do have the required count of ten lines for a true “décima” however, the rhyme scheme does not follow any common pattern. At the same time, this is the only instance of a ten-line sequence. All the remaining coplas are four-line constructions and most continue the rhyme pattern established in the first two “abcb”. The statement itself also does not return as a refrain, so this is not structurally a décima.

In terms of content, this break offers a comment on local communities that might affiliate with the Isleños. These two isolated lines narrate that Molero moved on to Violet, an African-American community where he may be successful in his efforts and in the next copla, he also recruits twenty Mexicans and twenty Spaniards. With his crew of one hundred and one, it still takes all day to get them on board this giant boat.

While this is not a true décima structurally or in its rhyme scheme, it fits the tradition of commemorating local events and it is quite possibly a product of corporate authorship. In addition, it is interesting that the content confirms at least an awareness of and an attempt to connect with other culture groups in the area. The first two communities mentioned, Delacroix and Bencheque are Isleño settlements and Bencheque gives one more recruit than its neighboring city. “English Turn” is not an Isleño town. It
is an English-speaking enclave and perhaps that language barrier offers a reason Molero was unsuccessful in recruiting there. The community of Violet, that the décima refers to as “el Canal” was an African-American community; however, MacCurdy mentions that African slaves fleeing the Spanish colony of Santo Domingo during the revolution in Haiti in the late eighteenth century settled in south Louisiana (477). The possible success here—they have promised twenty—may insinuate that there were still Spanish-speaking black families in the area in the early 20th century.

To specifically mention recruiting Mexican and Spanish sailors offers an interesting contradiction to the idea that the Isleños were an isolated, outsiders-resistant enclave. We know that Spaniards continued to immigrate to Louisiana after the era of independence and also during the Spanish Civil War. Nineteenth-century Canary Islander emigrants often returned to the islands or hosted relatives in their new communities, keeping alive the cultural exchange, not as a one-way trip, but as an interactive process. It is quite probable that families went to San Antonio, Havana, and San Juan to see other family members or to relocate.

This very décima confirms that there were also Mexican and Spanish recruits to be found, so we see that the Isleño towns were not as isolated as we have previously imagined. Returning to the poetic structure of these pieces, MacCurdy states that according to his informants, the Isleños practiced “coplas, décimas y cantares.” In the texts he collected, like the one included here, the Islenos seem to use décima and copla interchangeably and their “décimas” do not exhibit a consistent usage of the ten lines that were the original requirement for the form. In terms of genre, Louisiana décimas are not true décimas, but in terms of composition, they do reflect the improvisatory nature of the
form. We have seen only a few coplas with an occasional pie forzado. No evidence of the complex espinela common in Puerto Rico, Venezuela, Colombia and Chile, and Isleño décimas never include musical accompaniment. More like coplas collected in Northern New Mexico and Southern Colorado (although also popular in Panama and Colombia) and like the corridos from northern Mexico and Texas, Isleño compositions focus on collecting and performing local details. Armistead supports Paredes’s theory that the corrido and the Louisiana décima are closely related.

In examining the scholarship on the décima in Louisiana in the context of settlements and communities in South Louisiana as well as the information contained in an actual Louisiana décima, contrary to Lestrade’s assertion, and to what I had previously taken as a given, we begin to see that this was not an isolated enclave, but a community that enjoyed influences from numerous sources at various moments in history.

WORKS CONSULTED: