CHAPTER FOUR

THROUGH THE OTHERING GAZE: YUCATECAN TROVA MUSIC AND ‘THE TOURIST’ IN YUCATÁN, MEXICO

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Tourism is one of the most important revenue sources for Yucatán and Quintana Roo, two of the three states comprising the Yucatán peninsula. Quintana Roo is on the Caribbean Sea, one of the most transparent bodies of water washing sandy beaches that are among the whitest and most inviting in the world. Through beach tourism and resort infrastructure, Quintana Roo is one of Mexico’s top tourist destinations, visited by over six million tourists every year.¹ The state of Yucatán, instead, focuses tourism advertising campaigns on its natural and cultural resources, including pink flamingos, archaeological sites and local folk culture, and its available infrastructure for conference tourism. Over a million people visited Yucatán each year between 2000 and 2006, and the designation of Chichén Itzá in 2007 as one of the ‘seven modern wonders of the world’, is expected to raise the numbers of tourists coming into the state.

Yucatecan folk culture is advertised as one of the main regional attractions. Along with regional cuisine and the welcoming attitude of Yucatecans toward tourists, music is promoted as an inviting feature of Yucatecan life. In the city of Mérida, in particular, the type of music known as ‘Yucatecan trova’ is promoted as the authentic urban music of Yucatán, suitable not only for locals’ but also for tourists’ consumption. State and municipal authorities sponsor weekly events where trova occupies a central place. This special status of Yucatecan trova in public-funded recreational activities may appear as ‘natural’ because it is known nation-wide and throughout the Caribbean as an important musical style native to Yucatán. However, as I will show here, today’s special status of trova as ‘the’ music of Yucatán is the result of complex,

¹ According to the Mexico’s Nacional Bureau of Statistics (INEGI), the state of Quintana Roo is only surpassed by Mexico City in number of guests registered annually by hotel occupation records, between 2000 and 2006.
ongoing negotiations undertaken by cultural mediators with the local, regional and national cultural institutions and authorities.

In this paper I look at the politics surrounding the construction of trova as ‘heritage’ and the way in which those engaged in this construction rely on the image of ‘the tourist’, a foreigner who may come looking for the ‘authentic’ culture of Yucatán. This tourist figure is construed on the basis of trova audiences found outside the peninsula, and not on the basis of actual tourists visiting the state. The trova community had in the recent past a place of privilege in the public stages of Yucatán state, but as of 2001 new cultural policies favouring the funding and promotion of ‘high culture’ have placed ‘popular culture’, including trova music, in disadvantage. These new policies are having an important impact on the performance and representation of Yucatecan trova music, which is changing rapidly to adapt to the new politically-driven cultural milieu. ‘The tourist’, in many of its possible guises, is now being invoked as the impartial arbiter of musical worth and of the value of trova as beautiful, meaningful and worthwhile music.

Local civic organizations and trova groups try to work through the tourist gaze in order to claim tourists, foreigners and local reflexive spectators as possible allies in the struggle to regain a place of privilege for trova music as one of the most important regional cultural products. Trova, according to many Yucatecans and to the cultural authorities, can represent Yucatán and Yucatecans in a distinct and positive light, both within and outside the boundaries of this state of Mexico. In this context, trova music has traversed since 2000 a significant journey, from being a symbol of the urban vernacular, to becoming a representative of tradition that can also be part of the circles dominated by classical music and high art.

‘Tourists’ as othering onlookers

There is nothing particularly ‘traditional’ per se about tradition. Our ideas of tradition, popular culture, popular music, popular tradition and high art are all constantly fluctuating according to time, place and context. Trova music is usually described in brochures, tour guides and academic publications as the folk music of urban Yucatán (see Bock 1992). Tourists coming to the Yucatán peninsula and especially to the state of Yucatán will find this music described as an expression of the true soul of Yucatecans and the Yucatán. However, as I will show here,