

**La Quinceañera and the Keen-say-an-Yair-uh:
the politics of making gender and
ethnic identity in Chicago**

Karen Mary Davalos

Introduction

As James Clifford, and George Marcus (1986) originally suggested at a seminar in Santa Fe, ethnographers have been engaged in establishing their own authority over particular populations. We now read ethnographies with a different eye and see them as inherently partial truths (Clifford 1986). For some readers the task is simply to discover the author's strategies that transform the messy day-to-day details of research experiences into a legitimate written description or interpretation of a population.

In the way that the Santa Fe Seminar Group has encouraged us to look at how ethnographers and other collectors of culture authenticate their work, this paper is a mirror. However, the glass reflects "natives" instead. In this paper I explore the ways in which Catholic specialists, journalists, ethnographers and Mexicanas authenticate the quinceañera. I argue that many kinds of people in Chicago construct and authenticate the quinceañera in a back and forth---but not neutral---positioning of ideas. Furthermore, embedded within the various explanations of an authentic or genuine quinceañera are ideas about gender, sexuality, traditional culture, culture contact, and social position.

Before I begin let me provide a "quick and dirty" description of a quinceañera. Ethnographers (meaning anthropologists) and amateur cultural commentators (meaning journalists and Catholic specialists) represent the quinceañera as a rite of passage for girls. The quinceañera has been compared to a batmitzvah, a southern debutante coming-out party, and to a wedding. Gwen Stern's (1976) dissertation is one of two Chicago ethnographic accounts. Stern had the following to say about a "traditional" quinceañera:

The first part of the quincenera [sic] involves a mass in church where the girl gives thanks for guidance and makes a promise before the altar of the Virgin of Guadalupe. There is a procession up the aisle, with the girl on her father's arm, preceded by her attendants. During the mass, the religious medal is presented to the girl by her padrinos, and blessed by the priest...(43). [It] can be an elaborate event, equal to a wedding, in both time and expense...(42). Less affluent families, and less traditional ones, may simply give a birthday party on a daughter's fifteenth birthday, since a full-fledged quinceañera [sic] is an expensive affair (44).

Let me remind that these "quick and dirty" descriptions are truly a violation and probably reveal more about the ethnographer than the practice. Nevertheless, they provide a point of reference. In fact, ethnographers, Catholic specialists and journalists in Chicago have shown striking similarity in their authentication of the quinceañera. Between 1971 and 1991 they repeated uniform descriptions and explanations of the event in daily newspapers, dissertations, parish bulletins, diocesan guidelines for a quinceañera service, and internal Catholic periodicals written by and for Church specialists. This group has regarded the quinceañera in three ways: as an extension of particular Catholic sacraments, as a rite of passage, and as a practice that has historical continuity or Tradition.

Although this group legitimates the quinceañera in much the same way, their explanations are based on different projects. Some engage in the process of authentication because they are attempting to convince "misguided" clergy of the importance of cultural diversity in the Church and specifically the importance of the quinceañera. Others are attempting to correct the behavior of "misguided" worshippers who celebrate the quinceañera. Some projects use both strategies, but, those projects exoticize and romanticize difference.

Mexicanas describe and explain the quinceañera in several ways, some of which are incomplete. In conversations around the coffee or kitchen table, women and girls (who participated in an 18-month research project) spoke most often about

the quinceañera as "something that has to be done because of who we are" and as a way of "holding onto your roots." For this paper, I gloss these expressions as an imperative to practice one's ethnic culture in an event that makes a girl into a woman, but more importantly makes her into a Mexican.

In what follows I examine the ways that the two groups regard the quinceañera. My analysis pivots around the three explanations made by Church leaders, journalists and ethnographers, but this strategy is of course a "partial truth." The strategy makes it easier to notice how claims are legitimated, who or what is used as a source for legitimization, and how the authentication of a cultural practice is based on particular notions of culture, women, family, and ethnicity.

Explanations for the Quinceañera: making culture, gender, sexuality, and faith

Quinceañera as a Codified Religious Event:

Catholic priests and journalists describe the "most genuine" quinceañera as follows: The ceremony begins with a procession to the church in which the parents accompany their daughter. During the ceremony the girl prays to God in order to renew her baptismal commitment, to ask for a blessing as she enters a new stage in life, to give thanks for arriving at the age of fifteen, and to honor her parents. The ceremony focuses on the relationships between the parents and their daughter and between God and the family. Local guidelines recommend that the quinceañera "should be celebrated in the spirit of prayer, solemnity, simplicity and festivity" (Bañuelas 1981, 6). However, the guidelines assume that these are universal categories more important than the post-Vatican II concern for "cultural diversity." Some clergy are explicit about the number of attendants and kinds of Family sponsors (padrinos) allowed to participate in the procession and the ceremony. Family sponsors are defined as baptismal godparents or members of the Nuclear Family. By 1980 several parishes in the Chicago Archdiocese had codified the practice of having both parents or the father escort the

daughter into and out of the church. By 1990 the parental escort was referred to as a traditional practice.

Invariably, Catholic specialists and journalists describe and legitimate the quinceañera as a traditional religious ceremony which marks a rite of passage into adulthood. Several clergy and journalists specifically define adulthood as a movement from an irresponsible to a responsible member of society and church (see Bañuelas 1981, 5; Hansen 1990, 23; Pérez 1988, 21; Rodriguez 1975, 6). Adulthood, however, is not a generic stage of the life cycle but one that is infused with patriarchal notions of woman.

For example, one priest told me that adulthood was a time when "you start saying, 'I give'... and not thinking of yourself." Another priest recommended that "in keeping with the tradition of the cultural roots of the quinceañera celebration, the young woman could work on a project for the needy... visit the elderly, serve meals to those who are handicapped, help the handicapped, etc." (Bañuelas 1981, 5; my translation). In one of the most explicit instructions for gender roles and sexuality, another Catholic leader argued that after the event "the responsibility lies with the girl to preserve her [sexual] purity until her wedding day" (Rodriguez 1975,6; my translation).

By appropriating the event as an extension of baptism and codifying it within an American Catholic framework, Church specialists displace women from the center of the experience. Through the quinceañera, Catholic priests provide instruction to parents on how to gender and sex their daughters. The regulation on "family" sponsors codifies and naturalizes the Nuclear Family as the legitimate participants in a quinceañera. Worshippers who refuse to practice the quinceañera according to Catholic regulations are described as amoral, untraditional, or unfit parents.

Quinceañera as Gender- and Culture-making Process:

Women and girls explain and construct the authentic quinceañera not by the form or practice of the event, but the meaning behind or within the event. Since authenticity is located in meaning, a diversity of forms and practices are referred to as a quinceañera. Most women and several girls described the

quinceañera as a process. Their own expression, "becoming conocido" ---conveys at least two meanings: becoming a woman and becoming known as a Mexican.

For one woman, the quinceañera is an imperative because she believes that Chicago offers very few role models and even fewer opportunities to learn about Mexican culture. The event gave her daughter a sense of pride and self-worth as a Mexicana in the face of local forms of discrimination and assimilation. She explained it to me this way:

Gloria: Because of who we are and because of who I wanted my daughter to be.... My daughter's life has always been Americanized. We live here [in Chicago]. She went to school here. English is her first language, Spanish her second. So, how do you hold onto your roots? How do you put a value to it [if] you can't see it?... [It is] something that has to be done.

Listen how a young woman experienced her sexuality and cultural identity through the event.

Alicia: I just knew that a quinceañera was something that was very important to us.... Its something that a young lady should look forward to. I believe wholeheartedly that its a step forward. Because I think that: culture just makes you, not realizing that you are a women. You have to make decisions as a woman, you know. When you are fifteen and younger you can be a kid.... Its a step forward. Its saying its okay to be a woman, its okay to see those changes in any way it should be, mentally, physically, spiritually. Its kind of a jolt reaction,... but its good for you. 'Cause otherwise I wouldn't know how or where the dividing point was in my life. I think the dividing point was there only because I actually thought and saw everyone together. After that I started loosing weight like I said. When I look back I see that my life started at that point. After that. I am not saying right away when I turned fifteen, I am saying a couple of months later I started seeing that I like guys. For a long time I couldn't wear makeup.... [Before that] I don't remember much except studying and school.

Another young woman explained it this way: niñas become juvenes, but not mujeres. The point is subtle but clear. The girl comes to experience herself as a sexual being, but not as a person that engages in sexual intercourse (or becomes pregnant). Finally, the process of heterosexuality was reproduced for many girls who spoke about the quinceañera as the beginning of an interpersonal relationship with the Virgin of Guadalupe: woman to woman, mother to mother, or female-mortal to female-divine.

"Becoming conocido" is a process that focuses on the self and the making of identity, gender and sexuality. It is not a compartmentalization of the self, but a process of discovery for girls who begin to experience their bodies as sexual, cultural and faithful beings. The simultaneous creation and re-creation of these multiple identities through the quinceañera allows women to challenge rigid images of "the Mexican woman" and local concepts of cultural contact.

Quinceañera as Continuity: History and Tradition

Catholic specialists, ethnographers and journalists claim that the quinceañera is a tradition or custom which has historical origins or roots. People who regard the quinceañera as Historical or Traditional are usually attempting to convince "misguided" clergy. Most claim that the quinceañera has roots in or comes from indigenous cultures of Latin America, but different times and places are credited. In the last twenty years the quinceañera is said to have "come from Mexico" (Bañuelas 1981, 5), from an "ancient European social custom" which was later "adopted in Latin America" (Rodriguez 1975, 6), and from the "Aztec Empire in Mexico" (Beard 1980, 1). By 1990, journalists and Church specialists narrowed their claims to Aztec and Maya cultures.

A Chicago journalist explained that "it began in the 15th Century with the rise of the Aztec Empire in Mexico. With a life expectancy rate of 30 years, the quinceañera marked the midway point of an Aztec girl's life, the time when she would become a woman and marry... When the Spaniards arrived in the 16th Century, traces of Catholicism and the traditional Spanish 18th

birthday debut appeared in the ceremony" (Beard 1980, 1)

A priest offered an explanation which attributes the quinceañera more to the Spanish missionaries than to the indigenous people of Mesoamerica. "The quinceañera tradition has its roots in the cultural and religious practices of the Maya. Perhaps the great wisdom of the the first missionaries that came from Spain to evangelize in the Americas was based on the ability to respect the culture and religious traditions of the indigenous population. Today we find a mixture of indigenous and Christian traditions" (Conway 1990, 20).

I am not questioning whether or not the quinceañera can be traced to the distant past. What I find interesting is that Catholic leaders who want to "defend" this form of popular religiosity do so by using History, not individual or innovative expressions of faith or dynamic reconstructions of pre-Columbian cultures. For them, the only legitimate changes and innovations in the event are those that Christianity brought in the 16th century.

Just a Tradition: Cultural Meaning and Affirmation

The process of authentication for Mexicanas is dependant on "tradition" as well but with a smaller t. The quinceañera is not valued because women can locate its origins. Rather, they claim that the quinceañera is important because it transforms and physically connects one to Mexican culture.

Women spoke of tradition as a living practice in which innovation and continuity are not mutually exclusive. Objects, sounds, practices and tastes need not have a traceable and unchanged precedent from the past. (This of course can infuriate scholars who devote careers to tracing the origins of cultural practices which they assume are passed down intact from generation to generation). Adult Mexicanas explain that the "quinceañera is just a tradition" which they locate in specific memories and family experiences. Following more than a temporal connection, most women link the quinceañera to a specific person or to a specific place---that is, to a sister or to Mexico. Tradition can mean, "What did sister do? What did cousin do?" The experiences of padrinos---persons within the family either by marriage,

birth, and/or sentiment---often play a significant role in tradition-making.

When I asked women to describe the "most traditional" way to celebrate a quinceañera, they usually made a tolerant but disappointed smile. Several contexts could produce this gesture. First, the gesture must be understood as mutual positioning between Researcher and Participant. I was known to people as the Mexicana whose research on Mexican culture made me both an expert and a novice. Second, many clergy who refuse to celebrate the quinceañera justify their actions by claiming that people do not know the "most traditional" way to celebrate the event. Third, women were uncomfortable with a scale of "more or less traditional" because they saw the various forms of the event as an indicator of people's economic position. They would not refer to a person as "less traditional" because she could not afford a fancy reception, a gold medal, or a long gown. Fourth, this gesture is an acknowledgement of diversity. In fact, nearly all women and girls would not allow me to generalize about the practice and form of the quinceañera. I suggest that women and girls do not merely acknowledge diversity, but they think of diversity as an important aspect of Culture.

Another interpretation of this gesture is expressed in the following interview with a young woman, who despite the fact that she had organized her sister's quinceañera six months prior to our conversation, claimed that she did not "know much" about the event.

KMD: I want to ask you... what do you know about quinceañeras?

Emilia: Well, I don't know much. The only thing I know is... its that its more like a tradition, its just a tradition.... I don't know much about it. I wish I could help you. But I don't, I don't know 'cause it was just like a tradition.

....
KMD: Do you think that its an important thing to do or?

Emilia: My opinion, not really. I used to think so but then, I was talking to one priest and he made me change my mind.... And I was talking about this one time and he said,... "I think it would be just nice just to make a ceremony for her. And that's it. But why make all that party and those people?" He goes, That's like saying, here's my daughter, like take her, like showing her off.... Well, you're making a big party just because she's turning fifteen, like saying she's ready to get married. You know, here she is, take her." You know, that's how he put it.... Then I started thinking, "Yeah, why make a big party when you turn fifteen...?" [H]e didn't believe in cotillions. Something about the dresses too. He goes, "Why just waste all that money on that dress. Just put her in a nice dress." He was picky too.

....

Emilia: Well I guess they are blessing you and... See I know why I don't know, 'cause I'll ask my mom and she won't know what to answer me. I tell her. 'Cause I asked her, what does it mean?... She's say she doesn't know. But I have thought about it. And I cannot come up with an answer either.... Everybody turns fifteen and they make a big party, that's the way I do see it. They make a big party. And its like a tradition, you do it because other people do it, I guess. And because they, well, you know. I don't know....

The expression "I don't know" suggests another aspect of ethnic identity and culture: they are sometimes reinvented, confusing, and often imposed by "powerful others" (Worsley 1986, 246). I suggest that women view Culture as internal, familial, fluid, incomplete, and powerful. In this perspective Emilia is not deculturated or assimilated but within the process of cultural identity.

Furthermore, underlying each "disappointed smile" is a criticism of the politics of interpersonal and institutional relationships. The first two contexts (as well as Emilia's response) are a political positioning between people and institutions. Women challenge the Catholic Church and Researchers who claim to have authority or control over a cultural practice. The third context implies resistance to the local social order which makes

poverty a stigma. The fourth context is based on the notion that variation is important to Culture. This understanding of culture is itself a challenge to the local social order, theories of cultural contact, and the myth of assimilation which assumes people are absorbed into the Mainstream American experience. Diversity becomes a mode of resistance for these Mexicanas.

Conclusion

The explanations of the quinceañera as a Traditional practice are based on a western belief that peoples and societies of the past, usually a mythical pre-industrial static past, are more authentic and uncontaminated locations of Culture. The idea that ancient cultures are more authentic than modern, urban cultures is not unique to Church specialists and journalists writing about the quinceañera in Chicago. Anthropologists and other culture collectors have long held the assumption that culture itself is located in "pristine" field sites (read under-developed, pre-industrial, pre-capitalist countries). From this perspective, Traditional Culture is permanent and fixed. For Church specialists, Mexicans in Chicago have never arrived in the 20th Century (or the United States) but are still located in the conceptual space of Traditional Culture.

Consequently, Church specialists view alternate forms, practices and aesthetics as "pollutions" or "impurities" from which they must "rescue" the quinceañera. Like early anthropologists, Church specialists can understand their efforts to codify or construct conventions of behavior as maintenance of a "survival." Furthermore, Church leaders can authenticate the quinceañera using their own ritual---namely baptism---to "protect" against additional damage to a Tradition.

Although the notion of Traditional Culture specifies behavior for worshippers, it is blurred enough to allow Church specialists to mystify their own actions and codification of the practice. The ideas with which they surround the event---adulthood and responsibility---are vaguely defined and lack cultural specificity. (At the same time, these ideas are made compulsory by Catholic leaders). The invention and explanation

of the quinceañera by the Catholic Church ignores/lacks Mexican culture. According to Church views, Mexicans who celebrate the quinceañera do so as either good or bad Christians.

Reclaiming and recreating ethnic culture, gender and heterosexuality in a cultural practice is a very different project than institutionalizing a ritual in the image of Catholic doctrine or western notions of traditional culture and the urban poor. Mexicanas's explanations for the quinceañera are grounded in a diaspora experience. They are trying to "hold onto their roots" in the face of political and social institutions that promote and assume "assimilation." In context of struggle, the quinceañera becomes a demonstration and reaffirmation of culture and other identities. Mexicanas establish authority in action, experience, feeling, and words.

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