

ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: DOMINICAN GAGÁ FROM OUTSIDE AND WITHIN: DISCOURSES ABOUT GAGÁ, RACIAL DISCRIMINATION, AND COMMUNITY ORGANIZING IN THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

Víctor Miguel Hernández Sang, Doctor of Philosophy, 2024

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This dissertation examines the discourses that surround Gagá, an African-derived ritual tradition that entails processional music and dance performances to honor deities of Vodou, which is primarily practiced by Haitians and Dominicans of Haitian origin in the Dominican Republic. This study explores the characterization of Gagá from the perspective of outsiders (the media and public figures) and the viewpoint of insiders (the partakers of the tradition). In the analysis, I identify correlates between the characterization of Gagá in the media over time and major political and economic developments in the Dominican Republic. Additionally, I explore the work that community members of Gagá conduct to combat racism and harmful stereotypes about their music and religion. Based on fieldwork, archival research, and compilation of online media, this work provides a nuanced view of the perspective of *gagaseros* (practitioners of Gagá) regarding their tradition, self-identification, and racial discrimination.

DOMINICAN GAGÁ FROM OUTSIDE AND WITHIN: DISCOURSES ABOUT
GAGÁ, RACIAL DISCRIMINATION, AND COMMUNITY ORGANIZING IN
THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC

by

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Dedication

For my parents, Suk-Lang J., and Víctor S.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

In September 2013, the Dominican Constitutional Court issued a ruling that stripped away the citizenship of thousands of Dominicans of Haitian descent. In consequence, many were forced to flee the country or to hide from the authorities for fear of forced deportation (Hayes 2019). Since the ruling, many Dominican public figures and political groups have more openly expressed hostility toward the Haitian Dominican community. Numerous protests and marches against the ruling have taken place in urban centers of the country (Estrella 2020), as well as demonstrations led by ultranationalist groups who favor the new policy. Many of the people affected by the 2013 ruling are descendants of sugarcane workers whom the Dominican state brought to the country as seasonal workers (*braceros*) in the first decades of the twentieth century and who were often not given proper documentation (Childers 2021). This community has remained one of the poorest and most socially marginalized sectors in the Dominican Republic (hereafter D.R.). Dominant sectors of Dominican society often portray Afro-descendant traditions associated with Haitian Dominicans, such as Vodou and Gagá, as incompatible with the values and identity of the nation. Since the country's independence in the nineteenth century, the Dominican elite has considered the Spanish heritage of the nation as superior to the African legacy. The 2013 ruling is one of the many developments that reflect the long-standing anti-Haitian discourses in public opinion.

My research joins a growing body of scholarship that has focused on questions pertaining the Haitian Dominican community and engages in conversations

about race and racial discrimination in the Dominican Republic. In order to contribute to the conversation on issues of anti-Haitianism, I interrogate the discourses that surround the concept of Gagá (an African-derived ritual tradition that entails processional music and dance performances to honor deities of Vodou) from various angles. I analyze the portrayal of Gagá from the “outside”: in the printed and online media (from 1979 to 2022), and I examine the characterization of Gagá from “within”: the perspective of community members. I study how practitioners define Gagá as Dominican to challenge anti-Haitian sentiment. Finally, I spotlight some of the endeavors that community members undertake to combat racist mischaracterizations of Gagá and its practitioners. The exploration of the discourses that surround Gagá serves as a window to broaden Dominicanist scholars’ understanding of ethno-national identity and anti-Haitianism.

Once a year, for three days straight, Gagá practitioners carry out processions in public areas throughout the country that culminate on the evening of Easter Sunday. The Gagá band, comprised of aerophones, membranophones, and idiophones, accompany dancers and singers. This entire ensemble leads a procession of devotees of Vodou deities. Throughout the year, Gagá bands may perform for religious ceremonies led by a religious leader in private homes or in bateyes, not in towns or urban areas. For a few days a year, Gagá processions become the center of attention in many towns and rural communities throughout the nation.

The marginal position that the Haitian Dominican community and Gagá hold within Dominican society is also reflected in the lack of attention that they receive in the media and printed press. The limited coverage of Gagá and Vodou is often filled

with mischaracterizations of the traditions and the people who practice them. Given that most practitioners are of Haitian ancestry, the portrayal of Gagá and Vodou in the media mirrors historical anti-Haitian discourse. In more recent decades, as I demonstrate in my work, journalists have more accurately depicted Gagá in ways that correspond with the accounts of Haitian Dominican community members.

In my analysis of primary sources, I identify correlations between the portrayal of Gagá in the press, significant economic and political developments, and an increased professionalization of Gagá practitioners. Major political and economic developments characterize the decades of the 1990s and the early 2000s in the D.R., such as the presidential campaign of Francisco Peña Gómez (a Dominican politician of Haitian ancestry), the decline of the sugarcane industry, and the implementation of economic policies that favor private capital and especially in the tourism industry. Anthropologist Kiran Jayaram (2010) argues that these two economic developments led to significant changes in migration patterns within the Haitian immigrant community: many moved from rural dwellings (where they have primarily worked in sugarcane mills) to the city (mainly to work in construction) and beach towns (to work in the tourism industry). From the stories of my interlocutors, I pinpoint correlations that fit the migration patterns documented by Jayaram. I suggest that these economic developments of the 1990s not only affected migration patterns but also impacted the practice of Gagá and the reportage of the tradition in the press. These three developments (Peña Gomez's presidential campaign, the decline of the sugarcane industry, and the all-inclusive tourism complex), which span about a decade (from the mid-1990s to the mid-2000s), had significant effects on the Haitian

Dominican community and its traditions. For instance, I identify increased attention toward Gagá and Vodou and a willingness of newspaper writers to label Gagá practitioners as Dominicans starting in the early 2000s. Additionally, around that same time, *gagaseros* (a common name for those who practice Gagá: dancers, musicians, singers, and other roles) increasingly participated in Gagá groups as hired contractors while fewer of them were partaking in processions solely for religious obligations.

Gagaseros categorize Gagá as a Dominican tradition, a description that challenges how the elite (mis) portrays the tradition. Elite individuals who critique Gagá (politicians, local authorities, Christian church leaders, and public figures) often regard Gagá as a Haitian tradition and describe *gagaseros* as Haitian nationals who are practicing a foreign ritual in the D.R. Many detractors of Gagá justify the attempts to limit the circulation of Gagá groups on the basis that Gagá is not a Dominican tradition. Contrary to this understanding of Gagá, its practitioners—who overwhelmingly self-identify as Dominican of Haitian ancestry rather than solely as Haitian—consider Gagá a Dominican tradition. While *gagaseros* highlight the Haitian origin of Gagá, they believe that it is part of the culture of the Dominican Republic. In my dissertation, I examine an array of sources that provide a window into the ways that cultural insiders and outsiders have understood and portrayed Gagá and Vodou and how community members contest long-standing anti-Haitian discrimination.

Gagá practitioners consider Gagá to be Dominican “folklore” and “culture,” which are terms that the Dominican state has historically used to co-opt music and dance traditions for political advantage. As part of modernization and nation-building

projects, Latin American and European states and elite have led efforts to recontextualize and embellish rural-based music and dance practices, a process that music scholars often describe as folklorization (Rios 2020:5). Government officials found that promoting rural music genres as emblematic symbols of their respective nations was useful in fostering nationalism, which was a cornerstone strategy in modernizing the state. Dominican authorities and intellectuals have selected rural musics and dances that they considered unique to the country and framed them as representative of a unifying national identity. During the first half of the 20th century, Dictator Rafael Trujillo (from 1930 to 1961) purposely promoted, supported, and spotlighted merengue, a trio-based dance music originally from the northern region of the country. Trujillo's project included funding a national merengue ensemble, promoting the production of music, and heavily disseminating it on the radio. This push by the dictator led eventually to widespread recognition of merengue as the national music of the country (see Austerlitz 1997). Merengue is among various traditions considered unique to the culture of the Dominican Republic and part of national folklore, that is, the cultural patrimony of the nation.

Trujillo, whose dictatorship Dominicanist historians have characterized as a brutal Hispanophilic regime, was deliberate in disseminating merengue as national music given that the northern region, or Cibao, has historically been the area with the “whitest” population. Since Spanish colonization, sugarcane plantations have mostly concentrated in the Southern and Eastern regions of the country, whilst the North had been dominated by cattle raising and other crops (Moya Pons 2010). While sugarcane plantations concentrated the largest population of enslaved Africans, white Spanish

settlers predominated in cattle raising and in the production of hide (ibid.). Trujillo also spearheaded a massacre that targeted Haitians and Dominicans of Haitian ancestry in 1937 in which armed officials assassinated an estimated ten to twenty thousand people in the northern border area (Hitzen 2016). Scholars explain that merengue, an embraced couple dance, fit Trujillo's nationalistic project given that it was not associated with Black populations in the nation. Trujillo hired musicians who embellished the trio-based genre by enlarging the ensemble with jazz big band instrumentation in order to appeal to cosmopolitan sensibilities (see Austerlitz 1997).

Typically, the people who lead the various projects of folklorization in Latin America and the Caribbean are those of lighter skin, wealthier, and with more access to higher education. After the end of Trujillo's regime, college-educated, urbanite musicians (who had minimal direct connections to the communities of the music they were learning and disseminating) introduced African-derived, rural traditions to a broader audience. A collective of musicians and scholars founded Convite with the objective of performing, documenting, and studying marginalized Afro-Dominican musics (Pacini Hernández 1991 and Tallaj 2015). This group conducted original field research and learned and interpreted musics and dances from various communities between 1974 and 1981. Convite was not only a champion and promoter of these musics but also was critical of the Hispanicist political ideology of the ruling class. Convite's goals included the promotion of marginalized Afro-Dominican traditions as representations of Dominican identity and the depiction of these genres as valuable to the same degree as other ones such as merengue.

The Cocolo music and dance, which are cultural expressions officially accepted as part of the cultural patrimony of the Dominican Republic (like merengue), share various parallels to Gagá and prove a useful comparison. During the first half of the twentieth century, sugarcane seasonal workers from English-speaking Caribbean countries brought their music and dance, which practitioners and folklorists—generations later—labeled as a distinct Dominican tradition known as Cocolo music and dance (Cowie 2006). The term “cocolo” was originally used to pejoratively refer to these English-speaking Black workers, but it has now, for decades, been re-appropriated. Around the same time that Haitian immigrant braceros immigrated to the D.R. to work in the sugarcane industry, a large community of Cocolos settled in San Pedro de Macorís (a city also associated with Gagá groups) who popularized the character Los Guloyas in theatrical dance acts accompanied by a band that performed in the streets on specific holidays throughout the year (Santana and Sánchez 2022). In the early 2000s, Dominican cultural brokers and scholars successfully included the music and dance of Cocolos in UNESCO’s List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, of which three other Dominican traditions are part to this day: merengue, bachata (genres considered emblematic of Dominican identity domestically and internationally), and the Congos of Villa Mella (an afro-descendant religious expression). The Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of UNESCO has the goal of encouraging members of the United Nations to ensure the viability of “intangible” traditions, that is, “practices and expressions that do not leave extensive material traces, such as storytelling, craftsmanship, rituals, dramas, and festivals” (Hafstein 2018:3). Although the

trajectories of the Cocolo and Haitian immigrant communities share various similarities, the cultural expressions associated with the Cocolos have not carried the same unfavorable connotations to date as Gagá.

While Cocolo music and dance are today accepted as unique expressions of Dominicaness, Gagá continues to face resistance from dominant sectors of society. The religious aspects of Gagá, and the geographical proximity between Haiti and the D.R., I suspect, are factors that contribute to the ongoing repudiation of Gagá and its community. Even though some of the theatrical performances of Cocolos took place on Christmas Day and Three Kings Day (December 25 and January 6, respectively), the activities carry a secular character. Moreover, the shared physical border between the D.R. and Haiti seems to have facilitated the continual influx of Haitian migrants throughout the twentieth century. In contrast, the migration wave of Cocolos had waned down by the 1940s. The case of Gagá in comparison with that of the music of Cocolos, demonstrates that the objections to recognizing Gagá as a Dominican tradition are not only based on racism, instead, the rejection is founded on profound anti-Haitian sentiment.

Elite grand narratives that coopt cultural expressions, such as folklore, will often serve the dominant sectors and might have a negative impact on the marginalized communities. Folklorist Valdimar Hafstein, former chair of the Icelandic Commission for UNESCO, examines the behind-the-scenes procedures of UNESCO's Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) and its history (2018). Hafstein suggests that UNESCO's ICH project shapes national and local discourses around heritage in ways that benefit the status quo of dominant

classes and nation-building processes. In his book *Making Intangible Heritage*, Hafstein analyzes various case studies from UNESCO and demonstrates that intangible heritage allows governments to “create instruments to act on populations” (104). Foucault’s conception of “governmentality” (1991), with which Hafstein engages in his analysis, offers a useful lens that elucidates the supremacy of the ruling class. Folklore, understood as a representative cultural expression of the nation-state, is part of the “ensemble, formed by the institutions, procedures, analyses and reflections, the calculations and tactics that allow the exercise of this very specific albeit complex form of power” (102). Most of my interlocutors define Gagá in a manner that aligns with UNESCO’s concept of intangible cultural heritage, a term with which UNESCO replaced “folklore” in the 1990s (Hafstein 14). For the Gagá community to use the language of the oppressor (in this case the Dominican state) could produce unintended consequences. On the one hand, asserting the Dominican identity of Gagá and representing it as a form of Dominican folklore (as my interlocutors show) may foster inclusion and dispel its mischaracterization as a non-Dominican cultural expression. On the other hand, re-appropriating elite conceptions can, in turn, serve the interests of the dominant sector of society. Given the problematic association of folkloric traditions with “superstition,” relying on such conceptions can aid in maintaining the status quo, that is, one in which the elite consider Gagá and Vodou as inferior to other forms of expression and religions. In order for governments to successfully further political ends through the promotion of folklore, it is beneficial for the state that citizens (the ones governed), subscribe to

such projects without coercion. Dominicanist scholars have yet to further closely examine the implications ICH and UNESCO's designations might have in the D.R.

The case of Cuba offers a useful comparison. Cuban folklorists such as Fernando Ortiz, strongly influenced their Dominican counterparts who documented rural-based music expression throughout the twentieth century and paved the way for projects like the group Convite in the 1960s. Folklorization in Cuba goes back to the late nineteenth century in which various political factions and artistic movements drew upon rural, Afro Cuban musics and dances as inspiration and for political projects (see Moore 1997). Cuban Santería is a significant case that shows the possible paths that processes of folklorization can take. Katherine Hagedorn (2001) points to the complexities of navigating the folklorization of Santería in its secular and sacred performing contexts and how they overlap. Hagedorn demonstrates the nebulous lines between the sacred and folkloric contexts and elucidates the continual influence between the two practices. Her work shows, however, that Santería continued to be diminished in status. She illustrates the unfavorable political position that folklorization can have for disfranchised communities:

In Havana, at least from the late nineteenth century to the present, the concept of 'Cuban folklore' has been simultaneously racialized and disempowered—racialized because it has come to refer almost exclusively to the religious performance tradition of Cubans of African heritage, and disempowered because those religious traditions were categorized by nonpractitioners not as divinely potent modes of communication between deities and mortals, but rather as 'folk traditions,' objectified and reconstructed without consideration for their contemporary religious context (2001:4).

Despite the support and dissemination that the Conjunto Folklórico Nacional received from the Cuban government, Hagedorn shows that Santería remained a second-class tradition. The racial discrimination that affected Black Cubans and the stigma that

santeros (Santería practitioners) carried remained. The main intention of the Conjunto was to present a secularized performance of the music of Santería without the objective of highlighting the religious components. In contrast, the community members I discuss in this dissertation aim to present Gagá and Vodou to a general audience as religious practices. I gather that community members of Gagá do not wish to secularize Gagá folkloric performances, rather they intend to present it as a religious ritual.

Dominican Evangelical church leaders, politicians, and other prominent public figures have long vilified Gagá and Vodou. Gagá members often talk about the antagonism that Evangelical leaders promote against Gagá by labeling it as diabolic and thus something that should not be allowed¹. These religious leaders, along with local government leaders, have attempted several times to limit the circulation of the procession of Gagá during Semana Santa (Holy Week) under the pretense of public safety (Diario Libre 2018), relying on the misconception that Gagá processions often directly cause violent incidents in public areas. In doing so, the authorities attack the constitutional freedom of religion and expression of Gagá practitioners, as Gagá leaders and advocates have argued. In recent years, community members from around the country have worked to form a society of Gagá groups with the purpose of serving as the intermediary between groups and local authorities, to combat the elite's perception that denigrates Gagá, and to oppose practices that endanger their rights.

¹ Leaders and members of the Evangelical Church and of many other Protestant churches are often critical of Vodou and other African-derived religious rituals labeling these as antithetical to their teachings.

In 2023, community leaders established the first organization to represent Gagá groups at the national level: the Asociación Dominicana de Gagá (ADOGA; Dominican association of Gagá). It was formed to serve as the intermediary body between Gagá groups and the state, among several other goals. On behalf of the community of gagaseros, the organization advocates for fair policing practices and strongly opposes discriminatory behavior from local governments and Evangelical church leaders. Drawing from my involvement in formative meetings of the organization and information from constituents, I tell the story of how gagaseros have organized themselves to guarantee their right to freedom of religious expression. ADOGA also works to educate the public about Gagá and Vodou in order to dispel harmful stereotypes about their traditions and community. Jovanny Guetto's YouTube channel shares these goals. The channel producers focus on making content that provide accurate representations of Gagá and Vodou, and therefore complements the initiatives of ADOGA. Ultimately, ADOGA and Jovanny Guetto YouTube channel communicate the community's concerns.

Gagá, Rara, and Vodou in the Island of Hispaniola

Scholars have traditionally referred to a wide range of religious practices and beliefs of the Dominican Republic as “religiosidad popular” (popular religion), specifically those that developed in the New World and combined Roman Catholicism and African religions. Among scholars, a well-accepted grand narrative about how these religions emerged is that African slaves utilized Catholic imagery and names to camouflage their religions and thus avoid censorship (e.g., Murrell 2010). In Hispaniola, two religious systems are common throughout the island:

Vodou in Haiti and Vudú in the Dominican Republic (also known as *Las Veintiunas Divisiones*). Practitioners of Vodou and Vudú are devoted to deities called *lwas* and *misterios*, respectively. Through the assistance of a religious leader, believers are able to communicate with the *lwas/misterios*. Devotees of Vodou and Gagá, often use the terms *lwa* and *misterio* interchangeably to refer to the deities, as I learned during field research and as seen in YouTube Videos.² Practitioners of Vodou and Vudú in the D.R. are normally Catholics who believe in other deities. A variety of drum ensembles, which vary by region and by personal preferences, accompany religious ceremonies throughout the year in private and public events in which a religious leader summons *lwas/misterios*.

Gagá and Rara (the Haitian tradition from which Gagá derives), which are expressions of Vodou, are some of the many Afro-descendant traditions of the Caribbean. Scholars have defined Gagá as a mutual aid society in which constituents are devotees of Vodou deities (Rosenberg 1979, Alegría Pons 1993, and Landies 2009). *Gagaseros* carry the Gagá procession, which includes music and dance, each year during Semana Santa (Holy week). Practitioners use the term Gagá to refer to both the community or family that is represented by a Gagá group as well as to the band of musicians and dancers that lead the procession. To pay tribute and give thanks to the *lwas* or *misterios*, Gagá bands lead processions through towns and *bateyes* (the housing communities in sugarcane plantations) and visit the homes of devotees who have a close relationship with the group.

² In contrast, practitioners of Dominican Vudú or Las Veintiuna Divisiones—based on my field research on palo drumming ensembles that performing in fiestas de misterios (see Hernández-Sang 2018)—do not usually use the term “lwa.” My interlocutors would exclusively use “misterios.”

The three-day procession for Semana Santa starts on the morning of Good Friday and finishes on Easter Sunday. On Thursday night, the Gagá band performs to honor deities, while religious leaders conduct several rituals to prepare for the procession. Religious followers and the public join the procession and participate in the music and dance. Traveling through towns, these processions fill the streets and public spaces during the days leading up to Easter Sunday. For many participants in Gagá, the procession is a *festejo* (celebration). The Gagá procession is a carnivalesque display of colorful garments worn by female (*reinas*) and male (*mayores*) dancers. A typical procession of a Gagá group would start their journey from their home batey and make their way on foot to neighboring bateyes. As the groups visit bateyes, the general audience may join the group and follow it, singing along, as it continues its path toward another batey. The male dancers front the Gagá band, followed by the female dancers, who are then followed by the musicians and singers. Lastly, other Gagá practitioners, sympathizers of the group, or passersby follow the singers and may join in singing. Depending on the route that the dueño of the group decides to follow, Gagá groups may hire transportation and move from town to town on a bus. Once in a convenient location, the procession starts its path and visits predetermined homes of devotees along the way. Urban areas and towns surrounded by Gagá groups might have a town center in which a large crowd of people gather to see Gagá groups pass by and dance along.

In Haiti, unlike the case with Gagá in the D.R., Rara bands explicitly express social commentary and often perform songs that comment on the authorities and the state. For scholars of Rara, the procession allows the community to engage in

political affairs and serves as an important medium through which they negotiate their relationship with the state (Largey 2000; McAllister 2003). Rara allow the poor, rural masses of Haiti to assert political positions in the face of economic and social marginalization. Elizabeth McAlister (2003), argues that Rara “should more properly be understood as a synthesis of Carnival behavior and religious practice” (31) in which the carnivalesque is openly displayed and “protects” the more private religious “work.” (ibid.). During the Lenten season, Rara bands may rehearse their repertoire and perform out in the streets on Sundays to gather support from their “fans” in preparation for the multi-day procession (Largey 2012:168).

Imported to the Dominican Republic by Haitian immigrants who were brought to work in sugarcane plantations in the first decades of the twentieth century, Gagá today is practiced by descendants of those workers as well as some Dominicans who do not claim Haitian ancestry. Because of its Haitian genesis, Gagá and Vodou are generally solely associated with Haitian immigrants and detractors often portray these traditions in a negative light. Despite these anti-Haitian practices, Gagá groups continue to perform in public spaces, displaying their music, dance, and religion.

June Rosenberg’s (1979) work, which provides a general overview of Gagá in the D.R. by comparing several groups, has strongly influenced subsequent scholarship on the subject (e.g., Alegría Pons 1993; Andújar 1987, 1992; Lara 2005; Santana and Sánchez 2022; Tejeda 1995). Rosenberg characterizes Gagá as Dominican rather than Haitian—even though Gagá derives from Haitian Rara—and makes the argument that Gagá is a tradition that has evolved into a distinctively Dominican expression. Besides the handful of scholarly works on Gagá (mostly

Dominican scholars), ethnomusicologist Maurea Landies' (2009) dissertation is the only extensive ethnographic work that examines many of the rituals of Gagá and Vodou in bateyes, including the procession and the band. She argues that Gagá is primarily a healing community that serves practitioners by articulating alliances and maintaining social networks as alternative social structures.

Many scholars of Afro-Dominican music and religion have largely focused on either the non-musical ritual aspects of the religion or solely on the music. For instance, Santana and Sánchez (2022), in one chapter, provide a detailed analysis of the instrumentation, musical language, and lyrics of the music of Gagá. Their work offers a foundational analysis for the study of this music. Other scholars such as Martha Ellen Davis (1976, 1981, 2012) and Daniel Piper (2012) have written extensively on the social and economic contexts of African-derived drumming ensembles used in “religiosidad popular.” Moreover, Angelina Tallaj (2015, 2018, 2022), problematizes the long-standing narrative that due to the official Hispanicist political discourse, Dominicans have historically downplayed their African ancestry as expressed in music. Her work suggests that “elements of Blackness have always existed within Dominicaness” (2022:62). Tallaj explores the nuanced ways that musicians have re-appropriated and popularized Afro-Dominican musics and incorporated Gagá into Dominican popular music genres. No other music scholar has addressed issues of anti-Haitianism in relation to Gagá or other Afro-descendant traditions in the D.R. My work positions Gagá and Vodou at the center of the conversation on the issues the community faces regarding racial discrimination and anti-Haitianism.

The Gagá music band is comprised of an ensemble of *bambúes* (bamboo-based wind instruments) and the *tatú* (tin cornets) that provide the harmonic foundation and the *tambú* (a leading one-headed drum that improvises), which directs the rest of the percussion section: a *bombo* (bass drum), the *catalié* (sometimes a snare drum), and a metallic shaker. Meanwhile, the lead singer and the chorus initiate the songs and continue in a call-and-response structure. A full set of bamboos is usually composed of three or four instruments that produce one or two notes and which are tuned to each other to form a given chord. An ensemble may have multiple of the same bamboo to have a louder sound. With a Caribbean tresillo as rhythmic base, these bamboos interlock with each other forming a single melody.³

The music of Gagá has influenced popular music genres. Although the music of Gagá has not been widely commercialized, artists of merengue de calle⁴ have incorporated various aspects of the music such as the rhythmic pattern of the *tambú*, the bass mimicking the *bombo*, and saxophones emulating the ostinato of *bambues* (Tallaj-García 2022:59). Merengue de calle is rooted in the Black experience and associated with low-income and dark skin populations of *barrios* in the outskirts of cities. Moreover, in the last few decades, a number of musicians who incorporate and fuse various Afro-Dominican genres have employed Gagá sounds and instrumentation (see Davis 2012). More recently, a small alternative and indie rock scene of bands that blend rock, Gagá, and other Afro-descendant genres is growing in

³ For a comprehensive and detailed discussion on the instruments of the Gagá band, including transcriptions, see Santana and Sánchez 2022.

⁴ Roughly translated as “street merengue,” merengue de calle is a subgenre of the national merengue characterized by short and repetitive melodic motifs and lyrics, faster pace, and “shortened” rhythmic pattern that contrasts with merengue.

popularity primarily in Santo Domingo, the capital city. All these incorporations of Gagá in popular music, however, remain on the fringes of mainstream media.

Race and Haitian Immigration in the Dominican Republic

Because of the antagonistic relationship between the D.R. and Haiti, in which the Dominican elite have considered Haiti as the Other, the discussion of national and racial identity in the Dominican Republic is closely aligned with the issue of Haitian immigration. In the early twentieth century, the border area in the northwestern region of the country was a porous area where Haitian immigration was prominent and diverse groups co-existed, which the Dominican state considered a threat (Derby 1994, Paulino 2016). Borders, both physically and metaphorically, are important sites for understanding issues of racial identity, immigration, and discrimination (García-Peña 2016, Ricourt 2016). Starting in the late nineteenth century, the Dominican sugarcane industry, funded by the state and private sector, fostered the immigration of Haitian workers (along with workers from other Caribbean countries), as a source of cheap labor (see Martínez 1995, 1996, 1999). The sugar industry and the circulation of workers played an important role in the formulation of ideas about national identity that later defined racial categories (Mayes 2014). By the end of the nineteenth century, the intelligentsia, informed by European notions regarding “progress” and the tenets of Liberalism, shaped official ideas about national character, which excluded Haitian Dominicans from the national imaginary (Martínez-Vergne 2005). My focus on the experience of a community that Dominican nationalist discourses regard as Other will hopefully contribute to a greater understanding of subaltern perspectives in the D.R.

The increased discrimination against Haitians and Dominicans of Haitian origin in the last few decades has driven scholars in various fields and disciplines to pay greater attention to topics related to the experience of Haitian immigrants and their descendants. Some scholars have examined the impact of immigration policies on the lives of Haitian Dominicans and Haitian immigrants (Aber and Small 2013, Childers 2021, Hayes 2021). These works demonstrate how the Dominican state has systematically excluded Dominicans of Haitian origin leaving them in a gray area of legality between “documented” and “undocumented” (Childers 2021). Other recent scholarship centers the adversities of Haitian immigrant women and argue these subjects are often left out of the immigration narratives (Shoaff 2017; Wooding and Petrozziello 2013). Haitian immigrants have also faced hurdles in accessing education (Barlett 2012). Haitian immigrants and Dominicans of Haitian descent continue to disproportionately experience the damaging effects of immigration policies.

A common narrative present in earlier scholarship, the media, and popular culture is that the Dominican elite have historically rejected blackness in favor of highlighting European heritage and ignoring the nation’s African roots (see Howard 2001, Sagás 2000, and Torres-Saillant 1998). Recent scholarship, however, has focused on challenging such reductionist narratives by re-visiting dominant discourses that shaped ideas on national and racial identity. Some scholars have re-examined historical processes and have suggested reinterpretations of previously well-accepted grand narratives about Dominican music (Hutchinson 2016), and in official state discourse (Simmons 2009). Other scholars have examined the representation of Black Dominicans and Haitians in school materials (Wiggington

2005, 2019) and the unfavorable portrayal of the figure of the beggar Haitian mother in the printed press (Shoaff 2017). Moreover, transnational connections between the D.R., Haiti, the United States, and other places in the Caribbean are key in the development of discourses about the national character and concepts of race, a framework that earlier scholarship tended to overlook (Candelario 2007, García-Peña 2015, Wright 2015). In this recent body of work, scholars illuminate the intertwined histories of the D.R., Haiti, and the United States that have shaped the concept of race.

The conception of race and discourses about identity, nationalism, and color are intertwined with the political history between the Dominican Republic and Haiti and their past as European colonies. Dominican elite has long defined official discourse about the nation and the racial composition of its citizens as opposite to that of Haiti (Sagás 2000). One of the main factors that influenced such oppositional construction of national identity was the D.R. declaring independence from Haiti in 1844. After twenty-two years of Haitian rule, the Dominican bourgeois led an independence movement that culminated in the creation of the Dominican state. To emphasize the difference between the two nations, the Dominican elite propagated the idea that D.R. was primarily a Hispanic nation in which Spanish values prevailed. In contrast to Dominican cultural identity, the elite considered Haiti a predominately Black nation with a different worldview (Howard 2001).

For the most part, race and race relations in the D.R. operate similarly to the rest of Latin America. One of the predominant official discourses about race and ethnicity is associated with the mixture (*mestizaje*) between the native populations,

the European colonizers, and the enslaved Africans. In the D.R., a large percentage of the population self-identify as mixed or *mestizo* (Wheeler 2015). To indicate shades of skin color that range from white, on one end of the spectrum, to black, on the other end, Dominicans commonly use a variety of terms to self-identify and describe other people. Dominicans emphasize physical appearance and use words like *indio*, *mulato*, *mestizo* (mixed), *negro* (black), *blanco* (white), and *trigueño* (fair skin) to describe skin tone (Wheeler 2015). During Trujillo's dictatorship, as a way to obscure the Black heritage of the nation, the government introduced the term *indio* as an official skin color category that citizens could choose to include in their national identification card or *cédula*. Decades later, "indio" became the most used term by Dominicans to self-identify in the *cédula* (Lamb and Dundes 2017). Even though a wide range of shades in the population is evident, "indio" came to signify a broad variety of skin tones. While much of the perception and choice of "indio" is based on an individual choice, the use of the term also varies across social classes and regions.⁵ Even though ethnic Dominicans and ethnic Haitians⁶ may have a similar dark skin tone and can be ethnically "indistinguishable," Haitian immigrants are racialized as black, that is, "blacker" than black Dominicans. Black Haitian immigrants are heavily associated with manual labor, lower formal education, and low income. A common

⁵ The diverse perception of color that varies across region and class became clearer during fieldwork. While taking a private drumming lesson with Pirulo, the leading musician of La Ceja Gagá group and who is of a dark skin tone, he took a phone call with another Gagá musician and in the conversation referred to me as "el blanquito" (the white guy). Growing up in the D.R., I considered myself *indio* or *indio claro* (light *indio*). While I acknowledged that my skin tone was on the lighter side of the tone spectrum, I would never consider myself white or *blanco* given that, in my eyes, there are Dominicans who are lighter than me that I consider white.

⁶ For this dissertation, I define ethnic Dominican as a Dominican national who does not claim Haitian ancestry and ethnic Haitian as a Haitian national whose parents and grandparents are from Haiti (see Martínez 1997).

belief heard in D.R. is that there is no racism in the country and only discrimination based on social class. This narrative, however, disregards the blatant racial discrimination that Black people (both Haitian and Dominican) endure in the country.

The Significance of Studying Gagá, its Music, and its Community

The printed press and other media often promote secular and religious festivities associated with Semana Santa that reflect the elite's preferences. Very commonly, newspapers and cable TV advertisements portray the preferred activities that Dominicans from all economic backgrounds commonly undertake during this holiday season: festivities of the Catholic church and families going to the beach and rivers on day trips to spend time off with loved ones. Retail stores of all kinds capitalize on this holiday theme and offer sales on goods useful for beach and river trips. Newspapers fill up their space with these offers and advertisements that promote vacationing. Barely included, however, are reports on the processions of Gagá that are so ubiquitous in various regions of the country; Gagá groups take over the landscape of many towns.

I consider Gagá a tradition that is visible yet invisible. That is, the procession is considerably noticeable in the streets, while it is a tradition from a community that is continually excluded and which the elite and the authorities continue to belittle. Gagá processions take up considerable physical and audible space. The procession is large and loud. Although Gagá groups take to the streets of towns around the country every year, they remain at the fringes of society. As an object of study, Gagá illustrates how a disenfranchised community responds to discriminatory policies and continuous scapegoating. Even though the Gagá procession does not explicitly

engage in politics, community members are making use of their tradition to challenge the authorities and address social inequalities. The study of discourses about Gagá from within the community and from outside of it, broadens our understanding of the harmful effects of historical Othering and racialization of music and religious traditions. Studying how a community and its musical traditions are affected by state politics might widen the perspective on the negative effects they have in other sociopolitical contexts.

When Dominican politicians and public figures convey their concerns in the media regarding immigrants, they most often imply issues with Haitian immigration. This blatant racist anti-immigration stance that targets Haitian immigrants and affects Black Dominicans becomes apparent when state agencies carry out raids aimed at people of darker skin. When officials debate about the overuse of public resources (especially the health sector), they particularly refer to Haitian immigrants. In the last decade, the influx of Venezuelan immigrants (of which a high percentage are lighter skin) has significantly risen, and their presence notably increased in businesses and public areas. The same conversations that surround the “problema haitiano” are usually not made about other immigrant groups.

In this work, I explore the discourse surrounding Gagá and Vodou that outsiders (specifically newspaper writers) and insiders (religious leaders and band members) create to discuss these traditions with the public (in the newspapers, on YouTube videos, and in public events). In the context of a history of elite anti-Haitian discourses, I delve into how insiders make use of their discourse about Gagá and Vodou to fight against discrimination and dispel harmful stereotypes about their

community. By examining these discourses, I identify correlations between them and significant socio-political moments in the D.R. More broadly, the observations I make concerning how Gagá and Vodou are portrayed and discussed relate to issues of ethno-national identity, the racialization of Haitian immigrants, and the marginalization of Dominicans of Haitian ancestry in the D.R.

In this current sociopolitical climate, with the resurgence of anti-Haitian political leaders and xenophobic discourse in the media, research on topics and communities that are the targets of overt discrimination and marginalizing policies is vital. With this project I join the critics of exclusionary policies and of the state that discriminates against a vulnerable sector of the population in the D.R. Given the ongoing mass deportations and the legal limbo in which many people find themselves as a consequence of the 2013 ruling, conducting research on the community and its expressive traditions, while it may not directly benefit them, might have an indirect impact on the community. I see my project as a text that might be of use to institutions and individuals who work with Haitian Dominican communities to better their quality of life of people and advocate for inclusive policies.

Methodology

The primary sources I examine in the project are a combination of interviews (both individual and in group) I conducted either in person or remotely via video and phone call, printed and online press articles, and publicly available online YouTube videos. Between 2017 and 2022, I conducted over 40 interviews. Starting in 2020, I created a collection of sources of the printed press from national archives of the Dominican Republic and those publicly available online. The online videos are a

selection of YouTube videos produced and published by Jovanny on his channel Jovanny Ghetto Gagá. I conducted in-person interviews in the summers of 2017, 2018, and 2019. In 2020, due to the Covid-19 pandemic and health policies, I found myself having to conduct interviews over the phone, via text messaging, or via Zoom. Because of the technological limitations of many of the potential interviewees I faced some complications in conducting interviews. Additionally, instead of meeting people for the first time in person to ask for an eventual interview, I started to do so over the phone, which, I believe, created a challenge to getting acceptance and in building rapport with those who agreed to be interviewed. In summer 2021, at the time when a large percentage of the population both in the U.S. and the D.R. was no longer in pandemic conditions, I went back and conducted a handful of in-person interviews. Given the conditions at the time, I was able to feel more at ease with regard to the safety of interviewees and myself, and the ethics of navigating a pandemic. The wide variety of sources I have gathered for this dissertation allow me to paint a broad picture of the ideas that circulate both inside and outside the community regarding Gagá and Vodou.

I made my first visit to a batey in 2017 with Wendy Osirus, a social worker and immigration advocate based in Santiago de lo Caballeros, my hometown. I was initially put in touch with Wendy via my aunt, Mildred D. Mata, who is also a social worker. Wendy and I travelled to Batey Baraguana, which was at least at that time one of the bateyes to which Wendy's organization, MONDHA (Movimiento por los Derechos Humanos, la Paz y la Justicia Global), provided services. My second visit to a batey was to La Ceja, which is home to the Gagá group that I most often discuss.

Scholar and musician Edis Sánchez, who has also conducted fieldwork in La Ceja for his academic and artistic work, drove me to the batey and introduced me to Tatá, the religious leader of the group. The following summer in 2018, I returned to the two bateyes and conducted interviews with individuals whom I was put in touch with by others I met the year before. In addition to interviews in bateyes, I also spoke with scholars who have written on Gagá, such as Dagoberto Tejeda, musicians like José Duluc, and other Gagá advocates who are from outside the community but who have developed strong bonds with various groups of Gagá. I travelled between La Ceja and Baraguana on multiple occasions as well as to other towns in which members of these groups resided. Via the scholar Carlos Andújar, I met and interviewed the religious leader Papito from Básima, Villa Altagracia. Likewise, I met and interviewed another Gagá leader from Haina, Guigo, to whom I was introduced to by Marino Brito Guillen, a friend of my uncle, Julio Mejía.

I was able to document Gagá bands performing and leading processions multiple times between 2019 and 2020. My first experience witnessing and documenting a Gagá procession was in 2019. I followed the procession of the Gagá group La Ceja for two days and also documented the activities of two other Gagá groups at a town center. In this trip, I documented La Ceja as the group navigated the neighborhoods of the city of Higüey. In a similar short trip in the summer of the same year, I interviewed two of the coordinators of La Ceja: Pirulo and María. In January of 2019, I provided the funds for a mock Vodou ceremony with religious leader Papito in which the Gagá group from Básima performed both for the ceremony and a mock procession.

While I interviewed gagaseros from various regions and Gagá ensembles, a large portion of the interviews and conversations that I draw from are with members of La Ceja Gagá group. This group has a long history of welcoming outsiders who had become heavily involved with the group by attending the procession every year, initiating as dancers, and playing in the band. Musicians and Gagá advocates, José Duluc and Roldán Marmol, are two of the many Dominicans without a familial relationship to La Ceja who became members of the group for some time. In this sense, La Ceja is an “unconventional” Gagá group compared to a “typical” one in which members have a connection to the batey because of family or geographical proximity. Under the auspice of Roldán Marmol and other artists from Santo Domingo, La Ceja was a beneficiary of a series of fundraising concerts called “Artistas por El Gagá” held every year for over a decade starting in the mid-1990s in the capital city.

In 2020, I planned to go back to the Dominican Republic to finish compiling my primary sources for six months from February to August. A handful of weeks after I arrived, the Dominican government issued a lockdown and curfew. The policies to mitigate the covid-19 pandemic stalled my research for a couple of months, and what I was able to accomplish in the remainder of my trip was much more reduced than originally planned. During the lockdown, I conducted multiple interviews via zoom and phone calls with members of La Ceja. Around mid-June, after the government had relaxed the lockdown policies, the national archives opened, only allowing access to their digitized documents.

Most of my archival work was focused at the Archivo General de la Nación (the national archives) of the Dominican Republic located in Santo Domingo, the capital city, where I spent six weeks going through the digitized newspapers, mainly those of national reach but also including minor publications. My method consisted of going through the publications from as far back as the 1960s, after the longest dictatorship in the country, around the dates to Semana Santa. I would look at the newspapers from about a week prior to the beginning of Holy week to a few days after Easter Sunday, depending on availability. Given the sanitary regulations due to the covid-19 pandemic, I only had access to the documents already digitized by the archives. The public did not have access to the original sources. As I browsed each newspaper along the years around the same time each year, I looked for any articles, notes, and writings that mentioned Gagá, Vodou, Haitian immigrants, folklore, traditional music, or other related terms. From the search at the archives, I was able to gather over a dozen articles that were either centered on Gagá or Vodou or mentioned it in passing as part of main point. Another two dozen of articles were related to the sugarcane industry or Haitian immigration. These provide a more holistic sample of the type of articles that major newspapers would publish around Semana Santa each year. A smaller portion of primary sources from the printed press were collected from the Fondo Fradique Lizardo del Folklore Dominicano, located at the Mediateca of Centro León, city of Santiago. This fund includes a plethora of documents created and collected by Dominican folklorist Fradique Lizardo in the 1970s and 1980s. I found a handful of newspaper articles from those decades that report on Gagá.

As for the online newspapers and printed press articles, I searched on Google.com using key terms that included Gagá, Vodou, haitianos, inmigración, brujería, folclor, folklore, folklore, hechicería, procesión, semana santa, and inmigrantes, among others. For each search, I combined Gagá, Vodou, and “republica dominicana” with the other terms. For each search I went through all the tabs that Google provided until arriving to repetitions. After opening all tabs, I would save as PDF those texts and sources that were relevant and related my search. From this method I compiled 143 digital sources. Some of these are newspaper articles that are also found in the printed editions of national newspapers as well as sources only found online. Many were also re-posts from websites that replicated the stories found in national and regional print newspapers. Others were anything from blog posts to short mentions of Gagá in non-media websites. Many of these are press articles that discuss Gagá as activities that occur during Semana Santa like those discussed from the earlier period. Others are notes that alert about incidents reported by police that are related to the procession or Vodou ceremonies.

Some of the knowledge about ADOGA comes from two WhatsApp group chats, which I was invited to join in 2020 after the second meeting of the organization (discussed in Chapter 4). Originally, ADOGA’s chat was called Asociación de Dueños de Gagá, which was a provisional name. In early 2021, because of differences among constituents, another group chat was created and became the chat in which the main communication about meetings, gatherings, and procedures were communicated. After the organization made ADOGA its official name, the previous chat was re-named ADOGA and it is now the main channel of communication. Along

all of this, members in both chats made use of the chats simultaneously, that is, major information that was shared in one group was also shared in the other and vice-versa. As soon as I was added to the group in 2020, Ramón Britis introduced me in the chat, which includes other Gagá enthusiasts and advocates like me. Given that the narrative I built about the groups is partly sourced from the chat, in which not all members are aware of my position as researcher nor have consented to have their information made public, I do not disclose their names. When I mention specific names, those are from individuals who I interviewed or from whom information is found publicly online.

Jovanny Guetto Gagá is a YouTube channel dedicated to content about Gagá and Vodou in which the creator, Jovanny, documents Gagá processions each year, conducts interviews with Vodou leaders and community members, and expresses his opinions on a variety of issues pertaining to Gagá and Vodou in vlog-style videos. To select the videos, I browsed the entire channel from its first video uploaded to the last one at the time of the collection in early 2023. While browsing the titles, I made note of those that caught my attention and those that stood out based on the significantly higher number of views. I selected 30 videos which I analyzed based on the content they offered about the ways interviewees talked about Gagá and Vodou, their relationship with the community, and their experience as members of the Gagá community.

Summary of Chapters

Chapter 2 analyzes written sources that address Gagá and Vodou. I examine how journalists and other newspaper writers have reported on, described, and

portrayed Gagá and Vodou in the printed press and online news outlets. In the chapter I pinpoint correlates between significant moments in Dominican history and shifts in the characterization of Gagá in the press. Peña Gómez, a highly popular Black politician of Haitian ancestry, was victim of dirty counter-campaigning during his presidential run in the mid-1990s in which political opponents questioned his nationality by depicting him as Haitian. In the second half of the decade, politicians implemented neoliberal economic policies that greatly affected the Haitian Dominican population in the 1990s. These historical moments mark a time in which press reports on Gagá more closely approximate the experiences of Gagá practitioners. The set of sources I examine are divided into two groups: the Early Period (1979-1991) and the Late Period (1998-2022). While similar in many aspects, I tease out the differences in which journalists narrate and characterize the community of gagaseros.

After exploring the characterization of Gagá by outsiders, I turn to the voices of insiders, that is, community members. I pay attention to how these individuals define and present Gagá. In Chapter 3, using the same questions from chapter 2, I examine the discourse on Gagá and Vodou of my interlocutors and how they discuss the people making Gagá. Drawing from field research interviews and online public videos, I lay out the critiques that some have toward the reportage of Gagá and about problems with local authorities. My interlocutors denounce inconsistent policing of Gagá processions. These irregular police practices, which I consider problematic, are part of anti-Haitian policies in the D.R. Furthermore, from my conversation with gagaseros, I identify changes in how they practice Gagá. In the last couple of decades,

fewer Gagá members continue to make religious commitments with their Gagá group and more leaders of Gagá groups face the need to provide musicians and dancers with monetary compensation. I suggest that the significant political and economic moments of the 1990s discussed in chapter 2, have played a significant role in such change of tendency within the community.

Many community members are taking the initiative to address and work against the negative perception of Gagá in the printed press and the harmful practices of local authorities. In chapter 4, I tell the stories of two organizations that have recently formed and are working to change the public's perception about Gagá and Vodou, and to seek greater political representation. ADOGA, an association that seeks to ameliorate the encounters between Gagá groups and the police, represents Gagá groups at the national level before government authorities. Jovanny Guetto, the creator of a YouTube channel dedicated Gagá and Vodou, shares similar goals to ADOGA and produces videos to document Gagá and interview community members and Gagá leaders talk about their experience with Gagá and to foster solidarity among the community. In both platforms, asserting pride in the Black identity of the community is at the core of their struggle to combat anti-Haitianism and present Gagá in a positive light.

Chapter 2: Characterization of Gagá in the Printed and Online Press, 1979-2022

Columnist Manolo Nova wrote an opinion piece in newspaper *El Día* titled “El Gagá no es dominicano” (Gagá is not Dominican) in 2017. Without having to read the piece, the title gives away the central argument that the author puts forward. He asserts that because Gagá originated in Haiti, it is “una manifestación cultural 100% ajena a nuestro país” (a cultural manifestation 100% alien to our country) (Nova 2017). To support his statement, Nova cites Edwin Paraison, a former Haitian ambassador, who published a piece two years prior in *El Día*, in which he stated “no existe sin embargo ninguna duda respecto a la llegada a la República Dominicana de esa tradición popular a través de la migración haitiana relacionada en principio al corte de caña” (there are no doubts about the arrival of this traditions [Gagá] to the Dominican Republic related to Haitian immigration and to the sugar cane industry). Additionally, Nova explains that “Dominicans of his generation” probably first became aware of “a dance called Gagá” in the late 1970s. By suggesting that Gagá is completely alien to the D.R. and only heard of some decades ago, Nova is refuting Gagá practitioners’ belonging to the nation. Immigration advocates and activists who work for the inclusion of Dominicans of Haitian ancestry have been struggling against narratives, such as Nova’s, which have marginalized and alienated Dominicans of Haitian ancestry for decades. Sensationalist reports on the so-called “el problema haitiano” (“the Haitian Problem,” a phrase often used by politicians to refer to the Haitian immigration issue in the country), which vilifies the Haitian

Dominican community and permeates the media, are present in the way journalists have characterized Gagá and *Vodou*.

I examine press notes and articles in national-reaching newspapers and smaller online news outlets (published between 1979 and 2022) that reveal how the media portrays Gagá, Vodou, and Dominicans of Haitian origin. Not surprisingly, all writings publicly available on the internet that mention and describe Gagá and Vodou reflect an outsider perspective, rather than the view of practitioners. I classify articles of the printed and online press in two chronological groups, which are separated by what scholars consider a major development in Dominican politics. For instance, the presidential campaign of the first Black Dominican of Haitian ancestry to run for the position, Francisco Peña Gómez—who was extremely popular but was subject to a racist counter-campaign during the first half of the decade of the 1990s and, as a consequence, lost the elections in the run-off because of a political pact by opposition parties—occurred in the gap of time between the two groups of sources (see Sagás 2000).

Leading up to the presidential elections of 1994, opposition parties portrayed Peña Gómez as a Haitian national who had a strong allegiance to the Haitian state and would prioritize its interests over those of the Dominican Republic (Sagás 2000:107). One of the major political parties of the opposition produced a television advertisement that included footage of Peña Gómez participating in a religious ceremony hosted by a Brazilian healer, who was portrayed as a friend of Peña Gómez (Sagás 2000: 108). Toward the end of the clip, Peña Gómez is shown behaving in a manner that suggests spirit possession. This shows the intention to associate Peña

Gómez with the Haitian state and with activities (in this case, a non-Catholic religious ceremony) coded as non-Dominican, Black, and Haitian. In *Coloring the Nation*, David Howard (2001) discusses how many Dominicans have remembered the controversies surrounding Peña Gómez's presidential campaign. Howard provides extensive evidence that a large number of Dominicans believed at the time that Peña Gómez was "too black" to be president of the Dominican Republic. International press reported that at a rally prior to the elections, Peña Gómez "proudly referred to his dark skin, pointed out racist remarks by his opponents, and urged the mostly mixed-race and black 'impoverished masses' to vote for him" (Latin American Data Base 1996). As Howard and other scholars have documented, Peña Gómez was subject to one of the most racially charged countercampaigns in the history of Dominican politics.

The results of the 1994 elections led to a political crisis that resulted in a second presidential election only two years later in 1996. Because of pressure from various sectors and innumerable accusations of electoral fraud, the Junta Central Electoral (central electoral commission) admitted that the slight margin of Balaguer over Peña Gómez in the results of the 1994 elections was due to irregularities (Betances 2005). The commission's acknowledgement, which proved the election results to be unreliable, led the leaders of the major parties to sign a political agreement that called for a new presidential election in 1996. In the first round of the 1996 elections, Peña Gomez finished in first position with over 45 percent of the votes (and seven points ahead of the second-place candidate, Leonel Fernandez, of the PLD) but did not attain the required 50 percent plus 1 to win. Leading up to the

run-off elections, the two major opposing parties to the PRD (the PLD and the PRSC, led by Juan Bosch and Joaquín Balaguer respectively)⁷, signed a political pact in which Balaguer supported the PLD's candidate, who defeated Peña Gómez. Balaguer and Leonel Fernández continued the anti-Haitian rhetoric against Peña Gómez through the 1996 elections. Additionally, before the elections, the Comisión Nacional para los Derechos Humanos (the national human rights commission) accused the government of “violating international treaties and conventions through arbitrary deportations” citing that over 350,000 undocumented immigrants resided in the D.R., but only those of “black skin” were deported (Latin American Data Base 1996).

Right around the same time as this political development, merengue musicians incorporated images and musical elements from Afro-descendant musics, including Gagá and dance of Cocolos. Juan Luis Guerra, who at that time had come to fame in the Dominican Republic as one of the most internationally recognized musicians from the country, released the music video “A Pedir su mano” in which a Gagá band and Cocolos dancers were prominently featured and the sugarcane fields appear in the background⁸. Other well-known musicians, such as Kinito Méndez, combined merengue with palos—an Afro-descendant music ensemble of the D.R. commonly used in various religious ceremonies—and incorporated imagery and lyrics related to Dominican *Vudú* (Tallaj-García 2015). In the early 2000s, other merengue musicians incorporated musical elements of Gagá music in merengue de calle songs. Tallaj-

⁷ The PRD presented itself as a progressive party in contrast to the long-established conservative politics of the PRSC and to the more-recently founded, moderate PLD.

⁸ Juan Luis Guerra drew inspiration from other musicians that implemented such approach decades prior, like Luis Días (former member of Convite), who fused rock music with Afro-descendant music traditions, but did not receive the same exposure as Juan Luis Guerra.

García analyzes hit songs by Omega in which the harmonic and rhythmic foundations of Gagá are woven in with merengue. Additionally, a song called “Gagá electrónico” was prominently featured in *colmado*s and street parties in which all these songs (Guerra’s and Mendez’s) were popular.

Following the 1996 elections the Dominican Republic saw the exponential growth of what became the nation’s number one source of revenue today—the all-inclusive resorts tourism industry. Its growth, along with the decline of the sugar cane industry, shifted the Haitian immigrant labor force from sugarcane fields to beach towns and cities. Haitian immigrants and Haitian Dominicans looked for jobs in hotels and construction sites around the country (Jayaram 2010). I interpret this wave of rural-to-urban migration as a one of the reasons why the printed and online press have paid greater attention to Gagá in recent decades. With this reading, my aim is not to demonstrate a causality or extent of impact. Rather, I pinpoint a correlation between the post-1996 rise in news reports on Gagá, and a shift in Haiti to Dominican Republic migration patterns fueled by changes in the economy.

Governments and private sectors have utilized Afro-descendant traditions for the economic benefits of the tourism industry. For example, in Cuba, elite and government authorities had banned, and later co-opted traditions associated with the African diaspora for the benefit of the private sector between the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century. Because of anti-Black attitudes that attributed violence and issues of public safety to *comparsas*, authorities suspended the permission for these groups to circulate freely in streets. In *Nationalizing Blackness*, Robin Moore (1997) documents the prohibition and subsequent legalization of

comparsas in public space in Cuba during a period in which middle- and upper-class white Cubans held much of the political power. In Cuba, according to Moore, the term comparsa has been used to describe Afro-Cuban carnival street bands typically organized in economic and socially marginalized barrios of Havana. After the war of independence, middle-class and liberal intellectuals increasingly perceived comparsas and other African-derived cultural expression as “diabolical” and “disgusting.” This rhetoric, Moore argues, “can be understood as part of a larger movement to modify Cuba culturally and to permit the dissemination of only those images of the nation that conformed to a middle-class European norm” (71). Due to economic and political reasons, in 1937 local authorities lifted the ban of comparsas and allowed them to be integrated to carnival celebrations after three decades of prohibition. The international popularization of Cuban popular music genres along with comparsas attracted tourism, which brought necessary revenue to the Cuban state. Similarly, in the Dominican Republic, Gagá groups have been featured in events catered to foreign tourists (mostly from North America and Europe) to disseminate the idea of cultural uniqueness to Western audiences. Alegría Pons (1993) references a handful of occasions that took place between 1989 and 1992 in which Gagá groups from La Romana performed at beach clubs.

The first period of sources, hereafter Early Period, spans about 12 years (from 1979 to 1991). In my search for sources, I skimmed through newspapers starting in the second half of the 1960s, but 1979 is the earliest year with a publication that mentions Gagá or Vodou of the articles I found. Among the online sources, which I refer to as the Late Period, the earliest writing is from 1998 and the most recent from

2022. Even though the online collecting approach for the Late Period might lend itself to finding more sources than the National Archives, the relatively low number of sources found prior to 1991 reflects the lack of attention that the printed press had given Gagá and other African-derived traditions.

My main goal in considering these articles is to shed light on the ways that writers for the printed press, whose views usually reflect the perspective of the dominant sectors of society, have characterized Gagá over the last few decades. Based on my analysis, I identify major trends and shifts in how newspaper writers have portrayed Gagá and the Haitian Dominican community. While doing so, I assess the claims these authors make and consider the implications for the Haitian Dominican community and discourses on national identity.

To analyze these articles, I ask three guiding questions: 1) how do these authors describe the tradition of Gagá? 2) how do these authors portray Gagá practitioners? and 3) how do these authors characterize the national origin of Gagá? These questions allow me to frame the reading of the sources and offer a way to extract information in an organized manner. By looking at the two groups of sources—the Early Period (1979-1991) and Late Period (1998-2022)—I make two general observations that reveal contrasting talking points found in the sources. The articles of the first group frequently mention the Haitian origin of Gagá and sometimes acknowledge that its practitioners include Dominicans of non-Haitian descent, but for the most part refrain from characterizing the tradition as Dominican or Haitian Dominican. In the second group, while some articles also recognize the

Haitian ancestry of Gagá, many writers characterize the tradition as Haitian Dominican.

I pinpoint two other differences: authors in the Late Period discuss racial discrimination and expand on the history of Gagá. I suggest that the shift of the immigrant workforce to the construction and tourism industries might have contributed to the increased attention newspaper writers have paid to the conversation about racial discrimination in recent decades. Even though issues about discrimination and racism were not at the center of political conversations and talking points in the media in the 1980s, the lack of coverage to the situation of Haitian immigrants does not reflect the reality they were facing throughout that period given their precarious living and economic conditions in bateyes. Moreover, compared to the Early Period, writers in the Late Period dedicate more space to providing historical background on Gagá. The writers provide more specific details about the origin of Gagá, rather than simply indicating that the tradition comes from Haiti. The willingness to include more extensive historical background and discuss how Gagá practitioners experienced racial discrimination is a significant shift between the two period of sources.

I correlate the major political and economic developments in Dominican history discussed above to the set of observations I make on how newspaper writers portray Gagá and its community. I propose that these pivotal developments of the 1990s (the presidential election of Peña Gómez, the economic shift, and the rural-to-urban migration pattern) influenced how Gagá was represented in both groups of sources. My intention in this chapter is to elucidate these overarching trends, to show

the changes between the Early and Late periods, and to suggest the possible factors that impact the shift in the portrayal of Gagá in the media over time.

It certainly is not surprising that Gagá is underrepresented in the printed press in the Early Period. The lack of attention to Gagá speaks volumes to the historical marginalization and the discrimination that people of darker skin color in the Dominican Republic have faced and continue to endure, regardless of religious and musical affiliations. Commonly too, the media is populated by narratives about Catholic rituals and traditions of Semana Santa (Holy Week) and by the commercialization of typical leisure family activities, such as spending time at the beach. The remainder of the chapter is divided in two major sections, the first devoted to the Early Period, and the following to the Late Period.

Early Period: Portrayal of Gagá and Vodou in the Printed Press (1979-1991)

The political scene of the Dominican Republic during the decade of the 1980s is marked by a transition from the oppressive government of Joaquín Balaguer and his authoritarian Bonapartist governance (Benito Sánchez 2012) to a series of democratically elected presidencies. After the twelve-year presidency of Joaquín Balaguer (1966-1978), a period that was characterized by a continuation of Trujillo's dictatorial practices and by the persecution and assassination of political dissidents, the presidential election in 1978 saw the rise of a new political party to power, the *Partido Revolucionario Dominicano* (Dominican Revolutionary Party; hereafter PRD). As candidates for the PRD, Antonio Guzmán and Salvador Jorge Blanco won the presidential elections of 1978 and 1982, respectively. Prior to 1978, the PRD had gained popularity as a left-leaning party that contrasted with the conservative politics

of Balaguer. Peña Gómez became one of the party's top leaders after Juan Bosch, the founder of the organization, left the PRD because of "political and ideological reasons" in 1973 (Betances 2010:43). By 1986, internal divisions within the PRD favored Joaquín Balaguer, who was president again until 1996. During all these presidencies, government authorities paid little attention to the marginal condition of the Haitian Dominican community.

In 1979, June Rosenberg published the first scholarly study of Gagá. Her book became widely influential among scholars, folklorists, and enthusiasts of Afro-descendant music and religion. One of her most salient arguments is that Gagá is a Dominican tradition rather than a Haitian one. Her writing, however, seems not to have been as influential in newspaper writers from the Early Period. Only one of these authors cites June Rosenberg in 1980; the remainder of articles between 1983 and 1991 do not cite this work.

As mentioned earlier, the results of my search for newspaper articles that feature Gagá (or even mentioned it in passing) demonstrates the media's lack of attention to Gagá. In addition to the scarce consideration in the press, newspaper writers also paint Gagá as secondary vis-à-vis other Easter-time activities. One example of this is a brief newspaper note published on 23 March 1989. Titled "Para los que se quedan..." (for those who are staying in town), Ana Mitila Lora writes about activities that families that decide not to travel for the holidays can undertake around the city (Lora 1989). The writer suggests activities, such as strolling along the Malecón (the waterfront), or visiting the Jardín Botánico (botanical garden), or spending time at Zona Colonial. These are well-known family-friendly sites in the

capital city. Among her recommendations is to go experience the Gagá of batey Palavé, which is in the outskirts of the city. The caption of a black and white picture of a male Gagá dancer that accompanies the text reads “Entre las opciones que los entornos de la ciudad de Santo Domingo oferta está el Ga-Ga del batey de Palavé” (among the options surrounding the city of Santo Domingo are the Gagá group of Palavé batey). Ana Mitila Lora’s article is an example of someone considering Gagá as an alternative activity to mainstream ones for outsiders (in this case, people from the capital city). While all those options are secondary for the urban elite, Gagá is not an alternative activity for people in the batey, rather the norm. In the little attention that Gagá receives in the media, newspaper writers report Gagá as a minor activity compared to Catholic rituals and familial vacationing.

How do these writers define and describe Gagá?

Folklore and Tradition

Some of the journalists define Gagá primarily as a religious activity. The term “ritual” and “rito” are used in two of the sources. The earliest article, from 1979 by José Andrés Pena, describes Gagá as a “ritual de semana santa” (ritual of Holy Week) and mentions that it is a “rito estrechamente vinculado al vudú” (a rite closely associated with Vodou) (Pena 1979). Similarly, Biaggi, in 1989, discusses the “ritual del Ga-ga” and states that Gagá is a “syncretic” tradition that combines Christian and “pagan beliefs” (Biaggi 1989). In this way, these two authors spotlight the religious aspects of Gagá. In the article from 1980, López refers to Gagá as a “comportamiento mágico religioso” (magic-religious behavior) and acknowledges Rosenberg’s work (López 1980). López also draws a comparison between Gagá and two other traditions,

Los Morenos and Los Congos de Villa Mella, which are Afro-diasporic music genres associated with distinct religious ceremonies in the country and performed in celebrations associated with the devotion to Catholic deities. Scholars often couple together these celebrations as expressions of “religión popular” (folk religion), that is, of religious rituals associated with the African diaspora that incorporate elements of Catholicism but are not officially recognized by the Catholic Church.

In the Early Period, two journalists who report on Gagá also write articles on “folkloric” activities from around the country that take place during Semana Santa. In several articles, writers classify Gagá as a folkloric tradition that is part of a group of customs associated with Easter. The 1989 article describes a number of “eventos folklóricos de Semana Santa” (folkloric events of Semana Santa) (Biaggi 1989), in which the writer includes Gagá alongside Los Cachuas del Cabral⁹ (which is also included by writers in other articles). Ana Mitila Lora, in the article in which she discusses “ritos y magia en viernes santo” (rites and magic in Good Friday), describes a number of activities commonly practiced in the Easter season—though excluding Gagá—in the countryside of the nation (Lora 1989). Lora refers to these activities as part of “nuestro folklore” (our folklore). For the author, “religiosidad popular” (popular religion) transmits “un matiz mágico” (a magical tinge) to Good Friday. Even though Lora does not describe Gagá in this article, she includes a picture of Los Cachúas de Cabral, which in other articles is described as an Afro-Dominican tradition related to Gagá and part of Dominican folklore.

⁹ During Semana Santa, the carnival character Los Cachúas take on the streets in various towns of the Southern region of the D.R.

As mentioned earlier, journalists often present Gagá as one of many yearly activities, whether secular or religious, that happen around Semana Santa. Gagá is generally presented as an activity that is not well known (that is, to the dominant sector). For the writer of the article “Semana Santa: La cara oculta de la cultura popular,” as its title suggests, Gagá is part of “la cara oculta” (hidden face) of the celebrations around Semana Santa (Herrera 1991). This is particularly significant because it highlights the peripheral status of Gagá and other traditions deemed similar. On April 6th, 1980, López writes about Gagá, which he refers to as one of three “manifestaciones” (manifestations or demonstrations) of “caracter primitivo” (primitive character) (López 1980). López explains that in some of his previous articles, he discussed five different Semana Santa traditions, two of which he considers “official” in contrast to “primitive” like Gagá. These two other “manifestaciones” are Los Gachos de Cabral and Los Morenos de Villa Mella (the latter an Afro-diasporic tradition).

Because of the carnivalesque performativity of Gagá, other writers (including scholars such as Dagoberto Tejeda) have discussed Gagá as part of carnival traditions. For instance, Miguel Polo, in his 1983 article, refers to Gagá as the “tradicional carnaval de Gagá” (Gagá traditional carnival) (Polo 1983). Although the carnival season traditionally precedes the Lenten season, the Dominican carnival period does not follow the Catholic calendar. Because of this, Gagá processions often coincide or closely follow the carnival season.

The allusions to folk religion and folklore that commonly appear in newspaper accounts of Gagá and Vodou diminish their legitimacy as religious expressions.

Notably, journalists do not refer to Catholicism as a “folk religion,” but rather as “religion.” In this sense, the use of “folklore” relegates Gagá to a realm of superstition. Regarding Gagá and other Afro-Dominican religious expressions merely as folklore and not institutionalized religions such as Catholicism reinforces the notion that because Vodou is not a state-recognized institution it is less legitimate than the Church. Furthermore, journalists labeling Gagá folklore can potentially be paradoxical: while the tradition is not described as Dominican, equating Gagá to the “folk” realm implies Gagá is a tradition that is part of the folklore of the Dominican Republic. Even when Gagá and Vodou are not directly considered Dominican traditions, placing them in the same general category as other Dominican folkloric traditions implies, probably inadvertently, that they are Dominican.

Where do these journalists say gaga originated?

Only three of the journalists in this group of sources mention the origin of Gagá. Martín López, in a 1980 article in *El Nacional*, states that Gagá is first an African tradition and secondarily one of Haitian origin (López 1980). This author, like others, specifies that Gagá is from the bateyes. With that statement, given the association of bateyes with Haitian immigrant workers, the author is clearly suggesting that Gagá is Haitian. This is the only article from the Early Period in which the writer explicitly acknowledges the African origin of Gagá. He does not, however, directly mention anything related to the national origin of the tradition. In the article, López cites Rosenberg, which may or may not indicate that he recognizes that Gagá is a Dominican custom. Another writer, Ruth Herrera, references

sociologist Dagoberto Tejeda in her 1991 article. In it, Herrera states that Gagá comes from “folklore hatiano,” but according to Tejeda, it has become a Dominican tradition (Herrera 1991). The 1989 Hoy article by JA Biaggi, says that Gagá has “adaptado su propia personalidad” (adapted its own identity) in the Dominican Republic (Biaggi 1989). This statement indicates that the author considers Gagá to be Dominican. Even though this piece does not directly indicate the tradition’s national origin, it implies that, by the time the article was published, Gagá had not only adopted new characteristics in the D.R., but also formed part of the nation’s cultural patrimony.

Even though June Rosenberg published her book—in which she defined Gagá as a Dominican tradition—right around the onset of this period of sources, her main argument does not appear to have influenced journalists of the Early Period. This is clear by the number of articles in which the authors characterize Gagá either as a Haitian tradition or as a folkloric tradition that takes place in the Dominican Republic without considering it may be Dominican, at least not explicitly. The historical connection to Africa that Martín López highlights in his piece could be interpreted as a way to distance Gagá from Dominican culture given that, in the D.R., Haiti is coded as Black and the dominant national discourse is Eurocentric. In this sense, to link Gagá’s origin to Africa might strengthen the position that Gagá is not Dominican.

How do these writers describe the people making Gagá?

Gagá practitioners (Dominicans or Haitians)

While the consensus in this set of sources is that Haitian individuals dance and play Gagá during Semana Santa, several of these articles mention that Dominicans

get involved in the festivities as well. Authors of these articles acknowledge that, because of living in proximity and marriage, Dominicans live in bateyes and work in the sugarcane industry alongside Haitians. Other articles, while stating that most of the members are Haitian, mention that many Dominicans who participate in Gagá processions are of Haitian heritage. Notably, the authors of these articles do not question the Dominicanness of these individuals. These writers consider participants of Gagá Dominicans who have all the rights, rather than Haitians who possess work permits or are undocumented.

Among the articles considered for this section, the identity of Gagá practitioners varies from author to author. Many journalists suggest that the members of Gagá groups are primarily Haitian. The writer of the earliest article from 1979 in *El Caribe*, José Andrés Pena, makes it clear that the tradition he is describing is fundamentally Haitian: he says Haitians and Haitian descendants celebrate Gagá. According to Pena, the dance is “basically” (básicamente) Haitian (Pena 1979). At the same time, the author states that “dominicanos se han adaptado bien a él” (Dominicans have adapted well to it [the dance]). The article continues clarifying that these people are Dominicans who “conviven estrachamente con los haitianos” (live closely with Haitians). In the 1983 article in *El Nacional*, Miguel Polo describes the people in a similar way. He says Gagá is made by “dominicanos y haitianos residentes en los centrales azucareros” (Dominicans and Haitians residing in the sugar mills) (Polo 1983). While both writers acknowledge the presence of Dominicans in Gagá, they differentiate Dominicans from Haitians. In that way, the writers maintain the ethnic-national distinction between the two groups. The authors imply that the

Dominicans are not of Haitian ancestry. By recognizing both nationalities, these writers emphasize the differences between the two groups of people.

The 1991 article published in *El Nacional* by Rafael Núñez describes Gagá participants as Haitians and *rayanos* and recognizes that Dominicans also become involved in the tradition (Núñez 1991). Rayanos describes children of Haitian immigrants who are born and raised in the Dominican Republic. The term comes from the word *raya*, which many use to mean border. This alludes to being of or from around the border area of Haiti and the Dominican Republic. In this sense, “rayano” is commonly used in the D.R. to refer to people of Haitian ancestry (Victoriano-Martínez 2014). Núñez also states that Gagá is from the bateyes and describes the population as “colonias haitianas.” *Colonia* is often used in the Dominican Republic to refer to immigrant communities.

In sum, according to these sources, the participants in Gagá processions include Dominicans of non-Haitian heritage who became involved in the tradition because of familial ties (e.g., marriage) or residency in an area with a large Haitian Dominican population. Journalists do not acknowledge the Dominican citizenship or self-identification of the descendants of sugarcane workers who arrived at the end of the nineteenth century. In their language, these authors imply that the individuals they presume to be Dominican have no Haitian origin. The writers in this group of articles associate Gagá with either the Dominican Republic or Haiti. In this sense, these authors recognize the hybridity of Gagá. With the exception of the earliest article—by José Andrés Peña in 1979—these authors recognize the two nationalities associated with the tradition. Even though only one of the writers references June Rosenberg

without explicitly acknowledging her point that Gagá is a Dominican tradition, their description of people making Gagá seems to have been influenced, to some extent, by her work on Gagá.

Around the time when the latest article of the Early Period was published in 1991, the presidential campaign of Francisco Peña Gómez was in the works. As previously discussed, the next election cycle in the D.R. was to take place three years later in 1994 and then 1996. By 1991, Peña Gómez had been the mayor of Santo Domingo, the capital city, and was well known in politics and the public. During his campaign, Peña Gómez rallied sympathizers with a discourse of progressive politics that challenged those of the conservative government of Balaguer. The PRD presented itself as a party that would favor the interest of the masses rather than the elite. During his political career and presidential runs, Peña Gómez faced much backlash and discrimination that was centered around his Haitian background. Coincidentally, the gap of years between the most recent article of the Early Period (1991) and the first article of the Late Period (1998) falls right during the period of the presidential campaign and the years in which the tourism industry initiated a relatively rapid growth. Meanwhile, the Dominican state distanced itself from the sugarcane industry as it started to decline, and this led braceros (seasonal workers) from bateyes to start looking for jobs outside the fields in towns that had growing hotel markets (Jayaram 2010). During his presidency from 1996 to 2000, Leonel Fernández favored foreign investment and heavily promoted tourism. The government also prioritized private capital and free-trade zones, which are to date, along with tourism, two of the most dynamic economic sectors in the D.R. (Betances

2010). These developments in Dominican history coincide with a noticeable shift in discourse surrounding Gagá in the printed press. The way journalists depict Gagá changed in the following decades.

Late Period: Printed and Online Press, 1998-2022

My reading of the sources from the second group points to a broader acceptance of the argument that Gagá is a Dominican tradition. While the press seems to pay more attention to Gagá and the Haitian Dominican community than occurred in prior decades, articles show that Rosenberg's assertion from the late 1970s has become more influential beyond academic circles. This is also an indication that the work of other scholars, such as Dagoberto Tejeda, who journalists also often cite in this period, has also had an impact in how writers present Gagá. Rosenberg's book was published around the same time as a bulk of work by historians and social scientists both in the Dominican Republic and in the Euro-American academy that address the sugarcane plantation industry and the Haitian immigration. In these works, scholars addressed the exploitation and precarious living conditions of sugarcane workers, among other issues relating to the industry (see Baez Evertz 1986, Hernández et al. 1975, Madruga 1986, Moya Pons 1986, Murphy 1986).

While writers in the Late Period acknowledge that Gagá has become Dominican or that there is a Dominican version of Gagá, the discussion about the legitimacy of Gagá and Vodou as religions is rather similar through the decades. Given the pervasive political power of the Catholic Church and the growing popularity of Evangelical churches in the Dominican Republic, it is not surprising

that the notion of Vodou as merely a religious practice of uneducated Christians or devil worshipers prevails. For instance, newspaper writers continue to describe Gagá as “religión popular” in the Late Period.

The Othering of Gagá and the reporting of popular leisure activities that families undertake during Semana Santa continue to be as common in the Late Period as in the Early Period. Within that frame, journalists who report on these activities and mention Gagá in passing, continue to classify Gagá as a secondary, less popular happening. For instance, the author of the 2006 article titles it “la Otra Semana Santa dominicana” (the other Dominican Holy Week) (Hoy 2006). I see this example as a parallel to “cara oculta” (from the 1991 article by Herrera) and “Para los que se quedan” (by Lora in 1989 short note) in that these writers present Gagá as a lesser known and as the “other” tradition outside the norm, that is, the officially recognized Christian activities. In this sense, even when newspaper writers indicate that this music and dance tradition is part of “folclore dominicano” (Dominican folklore) they place it in the periphery of what is Dominican.

While I indicate that the overall characterization of Gagá in the Late Period is one in which writers tend to abide more to the recent ideas about Gagá, it is in the same period in which voices speak against Gagá publicly in the form of opinion pieces. I found online opinion articles that question the legitimacy of Gagá as a form of religious expression. In addition to Nova’s article (discussed at the beginning of the chapter), two other opinion pieces that I found in the online search present typical anti-Haitian discourses that are ubiquitous in politics. For these authors, the values associated with Gagá are incompatible with those of the D.R. Gagá is completely

foreign and the people practicing it are invading the cultural landscape of the country. As suggestions for solutions, these writers demand that the government authorities and leaders of Christian churches take matters into their hands. These writers highlight what they consider negative traits of Gagá and Haitian Dominican traditions, and thereby disseminate damaging stereotypes.

To drive his point, Manolo Nova makes the unfounded accusation that Gagá groups disrespect the Dominican Republic. He claims that Gagá practitioners used the Dominican flag improperly such as stepping on it and wiping after defecating. Nova indicates that Gagá groups ripped the flag and hang it from trees to symbolize the defeat of the Dominican Republic. Given that, in his view, Gagá is a representation of the “haitianismo” (Haitian essence) that permeates Dominican society, Gagá is also “dislocando la vida y la cultura dominicanas e invadiendo incansable el territorio y las instancias nacionales” (dislocating Dominican life and culture and tirelessly invading the territory and national authorities) (Nova 2017). Since Nova states that God will take care of Gagá, it signals the trope that the Dominican Republic is only a Christian nation in which non-Christian religions are not welcomed. By making such an allusion, it implies that Gagá cannot possibly be Dominican and that it is proof that traditions like Gagá only belong to Haiti. He continues, “Ojalá RD merezca la protección del Todopoderoso y logre sofrenar al Gagá, tradición erótica que ofende nuestra decencia y nuestras virtudes.” (I hope that the DR deserves the protection from the Almighty and gets rid Gagá, which is an erotic tradition that offends our decency and virtues). Nova, moreover, criticizes politicians for failing to educate and defend the nation in accordance with Christian doctrine. Nova is not only putting the

responsibility of molding the nation on politicians but also making a direct reference to the supposed Christian values that characterizes Dominican culture and by which all citizens must abide. In reference to politicians, he says, “vestir trajes de seda sino para educar y defender al país, siempre con arreglo a los valores de la doctrina cristiana” (wearing silk suits but to educate and defend the country, always in accordance with the values of Christian doctrine). Nova’s allusion to protecting the nation implies a threat, one from Haiti and Haitian immigrants that are contaminating the religion of the Dominican Republic.

Camelia Michel, author of an opinion piece in 2017 around Semana Santa titled “Violencia y Gagá en la Semana Santa ¡Que viva la cultura binacional!” (Violence and Gagá on Holy Week. Long live bi-national culture), expresses her disapproval of Gagá and the problems she sees with the mixing of traditions from Haiti and the D.R. (Michel 2017). Given that the title of the piece includes the word “violence,” the title sets a negative tone from the onset. The second half of the title, surrounded by exclamation points, claims to celebrate the “cultura binacional.” This statement, however, reads as sarcasm that reinforces the negative perspective on Gagá. Three online news outlets republished this article, which shows part of the impact and interest the piece generated by other online sites. Michel addresses the problem she sees with Gagá and Vodou as religions. She calls out Catholic priests who despite disagreeing with polytheism and who critique the authorities, fail to publicly call into question Gagá and its practitioners for their practices and beliefs. For the author, the influence of Gagá on Dominicans is a major problem that has been caused by the “transculturation” that primarily affects Dominicans of “extracción

social humilde” (humble origins). The author describes Gagá as “practices that are foreign (*ajenas*) to Dominican culture that generate disturbances and conflict (*enfrentamientos*).” She acknowledges that there are many complaints about Gagá on social media. In order to justify her disapproval of the procession, she describes a number of instances reported in the media in which violent encounters between Gagá groups were described and cited the complaints that residents of a neighborhood had about them.

Plutarco Medina published an opinion piece on *Acento.com*, a progressive online newspaper. The author mentions that the growth of various religions in the D.R. is a product of the “inmigración masiva” (massive immigration) that includes Islam and Gagá, Vodou, and Santería (Medina 2017). The language seems to indicate that the rise of Islam in Haiti is also a factor in the growing practice of Islam in the D.R. The Dominican constitution dictates freedom of religion, explains Medina, but he calls attention to the “entronización” (enthronement) of these Gagá elements in Dominican culture. Citing a report from the Pew Research Center, Medina points out that Islam has been growing in Haiti, reflected by the presence of five mosques by 2012, and that by 2010 around 2000 Islam devotees were present in the Dominican Republic from several nations including Haiti. Medina says he is opposed to the proposal of teaching Haitian Creole in schools because he believes that teaching the neighbor’s country language would contribute nothing to the education system and the profile of the Dominican student. He explains that supporters of it claim economic reasons. To these proposals, Medina wonders whether they are part of the “fusion plan of the island,” which is an idea commonly echoed in the media by public figures

who suggest that unpatriotic people want to unify the two nations into a single island country. Medina portrays Islam as a religion that is too foreign to the culture in the D.R. and thus it is not compatible with the nation. He states that “el islamismo rechaza totalmente la influencia externa y es de manera radical, antagonista a los no musulmanes” (Islam completely rejects external influence and radically antagonizes those are not Muslim). Unlike the other opinion pieces that do not support Gagá, Medina seems to be more careful about his description of the religion and processional tradition, given that he does not use strong words that give a negative light to Gagá or the community.

Medina’s, Michel’s, and Nova’s arguments revolve around the question of cultural difference. Their opinion about Gagá, and their disapproval is justified by the historical narrative of the unreconcilable differences of the two nations that share the Island. For them, Gagá is too foreign and incompatible with the people of the Dominican Republic, and therefore people should not practice it on Dominican soil. And those who support Gagá and disagree with their perspective, as Nova points in his piece, are “malos dominicanos” (bad Dominicans).

Given the ways journalists characterize Gagá during the Late Period, it could indicate that the ideas put forward by June Rosenberg have become more widely influential. As evidence, more articles reference or cite Rosenberg’s ideas. More of these writers not only reference the scholarly work of Rosenberg and Tejeda, but many authors also interview cultural brokers who have dedicated their lives to studying and advocating for Afro-Dominican musics. When these individuals talk about Gagá, they mention the long-standing discrimination against Gagá and its

people, and the historic marginalization that the Dominican state has exerted upon them. In sum, I see a trend that goes from very little engagement with scholarship, practitioners, and cultural brokers, to having more of it. And in that trend, these journalists give more space to interlocutors talking about racial discrimination. Lastly, the general trend also points to the embrace of narratives about national origin and identity that recognizes that of the descendants of sugarcane workers.

How do journalists and newspaper writers define and characterize Gagá?

There are three prevailing terms that dominate the ways that writers define Gagá. “Manifestación” (manifestation) comes up the most, followed by “expresión” (expression) and “ceremonia” (ceremony). Journalists from the early period also used these terms, although less frequently. While “ceremonia” is present in the previous sources, “manifestación” and “expresión” are first found in the Late Period. When writers refer to Gagá as a ceremony, the religious facet of Gagá is implied. However, the terms “manifestación” and “expresión” seem to hint less strongly to the sacred side of Gagá. These two words associate Gagá with expressive culture and folklore. Commonly, the two terms are used in conjunction with “cultura,” as “manifestación cultural” and “expresión cultural.” Moreover, the use of “folklore” to refer to Gagá comes up at a similar rate as that of the Early Period. In this way, writers situate Gagá in a way that might indicate they consider it as part of the culture of the Dominican Republic, even if that was not their intention. Moreover, describing Gagá using any of the three terms, continues to relegate Gagá to a lesser realm associated with “unofficial” religious practices and one that emphasizes otherness within the

constellation of other Dominican rural-based music traditions linked to religious beliefs.

From where do these journalists say gaga originated?

While journalists in the Early Period characterize Gagá as a Haitian tradition to which Dominicans have become assimilated or solely as a Haitian one, many writers in the Late Period describe Gagá as a Haitian Dominican music tradition. Given the title “El Gagá es también parte de la Semana Mayor - Folklore dominicano” (Gagá is also part of Holy Week), the 1998 article by folklore dancer and author, Xiomara Pérez, implies that Gagá is a part of the list of traditions of the Dominican Republic (Pérez 1998). By saying that Gagá is part of La Semana Mayor, the author includes Gagá and its practitioners as one of the most popular holidays in the Dominican imaginary. Later in the article, Pérez considers Gagá “identidad nacional dominicana” (Dominican national identity) because Gagá groups sing in Spanish. June Rosenberg examines groups singing in Spanish in order to characterize Gagá as a Dominican tradition. Close to Holy Week in 2016, *Diario Libre* published a short online video showing clips of a Gagá group from the capital city in which the author accompanying text does not mention whether Gagá is Dominican or Haitian (Romero 2016). Even though, compared to the Early Period, a higher percentage of newspaper writers associate Gagá with a Dominican national origin, two articles reference only the Haitian origin of the tradition, saying that it comes from Haitian Rara, and not qualifying it as either Haitian Dominican or Haitian. Two other articles, from 2017 and 2018, do not attribute a national origin to Gagá. Rather, these writers say that Gagá comes from Rara. In this sense, these two stress the foreign origin of

Gagá. Moreover, some writers mention the African origin and the relationship to other Afro-Caribbean traditions. Unlike the articles from the Early Period, more frequently, writers allude to the African diasporic dimension of Gagá by stating that Gagá is part of the group of African musics from the region. While the writers' description of the people making Gagá in the Late Period varies, most of the articles' depiction of Gagá practitioners is hybrid, that is, most participants are Dominican of Haitian origin.

Integration / combination

In a similar fashion to articles in the Early Period, a number of authors describe Gagá as being “integrated” (*integrado*) into Dominican culture or being combined with Dominican traditions. Some authors use the term “combinar” (to combine), which emphasizes the separation of two sides that come together. The use of these two words implies that two or more distinct elements, in this case a Dominican and a Haitian tradition, come together to form one. On 24 April 2011, around the time of Semana Santa, *Acento Digital* published a short article in which the author asserts that Gagá came to the D.R. from Haiti but that it has been integrated into Dominican culture. This piece is a report on the procession of Gagá Batey San Luis on Saturday 23rd, the day before Easter, in which, according to the article, “dozens of people” participated (Olivo Peña 2011a). The article writer offers general remarks about Gagá and explains that it is practiced primarily in the sugarcane plantations in which “se ha producido una fusión entre los ritos y culturas Haitiana y Dominicana” (there has been a fusion of Haitian and Dominican rites and

cultures). The author finishes stating that, as the years have passed, Haitian immigrants have left this legacy to their children and that has turned Gagá into part of the “cultura popular” (popular culture) of the country. Similarly, a 2014 article also published in *Acento.com*, suggests that Gagá is of Haitian origin, but that it combines Dominican and Haitian elements (Paraison 2014). What does the use of the words “combination” and “integration” in the portrayal of Gagá imply regarding the tradition? The language that newspapers writers employ in these articles suggests that Gagá, a culture of Haitian origin, has assimilated to a receptor one, that is, Dominican culture. Gagá is thus portrayed by these writers as having become part of Dominican culture and music.

Dominico-haitiano (Haitian Dominican)

The use of the hyphenated demonym to describe Gagá members gradually becomes more common in articles published the Late Period. Rather than labeling Gagá as a Haitian tradition, these writers imply that Gagá belongs in Dominican culture. With the hyphenation, journalists acknowledge that the origin is Haitian but that it is now a Dominican tradition as well. In the summer of 2015, *El Biran NY*, an online news source, publishes an article that is primarily based on the writings and observations of anthropologist Carlos Andújar. The article writer, Wilson Inoa, considers Gagá to be “Dominico-Haitiano” and having Haitian ancestry from Rara (Inoa 2015). Also, *El Nuevo Diario* published an article written by *Agencia EFE*, in which the author refers to Gagá as a “rito dominico-haitiano” (Haitian Dominican rite) and includes a brief historical note explaining that the tradition was originally

Rara and brought to the sugarcane fields by Haitian immigrant workers (Montecelos 2017). The use of a hyphenated identity has significant implications for the anti-racism struggle that activists and Gagá members have conducted and continue to pursue. My intention is not to suggest, however, that this important change in how media accounts refer to Gagá—as Haitian Dominican rather than solely as Haitian—has had a major impact on the Haitian Dominican community. Rather, such shift in the idiom might indicate that mainstream media, at least indirectly, recognize the pleas coming from a long history of activism.

In the Late Period the language of “combination” and “integration” and the use of a hyphenated national identity reveals the influence that the work of scholars from prior decades has had on journalists who report on Gagá in the twenty-first century. The use of these terms suggests that the perspective on Gagá of these newspapers writers is slightly more reflective of that from scholars such as June Rosenberg. Referring to Gagá as a Haitian-Dominican tradition may imply that the people making Gagá also identify as such. This may suggest that these newspaper writers more closely reflect the identity discourse of the Gagá community.

How do these writers describe the people making Gagá?

In the Late Period, writers commonly describe Gagá practitioners using a language that denotes a blended ethno-national identity. As stated earlier, journalists often use the hyphenated demonym “Dominico-Haitiano.” At the same time, however, many keep a similar language from the Early Period by describing participants as both Haitian and Dominican individuals, that is, they refer to the practitioners as two distinct groups of people. Additionally, several articles use other

ways to describe the people that are not present in the sources found at the National Archives. An example of this language is writers talking about “lazos” (bonds) between Dominicans and Haitians. One of the authors quote sociologist Dagoberto Tejeda in which he considers Gagá a “cultura binacional” (national culture). Overall, rather than describing people as Haitian immigrants, many writers are willing to depict Gagá practitioners as people who are Dominican and who claim Haitian ancestry.

Even though Xiomara Pérez states that Gagá is part of Dominican identity in her 1998 article, she describes people in the procession as Dominicans and Haitians who mingle for the festivities (Pérez 1998). She does not qualify participants as Haitian Dominican. Pérez cites Rosenberg’s work, but she makes a clear distinction between Haitians and Dominicans. The author says that “los participantes, haitianos y dominicanos, se confunden” (the Haitian and Dominican participants are hard to tell apart). She also notes that Haitians and Dominicans who live in bateyes often inter-marry. Many subsequent articles note that marriages between Haitians and Dominicans account for the rising number of Gagá practitioners of non-Haitian heritage.

In a 2015 article, the writer Wilson Inoa cites Carlos Andújar in which he mentions the evolution of Gagá from Rara. The journalist says that according to Andujar, because of the nature of bateyes, Gagá is “Dominico-Haitiano.” The writer states that one of the elements that make it “dominico-haitiano” is Dominicans getting involved in the tradition as much as Haitians, given that Dominicans also make commitments to Gagá groups (Inoa 2015). A 2012 article talks about the bonds

(*lazos*) that connect people across nationality. In this article, which is not solely focused on Gagá, the author refers to Gagá as one of the many activities that happen during Semana Santa. The journalist says that “mujeres dominico-haitianas” (Haitian Dominican women) dance to highlight “la cultura Haitiana a través del Gaga” (Haitian Dominican culture through Gagá) (Ramírez 2012). Later, the author quotes two individuals, Miguel Rene and Yesica Ozuna, presumably Gagá participants, who explain that the purpose of the celebration of Gagá in Monte Plata (the province which the journalists talk about) is to “buscar unir los lazos dominico-haitianos” (to seek the creation of Haitian Dominican bonds).” While the dancers, that is, the member of Gagá groups, are referred to as Haitian Dominican, the very practice of this dance is a vehicle to showcase Haitian culture, as expressed by the practitioners. In this sense, the journalist recognizes the Haitian Dominican character of the people, while also acknowledging the Haitian lineage.

The newspaper writer Gustavo Olivo Peña, in a December 2011 article on Gagá, mentions that the bateyes represent “el espacio de encuentro de la cultura binacional de la isla” (the space of encounter of the bi-national culture of the island) and considers Gagá to be the most emblematic representation of such fusion (Olivo Peña 2011b). Peña explains that the combination comes from intermarriages, which he calls “matrimonios bi-nacionales” (bi-national marriages). He says that because of marriage, Dominicans are attracted to bateyes and get involved in Gagá and other traditions. In a brief online publication from 2017 in *Diario Libre*, the author describes participants of Gagá as “descendientes de haitianos y dominicanos” (descendants of Haitians and Dominicans) (*Diario Libre* 2017). In this sense, authors

allude to a process of acculturation, in which people from two distinct cultural backgrounds amalgamate. In this process, one host culture is more dominant than the incoming one. From this phenomenon, a new culture emerges. In this case, Haitian Dominican people are at the heart of this culture.

In 2019, Merksided Avelino, on the online newspaper *Z Digital*, interviews a man named Mantequilla. A Gagá dancer who got initiated in his group at age 15, Mantequilla believes that “estamos todos ligados, la misma sangre. La República Dominicana es una nación ligada, no se puede romper la cadena. Hay haitianos que se casan con dominicanas y dominicanos que se casan con haitianas y tienen hijos” (we are all bonded by the same blood. The Dominican Republic is a bonded nation, the connection cannot be broken. There are Haitian men who marry Dominican women and Dominican men who marry Haitian women and have children) (Avelino 2019). In 2018, Enrique Cabrera Vásquez writes for *Municipios Al Día*, referring to people as “Dominico-Haitianos” and explains that in some of the Gagá groups that he observed, there seems to be a higher participation of Dominicans than Haitians (Cabrera Vásquez 2018). Finally, in a more recent article from early 2022, the author says that participants are Dominicans of birth and origin (Ferrerías and Luna 2022). These three articles show a progression in which the author describes members without highlighting the distinction between people of Haitian and Dominican origin. Instead, these journalists feature in their articles members of Gagá who are Dominican of Haitian ancestry. Rather than emphasizing the two distinct ethnic groups, these writers refer to people making Gagá as a one group who are bonded by blood, who are hyphenated, and who are Dominican nationals.

The overarching narrative about Gagá exhibited in the Late Period more accurately reflects the reality of the people of the community. The recurrent language of “cultura binacional,” “lazos,” “same blood,” and identity hyphenation to describe Gagá suggests lineage and heritage. These terms, which practitioners use to speak about Gagá and journalists reproduce, allude to a discourse about belonging and national identity. By the 1970s there already were children of Haitian immigrants who were born in the Dominican Republic and granted birth certificates that denote them as Dominican (Curiel Pichardo 2019). This means that the sources in the Early Period do not reflect the reality of Gagá practitioners at the time. That is, writers in the press create a narrative that is far from the experience of the community that they report on. These writers do not address the reasoning behind their assumptions about people’s ethnic background or self-identification. This could be due to lack of knowledge or limited interaction with Gagá practitioners in bateyes. Only in the articles in which authors interview informants, their ethnic background might be revealed. In contrast, the language that journalists adapt in the Late Period more closely reflect the experience of those they write about.

Reportage on Discrimination and Marginalization

Eleven articles published between 2006 and 2022 I found online acknowledge the marginalization that Gagá and the Haitian Dominican community face in the country. In these articles, the conversation about discrimination overwhelmingly comes from scholars and cultural brokers who are interviewed by journalists. Only in four of the eleven articles, journalists quote individuals who are from Gagá

communities and mention their marginalization. Although the number of articles in which the writers quote individuals talking about discrimination and marginalization is relatively small, proportionally compared to that of the Early Period, there is an evident willingness of newspapers in allowing journalists to quote interlocutors making controversial points about racism. The author of the earliest article in this group, from 1998, interviews sociologist Dagoberto Tejeda, who by that time, had established himself as reputable scholar of Afro-descendant traditions of the D.R. In the article, Tejeda states “la marginalización de Gagá y lo africano por las élites dominicanas se debe al racismo y el rechazo a la negritud” (the marginalization of Gagá and the African by the Dominican elite is due to racism and the rejection of blackness) (Pérez 1998).

Like Dagoberto, other scholars and musicians who have dedicated their careers to studying and disseminating Afro-Dominican culture make their voices heard in the printed press. Through the study of music and anthropological research, musicians such as José Duluc, Xiomara Fortuna, and Toné Vicioso have disseminated Gagá and other Afro-descendant musics to a broad audience, especially the educated urban population (see Tallaj 2015 and Davis 2012). As part of their music career, these musicians have organized workshops and talks to address Afro-Dominican music traditions and their own music creations.¹⁰ At their workshops, lectures, and music performances, these musicians are vocal about the marginalization of the traditions like Gagá and are critical of the elite discourse that downplays the African

¹⁰ In 2012, as a student of a three-week long summer program on theory, history, and practice of Afro-Dominican music genres, led by ethnomusicologist Sydney Hutchinson, we visited Xiomara Fortuna at her home in which she addressed her music and experience as an advocate of Afro-Dominican culture.

heritage of Dominicans. El Caribe published an article in 2016 titled “El Gagá, una tradición folclórica que aún lucha contra el rechazo” (Gagá, a folkloric tradition that still struggles with rejection) in which Duluc, Fortuna, and scholar Xiomara Pérez talk about the discrimination that Gagá faces. Xiomara Pérez explains that even though Gagá has been part of Dominican livelihood because of social relationships between Haitians and Dominicans, there is a still “rechazo” (rejection or disavowal) (Pérez 1998). The article’s author says that most Dominicans do not accept Gagá because it comes from the bateyes and it is practiced by those who were enslaved during the colony. Moreover, a piece published by *Acento.com* on April 6, 2012, is primarily based on the work of anthropologist Carlos Andújar. In this article, the writer cites Andujar’s ideas to describe Gagá (Gerrero 2012). The author reports that, according to Andujar, the Gagá procession is rejected by dominant sectors of society for a number of reasons including the low status of African-descendant traditions and because of a lack of understanding of the religion.

Roldán Marmol, a cultural activist, musician, and a former Gagá dancer, serves as a source about Gagá in four articles from the Late Period. For at least two decades, Roldán has been involved with Gagá groups and closely worked with them through his organization Fundación Cofradía. He is a well-known advocate for Gagá among the community of gagaseros and had been a *mayor* in La Ceja Gagá group. In 2008, the *Listin Diario*, one of the oldest newspapers still in circulation in the D.R., published an article on 18 April, around the time of Semana Santa (Tejeda 2008). The author interviewed Marmol to talk about his album *Sí Gagá* (Yes Gagá), which he produced. Marmol invited various Gagá bands and other musicians of Afro-

Dominican musics for this album, which fuses Gagá with other Dominican popular music genres, such as merengue, bachata, as well as foreign ones like jazz and rock. In the article, Marmol asserts that Gagá is becoming a music of broad, popular liking and that external support is the only thing Gagá is lacking. He believes that if there were more recordings and promotions of Gagá, the music would be in the top charts because its rhythm is very “contagioso” (contagious). He makes the case that this music and other Afro-Dominican genres are not more popular because of the “prejuicios raciales existentes en la sociedad dominicana” (racial prejudices that exist in Dominican society).

In two articles published in 2018 and 2019, Roldán elaborates on the issues that Gagá practitioners continue to face. In 2018, Roldán states, “esta manifestación cultural aún lucha contra la discriminación de algunos sectores” (this cultural manifestation still struggles with discrimination from various sectors) (Santana 2018). Later, in 2019, Roldán narrates two moments in which a Gagá group was subject to unfair policing (Avelino 2019). The newspaper article writer quotes Roldán telling the story of the attempt to prohibit a Gagá procession the year before in 2018. According to him, in a problematic situation, police stopped a Gagá group and threw tear gas at them. For him, these are clear signs of “rechazo” (rejection) and “discriminación” (discrimination) towards Gagá groups and the community of gagaseros.

In four out of the eleven articles that include some discussion on discrimination, writers interview gagaseros who mention their first-hand experience. In 2018, *Diario Libre* published a note in which the author cites two members of

Gagá groups whom suggest that the authorities “deben proteger esta actividad que consideran una muestra más de la cultura que contribuye a la diversidad popular de la República Dominicana” (should protect this activity, which they consider one more example of culture that contributes to the popular diversity of the Dominican Republic) instead of prohibiting it (Santana 2018). The author includes a hyperlink to an article on the attempted prohibition of the procession in La Romana weeks before it was published. In 2019, *Z 101 Digital* (the online news outlet of Z 101, a reputable and well-known radio station) published an article in which the journalist interviewed a gagasero known as Matequilla who expresses his disapproval of prohibiting Gagá processions (Avelino 2019). In the two other articles published in 2020 and 2022, journalists report on events in which Gagá groups were involved. In November of 2020, leaders of Gagá groups met with the Ministry of Culture at the time, Carmen Heredia, in an effort to formalize ties with state authorities that originated in political organizing by Gagá groups. The state office circulated a press release reporting on this encounter in which Gagá leader Miguel Angel Welch Valoy expresses “Gagá sufre porque lo tildan como representación de lo haitiano” (Gagá suffers because they consider it a representation of Haitian things). With the intention to represent Gagá as a tradition that is part of Dominican culture, Miguel Angel emphasizes that Gagá is not a representation of Haitian culture. Rather, for him, it is indeed a representation of “lo dominicano,” that which is Dominican (Ministerio de Cultura 2020).

While racial discrimination might not have been a prominent talking point in politics and the media during the decades of the 1970s and 1980s (the Early Period), the living conditions of Haitian immigrant workers in bateyes had been precarious for

a long time. Several scholars published works—both books and academic articles in the D.R.—that discuss the sugarcane industry and the labor exploitation of Haitian braceros (Moya Pons 1986, Baez Evertz 1986, Lozano 1992, Del Castillo 1978, Muto 1980). Meanwhile, only one of the articles from the Early Period alludes to the workers’ precarious situation.

Writer Miguel Polo highlights the economic hardships that people living in bateyes face and how these challenges affect the making of Gagá in the 1980s. The article’s title, “Ven Gagá pierde Lucidez” (they see Gagá loses shine), centers the precarious conditions of Gagá by indicating that groups are losing “lucidez” (brightness). Polo quotes a dueño who talks about the difficulty they are having in making Gagá happen (Polo 1983). Franco, the dueño of Gagá from batey Palavé explains that the lack of funds will prevent them from coming out with new costumes for the band that year. He explains that using the same attire from a previous year may prompt other Gagá groups to mock them. Being the object of jokes, he says, might cause fights between groups. For Franco, according to Polo, the options are either not to “take out the Gagá” (*sacar el Gagá*, in Spanish, meaning to carry out the procession) or to be potentially considered a less impressive group. The piece ends by describing the living situation of workers and their families who live “apiñados” (highly crowded) in barracks of more than 30 bedrooms.

In December 2011, *Acento.com* published an article about Gagá that discussed its socio-economic context and the demographics of the procession. In this piece, the author cites the work of two scholars, Moseley-Williams and Wooding, to argue that the culture of the bateyes is one in which people follow rules and norms different

from those of the larger society in the D.R., to the extent that the national currency is not even used (Olivo Peña 2011b). According to the journalist, Gagá has influenced the musical production in the country. The journalist emphasizes that marriages between Dominicans and Haitians incentivize Dominicans to move into bateyes. For the author, bateyes represent the space in which the “cultura binacional” (bi-national culture) in the island thrives. In general, this piece highlights the mixture or “syncretism” of Dominican and Haitian music and religion, culturally and religion-wise. This piece and the one discussed above by Miguel Polo are the two examples from both groups of sources in which the authors focus on the living and economic conditions of the residents of bateyes. Addressing these hardships and dire living conditions could be understood as a way to contribute to the discussion about discrimination and labor exploitation that the Dominican state and private sectors have subjected the laborers of sugarcane fields.

Closing Thoughts

At first glance, the increasing presence of the voices of Gagá practitioners and the inclusion of stories about discrimination and the historical marginalization of Gagá in the printed press might suggest that the socio-economic and political conditions of Haitian immigrants and Dominican of Haitian ancestry have improved in the last four decades. Identifying this increase could be read as an indication that the struggle of these populations will eventually ameliorate since there has been a shift on how the printed press discusses Gagá and Vodou. However, the ramifications are far more complicated. The higher number of articles in the Late Period, the language of “Haitian Dominican” and the coverage about discrimination, certainly

mean more visibility for Gagá and the community. This move toward representing Gagá as a Haitian Dominican tradition and acknowledgement of the national belonging of practitioners of Gagá also contributes to the debate, a contentious one, on Gagá's place in the culture of the Dominican Republic. There is, however, a very thin line between creating more presence on topics and issues pertinent to the Haitian Dominican community and the acceptance of Gagá as part of the national culture by the elite and dominant sectors of society. Similarly, there is a difference between accepting Gagá as part of Dominican culture and considering Dominicans of Haitian descent as members of the nation. The increased presence of this tradition, its practitioners, and the coverage on discrimination can potentially deepen the mischaracterization and prejudice against the Haitian Dominican community. The presence of cultural brokers on national TV addressing Gagá and its place as a cultural heritage of the nation can reinforce the folklorization and de-legitimatization of Gagá and Vodou. The observations I make in this chapter have implications for the construction of a discourse about national identity, national belonging, and ethno-racial discourse in the Dominican Republic. I point to a shift in discourses on ethno-national identity and the Other in the D.R. While this shift reflects more closely the experiences of the community, it continues to perpetuate a construction of the Other and a partial inclusion of Dominicans of Haitian origin.

Chapter 3: Gagá from Within: Insider Discourse on Gagá, Vodou, and Culture

Gagá members commonly describe Gagá as “una cultura” (a culture) and as Dominican folklore. These definitions of Gagá make a case for the Dominican identity of the tradition. In this sense, the community’s conception of Gagá repurposes Dominican nationalist concepts that the state has used to exclude Haitian Dominicans from full membership in the nation. While the elite (politicians, public figures, and the authorities) deny the place that Gagá and its community has in the ethos of the nation, the Haitian Dominican community’s notion about their tradition and identity defies that of the authorities. In this chapter, I show how community members who participate in Gagá groups and practice Vodou produce a discourse that challenges the long-standing exclusion of Dominicans of Haitian ancestry from the concept of national identity and belonging.

As discussed in Chapter 1, the Dominican state sanctions the concept of folklore. Government authorities have historically defined what folklore is and thus determined what represents the cultural heritage of the nation. For example, throughout the twentieth century, the Dominican state promoted merengue (a music-dance genre) as unique form of national culture and characteristic expressions of national identity (Austerlitz 1997). Researchers started to use the term *folklore* more widely in the first half of last century. Eventually, folklore became synonymous with national identity. Prior to the 1970s, this term did not include Afro-descendant musics, dances, and religions such as a Gagá and Vodou. The state considered

folklore to be those musics and dances primarily derived from European traditions associated with the colonial heritage of the nation.

Gagá groups have long participated in folklore events both sponsored by government agencies and private or nonprofit organizations. From music and dance performances at all-inclusive hotels (as documented by Alegría Pons 1993), to festivals that promote Dominican music, Gagá groups have starred as representations of Dominican culture. A well-known yearly festival, the Fiesta de San Antonio organized by Los Hermanos Guillén—who have, for a few decades, celebrated their family devotion to San Antonio passed down for three generations—is a clear example. At the festival, which takes place on the Sunday closest to the day honoring San Antonio, June 13, organizers feature a number of music groups that specialize in Dominican musical expressions such as merengue, bachata, salves, palos, and Gagá (Sánchez 2015). Gagá groups have also participated in the government-sponsored national carnival parade organized by the Ministry of Culture every year in early March (Mármol 2020) as one of the many examples of the carnivalesque traditions of the country. In recent years, however, organizers have not invited Gagá groups to partake because of accusations of fights among groups. Additionally, in the Dominican diaspora in New York City, a group of musicians and advocates of Afro-Dominican music and dance lead workshop-like performances and community-building events in Central Park under the name Gagá Pa'l Pueblo (Gagá for the people) (Guilamo 2016). These are examples of contexts in which the music and dance of Gagá are folklorized and presented to an audience without the religious context in which they are usually performed.

By defining Gagá as folklore, Gagá members are making a strong case toward inclusion and responding to long standing anti-Haitianism. In this sense, the Gagá community utilizes the same language and concept that dominant voices have used to exclude them. That is, the community challenges the exclusion of Dominicans of Haitian origin from the ethos of the nation state by defining Gagá as a Dominican culture and folklore. Moreover, Gagá members' conception of Gagá also contests the characterization from Christian churches that often promote Gagá as a diabolic cult. As such, discourse about Gagá from within the community call into question the evidently erroneous understandings of Gagá that circulate in public opinion dominated by religious authorities. As shown in Chapter 2, newspaper writers have historically mischaracterized Gagá and Vodou. The media's portrayal of Gagá and Vodou reflects elite perspectives and marginalizes Gagá practitioners in the Dominican Republic. Given the discrimination of Haitian Dominicans, placing the voices of the Gagá and Vodou community at the core of analysis becomes an important task. It is crucial to foreground the perspectives of individuals in the community that work against racism and discriminatory language.

Local authorities and church leaders have made attempts to limit the circulation of Gagá processions based on the incorrect assumptions about the tradition. In two notorious occasions, in 2018 and 2022, local governments temporarily prohibited Gagá processions through specific small towns and cities claiming that Gagá practitioners incited violence in public areas. The experiences that Gagá group members told me about, however, greatly contrast with the arguments of detractors to ban, prohibit, or limit the circulation of Gagá. In this case, these

denigrators' cases against Gagá lose credibility. A rigorous consideration of the voices from within the Gagá community and an analysis of the discourse around Gagá and Vodou evidences the gap between, on the one hand, the experience of Gagá members and, on the other hand, the arguments against the open practice of Gagá. This gap serves as testimony of the myths and inaccuracies that dominant sectors of society have perpetuated about the Haitian Dominican community. The continued spread of uncorroborated stories about Gagá practitioners—such as they are worshipping the devil—obviously contribute to the anti-Haitianism in the Dominican Republic

According to many in the Haitian Dominican community, the involvement of Dominicans in Gagá has increased in the past few decades. My interlocutors speak of Gagá groups that have more Dominican members than Haitian ones. As observed in the previous chapter, newspaper writers have reported on this development in recent years. Some of my interviewees even stated that, without the participation of Dominicans, Gagá groups would not be able carry out the procession. One of the prominent claims made by critics of Gagá, as noted in the previous chapter, is that this is not a Dominican tradition because it is practiced only by Haitian immigrants. The experience described by my interlocutors, however, contrasts with that of critics who are not well informed about the ethnic composition of Gagá. Moreover, many interlocutors assert that Gagá is a Dominican tradition. Among these individuals are people of Haitian descent who acknowledge their Blackness and identify as Dominican or Haitian Dominican. This characterization of the people who make Gagá is based not only in the perception that many ethnic Dominicans are getting

involved but also in the overwhelming self-identification as Dominicans of Haitian ancestry of those who grow up in *bateyes* surrounded by the tradition.

My interlocutors believe that Gagá members participate without a religious commitment more frequently than in the past, and instead, continue their participation because of family tradition and connection to the community. As an example, many interlocutors pointed to the increase in dancers and musicians who are hired to participate rather than performing during the procession solely for personal motives and without compensation. While some lament this approach because of the cost it represents for *dueños de Gagá* (Gagá group leaders), others acknowledge that it is an economic necessity for musicians and dancers. At the same time, many interviewees expressed their perceived decrease of Gagá members who no longer make a *promesa* (religious commitment) with Gagá groups. Some interlocutors explained that *promesas* had been more common decades ago. I illustrate in this chapter the correlation between these shifts and the key economic and political developments discussed in the previous chapter, that is, the gradual downturn of the sugarcane industry, the exponential growth of the tourism industry, and the rural-to-urban migration of Dominicans of Haitian descent.

By framing Gagá as a culture and by emphasizing the perception of increased participation of Dominicans, the Gagá and Vodou community contest elite discourse about their traditions. The demonization of Gagá by the Church and the continual exclusion by government authorities is a racist project tied to the racialized condition of these traditions. These understandings of Gagá and Vodou perpetuate damaging and stereotypical ideas about Dominican of Haitian ancestry, their ancestors, and

recent Haitian immigrants. By examining the narratives about Gagá of the community, I show some of the work that these people are doing to reject and to contest the bogus characterization that the elite perpetuates.

One of the venues in which the perspectives and voices of community members are present is the YouTube channel “Jovanny Ghetto.” The creator and host, Jovanny, dedicates many of the videos to interviewing Vodou religious leaders and other members of Gagá groups across the country. In these videos, interviewees talk about their experience and work as religious leaders, *dueños de Gagá*, dancers, and musicians. Jovanny often asks them about their trajectory and how they navigate the religion. In many of the interviews, the perspective of how people define and describe Gagá and Vodou appears as well as the rejection of Gagá from Christian churches and public figures. My field research interviews, and the interviews conducted by Jovanny online, share several talking points that I identify and deem relevant. Among these are the public’s misunderstanding about the music and religion, the rejection of Gagá by dominant sectors of society and Christian churches, the defining of Gagá as folklore, and the discrimination against people of darker skin colors.

This chapter is divided into two sections: the first one examines discourses on Gagá and Vodou generated by community members, while the second explores community notions regarding group membership. By examining these aspects, I document a community that defies the misconception of an important activity that is integral for their community-building and for sustaining solidarity among themselves (see Landies 2009). The community’s depiction of their tradition challenges the

dominant sectors of society that have historically excluded them from the national debates and from places of power in the Dominican Republic.

Part I: Insider Discourse on Gagá and Vodou from the Batey Community

Gagá as Dominican Folklore and Culture

Many practitioners consider Gagá to be a folkloric tradition of the Dominican Republic. In his approach to defend the legitimacy of Gagá and Vodou, Gagá dancer Cachimé equates them to other dance and music traditions accepted as part of the folkloric repertoire by the dominant sectors of society. “El gaga es como una cultura, es un baile como cualquier otro, un baile folclórico, baile y danza igual que la mangulina, el pripri, el baile de buey” (Gagá is like a culture, it’s a dance like any other, a folkloric dance like *manguilina*, *pripri*, dance of the ox), Cachimé argues. Cachimé, who is a folklore dance instructor by training, knows well the canon of dances that have been choreographed by folklorists in the country. He considers the dance of Gagá to be a folkloric dance that deserves the same level of understanding as the rest of the dances. La mangulina, pripri and El Baile del Buey are a set of folklorized dances from rural areas of the Dominican Republic that are no longer practiced outside of the staged and stylized folkloric dance performances done by folklore dance troupes (see Lizardo 1974). Cachimé qualifies Gagá as a “rural thing” that is a “cultura” like any other. He explains that it came from Africa. He continues telling me that schools are implementing Gagá, politicians are using it, and that it makes it part of Dominican culture. What people don’t understand is that Gagá is a culture like any other, he stated.

Similarly to Cachimé, many members of Gagá commonly refer to Gagá as a “cultura.” In interviews I often asked my interlocutors what Gagá is or how would they define it. “I see Gagá as a culture” (*yo veo el Gagá como una cultura*), César stated to me during our interview. César, who is a young religious leader and Gagá dancer from La Romana continued saying “...que sale de la raíz” (which comes from the roots). Damaris, who has been in the leadership of the Gagá group La Ceja, says that Gagá “is a cultural thing” (*algo cultural*) and “a folkloric thing” (*algo folclórico*). In one of our interviews, I asked her about the media’s reportage of violent acts during processions. To justify her disagreement with local authorities attempting to prohibit the processions, Damaris says they should not forbid it because it is a “cultural thing.” The culture argument my interlocutors bring forward is a manner to legitimize the procession and the tradition. Because it is culture and folklore, to practice Gagá in the streets is a right the community has. Because it is a legitimate folkloric tradition for the community, Gagá is not an unorganized activity that is made only for the purpose of festivity and recreation.

Religious leader Mariela makes a connection between creativity and Gagá by defining it as a “creatividad cultural” (cultural creativity). When I asked her to elaborate what she meant by that she described the process of taking some kind of material and transforming it into something that serves a different purpose. She gives me the example of taking pieces of fabric and turning them into things such as curtains, *pañuelos* (handkerchiefs) or, in the case of Gagá, garbs for dancing. She continues explaining that gaga is a “creatividad cultural” because it is a music and a dance that attracts people. For her, one cannot ignore a Gagá band’s music passing by

one's home and window and getting up and dancing to the song. The colorfulness of the clothes used in Gagá attracts the attention of foreigners, who, according to her, are drawn to Gagá because of the bright colors displayed by the group. *Creatividad cultural* is a phrase that seems to encapsulate the "artistic" aspect of Gagá and the legitimization of Gagá and Vodou as cultural practices. Mariela's understanding of "creatividad cultural" seems to be about applying creative craftsmanship to transform objects into attractive and colorful ones that lure outsiders in. The analogy of using fabric or, in the case of her example, curtains, to make garbs suggests that Gagá can come from ordinary objects and be created with minimal resources. Because folkloric musics and dances are considered to be cultural expressions in which creativity plays a prominent role, Mariela's definition points to equating Gagá to traditions that are considered part of the folkloric repertoire of the country.

Gagá as Tradition and "in the Blood"

"Having the merengue in one's blood," is a well-accepted, common phrase people use when discussing the sentiment linked to Dominican national identity that the state has historically promoted. Merengue musicians have long expressed that Dominicans carry merengue music and dance in their bloods. Likewise, public figures and politicians often support the claim by heavily showcasing the music in campaigns, the media, events, among others. Merengue is widely viewed as the most emblematic music and dance of the country. At cultural and public events, organizers often showcase merengue and dance troupes known as *ballet folklóricos* that perform a highly choreographed dance to merengue music while wearing garments considered "typical." State agencies promote merengue abroad as a representation of Dominican

culture at international events. Because of the long history of state sanctioned cultural productions, the status that merengue has is rarely questioned by the public.

Given that the discourse about blood is regarded as legitimate in the group of Dominican musics and dances, the connection that Gagá musicians make between blood and Gagá could be understood to reference the well-accepted discourse about national identity. By connecting Gagá to their bloods in discourse, Gagá members are indicating that Gagá has an undisputed connection to the nation. In various interviews, my interlocutors bring up the discussion about having Gagá in their bloods as a response to my question of why they do Gagá. The use of blood is connected to the idea of lineage. Many of my interlocutors speak to the fact that “they were born with it” or that “they are surrounded by it.” Some musicians have told me the phrase “nací con eso en el batey” (I was born with that in the batey). Andrés León (familiarily De León), a member of La Ceja group, not only carries Gagá in his blood, as he says, but also claims to have been born in “la tierra del Gagá” (the land of Gagá), which he considers it to be the batey. Miguel, another member of the same group and who was also born in a batey, replied to my question of why he does Gagá saying, “I have it in my blood, I was born with it.” In these statements, De León and Miguel attribute their choice to make Gagá to something they did not choose. These statements imply that practicing Gagá, in a way, is inevitable for them if not expected. In their language, Miguel and De León indicate a close connection between bloodline, family surroundings, and the place of birth, all which then follow the logic of being Dominican of Haitian origin.

In addition to the strong connection to family that many make, others, like Café (also member of La Ceja), place Gagá as an important activity in their lives. When I asked Café why he dances Gagá he responds “lo que pasa es que ya eso es una tradición que lo tiene uno en la sangre, que uno mejor pierde el trabajo que tiene. Mejor uno pierde el trabajo que tiene y le sigue la rienda a su tradición” (it is already a tradition that one has in one’s blood, a tradition that one loses its job over. One better loses one’s job over continuing the [Gagá] tradition). For Café, Gagá is so important to commit to that he would rather lose his day job than not participate in Gagá. For people with a promise to a deity, following through the commitment goes beyond material needs, in the case of Café, maintaining a source of income. He is expressing that continuing with one’s tradition is more important than maintaining his own livelihood.

Dominicans and Haitians in Gagá: People in the Procession

Many of my interlocutors and several of the interviewees in Jovanny’s YouTube channel understand Gagá as a Dominican tradition with Haitian origins, as previously stated. I argue that the community can ascribe a Dominican character to Gagá based on two factors: 1) many of the people who currently participate in Gagá are Dominicans who do not claim Haitian ancestry, and 2) many—who were born and raised in bateyes and grew up surrounded by Gagá—identify as Dominicans of Haitian descent. By considering the identities of gagaseros, I show that from the perspective of the community, the procession rightfully is a Dominican tradition.

According to the perception of many gagaseros, more Dominicans who do not claim Haitian heritage are increasingly involved in Gagá processions. A clear example of people from outside bateyes who are closely involved with Gagá groups is the late father of Pedro and Tita. As they recounted to me, their father, who does not claim Haitian ancestry, became involved in La Ceja in the late 1980s. Pedro and Tita say that their late father, who lived in the city of Santiago, was fascinated by Gagá and was welcomed and integrated into La Ceja group. He would go to La Ceja every year for the procession and dance with the band. Growing up, Tita and Pedro spent their Semana Santa with their father and Gagá La Ceja. They have continued with this practice every year and have kept a close relationship with members of La Ceja beyond the yearly procession.

In the perspective of Pirulo—coordinator of the music band of La Ceja Gagá group—more Dominicans than Haitians are involved in Gagá. When I asked Pirulo about negative comments he has heard about Gagá and what his opinion is regarding people who criticize Gagá because they believe it is not a Dominican tradition, he tells me that he sees that nowadays about half of the people involved in Gagá are Dominican. As an example, Pirulo says:

“si hay 100 personas, hay 50 haitianos y 50 dominicanos. Porque el dominicano ahora mismo le está gustando el Gagá. Tu me entiende? Hay dominicano que salen de aquí y duran los tres días atrás de un Gagá. Se supone no e nama haitiano que lo están haciendo.... Hay dominciano que me han dicho, “oye prepárate que vamo a hacer un Gagá” Dominicano, que no e haitiano. Ahí e que ta el problema, que no nama el haitiano que lo hace, e ligao ahora mismo” (if there are 100 persons, 50 are Haitian and 50 are Dominican. Because Dominicans are the ones right who like Gagá. You get it? There are Dominicans who spend the three days with a Gagá group. It is supposedly only Haitians doing it... There are Dominicans who tell me ‘hey, get ready, let’s go out with a Gagá group,’ Dominicans who are not Haitian.

That is the problem that it is not only Haitians doing it; it is a combination right now).

In his description, Pirulo is very clear that Dominicans are heavily involved in Gagá and implies that Gagá is not only Haitian. According to Pirulo, some of the initiative is also likewise coming directly from Dominicans. He also emphasizes that the “problem” is that it is not only Haitians who are making Gagá, but Dominicans. Pointing out “the problem” seems to be referencing the misinformed idea that, according to him, the migration enforcement agency has about the membership of groups (that all or the overwhelmingly majority of Gagá practitioners are Haitian).

Pirulo told me:

“Tú sabe que la migración siempre vive hablando que los haitianos que si yo que. Pero a veces, ahora mismo, ahora mismo a veces no el haitiano que está haciendo el gaga. Hay más dominicanos haciendo gaga que el mismo haitiano. Ahora mismo tú vas al Gagá San Luis, el gaga de Consuelo, usted busca músicos, la mitad haitiano, la mitad dominicano, que han aprendido a tocar corneta, lo bambú, tambú y ello tan aprendiendo” (You know, Migration always talks about Haitians. But now more Dominicans are making Gagá than Haitians. You go to Gagá San Luis and Consuelo: half of musicians are Haitians, half are Dominican who’ve learned to play the corneta, the bambú, and the tambú).

According to many of my interlocutors, the San Luis Gagá group is one of the largest and well-known ensembles. Pirulo is emphasizing the significance of the involvement of Dominicans in Gagá: If a large and well-known group is comprised of many Dominicans, then it might reflect the scale of the involvement of Dominicans. When Pirulo mentioned *migración* (referring to Dirección General de Migración, the immigration state agency of the D.R.) and says that they “viven hablando de los haitianos que si yo que” (say whatever about Haitians all the time), he is indicating that the government’s narrative about Haitians is ill-informed. “Que si yo que,” is a

common way to say “whatever.” In the D.R. this is a common phrase to refer to a perspective, opinion, or argument which one does not agree with and often said with a tone that denotes dismissal or mocking. Pirulo says that “migration” talks about *haitianos* in relation to Gagá incorrectly or with a perspective he does not share. Because of his argument about the majority of Dominicans making Gagá, along with the inaccurate perspective from immigration authorities about Gagá practitioners, it can be inferred that Migración thinks it is mostly Haitians people making it. Therefore, Gagá is a Haitian tradition for the agency.

Similarly, Miguel perceives a change in the majority of people who practice Gagá from majority Haitian to more Dominican. A difference compared to Pirulo’s point is that some Dominicans who are getting involved in Gagá are of a higher economic status, as Miguel describes.

“El Gagá lo hacían los haitianos como se dice, pero ahora es diferente. Ahora el Gagá lo hacen los pudientes, los riquitos. Porque a los dominicanos le gusta más el Gagá ahora que a nosotros” (Gaga used to be practiced by Haitians, but now it’s different. Now the well-off, the rich make it. Dominicans now like Gagá more that we do).

Miguel’s statement suggests a shift in Gagá membership over time. Throughout the interview, Miguel referred to other people from the capital city who have become involved. “Tengo un amigo que vive fuera... y que hora vienen todos los años a bailar ese Gagá” (I have a friend who lives abroad... and they now come back every year to dance Gagá). In 2019, while I was documenting La Ceja’s procession, I met people from the capital city who were not born in bateyes and who have no family connection to Gagá. These were musicians who have formed strong ties to members of the group, especially via Pirulo. Pirulo plays drums in the alternative rock band La

Gran Mawon. The members of the band have been spending Semana Santa with La Ceja for the last few years. Both Pirulo and Miguel point to Dominicans having a higher affinity for Gagá in more recent times. In their speech, they exaggerate the interest that they see Dominicans have in Gagá. This emphasis allows them to make their point clear about the increase in Dominican participation in Gagá groups.

Caquín, a member of La Ceja group, emphasizes on the Dominican identity of the dueños of major Gagá groups. He explains:

“Lo Gagá fuerte de ahora como el de Moreno, Moronta, gaga que son otro nivel, los dueños son dominicanos... que no son grupos que el dueño viene de Haití directamente. Son dueños de ascendencia haitiana como yo pero que son nacidos aquí en RD. Las reinas también dominicanas, los que tocan por igual ... pero la mayoría de gente que le anda atrás son dominicanas también o sea, hubiera desaparecido si esto fuera nada mas de haitianos.” (the strong Gagá group nowadays like Moreno, Moronta’s, groups that are at another level, the leaders are Dominican... the dueños did not come directly from Haiti. They are of Haitian ancestry like me but were born in the D.R. The reinas are also Dominican, the musicians... most people who follows the procession are Dominican as well... I mean it [Gagá] would have disappeared if only Haitians were involved).

For Caquín, the Dominicaness of the members of Gagá groups is overwhelming evidence of the Dominican quality of Gagá. If the people making Gagá are Dominicans of Haitian ancestry, like himself, then Gagá is a Dominican tradition.

Caquín continues:

“Pero yo creo que el gaga lo han aceptado muy bien porque en muchos sitios que se baila normal, nadie te molesta y ya no es como antes. Porque antes uno veía mucho haitianos. Ya lo gente que lo lleva son la gente del pueblo, lo dominicano. Si los dominicanos no van al Gagá, no se hace Gagá. Porque lo haitiano no tienen fuerza dizque pa sacar Gagá y andar pueblo por pueblo, provincia por provincia. Ya lo dominicano, eso son como patrimonio de los dominicanos, ya. Ya eso es cultural. Eso es algo cultural aquí ya” (I think Gagá has been accepted well because it is danced in many places, not one bothers it like before. Because before it was a lot of Haitians making it. Now it is Dominicans. If Dominicans don’t go then there’s no Gagá happening.

Haitians do not have the means to do Gagá. It's now like a Dominican patrimony, a cultural thing).

In Caquín's reasoning, because of the makeup of members and the general acceptance he perceives, Gagá is a Dominican tradition. In that sense, he believes that Gagá is already part of the cultural patrimony of the D.R.

For Caquin, Gagá depends on the presence of Dominicans, as he explains that, without the current presence of them, Gagá groups would not have enough support to carry out processions. This support is importantly monetary. As he says, "Haitianos no tiene fuerza dizque pa sacar Gagá" (Haitian do not have the means to have carry out a Gagá procession). In this sense, Caquín understands that Haitians need additional support, which can come in the form of funding. For Pirulo, Miguel, and Caquín, the reliance on Dominicans is also based on the attendance and in the amount of people. In their own way, each of them points to the large percentage of Dominican that participate. Without it, processions would be minimal and endangered. Caquín and Miguel point to the overall economic differences between Haitians and Dominicans. They indicate that Dominicans generally have more money than Haitians. In a more direct manner, Miguel describes some Dominicans as "pudientes" (well off). And, in a more subtle way, Caquín implies the same by saying that without the economic support of Dominicans, Gagá processions would not be possible. Like Miguel and Pirulo, Caquín also emphasizes the change over time: in the past, mostly Haitians participated in the procession. Given that Dominicans are so heavily involved, Gagá—according to Caquín—is already a Dominican culture. In this regard, the increased presence of Dominicans makes Gagá a Dominican tradition.

Guigo, a former dueño de gaga from Haina, argues that most people who make Gagá are Dominicans descendants of Haitian immigrants. In our interview, I asked him what nationality he considers Gagá since some people call it Dominican and others Haitian. Guigo said

“ahora mismo es más dominicano que haitiano. Ya el haitiano se recoge. Ahora que usted ve un Gagá, es dominicano. Y ahora mismo más dominicano que haitiano. Tu ve el Gagá que hay gente que se va con su pañuelo amarrado, con su macuto, dominicano, dominicano-dominicano entregado. Entonces ya... y lo tocan, van aprendiendo. Y ahora mismo está más ligado dominicano que haitiano” (right now, it’s more Dominican than Haitian. You see a Gagá and it’s Dominican. You see Dominican-Dominican individuals who carry their pañuelos and macuto, fully devoted).

For Guigo the ratio of Haitian and Dominican participants in the tradition, along with the passion they both invest, are significant. To emphasize his point, Guigo says “Dominican-Dominican” to indicate the extent of people’s self-identification. The repetition seems to imply a strong identity that cannot be refuted.

During Guigo’s interview, I followed a similar sequence to what I did in Pirulo’s interview. I commented to Guigo that in some Gagá groups “hay miembros que vienen de Haití, y muchos miembros que son hijos de haitiano o de abuelo” (there are group member who come from Haiti and others who are children or grandchildren of Haitians), to which Guigo responded:

“No, porque la mayoría son ya de gente que su papá son haitiano, su mamá son haitiana, viven adentro del batey. Ya tiene que por lo menos... porque esa es una música que te contagia, y si no te contagia yo vengo y te enchincho [inaudible] y vamo a suponer, él no sabe, ya yo lo voy a enseñar, y va aprendiendo y hasta que ya, llega el año que viene y ya sabe tocar. Porque eso se compone por los familiares, que le gustan eso, y los muchachos que me estén mirando ya se inyectan” (Most of the people are children of Haitians and they live in bateyes. It’s a music that’s catchy and, let’s say someone doesn’t know and I teach them and they learn so that next year he performs. It is comprised of family and relatives who like it and get involved in it).

In his example, Guigo provides some information about the population in bateyes and explains that many members of Gagá are children of Haitians who get involved because they are born surrounded by the music and dance. Right after his statement about the children of Haitians practice Gagá, I replied “también había mucha gente que en el Gagá se metían gente dominicano y haitiano y de una mezcla” (there were also both Dominican and Haitian people who would get involved in the procession).

To this, Guigo responded:

“si, porque es una tradición que es para todo el mundo, eso es igual que tu dice “las puertas estan abiertas.” Es como la política. Usted viene, a ver, esta comportándose bien, to ta bien, y majomeno te van a sacar pa fuera [...] No, eso es ahi pa to el mundo: Americano, Españoles. Antes aquí venían españoles a grabar y así. Porque vienen mucha gente a conocer el gaga. Venían desde el jueves y amanecían con uno pa ver bien como se saca” (yes, because it is a tradition for everyone. Door are open. For Americans, Spanish. Spanish used to come to video tape. A lot of people come to know about Gagá).

Some interlocutors pointed out that foreigners also partake in the procession. This involvement of outsiders facilitates to reason that Gagá is not only for Haitians and Dominicans. Guigo told me that the doors are open as a metaphor to indicate that Gagá is welcoming to people from all nationalities.

I prompted Damaris, the current leader of La Ceja, for her opinion about authorities justifying their endeavor to prohibit the procession of Gagá because it is a Haitian tradition. Her response was:

“el gaga no tiene que ver con nacionalidad ni color, porque si a ver vamos, en un grupo de gaga ahí tú vas a ver americanos, vas a ver chinos, haitianos, dominicanos. Es una mezcla, una mezcla de personas y eso llama mucho la atención” (Gagá has nothing to do with nationality or color, because in a Gagá group you might see Americans, Chinese, Haitians, Dominicans. It is a mixture of people and that’s attention grabbing).

For Damaris, the involvement of people from within and outside the nation of various ethnic backgrounds makes it a mixed activity. This mixture, for her, is what enables Gagá to catch the attention of the authorities and the media. Since people of various backgrounds are involved, Gagá is not a Haitian tradition as it is commonly referred to in the media and printed press. Instead, for Gagá members like Damaris and Guigo, the evidence of heavy involvement and interest from people other than Haitians is evidence that Gagá is a tradition that is not solely Haitian. The procession is an open event, Gagá groups make feel like home many non-Haitian Gagá enthusiasts, and Gagá groups welcome musicians and dancers who did not grow up with the tradition or have no connection to Haiti. Following this logic, because Gagá is not only comprised of Haitian participants, the tradition is incorrectly regarded as an activity exclusively for Haitians.

While many of my interlocutors emphasized to me the predominance of Dominicans in Gagá, others are forthcoming about the Haitian origin of the tradition. César, who also told me that Gagá “salió fue para nosotros los negros” (came out for us, Black people) is very forthcoming about self-identifying as Black and Haitian. In our conversation, César told me that he and his mother were born in the Dominican Republic and that all other ancestors and relatives are from Haiti. I asked him if he was from a batey and he told me:

“Sí ...pero gracias a Dios yo soy haitiano, no me niego ni nación, y tú me disculpas, yo no niego mi raza, yo me siento orgulloso, gracias a la misericordia, y lo que yo estoy sirviendo yo me siento orgulloso y me siento contento también” (I am Haitian and don’t deny my nation. I feel proud and happy).

In this case, César is communicating to me his connection to the Dominican Republic, letting me know that he was born there. At the same time, he reminds me that he identifies as Haitian, and he is proud of it. In his speech, César is making sure that I know that he does not deny his ancestry. Perhaps because many Dominicans of Haitian origin are told to deny it, he accentuates it.

The consensus among all these individuals is that Gagá is a Dominican tradition with an overwhelming participation of Dominican persons. This understanding of Gagá does not negate, however, that it is also Haitian and that it has its origin in the sugarcane plantations where Haitian immigrants created roots over generations. Given that many practitioners identify as Dominican and perceive an increasing involvement of Dominican individuals who do not claim Haitian ancestry, Gagá is, then, also a Dominican tradition. Because of the emphasis on the membership of Dominicans, I contend that the community's discourse around Gagá is one that aims to carve out their place within Dominican society. Moreover, César's perspective demonstrates the nuanced experience and perception within the community of gagaseros: an outlook in which practitioners recognize both the Haitian and Dominican character of their tradition.

The citizenship status and the possession of identity documents poses another set of factors that determine, from the perspective of the state, the incorporation of a person in the nation. My focus is on the perception and the language that members of the community use to speak about their tradition to outsiders (like me) and to a general audience (in online interviews). For my analysis, the distinction between statements about having documentation and possessing it is less relevant. Indeed,

because the government requires official records for citizenship status, my primary interest is not in whether my interlocutors are in accordance with the state or whether they possess such documents that, for the state, validate their claims. Instead, my focus is on considering the discourses from the community vis-a-vis that of the state. In doing so, I show how the community challenges the elite understanding of belonging to the nation and claim their place within it.

Jovanny Guetto Gagá YouTube Channel

The YouTube Channel Jovanny Guetto fronted by Jovanny focuses on creating content on Gagá and Vodou in which the community is front and center. Jovanny often explains in his videos that much of the motivation of this project is about tackling the stereotypes of the community and religion. For Jovanny it is important to show to a general audience what Gagá and Vodou are in order to dispel the major widespread negative perspective about the religion. At a glance, most of the content in the channel features Jovanny's interviews of religious leaders and community members. Jovanny also uploads plenty of content of processions and music performances of Gagá groups as well as Vodou ceremonies in which Gagá bands are prominently featured. Some other content in the channel is vlog-style videos in which Jovanny documents his opinion on a variety of issues pertaining the community. As shown in many of the interviews, interviewees often credit Jovanny's channel for a great contribution to the community of Gagá and Vodou practitioners. Some interlocutors assert that the channel has helped spread awareness about the religion and its misconceptions.

Based on the recurrent questions that Jovanny asks interlocutors during interviews, it is evident that his intention is to create a connection between the audience and the religious leaders. Jovanny often asks to his interlocutors to share with the audience a story that reveals how their lives were impacted by the deities. He also frequently asks the interviewees to share advice for followers of the religion and send a “message” to the community and fellow religious leaders. For many of the interviewees, their work as religious leaders started as young persons, but others began working later in their lives. To those who initiated their full-time role as religious leaders, Jovanny asks what their previous occupation was. His interlocutors often share their journeys of transitioning from other trades and adapting to a new lifestyle.

Jovanny’s interviews are characterized by topics about family lineage and personal journeys navigating Gagá and Vodou. Because of the nature of the religion, many end up participating in Gagá because they have older relatives already involved who encouraged them to pursue it. In Vodou, passing down the role as priest to a descendant is a key practice for the continuation of the religion. Scholars of Vodou have discussed how practitioners pass down the tradition (see Brown 1991). In the Guetto interviews, for instance, Maritza, a religious leader, tells Jovanny that his grandfather and great grandfather were involved with *misterios*. Because of this family connection she started serving the misterios (Jovanny Guetto 2022). As another example, Bleo (dueño of well-known Gagá Batey San Luis), invited his aunt to the interview (Jovanny Guetto 2019). According to him, she is someone who influenced his work a lot and one of the main reasons why he does the work he does

with misterios. The aunt, an elderly woman, expresses her support to his nephew while addressing the audience by looking directly at the camera. Her participation in the interview shows the importance that the inheritance and the lessons learned from elders have in Vodou. A notable moment is when she endorses her nephew's work. This demonstrates that Bleo is supported by his ancestors and can count on their knowledge. For many of the leaders, the story of how they came to work and make a living in Vodou seems to be important. Many have stories that begin in their childhood or a story of having their interest and affinity to the deities from relatives (a parent or a grandparent, usually). In these interviews, Jovanny is usually interested in hearing when they started working as an *oungan* or *manbosa*,¹¹ why they started to make a living.

The family stories of inheritance told by Jovanny's interlocutors can also reveal transnational connections and racialized origins that highlight the African ancestry of the religion vis-a-vis the Dominican elite's Hispanophilic discourses of ethno-racial identity in the D.R. Many of the interviewees are Dominicans of Haitians ancestry whose parents are either both Haitian immigrants or a mixture between Haitian and Dominican nationals. In many of the interviews, Jovanny is straight forward with his questions and often asks his subjects their identity and nationality. In the interview with Randy Criminel (Jovanny Guetto 2022), Jovanny asks him about his origin. Randy says that he is *arrayano* (a term for Dominicans of Haitian origin) on his father's side. Another brujo's grandmother is from St. Thomas, a Caribbean Island in the Lesser Antilles. Acknowledging his ancestry, Aneo indicates a

¹¹ Haitian Creole for male and female Vodou priest or religious leader, respectively.

connection to other Black nations in the Caribbean (Jovanny Guetto 2019). Aneo describes his grandmother, who decades ago would do certain things that back then were criticized of *servidores*¹² or and which, according to him, are now seen as normal and acceptable. The story goes that Doña Sabina would spend, as Aneo's story goes, up to three consecutive days in possession of a misterio while smoking and doing chores. He recounts that “mi abuela con Ogun pasaba tres días montada bebiendo cerveza, lavando, fregando y haciendo lo que tenía que hacer con Ogun en la cabeza y eso lo criticaban en eso tiempo” (my grandmother used to spend three days in possession of Ogun and people used to criticize that). Nowadays, according to him, people see that as appropriate behavior. He says that it is more acceptable for devotees to see *servidores* drinking and smoking while in possession of a deity. The story about Aneo's grandmother reflects the evolution and shifting trends in acceptance through time. The stories about lineage, inheritance, and the journey of religious leaders into Vodou center the community and family. These stories highlight the key role that the community and family play in their development and their reputation.

Some of the content in the Jovanny's YouTube channel is focused on critiquing the church that has continuously demonized Gagá and Vodou. In several vlog-style videos of at least 30 minutes, Jovanny is vocal about his disagreement and the Church's perception of Gagá, Vodou, and the community. Guetto published a video in which he responds to another video from another channel in which the host mocks his interviewee, a Vodou religious leader, and belittles the Vodou (Jovanny

¹² Spanish for religious leader of Haitian Vodou or Dominican Vudú.

Guetto August 2022). Jovanny has continued a campaign in his Instagram profile in which he antagonizes the Christian church and its leaders. Some of the posts in social media have responded to scandalous news breakouts about illicit and harmful acts that church leaders have done, such as rape of minors. In his posts, he makes comments about them and rhetorically asks whether anyone can name a religious leader of Vodou who has done such things. Jovanny's intentions are clear in that he is calling out the church and wants his audience to see it in an unfavorable light by highlighting some negative acts. His reaction is also a reflection of the fact that many in the Gagá community have converted to Christianity and abandoned Vodou at a notable rate.¹³ Gagá and Vodou are seen as diabolic and as something that Christians should stay away from.

The YouTube channel Jovanny Guetto has the potential to serve as a platform that transforms the elite perception of Gagá, Vodou, and its community more broadly. The democratization of media platforms, in this case YouTube, provides a community the ability to create and disseminate information and ideas to a broader sector of society. In mainstream media, such content is not usually produced or valued. In this online content, gagaseros are the protagonists of the narratives about traditions have long been relegated to second-class status and denounced as “uneducated” religious practices. The interviews that Jovanny conducts can show a richer view about the importance of Vodou and Gagá to the community. Ultimately, in the content of these videos, interviewees and Jovanny can challenge long-standing

¹³ A recurrent talking point with my interlocutors is the noticeable increase of Evangelical churches in bateyes for the last two decades and the number of former Vodou devotees and Gagá participants who have converted and wish to stay away from their prior religious views.

misguided and ill-intended narratives about Vodou that have been disseminated by cultural outsiders.

Part II: Shifts and Changes in Gagá over Time, as Narrated by Interlocutors

Gagá Groups: Changes in Membership and Motivation

In the last twenty to thirty years, as interlocutors narrated to me, many members of Gagá groups have gradually changed their motivations to joining their groups every year. Many recount that in many Gagá groups a lower percentage of participants do the *promesa* (religious commitment) committing to dance in the processions for a given minimum of years. Instead, more and more people participate in Gagá without that obligation. This shift in motivation, which many lament and wish were not as widespread, goes hand in hand with the common practice that *dueños de Gagá* find themselves needing to offer compensation to musicians and dancers participate during Semana Santa. According to some, many musicians and dancers only get involved if they are compensated for their time. While fewer people make religious commitment to a group, more dancers and musicians perform with different Gagá groups from year to year depending on how attractive an offer a *dueño* can make. By highlighting these shifts in membership dynamics, I identify a possible relationship between these and the economic developments in the Dominican Republic discussed in the previous chapter. The stories told by Gagá members about changes experienced in the last two decades or so, relate to the downturn of the sugarcane industry and the rural-to-urban migration of Haitian Dominicans at the turn of the century.

During their active years, many Gagá dancers and musicians participate in more than one Gagá group. It is common practice for members of Gagá to commit to different groups depending on the convenience or the offer they might receive from dueños. Even if a dancer or musician participates for a long time in the Gagá group from the batey they were born in or they grew up, they might later switch and commit to another group. In the previous works that document Gagá, scholars do not explicitly describe the batey of origin of members of Gagá groups. In my reading of these sources, I am left to interpret that, at least, the vast majority of participants of a given Gagá are from or have a connection to the batey in which the group is based. These researchers do not pay particular attention to the birthplace of members, other than their nationality (whether Dominican or Haitian). Because of this, I cannot compare my interlocutor's practices with that of those that June Rosenberg consulted in the 1970s. If we assume that prior to the 1980s, the vast majority of Gagá members were from the same batey of the Gagá group, then the practice of moving from group to group might be a custom that became more common in the last three decades or so. Likewise, Rosenberg and Alegría Pons do not discuss whether dueños de Gagá hire dancers and musicians. These scholars document the participation of members based on the religious promise they might make and their devotion to Vodou deities. Alegría Pons does make an observation about the migration pattern in Gagá groups he documented. He mentions to know of Gagá members who move away from the batey and return every year to celebrate the procession.

There are members of groups who were not born in bateyes and have never lived there, but whose parents or grandparents are from there, so they become part of

the Gagá groups. For instance, many of the members of La Ceja Gagá group might not even have familial connections to the batey but have made it their home Gagá group. Although Gagá groups are comprised with a majority of Dominicans of Haitian ancestry and Dominicans who do not claim Haitian connections, the vast majority of people who participate in Gagá are phenotypically Black. Many in the group La Ceja continue as part of the group because of comfortability, closeness, and feeling connected. For some in the group, one of the things that make La Ceja Gagá group is that it does not “get in trouble” (*meten en problemas*) and does not have a “beef” (*problemas*) with other groups. Some characterize the group as family-friendly in which kids can come and be in a “*sano*” (healthy) environment. In fact, Pirulo, whose family is from Magdalena Batey and who lived for many years in that batey, holds his loyalty to La Ceja. He has stated several times to me and others in the groups that he is committed to La Ceja.

From Religious Motives to Professionalization

I have continually heard from Gagá members that it is far less common for them to make the promise and commit to the Gagá for a minimal number of years. Many, like De Leon, have made the promise one time, which committed him to dance every year for 7 consecutive years, as it is tradition, and does not plan to do it again. De Leon commented to me that the commitment to dance 7 years is too demanding. Every year, De Leon has been spending Semana Santa with La Ceja, mostly singing. Rather than doing it for a religious commitment, he does it out of personal interest and to connect with the community. I have heard about the decline of promises from various dueños de Gagá from different regions of the country. The explanation as to

why this shift is not entirely clear. “Because times change” is an answer I heard often. My research suggests that the socioeconomic developments of the 1990s are key factors of this phenomenon.

Pedro Berroa, who dances in La Ceja, is an example of a *majo*¹⁴ who expresses a non-religious commitment to dancing with the group every year. For Pedro, his desire to come back to La Ceja every Semana Santa is based on the connection that his father built decades ago and linked to a devotion to continue such connection alive. According to Pedro, deciding to make a promise in a group is not only about the commitment to the group or to the *lwa*. The loyalty, Pedro believes, is also driven by fear of the consequences: he told me that people fear what the *lwa* might make happen if one breaks the commitment and does not follow through. Some of the fears of things that have happened, according to him, are that someone (a family member or a loved one) suddenly gets very ill or have a freak accident. Because of the strong commitment that making the promise (*subir en la silla*)¹⁵ entails, his father advised him and his sister to not do it.

Pedro recounted the story of somebody who betrayed the *misterios* in la Ceja by stealing money that was destined for the Gagá. The story goes that this person was responsible for the money and instead of saving it for what was originally intended, they misused it. A few days later, people in the group rumored that the person spent all of the money since it was not recuperated. And finally, a few days later the person fell ill and within months passed away. He tells me people in the countryside refer to

¹⁴ Male Gagá dancer.

¹⁵ When making a *promesa* (religious commitment), Gagá dancers participate in a ritual *subida de la silla* (lifting of the chair).in which they sit on chair are other members lift them up.

events like this as someone was eaten (“se lo comieron”) or that the devil ate them (“se lo comió el diablo”). He advises that when someone makes a commitment with the dark side (“lado oscuro”), meaning the Petró/Petwo family of Vodou, that person needs to be very careful in making sure they follow the asks that the deities give them in exchange for what they want from them. Commonly, when dancers make the promise to a deity to participate for seven years straight, they do not ask the dueño for compensation. Given that it is a religious commitment, the compensation would come in the form of what the deity will eventually grant the devotee in return of their dancing. The shift toward dueños hiring dancers and musician, makes sense given the considerably lower number of people that are doing the promise to deities.

Dancing and Playing for Compensation

Many more leaders of Gagá groups have found themselves with the need to make monetary offers or other styles of compensation to dancers and musicians in order to attain the necessary number of individuals for the band to be complete, as already established. As the person in charge and responsible for the group, the dueño is the person who has the duty to acquire the necessary funds to run the procession. The costs are both logistical and the compensation for dancers and musicians of the Gagá. Dueños de Gagá approach male and female dancers and promise a stipend for their time spent in the group. While some majos dance in one group for many consecutive years and develop their loyalty to such, others choose to dance for different groups some years depending on the offers they might get from groups with more resources.

Both the *reinas* and *majos*¹⁶ are managed by someone in the group whose responsibility is to coordinate, organize, and care for the dancers during the days of the procession.

Gagá practitioners commonly agree that the *dueño* is responsible for ensuring funds for their Gagá group. Pirulo and the rest consider that the person who wants to claim the ownership (to be the *dueño*) has to be the person to provide the funds or to find the funds for the procession and all the costs around it. For Pirulo, if one doesn't have the connections to get the funds, they should not choose to lead the group. During a group interview over Zoom, members of La Ceja emphasized the importance of having a person who can “dar la cara” (face the consequences) for the group and be responsible for gathering the funds and the necessities for the procession. While a *Dueño* is the person with the most responsibility, a collaborative effort can also be made to successfully “*sacar*” (carry out) a Gagá procession in Semana Santa. A *dueño* of a Gagá who promises to find the funds and later fails to do so, would “quedar mal” (look bad). The reputation of the *dueño* is more heavily linked to the Gagá, whether it is positive or negative. Another way that Gagá groups can collect what they need is by donations in the form of either cash or material goods. Groups could receive donations of fabric for the confection of the attires, shoes, shirts, the rental of a bus for transportation, cash to cover the costs, or food.

Carmelita, former leader of La Ceja, tells me that as a former *dueña*, she had to take care of all the financials, and she had to make sure that everyone got their fair share. She explained to me that dancers used to buy their own garbs for the Gagá

¹⁶ Female and male Gagá dancers, respectively.

group on their own expenses.¹⁷ As a hypothetical example, she told me a *reina* would have come to her with an offer for compensation and if she would not be able to afford that request then the person would go on to another Gagá group.

It is common for Gagá members to receive offers from multiple dueños. Several from La Ceja mentioned to me that because of their preference and the nature of La Ceja, they choose to stick with it. Pedro explained to me how a dueño would offer more money to *majos* for them to switch group and play with them. Pedro tells me that the first time he heard of a dueño de Gagá offering money to a majo was when his cousin accepted an offer. He, who was very satisfied with the compensation as Pedro told me, invited Pedro to leave la Ceja and come to another Gagá group in which the owner was paying dancers up to 15,000 pesos, compared to nothing in La Ceja. According to Pedro, dueños of Gagá who work with “strong” deities, such as Criminel, can charge a lot and because of those earnings they can afford paying attractive sums to majos. Pirulo has also stated that he has been given offers multiple time from various dueños of Gagá groups to have him join their band but has declined them. He says that he wants to stay with La Ceja and would not give up the groups for any amount of money. Caquin, for instance, stated that he had been offered money to go participate in other Gagá groups as a musician, but he refused to leave La Ceja. This is an example of the level of loyalty that members in Gagá can show.

For María, former member of La Ceja, the sense of competition between Gagá ensembles is one of the factors that drives the desire to hire dancers and musicians.

¹⁷ Normally, Gagá groups do not wear their clothes twice year after another. Instead, if the funding is available, new garbs are prepared every year.

According to her, because some Gagá groups have the goal to show off to other groups, the dueños seek to hire musicians and majos that would benefit the group's showing. Maria says that a handful of groups are responsible for attracting dancers with payments and effectively luring them away from other Gagá groups that were either not paying them or were paying them a smaller honorarium. "Everything has become about money," tells me María multiple times. Back in the day, according to María, Gagá groups would go out to the procession with just some rum, but nowadays you need much more than that, such as a lot of alcoholic drinks, a lot of food, "and a lot of everything." Given that, if the Iwa asks for the Gagá to go out, it is important that the promise is kept, the practice of hiring musicians and dancers puts additional pressure that can become unproductive to Gagá groups with less resources.

For some, by focusing on money and having to hire dancers and musicians, groups are moving away from tradition. María explained to me that many groups have prioritized money and consequently moved away from the original goal of the Gagá tradition. "Not everything is money," underscored to me María. She continued,

"porque hay veces que todos se enfocan en el dinero. El dinero es útil y realmente se necesita, pero hay veces que la gente se ha confundido con el Gagá de la Ceja.... se han avasado [sic] al dinero, ya no se trata de tradición. Un gaga ya no se trata de Gagá, se trata de dinero. Ya esto no es tradición, se llama dinero. Si yo voy a bailar, un ejemplo, 'ah, yo te voy a pedir tanto pa yo bailarte en tu gaga'. Ya no se trata de que tú lleve tu pañuelo y que vas a bailar tu tradición. Si no que esos tres días hay que costearle sus gastos y también hay que darle dinero" (Because, there are times they all focus on money. Money is useful and necessary, but there have been people who confuse it with tradition. It became no longer about Gagá but about money. If someone is going to dance, for instance, 'I ask you to pay me this amount to dance in your Gagá.' It's no longer about bringing your handkerchief and dancing your tradition. Nowadays, we have to pay for their expenses and compensate them).

According to her, once a group starts to offer money for hiring the band, it is not going back because gagaseros will now expect the same every year. She has noticed that such transition has been increasingly happening since around the 2010s. To illustrate her point, María posed a hypothetical case:

“por ejemplo, yo voy a bailar en tu gaga, Marta decía, ‘no, yo te voy a dar 5 mil pesos, tómallo pero tu tiene que bailar en mi gaga’..... entonces ya la gente, ya dañaron la tradición. Ya aunque uno no quiera tiene que dar dinero para que el gaga pueda brillar... [la gente] ...ya están esperando porque lo adaptaron a eso. Un gaga salía antes con un pote de romo, la música, y como se podía hacer el gaga. Ya ahora no, ahora es comida, mucha bebida, mucho de todo para que el gaga pueda, tranquilidad total y uno pueda cumplir con su compromiso” (for example, if I am going to dance in your Gagá group, you offer me money. They have harmed the tradition because now they are expecting to get paid. Gagá groups used to go out with rum but now you need food, a lot of drinks, a lot of everything).

María, like others, has a more pessimistic take on the tendency to hire. As a co-organizer of a Gagá at the time of in the interview, it is reasonable to expect that she has a less favorable view on this shift. She would be the least benefitted party in such transaction.

Chachime’s trajectory as a dancer of Gagá is one that exemplifies this recent trend. After dancing for some years in Gagá La 30, the first Gagá where he danced, he then went on to dance for other groups in subsequent years. “When they saw my work and labor,” Cachimé tells me, “...there were people who made me offers, gave me opportunities and from there I went on to Gagá of Apolinar. Now, I am one of the representatives and organizers of the group” (cuando vieron mi trabajo y mi labor, hubo gente que me hicieron ofertas, me dieron facilidades y de ahí me trasladé al Gagá de Apolinar y ahora soy uno de los cabecillas y representante de la organización). Cachime’s trajectory is an example of a Gagá practitioner who has

participated in multiple Gagá groups and who eventually assumed a leadership role in a group.

The shift in practice seems to have made it possible for dueños who are able to gather more funds from their clients and donors to gather more resources for the band (instruments, garment, etc.) and attract a larger number of dancer and musicians. The dueños who have more resources can lure more skilled dancers and musicians from other Gagá groups. This seems to have left many groups with fewer resources, with fewer musicians, less ability to create new garments every year, or simply not being able to go out in their procession. I hear from interlocutors that when dueños are not able to secure enough funds they make the hard choice to not carry out the procession that year.

Correlation between Shifts and Socioeconomic changes

The decline of the sugarcane industry and the increasing migration out of bateyes seem to be key factors in the shift of membership motives and professionalization discussed above. Younger people are leaving the bateyes for other jobs that the mills do not offer. As discussed in Chapter 2, several economic shifts marked the first decade of the twentieth-first century that transformed Haitian migration in the D.R. in relation to its insertion in the labor market, according to anthropologist Kiran Jayaram (2010). Jayaram argues that neoliberal policies heavily implemented during the first term (1996-2000) of former president Leonel Fernández and continued in his subsequent two terms (2004-2012) significantly changed the labor market of the Haitian immigrant community. With the decline of jobs in sugar mills, many from bateyes faced the necessity of leaving for towns and cities. In the

Eastern region of the D.R., where Gagá La Ceja and famous resort area Punta Cana are, many left bateyes for jobs in the service industry and all-inclusive resorts. Many of those who leave bateyes come back every year for their Gagá group's procession (also documented by Alegría Pons, 1994). And, in many cases, as I have been told, due to the same reason, many Gagá groups have to rely on sourcing musicians and dancers from other bateyes.

Bateyes like La Ceja, which are still operating under a sugar mill, have been affected by the reduction in production of the sugarcane and driven people away from the bateyes for work. Carmelita, the daughter of the late leader of Gagá la Ceja, explained to me that younger folks who were born and raised in the bateyes do not stay to work in mill and opt to leave the batey for better earning opportunities. Until around 2017, Carmelita lived in the batey with her husband while her children had moved away. Rather than working in the plantation or the mill, their children left for towns to find work in the thriving tourism industry. Several interlocutors explained to me that because of the migration out of La Ceja they have to hire musicians from elsewhere. Pirulo, who has been coordinating the music band for the past few years, contracts musicians from batey Magdalena (the batey he is originally from). Damaris, who is also originally from La Ceja, left the batey years ago to live in La Romana and work in the tourism industry. Her mother stayed in the batey (who hosted me twice during the rehearsals of La Ceja in 2020 before the pandemic lockdowns) while her children went on to find job opportunities elsewhere. Damaris is one of the many *gagaseros* who maintain a close relationship to the batey and returns every year for the group's procession.

While the dueños de Gagá who have the means to secure more funds for their group and thus attract more musicians and dancers, other dueños with fewer resources struggle with the shift from less religious commitment to more payment-based participation. Moisés, a dueño de Gagá based in La Romana, tell a tale that reflects some of the anxieties surrounding the need to pay for musicians and dancers.

Moisés: “Lo que hacen es que algunos nos engañan a los dueños. Va y te dicen que van a salir contigo, que necesitan ayuda de 5mil pesos, uno cuenta con él, y un ejemplo se va para donde Momón y le dice que necesita 3mil y cuenta con él, y después se va para donde la Ceja. Hay gente que viven de eso nadamás. Por eso es que el gaga ahora mismo no hay fuerza para hacerlo. No hay fuerza. La gente nos quita mucho dinero [inaudible] mucho, mucho. Nos maltratan mucho” (some people deceive dueños. They tell you they’ll go out with your group, that they need help with money, and for instance, they go to Momón and ask for money, and then they go to La Ceja. There’s people who do that all the time. That’s why we don’t have the means to do it right now. People take away a lot of money from us, it’s harmful).

Víctor: “eso es lo que oigo, de la diferencia, que antes tocaban...” (that’s what I’ve heard, the difference now, that people previously used to play...)

Moisés: “...gratis. Sí, gratis. Porque era compromiso, lo majo gratis, porque ya tenían. Pero ahora no. Ahora ello te piden lo teni. Lo que tú no usa, ello te lo piden, y cuando viene a ver tu más nunca lo ve a ellos. Sabe? Y nosotros tenemos mucho problema con eso. Hasta que nosotros no hagamos una reunión sobre estos problemas. Porque estamos haciendo mucha reunión dique para muchas cosas. Pero el primer problema de nosotros es que nos quitan mucho dinero” (...for free. Yes, for free. It used to be for commitment, the mayo: for free, because they use to have [the means]. But not anymore. Now, they ask you for shoes, and later they are gone. We have a lot of issues with that. We need to have a meeting to address this. The main issue is that they take a lot of money from us).

Moisés perspective on the economics running a Gagá group—while an outlier among my interlocutors—alludes to broader economic issues that the community faces. The living conditions of gagaseros is a precarious one, and as this experience indicates, it is so for both band members and group leaders.

From the anecdotes above, I gather that the economic developments at the turn of the century in the D.R. not only lead members of groups such as dancers and musicians to ask for stipends, but also affect the economic ability of leaders to pay for the labor. The problem that Moises points to is a clear reflection of the overall economic panorama that has affected the community. While bateyeros had lost job opportunities in the bateyes in working the same roles their parents and grandparents previously performed, they are now in need of asking dueños de Gagá for compensation and the necessary accessories. The question remains of which of the factors influenced or produced the other one. Have more practitioners stopped doing *promesas* to participate in Gagá because they could no longer afford it? How critical of a role has the downturn of the sugarcane plantation played in both the decline in religious promises and the rise in asking for compensation? Regardless of the causality, there is an evident correlation between, on the one hand, the labor and economic shift that affected Haitian labor market insertions and migration patterns, and, on the other hand, the hiring-to-play/dance and the diminishing of religious promises.

The Banda's Music: Criollo and Moderno

Some Gagá groups are currently playing what many call “estilo moderno,” which is a music style that borrows and imitates the northern Haiti Rara version. Some musicians and dueños talk about it as a positive change that Gagá music has undergone. Meanwhile, others have expressed disdain for the style and voiced resistance in changing to the “moderno” band. For some, “modernizing” the music of Gagá is desirable and even inevitable. This adoption of the music style of northern

Haiti's Rara seems to enable the practice of paying musicians for their labor. Some dueños de Gagá who have made the transition from criollo to moderno of their bands have to bring and hire musicians from Haiti. Given that the moderno sound is an adoption of an already existing style from Haiti, this "modernization" of ensembles can be read as a manner for the Haitian Dominican community to 1) reassert their heritage to Haiti and 2) to emphasize the Black and African characteristic of Gagá and Vodou. These group leaders speak of their music as being moderno while maintaining the raices, that is, the roots of their music. With this logic, these groups keep both their connection to the D.R. (their raices), while also highlighting their Haitian heritage.

What gagaseros consider Gagá criollo and moderno are primarily differentiated by the ensemble that leads the melodic and harmonic base of the tunes. In the criollo bands, a set of bamboos are the most sonically prominent and provide the harmonic base. Moderno is that in which a tin cornet ensemble predominates and produces the harmonic base and main melody, effectively taking over the sound of the band. The cornet ensemble makes the singing voices less audible and become the most salient sonic feature of the group. McAlister (2003) extensively documents Rara bands from the northern regions and describes the instrumentation and sonic features of these bands. In the interview with Edward from Dec. 1st 2021, Jovanny makes an statement about the relatively recent changes in the music that many gaga groups have done in the last two decades (Jovanny Guetto 2021). Additionally, according to Damaris, criollo groups like La Ceja use other percussive instruments that the moderno no longer use such as "la tamborita." For many, Gagá criollo is the style of

music closely related with the countryside (el campo). Gagá participants refer to gaga criollo as *de batey* (of batey), *de campo* (of countryside), and *tradicional* (traditional). As was explained to me, the Gagá groups that have dominated in bateyes are those that they consider criollo. Criollo is considered as an older style that has been around in bateyes for longer than the style they contrast it with *moderno*. The documentation of Gagá bands in the D.R. that previous scholars did between the 1970s and 1990s is consistent with the criollo style described by members of La Ceja Gagá.

Members of La Ceja pride in keeping the sound *tradicional* and have opted to maintain it that way. When I asked some of the members of de La Ceja why they like the group and why they stick to it, many said that they like the fact that the group has stayed criollo. Damaris prides herself in letting me know that Gagá La Ceja is one of the largest criollo Gagá groups at least in the Eastern region of the country. The preference for the criollo sound is exemplified in an anecdote narrated to me by María and later reiterated by Pirulo. Sometime around 2015 or so, as María recounts, she got interested in modernizing the sound of the group. She brought from Haiti a set of *cornetas*, hoping that the musicians would be excited about it. As it turns out, she told me, they all got together to try out and play the *cornetas* but none of the musicians liked them. They decided that they did not want to change the sound of the group and Maria ended up having to return the instruments and buy a whole new set of bamboos.

Pirulo explained to me that the coordination of the *cornetas* is challenging because of the many places from which musicians are gathered to play in La Ceja. The 12 cornets, according to Pirulo, have to be played together in a highly

coordinated manner. He told me that it became a challenge for the musicians and as a consequence they disliked playing with the instruments. Because these musicians come from various bateyes, the needed time to rehearse and learn to play the set of cornetas poses a challenge that they were not interested in taking. The number of musicians that can be available at one time in order to play in the procession is not as reliable. For Pirulo, in order to have the set of cornetas to sound well, the set of instruments has to be played in its entirety. In contrast to that, the set of *bambús* can be played with fewer musicians and still achieve the desired sound. Pirulo explained the musician's preference of the bambú over the cornetas when he said, "Si. Eso es un metal, pero después de que el bambú arranca es que le da el ritmo. Si hay poco musico se hace con el tercero y el cuarto" (Yes, that's metal, but once bamboo starts they set the rhythm). I then replied asking whether they would be partially use the set that María brought and Pirulo explained that "no, porque esos estan combinados para soplar los 12 juntos" (no, because those have to be all coordinated together). It seems that the experience of Pirulo with the bambu allows him to achieve the criollo sound of the band without the complete set of bambu. "Si el Gagá de La Ceja pierde el ritmo, se jodió todo" (if La Ceja loses its rhythm, it's all done). For Pirulo, La Ceja cannot change its sound because it is crucial for the continuation of the group. "No le gustaba, porque son 12 corneta entonces tiene que haber 12 musico y tiene que estar bien combinado porque si no se hace un tollo" (they didn't like it because you needed 12 musicians and they have to be well coordinated) Pirulo explained to me. It seems that rather than moving on to the modern sound, Pirulo supports maintaining the criollo sound for a number of reasons including the versatility of the bambú set and

because it is how the reputation of La Ceja was built. In addition to the preferences about the ensemble of bambú over cornetas, members of la Ceja have a preference to singing as Pirulo told me “Ya en la Ceja hay que cantar.... tigueraje. Siempre hay un tigueraje que canta y ahí cogen fuerza” (we have to sing in La Ceja. There are always young men who want to sing). In the moderno ensemble, in contrast, the instruments “sing” the melody instead.

Even though María once had the desire to *modernizar* the sound of La Ceja, she prefers the criollo sound because it is better aligned to her religious outlook. María considers that many of the Gagá groups that have a large ensemble of cornetas are flaunting their skills rather than being more serious about the religious purpose of the procession. She told me,

“esto es criollo. Pero ahora esto lo que se trata ahora es de 40-60 trompeta. Ya eso para mí, sin faltarle el respeto a ningún gaga, eso para mí no es música. Esos son los que están ahora mismo como dicen, en la línea. Todo el mundo quiere movilizarse la situación de que ‘vamos a echar un gaga adelante con 60 trompeta pa brillar.’ No, esto no es una orquesta, se trata de tradición y se trata de que este es un Gagá criollo y se ha quedado así. Pero como siempre, tenemos que sonar de una forma o la otra, porque es un gaga de respeto, un gaga familiar...” (without the intention to offend any group, having the 40-60 cornetas is not music for me. Everyone wants to do the same nowadays. No, this is not an orchestra. This is about tradition. It’s a Gagá criollo that has stayed like so. It is a respectable Gagá, family-friendly).

In her comparison between moderno and criollo groups, the latter are less concerned about showing off. Instead, as she seems to find more valuable, La Ceja is committed to its religious commitment and in being a reputable and family-oriented group.

María places the qualities of respectability and familial as more desirable trait to have rather than focusing on displaying the musical and dance abilities of the band.

For Moisés (also known as Cacú), modernizing his gaga group is necessary because in his experience, “people don’t want to sing anymore.” When he told me this during our interview, he did not mean it literally like that, but his sentiment summarized a justification for the change. When I asked him about the music style of his group, he replied “lo musico mio usan 18 cornetas. Todo instrumental. Tu sabe que esa es la moda de ahora” (my musicians use 18 corneta. It is all instrumental. That’s the fad nowadays). In contrast to his preference for “moderno” he tells me that Ramon Britis has told him that he does not want to change his style. “Lo de él es antigua..... bambú. Lo de el es natural” (his thing is like old timey, natural). According to Moises, Momón “Ni usa de las cornetas largas, sino tatú. Pero una cosa bien tocada. Pero yo le digo a el que hay un problema, que la gente no quiere cantar” (doesn’t use any of the long cornetas. But the problem is that no one wants to sing anymore). He continues telling me his experience with musicians who no longer showed interest in singing along the band “Entonces por eso fue que me olvide de eso y tuve que meterme al rito nuevo. Yo tuve que mandar a comprar esas cornetas para Haiti, comprar to mi instrumentos en Haiti, muchos intrumentos. Pero a la gente le gustaron” (that’s why I had to forget about that and adapt the new sound. I had to order them from Haiti. But people really liked them). For him that sound is “más duro, más moderno. Eso es un carnaval” (stronger, mor modern. That’s a carnival).

Some Gagá groups have been successful in making the transition to “moderno” while maintaining a strong following. Bleo, dueño of Gagá San Luis, and Edward, dueño of Gagá Calle 13, are two leaders who decided to *modernizar* their respective ensembles and pioneered what is known as moderno in the D.R. Both

groups have an ensemble of 30 to 60 musicians using cornetas to play the main melody and harmony. In both of the YouTube interviews of these two dueños, Jovanny asserts that their respective Gagá groups successfully modernized their sound while keeping it traditional. Jovanny states Gagá Calle 13 is one of the pioneers in combining the traditional and the moderno sound in an effective way after the year 2000. Edward explains that he has musicians from both La Romana and San Pedro de Macorís. According to him, the batey sound is more “acoplado” (musically well integrated). Bleo of Gagá San Luis brings musicians from Haiti to play in his ensemble to accomplish the “moderno” sound that Jovanny ascribes to the Gagá group. The musicians Bleo hires are from Artybonite, a department located in central Haiti. In his interview, Bleo explains to Jovanny that the style musicians play is from Haiti. Bleo recounts that he first heard the Gagá style from Artibonite at a Gagá performance in Mata Mamón, a small town in the D.R. After hearing a different “ritmo,” as he describes it, he decided to go to Artibonite and hire musicians to play cornets and bambúes in order to attain the sound from that region in his group.

The sound of the Gagá relies on the preferences of the lwa, who is the entity that asks dueños specific preference and to whom the dueño has the duty to please. In the interview to Bleo, Jovanny prefaces a question stating that he believes that Gagá San Luis sounds modern while maintaining the traditional sounds, qualifying the group as “innovador y a la vez antiguo” (innovative and antique at the same time) (Jovanny Ghetto 2019). Jovanny then wonders how Bleo accomplishes it. Bleo explains that the misterio is the one who dictated the instrumentation of the group. “El misterio es el que puso esa regla de que tiene que tocar con 7 bambu, para que

esté acoplado.... el bambú tiene que oírse, el tatú, la tambora, el canto, el canto es lo más importante” (the misterio made the rule to play with 7 bamboos so that they go well together. Each instrument has to be heard), says Bleo to Jovanny. Bleo places the power on the misterio/lwa, who is the one who owns the group (as religious leaders explain) and for whom the music and the procession are done every year (and throughout the year). Rather than placing the agency on himself about the musical choice, Bleo puts it on the misterio. Bleo later explains that because of the adherence to the quality of roots of the music, it is why the group is so popular, well regarded, and continuously well attended by large audiences. For Bleo, the balance between modern and traditional sounds has to be maintained “porque las raíces después se van a caer y no podemos dejar las raíces antiguas caer” (because the roots could be lost and we can’t let that happen). Jovanny’s partner in the interview asks Bleo why he thinks Gaga San Luis has been so successful with its followers and the success it has had throughout the years. For Bleo the answer is the “leman” (magnet, in Kreyol) that the group has. He explains that a Gagá group that has its “raíces” (roots), its misterio, its bacá, and temò, it has then a leman, which, as he says explains, attracts people and make them stay around.

The process of adoption of the moderno sound correlates with the shifts I have identified in the current and previous chapter (the motivation, the hiring, more presence in the press). The adoption of the Rara ensemble of northern Haiti needs further inquiring. Examining such process can elucidate further how the meanings associated with the criollo and moderno sound impact the conception of Gagá as folklore and as a “traditional” cultural expression. Within the understanding of

cultural heritage, the perception of modernization of sound, poses a seemingly contrary expectation to that one that of the notion of folkloric music. Even though the “modernización” of the music of Gagá seems to be a complete departure from the “criollo” sound (which is considered the rural, original, traditional sound), Gagá leaders are maintaining a connection to what is considered traditional or folkloric, at least in discourse. Given that the musical preference comes directly from the Iwa/misterio, the patron of the Gagá group, Gagá leaders understand that it must mean that they are able to keep a “traditional” sound while “modernizando” it. In this sense, the relationship between criollo and moderno can still fall under the typical idea of folklore and intangible heritage, one that has strong connections to “raíces.”

Closing Thoughts

In this chapter, I built on the observations made in Chapter 2 to further elucidate the gap between the community’s discourse about Gagá and the outsider discourse surrounding Gagá existent in the printed and online press. I also demonstrate further consequences that the pivotal economic and political developments of the 1990s had on the community of Gagá members and on the practice of Gagá. I have argued throughout the chapter that the experience of gagaseros and their conception about Gagá disputes the understanding and portrayal of Gagá by the elite. The narratives about Gagá not only challenge the elite’s portrayal of Gagá but also contest conceptions about national and racial identity that have dominated politics and official discourse in the D.R. Gagá members address some of the key talking points that denigrators of Gagá have disseminated. The very same principles that elite voices use to disregard Gagá and its community (that it is

not a Dominican tradition, that participants are only Haitian), gagaseros turn them around and questions it. I showed in this chapter that Gagá is a tradition grounded in the Dominican experience in which practitioners define it as Dominican. By using terms and concepts such as cultura, folclor, and blood, gagaseros define what Gagá is. In the second half of this chapter, I show further evidence about the importance of the political and economic developments of the decade of the 1990s and how these affected the Haitian Dominican community. The neoliberal policies that Dominican governments implemented by the turn of the century not only had a significant impact in migration patterns and the labor sector, as scholars have noted, but it also gradually impacted the approach to the Gagá procession. These broad effects on Gagá that might have led to fewer religious promises and an increase in hiring-to-perform, are consequences of politics that dismiss the livelihood of marginalized communities like Haitian Dominicans. In the next chapter, I look at projects that the Gagá community is undertaking to challenge discriminatory practices from local authorities and the police that stem from the same elite consideration about the Haitian Dominican community.

Chapter 4: Community Organizing: Anti-Discrimination Voices of Gagá

I was invited to participate in the first meeting of ADOGA on August second, 2020. ADOGA (Asociación de Dominicana de Dueños de Gagá) is an organization of members of Gagá groups that is primarily comprised of people of Haitian ancestry, many of whom identify as Black. At the meeting, Altagracia Jean Joseph, a Haitian Dominican lawyer, and a member of the organization, addressed the attendees with rhetorical questions and a touch of irony, while others responded and engaged with her. In the following excerpt, Altagracia dialogues with other members and unveil their experience as Black Dominicans of Haitian ancestry in the D.R.

“Who are we outside of the community, and the Gagá? I mean, when we go to the supermarket, do they give us things for free because we are from the batey, because we do Gagá? – “no,” two people replied simultaneously. “No? Oh, so we folks from the batey and Gagá also pay taxes?” – “We also pay taxes” – “much more”, two other people responded --- “they sell to us with higher prices because of our skin color,” a third person said.

Altagracia said, “so we don’t contribute, we go shopping, we take everything for free and go home because we are from Gagá groups, and we have privileges....” Someone replied, “we go buy some pork and they sell it to us double the price”, and another stated, “we are the ones that have less privileges, we go there and they say, ‘she’s a bruja!’”

After making a few comments about representation in the government in a less ironic tone, she continued saying, “...while they have a guy with his foot on your neck and you continue to pay your taxes, and there are none of your folks there, those who know your suffering, who know how much you invest and pay.”

In her speech, Altagracia makes clear that her experience and that of the constituents are enough of a reason to organize themselves as a community of *gagaseros* (Gagá practitioners). This brief set of statements and interaction between members of the

organization reflect key visions of ADOGA, and broadly, the experience of Haitian Dominicans in the Dominican Republic. Given their ancestry and that they have been subject to racist practices and marginalizing policies, Altagracia urges the audience to understand that they need representation in government. This representation must come from people from the community and who know their lived experience.

ADOGA seeks to mitigate the discrimination against the community of Gagá by bringing together their constituents and voicing their concerns to the central government. Likewise, as discussed in Chapter 3, other projects have pursued similar goals by creating and disseminating YouTube videos about Gagá and Vodou. Jovanny Guetto interviews religious leaders and community members, documents processions, and presents performances of Gagá, and other public events related to the community published on his YouTube channel. Through these organizations the needs and claims of *gagaseros* are carried on to the public.

The first goal of this chapter to illustrate how the actions, plans, and subject matter of ADOGA and Jovanny Guetto Gagá respond to historical, political, and anti-Haitian elite discourses in the Dominican Republic. The players in these organizations act both in response to their lived experiences and that of their ancestors. The constituents in these organizations understand that their experiences are very similar to that of their ancestors, whose lives were exploited by practices and policies from the state and the sugarcane industry. For the leaders of ADOGA and producer of Guetto Gagá, understanding the history of their traditions is key in contesting the rejection from the elite. As discussed in the previous chapter, community members often frame Gagá and Vodou as traditions that have been passed

down from previous generations, that is part of their culture, and that is rightfully Dominican folklore. In this discourse, gagaseros portray the history of Gagá as one that shows their belonging to the nation. ADOGA and Jovanny Guetto Gagá base their work on this understanding of Gagá and the history of Dominicans of Haitian ancestry.

The second goal of this chapter is: a) to show the efficacy of ADOGA and Jovanny Guetto Gagá in spreading their message, which reflects the voices and concerns of the community, and b) to illustrate the capacity they have in bringing the community together around the aforementioned discrimination issues. The leading actors in these institutions gather information directly from community members to spread their message and elevate their concerns. ADOGA is founded in organizing meetings that are open not only to members of Gagá groups but also to the community more broadly. In these meetings, attendees have the space to voice their concerns and communicate their struggles surrounding Gagá. Jovanny Guetto YouTube channel's backbone is community members expressing their experiences, concerns, and what Gagá and Vodou mean to them. These two organizations disseminate discourses that contend with elite anti-Haitian discourses, which have widely dictated state and social politics in the Dominican Republic. As discussed in Chapter 2, politicians, communicators, and journalists have used the phrase "the Haitian problem" to talk about Haitian immigration and the perceived threat that Haitians pose to the nation. In the last four to five decades, politicians have perpetuated a discourse in which Haitian immigration is seen as a "silent invasion" of

the country (Jaupart 2018). Those who perpetuate this idea say that Haitians taint Dominican culture, take over jobs, and overuse already precarious public resources.

The priority of ADOGA and Guetto Gagá is to present Gagá, Vodou, and the Haitian Dominican community in an accurate manner. For some in the community, the misinformation on Gagá procession contributes to the misunderstanding and stigmatization of Gagá and Vodou. Likewise, community members consider it important to inform the public on what Gagá is and what it is not. In this chapter, I discuss observations about the reportage of Gagá in the media, which community members believe is in part responsible for the misimpressions of Gagá and Vodou. The constituents of these two organizations are invested in creating the narratives about themselves rather than allowing the public media to stereotype them. Ultimately, ADOGA and Jovanny Guetto Gagá aim to close the gap between the reality in which the community lives and the outsider understanding of their livelihood.

As considered in previous chapters, Gagá groups have faced rejection from local authorities and mistreatment from police. Local authorities of various towns and cities have prohibited the circulation of Gagá groups during Semana Santa, but advocates and community leaders have opposed the local authorities. Two notorious moments, which many national media outlets reported on, were the 2018 and 2022 processions. On both years, local authorities and church leaders issued decrees to stop the procession of Gagá groups but soon after the local authorities dismantled their rules because of the counter protest from advocates and community members. Furthermore, the police enforce the circulation permits of Gagá by demanding that

dueños show their permit. This enforcement practice has proven problematic because it has not been consistently executed. Anecdotal evidence from interlocutors shows that police officers do not always follow the protocol. That is, even if a dueño has a valid permit, police might stop the procession.¹⁸ All of these are challenges that ADOGA and Jovanny Guetto fight to eradicate.

ADOGA is committed to serving as the intermediary institution that mediates communication between the authorities and Gagá groups around the country. In this role, ADOGA seeks to address the inconsistent police enforcement of circulation permit, among other issues. After a few years of preliminary meetings and two former names, ADOGA officially represented Gagá groups during Semana Santa of 2023. Serving as the intermediary organization and a direct link to the Ministry of Culture, has proven, for now, being effective in expecting more consistency from the local authorities. The recognition that comes from the state, in this case the Ministry of Culture, is often considered to have more weight and is less prone to be questioned by local authorities.

Fostering solidarity among Gagá groups and expressing the desire to cooperate are recurring themes in both organizations. In his interviews, Jovanny Guetto often prompts his interviewees to foster fellowship among Gagá leaders and group members. When interviewing religious leaders, Jovanny frequently asks them to convey a public message about cooperation and solidarity to other leaders in the community. Some of the messages encourage leaders of Gagá to be less self-centered

¹⁸ It is common practice in the Dominican Republic for police officers to perform random stop-and-checks to demand a bribe from people. The practice is normally attributed to corruption practice in Dominican state institutions and to the precarious salaries of police officers.

and to consider the broader benefit of the larger community. In many videos, the interviewees usually conclude that all Gagá groups are working toward the same ends and that they would all be better off working together.

In comparison to other projects, movements, and organizations that advocate for Haitian immigrants and the Haitian Dominican community, ADOGA and Jovanny Guetto Gagá place music and religion at the forefront of their core mission. Several well-known organizations in the D.R., such as MUDHA (Movimiento de Mujeres Dominicano Haitianas), Reconodi.do, and OBMICA have championed the rights of immigrant and their descendants and have worked against anti-Haitian policies (Estrella 2020). These civil-society organizations focus on advocating for access to legal documentation, basic public services, education, and other rights that the Dominican state has systematically denied Haitian immigrants and their descendants. Even though ADOGA is not an activist organization in its strict definition and most members do not self-identity as activists, I believe that because of their approach and work the organization could be equated to the labor of traditional activist collectives.

I contend that the endeavors that ADOGA and Jovanny Guetto Gagá have undergone in the last few years not only respond to a long-standing anti-Haitianism that affects Gagá and Vodou but are also effective in galvanizing the community and in voicing the concerns regarding the problematic portrayal of Gagá and their marginalized position in Dominican society. In their labor, these organizations articulate the most significant challenges, stemming from racism against Haitian immigrants and their descendants in the Dominican Republic.

Critical Perspectives on the Media Coverage of Gagá

Many in the community of gagaseros are critical of how press reports portray the activities of Gagá processions during Semana Santa. As noted in Chapter 3, during interviews, I prompted my interlocutors about the discrimination and rejection of the Haitian community reported in the media. While many recounted no major instances of blatant racism or violent encounters, some brought up complaints about the media that can be read as calling out discriminatory practices. Some interlocutors made comments regarding instances in which news outlets wrongly blame Gagá for violence that surrounds processions. I first heard about wrongly attributing violence to Gagá processions from Damaris, and later echoed by Carmelita, and Cachimé in their respective interviews I conducted. In the examples they provided, people who do not have a direct relationship with the Gagá (but who might be participating in the festivities) commits or gets involved in a violent act and then a Gagá group gets blamed. Some of these examples from online outlets or printed press I found online published in major newspapers like *Listín Diario*, *Hoy*, *Diario Libre*, and *El Caribe*. For instance, *Listín Diario* reported in 2013, “La Policía informó que dos personas murieron y otras tres resultaron heridas al originarse una riña en una fiesta “gaga” o de “palo” que era celebrada en Los Guaricanos, Santo Domingo Norte” (Police informed that two persons died and three other were hurt from a brawl in a Gagá or palo celebration in Los Guericanos, Santo Domingo Norte) (Listín Diario 2013). In 2017, *Diario Libre* stated, “Un joven habría sido asesinado a cuchilladas en medio de la celebración de una fiesta de Gagá que se realizaba en el sector Loma del Cochero, en esta ciudad” (A young person was killed by stabbing during a celebration of Gagá

that took place in Loma del Cochoero) (Vega 2017). Various other newspapers published press notes on both incidents: I found four on the incident in Los Guaricanos and five articles documenting the one in Loma del Cochoero. Based on reportages like these, one can see the relatively likeliness that a reader would associate this type of violence as a direct product of Gagá processions.

The problem with accurate representation is an issue of racial discrimination. Several scholars have considered the problems of negative representations of Haitian Dominican people in the printed press (Sagás 2000), in public school textbooks (Wigginton and Middleton 2019), and stereotyping narratives of Haitian beggar mothers (Shoaff 2017). These scholars discuss the negative impact that unfavorable representation of Haitian immigrants and Dominicans of Haitian origin have in the public perception and the harm it poses for the community. This disservice, in turn, fuels anti-Haitian narratives, negative sentiment in public discourses, and racial discrimination. Because critics of Gagá rely on the negative narratives about Gagá documented in the news, some members of the community are critical of the press and the journalistic practices they believe are poorly executed.

While it is common knowledge that violent encounters do occur from time to time among Gagá practitioners during processions, some believe, like Damaris and Carmelita, that the negative association between Gagá and violence is largely rooted in journalists wrongly blaming processions for violent encounters. Damaris told me a story of someone who tragically passed during a Gagá procession in San Pedro de Macorís. According to her, a man who did not have a connection to the Gagá had a brawl with someone and unfortunately fell from a from a building high enough to die

in the impact. When the freak accident happened, because a Gagá group was passing by, she says, the public perception was that the conflict and subsequent death were linked to that Gagá group. The public and festive nature of Gagá lend themselves to attracting large groups of people that surround the groups and follow processions without having a connection to the group, whether religious, friendship, etc.

Additionally, Damaris presented the violent conflicts as something that might happen anywhere regardless of who are the people involved. She explained that it can be as easy as two people having a disagreement for whatever reason, and when those conflicts happen in the context of a procession, the Gagá group will likely be scapegoated as the responsible entity. When I told Damaris that I had heard that when two Gagá groups come face to face during their processions they might engage in a violent brawl, she replied that people talk about it like that, but stressed that Gagá is not for fighting.

“Oye lo que sucede, que hay personas que se pelean hasta en la discoteca. Si tiene riña con otra persona y se encuentra en eso momento y tienen trago en la cabeza ‘ah, no yo voy a pelear con el, le voy a tirar y van a decir que fue el gaga’ que le dieron por el gaga. Pero eso es mucha mentira. Por eso es que siempre hay cabecillas, y hay personas para poner reglas y disciplinas. Por eso es que a veces hay gaga que llevan jefe encubierto para eso.” (Here’s what happens: there are people who brawl even at nightclubs. If they have a disagreement with someone else and they come face to face, and they’ve drinking, they’ll fight and say it was because of the Gagá. But that is not true. Gagá groups often have people to keep discipline and enforce behavior rules).

By making a comparison with nightclubs, Damaris is explaining that Gagá is not exceptionally violent. Rather, violence can happen anywhere and in any context.

Even though Damaris denies the violence in her statements by telling me that “eso es mucha mentira” (those are lies), moments later she gives me her perspective on potential reasons why encounters between Gagá groups might turn violent. She

describes that Gagá groups that “*salen*” (carry out the procession) with the intention to show off, are the ones that might be more prone to get in “negative” encounters with others. Those groups, she believes are often participating in the procession without a religious commitment to a *lwa*. “‘Yo soy grande, yo soy quien, yo soy fulanita de tal y tengo este gaga.’ Pero, y también, a veces para sentirse grande y vanagloriarse buscan problema con otro dueño de gaga. Pero eso no, no es así” (I am great, I am so-and-so and I have this Gagá group. And, sometimes, to feel grand some dueños look for trouble with other dueños. But that’s not right). These instances of violence that Damaris describes, and that other have recounted to me before, are the kind of examples that local authorities and church leaders amplify and use to justify their arguments against the free circulation of processions.

In my conversation with Cachimé, we considered the discrimination and “rechazo” (rejection) that Gagá suffers in the media. After I mentioned that I had seen reportage on violent acts during processions, he offered his critique of the press in how they document such occurrences. His main complaint about how Gagá is reported is that he believes that journalists do not thoroughly research the procession. Algunos de los noticieros,” he tells me, “cuando tiran algo no investigan, sino que ponen lo que le dan, pero no es que nunca estuvieron presente” (some media outlets, when they publish something they do not research, rather they say whatever they are told and they were never present [in the procession].” He continues, “hay algunos de ellos que agarran eso sin ver y sin estar presente y hacen un argumento falso con tal con vender su noticia hacen un argumento uy nos hacen daño a nosotros” (without being present, they [the media] make a false argument/statement as long as they sell

their news, and that way they harm us). For Cachimé, the press' tendencies is detrimental to the reputation of Gagá. If journalists who write about the violent occurrences would report about the incidents without portraying Gagá in a way that the readership could interpret it as having the blame, then individuals like Cachimé, Damaris, Carmelita and others would have a different perspective on the press. For Cachimé, one of the main issues with the discrimination toward Gagá is that Gagá is a "cultura indefensa" (helpless culture) that has no one to stand for it. He understands that those who talk badly about Gagá take advantage of the humility of Gagá and its people. "They take it and do and say whatever they want about it," he commented when referring to the media and the authorities.

The anxieties associated around the press and its presentation of the procession can also be paralleled with the necessity to inform the general audience with more research. The motivations about my research and interest in interviewing people about Gagá were brought up to me during an interview. The day in which Cachimé and I met for his interview, he brought me to the house of Mariela (*a servidora de misterios*, who I interviewed) in which Gabriel (a former Gagá dancer invited by Cachimé who I also interviewed) and another woman visiting Mariela (who I do not know her name) chimed in during my visit. Cachimé purposely took me to Mariela's place (as he told me later) for me to have various perspectives. While I was interviewing Gabriel, the woman visiting Mariela was listening to our conversation and during a pause she asked me why I was interested in learning about Gagá and what was my intention in doing so. "What's the objective? To inform?" she asks me, to which I promptly reply "yes, to inform...!" She cuts me off and finishes

the sentence: “to inform the population that is uninformed about it.” As I continued to listen, she said:

“es importante eso porque así uno orienta a la población.... la mayor parte de la población tiene un concepto erróneo de lo que es la cultura... porque, la brujería es una cultura, cabe destacar, eso es cultural también, entonces hay parte de la población que tiene un entendimiento erróneo de lo que es eso y ustedes lo que hacen es informarlos correctamente, está bien ese trabajo.” (It is important because that way one orients the population. Most of the population has a mistaken concept of what culture is, because “la brujería” is a culture, and you are correctly informing the population. That work is good).

This statement makes clear a number of points: 1) it reflects the sentiment that many have, which is based on real-world experience, that many people (for her, most of the people) have an inaccurate understanding of Gagá and Vodou, 2) this person validates my presence in the space of Mariela’s house as someone from “outside” who is coming to ask about Gagá and people’s experiences and perspectives, and 3) “la brujería,” that is Vodou, is a cultural practice worth accurately communicating about. Moreover, Mariela’s friend’s statement mirrors the concerns that Damaris and Chachimé bring up on the disinformation about Gagá in the public because of the media. The concerns that these individuals raise speak to the concerns identified by ADOGA and Jovanny Guetto. These problems reflect the broader conversation about the elimination of the stigmatization of Gagá and the overall acceptance of the tradition as a legitimate activity and cultural expression of the Dominican Republic.

Policing of Gagá and Permission to Circulate

Police racial profiling has been a common practice for decades in the Dominican Republic. Communicators, politicians, and journalists do not normally

prioritize discussing these issues in public and in the media. Policing and the militarization of police have been well documented throughout the world, not only in the United States but also across Latin America (see González 2019). These have not been, however, major subjects of academic writings in the Dominican Republic. During my field research trips to the D.R., I prompted many interlocutors about their experience with the police and their perspective on the policing of Gagá. Many would not have a lot to say or show significant interest in responding to my inquiry. But once I observed how important this issue was for ADOGA and some of my interlocutors, it became evident that the involvement of police in Gagá processions was a critical point for my research project. From stories I gathered in interviews and meetings, the usual practice that police often engage in with Gagá groups prove problematic. The problems are clear when understanding these practices through a racial lens and understanding that they are done in a manner that is violating of rights of people and are inconsistently implemented.

For instance, on the morning of Easter Sunday, April 21, 2019, while on our drive back to Santiago from the Eastern region, my parents and I drove by a batey where a Gagá group was passing by and police officers were around. After getting out of the car to take pictures of and video record the procession, while I was walking by the Gagá, I saw that a police car approached the group and the dueño signals the band to stop. The dueño approached the officer to speak to him. The Gagá leader reached inside his backpack and pulled out a piece of paper that he handed to the police officer. The cop looked at the document and handed it back to the dueño and

immediately got back into the police car and drove away. The Gagá group continued the procession.

This story of police officers stopping and demanding Gagá groups for their permits is a common scenario I normally heard from interlocutors when I asked them about their encounters with police officers and the circulation permits. Gagá groups are required by the authorities to carry a permit to circulate in certain towns and urban areas. Dueños de Gagá have to go to their local city hall to acquire a permit to circulate in the streets and other public spaces during Semana Santa. In the days of procession, the dueño walks around with the paper in their possession or gives it to another person in the group to carry. The police department is the enforcing entity that goes around demanding proof of permission from groups. When the police approach a group to ask for the document, Gagá leaders present it to the officers so that they can continue with the activity. Local authorities usually regulate where Gagá groups may walk: according to them, this is a public safety issue. I have been told that circulating around bateyes throughout the dirt roads of the sugarcane plantations is normally unregulated and groups move around more freely.

Policing in the Dominican Republic is a problematic practice in which corruption and violence dominate the scene. While the mainstream media does not usually portray the policing practices in the barrio as problematic, the corruption at the institutional level is often the center of attention. In the D.R. at large, it is very common for police officers to use checkpoints to get bribes from people. In recent years, the government has worked on putting together an interdisciplinary board of

experts and technicians to redesign the education curriculum officers receive focused on tackling the violence and corruption practices (Espinal 2023).

While immigration authorities in the past seldom entered bateyes to conduct raids and check the documentation of workers, this has recently changed and increased. Up until around the time when I first conducted interviews in 2017, interviewees from different bateyes would explain that they were free of policing inside of the bateyes. In contrast, outside the bateyes, Haitian Dominicans and undocumented immigrants had to be constantly aware of police stopping them in public streets, towns, and cities. This has changed in recent years. Organizations like Reconoci.do have reported a number of events in which police have gone inside bateyes, broken down home doors and run after people to be placed in a bus to be deported (Reconoci.do 2022). A place that was once a relatively safe zone for undocumented Haitian immigrants is now no longer a place of tranquility.

My interlocutors describe instances of inconsistency in the practice of validating permits. Some of the stories describe police officers who refuse to accept a group's valid permit. In other cases, police officers have prohibited Gagá groups from entering downtown areas even if their permit grants them permission to do so. Unsurprisingly so, there are a multiplicity of inconsistent encounters between the police and Gagá groups. Damaris told me an anecdote that illustrates such inconsistencies:

“Había otro Gagá ya bailando. Pero entonces yo tengo un amigo policía que él fue a un lugar que nosotros estábamos ahí en [inaudible]. Me dijo, ‘ustedes pueden ir a bailar para Guaymate’ a bailar, eso es mucha mentira. Cuando nosotros llegamos alla, por cierto, nos paró la policía ‘no, que no pueden bailar, que hay que buscar un permiso.’ Claro, yo andaba con un permiso, pero ello lo que querían eran chavito. Pero ya eran las 6 de la tarde. Y dije,

‘no, vamo a dejar eso para otro día.’ Bueno, así mismo. Tábamo decidido a no bailar en Guaymate pero el síndico no llamo y dijo ‘sí, vengan para acá. Ustedes no van a salir de Liguera tan temprano para irse a Higuey.’ Nosotros bailamos en Guaymate, sin ningún problema. Bueno, yo hablé con la síndica y la síndica me dijo, ‘no hay ningún problema. Ven, vamo pa la Policía.’ Nos hicieron un papel. No mandaron, de hecho, nos mandaron con unos cuantos policías, que no había gaga ya. Teníamos policías, pero.... había gente. Pero lo que nos salvó, también, gracias a Dios, [risas] que con ese permiso la policía nos acompañaron porque que si no esa gente no la iba a dejar salir de ahí”

(There was another Gagá group already dancing. I have a police officer friend who came to where we were. He said, “you all can come and dance in Guaymate.” That was not true. When we got there police officers stopped us, “You can’t dance here. You need a permit.” Of course I had the permit with me but he wanted money. It was already 6pm. And I said, “No, we’re not going to dance.” We made the decision. But then the Mayor of Guaymate called and told us, “Yes, come over here. You should not leave Liguera this early to then leave for Higuey.” We then danced in Guaymate without any issues. Well, I taked to the Mayor and she told me, “There’s no problem. Come, let’s go to the police.” They made a permit. They sent us off [to dance at Guaymate] escorted by some police officers) (Damaris, July 2018).

Even when the band has a valid permit, there have been examples when the group is not allowed to continue their procession and its members are apprehended and taken into custody. Miguel Angel recounts several instances when he and his group were taken by police along with their belongings and even food. According to Miguel Angel, this happened in 2017, a year when local authorities of San Pedro de Macorís (his hometown) prohibited the procession in the urban area.

In 2018 and 2022, local authorities attempted to completely prohibit the Gagá procession. These reflect 1) the problematic methods that limit the freedom of religion and culture that are rooted in anti-Haitianism and 2) the local authorities’ misunderstanding about the needs of the community (whether religious, culturally, socially, etc.). Both episodes incentivized the reaction from community leaders and Gagá advocates. More so, in 2022, the scandal reached international press from Spain

and Mexico. In both instances, local authorities, summoning a variety of reasons, prohibited the procession in their provinces and municipalities. Cultural brokers, such as Roldán Marmol and activist organizations, reacted to the claims. The reactions eventually made the authorities backtrack and allow the procession. In such incidents in which the police get involved, authorities scapegoat Gagá bands as the cause of the violent disturbances. Local governments and Christian leaders rely on those narratives to justify the limiting of the procession and the increased policing of them.

A week before Semana Santa, on March 22 of 2018, several national newspapers published stories indicating that local government authorities in the Eastern region had prohibited the circulation of Gagá groups. Roldán Marmol, co-founder of Fundación Cofradía ¹⁹ and long-time supporter and advocate of Gagá, spoke to several journalists to indicate that politicians in San Pedro de Macorís (a Province with a high number of Gagá groups), prohibited Gagá groups from conducting the yearly procession. He stated that the action is a violation of various components of the constitution including religious freedom and support of cultural expressions. He also indicated that both Gagá and *guloyas* groups (of Cocolos music discussed in Chapter 1) from San Pedro de Macorís were excluded from the Nacional Carnival Parade earlier that month and he stressed that they had historically been invited for many years. Marmol continued explaining that Article 64 of the constitution on cultural rights asserts that the State ought to support and promote cultural expression such as Gagá. Two days later, various outlets published a note

¹⁹ Fundación Cofradía is a non-for-profit organization dedicated to the dissemination of Dominican cultural expressions by providing services such as production of cultural events, concerts, music recordings, and supporting cultural brokers.

referencing a public statement by the Ministry of Culture in which the institution stated they were not responsible for the issues that happened in San Pedro between the local governments and Gagá groups.

The Governor of the Province of San Pedro, Luis Miguel Piccirillo, denied that he had prohibited the circulation of Gagá groups. He explained that several mayors from the province had recently formed the Comité de Seguridad Ciudadana (committee for the safety of citizens), which established that, in order to avoid violent acts, neither the Gobernación nor City Halls would grant the circulation permits to Gagá groups. He is cited, “We haven’t prohibited any Gagá...they can dance following the regulations of the Police” (Rivera 2018). The Governor clarifies that the Committee had decided that rather than granting the permits themselves, they were leaving it to the Police to do so. He justified the decisions of the organization by pointing out that there have been numerous deaths and hurt individuals that are product of the processions every year.

Marmol’s Fundación Cofradía rejected the decision that the Police would regulate the routes that the processions followed. A week later, on 29 March, several news outlets reported that after a meeting of the committee for security that was formed in San Pedro de Macorís (SPM), the authorities granted the permits of circulation to all Gagá groups from the province and outside of it who would normally come to the cities and towns of the SPM. While groups in SPM were granted their permits, Marmol communicated to the press that in the Province of El Seibo, the Governor Gerardo Casanova prohibited the circulation of Gagá groups in

that Province. According to Marmol, he tried to get in touch with the authorities but was not able to contact them.

The issue of inconsistent policing and the scapegoating of Gagá groups by local authorities are some of the problems that ADOGA seeks to mitigate. ADOGA has the goal to serve as the official organization that manages the permits. The goal is to be the intermediary between the local governments and the law enforcement agents. That is, groups would acquire their circulation permit through ADOGA rather than directly from local governments, as it has been typically done. ADOGA is also working to get the sanction of the Ministry of Culture at the national level, which as Ramón Britis explains, would make the permits have greater political weight. The intention is that having permits issued that are endorsed by both the organization and the local authorities would make police have less suspicion of unofficial documents.

After two years of official prohibition of the Gagá procession due to the policies to mitigate the covid 19 pandemic, Gagá groups were allowed to circulate and proceed with the processions and have large public gatherings in 2022. Even though the year before, in 2021, a number of Gagá groups celebrated Semana Santa either in their respective bateyes or nearby, outside the gaze of the enforcement authorities, 2022 was the first time in two years that many Gagá groups were going to finally carry out their procession. Even though the covid 19 cases had been under control and the vaccination rate was relatively high in the country, right around the corner of that Semana Santa, a number of authorities cited public health concerns in allowing Gagá groups to gather and have the procession. Some local authorities in the Eastern region released communications that Gagá was prohibited that year (Ozoria

2022). Such attempts to prohibit the circulation of Gagá received much more coverage in the press, both nationally and internationally, and elicited a stronger reaction from advocates of Gagá and Vodou. In the Google search I conducted to find the sources, I gathered double the number of sources that reported Gagá compared to the amount of articles collected from 2018. Both original and republished press notes popped up in the search and a number of publications from newspapers in Mexico and Spain made echo of the unjustified and problematic attempt to prohibit Gagá.

I see the concerns about the outsider view of Gagá and the inconsistent policing as two equally significant issues. These problems not only affect Gagá groups and its members, but they are a set of external matters that have serious implications on how the public and the authorities think of Gagá and its community. These exterior challenges, which are out of hand for the community are the main issues that ADOGA and Jovanny Guetto aim to change. These two organizations, with different approaches, make a priority to educate the public on what Gagá and Vodou are for the community. The individual concerns about the reportage of Gagá in the media reflect communal concerns that are present in the discourses of ADOGA and Jovanny Guetto.

Jovanny Guetto Gagá YouTube Channel

A recurring theme in the videos made by Jovanny Guetto is that the channel's purpose is to disseminate the culture and message of gaga. Some of the things that his interviewees say in videos is that the goal of appearing in Jovanny's videos is to bring together the Gagá groups, followers, and religious leaders. The conversation about acceptance of Gagá in the wider society and the elimination of the stigma that it often

carries represent other recurring subjects in the interviews Jovanny conducts. The videos I analyze were uploaded to YouTube between 2018 and 2022. In some of the videos, interviewees discuss sentiments shared across the board that speak to the concerns about the perspective of gaga from outside and to the need to organize the community. In analyzing the recurrent talking points brought up by both Jovanny as the interviewer and his interviewees, I show that the discourses in the content created and uploaded by Jovanny reflect the community's concern about the public opinion on Gagá and Vodou.

Since at least 2019, Jovanny has had the plan to formalize Movimiento Guetto as an organization that is recognized by the government. In two videos from 2019, Jovanny and two other men, talk about their intention to *politizar* (to politicize) the movement (Jovanny Guetto January 29 and 30, 2019). Despite receiving criticism from community members, as Jovanny states in the video, they assert that implementing this approach would benefit the movement. They explain that given that politicians hold power and pass legislation, they must be recognized by them to claim the representation they are seeking. Jovanny compares their intentions for organizing to the organization of lawyers, *camioneros*, and the LGBT community. For these men, these organized communities can claim their rights from the government and are recognized by the state in a way that benefits them socially and financially. Jovanny asserts that because the Gagá community is large enough, they will demonstrate the government that they are a large community that needs their support and recognition.

Jovanny also makes a comparison to samba and the Brazilian carnival. He explains that in Brazil, the samba and carnival groups are organized and recognized by the government in order to receive funding every year for carnival. He says a support like this to Gagá groups from the Dominican state is necessary because Gagá is “cultura.” For the three men, Gagá and vodou are essential to the culture of the Dominican Republic. They insist in their desire to show the public and the government that they are not just “brujos” and “devil worshipers” but that they are good, religious people and that Vodou is a real religion.

In his interviews, Jovanny is usually interested in hearing about the efforts from dueños de Gagá to change the perception about Gagá and Vodou. Well known and well-regarded leaders of Gagá, such as Bleo, places solidarity among groups as an important issue for the community. In the opener of the interview, Bleo thanks Jovanny for keeping the community—which he refers to as “todos los hermanos espirituales” (all spiritual siblings)—integrated (Jovanny Guetto, September 2019). He continues to praise Jovanny’s work because it helps to “dar seguimiento” (watch out) for the community and to avoid mishaps in the community around the topic of religion. In his interview, Bleo comments on the relationship between groups. He encourages Gagá leaders not to incentive animosity among Gagá bands in order to avoid the eruption of violence during processions. So that trouble does not arise, he invites leaders not to interfere with the maji of others. Because Bleo is well respected in the Gagá community, I can infer that his message carries considerable weight that would influence the viewers who make Gagá.

Miguel Angel urges other dueños of Gagá to realize that they all are working for the same end and that they need to unite for the benefit of everyone (Jovanny Guetto, December 2020). At the end of the interview, Jovanny asks Miguel Angel to give a closing statement to the viewers and other dueños de Gagá. “Come join the struggle,” says Miguel Angel. According to him, some well-off dueños can mitigate their limitations with money, but doing so only solves their problem and affects smaller Gagá groups. He states that what those wealthier groups are trying to solve is the same trouble that every group deals with and thus leaders should all congregate and work together.

The narratives highlighted in Guetto Gagá are ones that speak to the need to come together, work together, and community identity and pride. Jovanny’s goal is to disseminate the message broader and to invite the community to follow suit. At the same time, given the nature of the public channel and the explicit ask, Jovanny is also concerned with educating the public about what Gagá and Vodou represent for the community. The work of clarifying and defining Gagá and Vodou is a work that contributes to the construction of a collective identity and goals. In this sense, the ultimate intention of Guetto Gagá YouTube Channel is strongly aligned with that of ADOGA’s.

The Asociación Dominicana de Gagá (ADOGA)

ADOGA was formed to advocate for the Haitian Dominican community and practitioners of Gagá and Vodou. The recently established organization is working to address racial discrimination, social exclusion, stigma around Gagá and Vodou, to

educate the community, and to gain more power in political spaces. The organization seeks to create room for the dissemination and teaching of these traditions to remove the misconceptions and demonization that have permeated many sectors of society in the Dominican Republic. In doing so, their constituents want to put at the center of their content the African ancestry, to acknowledge and highlight this heritage. The collective seeks to incorporate numerous leaders of Gagá groups from around the nation. Ultimately, ADOGA is working toward building a sustainable system of legitimization that surpasses the rotation of government officials. All these are goals that tackle the pressing needs of the community.

Previously known as OCKIA (which stands for Organización Cultural Kiskeyana, Indígena y Africana), ADOGA's membership is composed of *dueños* de Gagá—literally “owner” in Spanish, who are the leaders of groups—members of groups, and allies (or *incorporados*, as they call it, which are supporters of Gagá affairs, such as me). Damaris from La Ceja and Miguel Angel Welch from La 30 are two of the officials who formalized the organization in the Ministry of Culture in early 2023. With the support of other organizations such as Fundación Cofradía, ADOGA finally made their organization a legal entity that will be recognized by the Dominican state.

One of the core goals of the organization is to contend with the exclusion that the community and their traditions have had in the Dominican Republic. One way is through plans of education for the community and outsiders. Leaders are planning to rent space on the radio and TV to talk about Vodou and Gagá. Many in the groups believe that education about the traditions will ameliorate the stigma. People in the

group say that showcasing the traditions will show the public what gaga and Vodou really are about, and not the misconceptions that characterize them as *hechiceros* (sorcerers) and devil worshippers. According to Ramón Britis those who practice Gagá and Vodou should learn about the history of their traditions and of their ancestors as well as the meanings behind what they practice. Miguel Angel Welch encourages people in the WhatsApp group to learn about the history so that they know what to say to journalists and filmmakers when they are asked about Gagá and Vodou. Other conversations revolve around taking advantage of the tourism industry, which is one of the major economic sectors in the country. Some members of the group want to see more involvement of Gagá groups in performances framed to showcase the expressive culture of the nation that are catered to tourists.

As previously mentioned, ADOGA also wants to get as many groups as possible to be part of the organization to ultimately serve as the national organization where all Gagá groups are part of. The membership to the group is twofold: 1) to serve as the entity through which gaga groups receive their permit to circulate in towns and cities, and 2) so that groups get to know and can support each other. Several members in the organization have said that building bridges across groups would help eliminate the rivalry between Gagá groups. In part, this rivalry comes from the competitiveness in the dance and the desire to present one's Gagá group as better than other ones. They say that *dueños* knowing more *dueños* and having a space to work together would contribute to diminishing the sometime-violent encounters between groups.

At the meeting of ADOGA in August 2020, Miguel Angel told a couple of stories about his interaction with and abuse from the police. He talked about two occasions when he was taken to jail while dealing with things related to gaga. He explained that he had been imprisoned unfairly and recounted getting beaten by officers without a fair justification. He tried to negotiate with the police officers, and it was not until after several attempts that he was able to get a deal so that he could be released. It seemed that he wanted to use those two stories as a way to convince attendees to join the group and why they need to organize. At the meeting, Miguel also referred to the hypocrisy that clients of his who are in powerful positions (in politics and business) request his services but outside his practice speak badly of him and pretend they do not know each other. Miguel insisted that this type of behavior is one that they should not tolerate and why he wants the groups to organize.

The police abuse that Miguel Angel's Gagá and others have gone through was one of the main causes that led the organization to acquire circulation permits from the Ministry of Culture that would have greater weight than those issued by local authorities. In his YouTube interview with Jovanny, Miguel Angel tells the story of how he came to know Ramón Britis (known as Momón), how he connected with people at the Ministry of Culture, and when they first received permits from such organization. As previously noted, in 2017, local authorities briefly prohibited Gagá groups from circulating in the urban area of San Pedro de Macorís. Despite Miguel Angel's adherence to the ruling, he and his Gagá group were detained by police four times by the end of that year. He says that the head of the police mentioned in passing that Gagá groups should organize and associate. And that suggestion, Miguel Angel

says, gave him the idea to approach the Ministry of Culture. When he had the opportunity, he met Geo Ripley, who at the time had a post in the Ministry. Ripley then introduced Miguel Angel to Ramón Britis. Starting the year after, the Ministry of Culture issued the permits for both of their Gagá groups and other neighboring groups that Miguel Angel and Ramón arranged for. Miguel Angel recounts that once he got apprehended the fourth time, he realized that he had to do something about it.

At the meeting on August 2, 2020, Miguel Angel made the comparison to *motoconchos*,²⁰ which he said are the most recently organized mode of public transportation in the DR. He believes that because they are organized, they are able to demand their needs from the government by going on work strikes and stopping traffic to draw attention to their cause. He insisted that they are able to do so because of their status recognized as a group by the government. Miguel Angel continued saying that since Gagá groups are not organized politicians are not going to listen to them or at least pay attention.

During her intervention at the August meeting, Altagracia Jean Joseph commented about outsiders who are interested in the study of Gagá. She referenced a Dominican scholar whose research is on Afro-Dominican musics and religion. She described him as someone who made a career off from what they do that is part of their tradition, heritage, and religion. Altagracia then pointed at me, while she apologized for putting me in the spotlight, and brought up that I am studying at a university in the United States who is looking into Gagá and is invested into

²⁰ Motoconcho is a mode of public transportation in which a motorcyclist carries one or two passengers to places where busses and conchos (4-door car transport with predetermined routes) do not reach.

something that has historically being regarded as something of lesser value. She questioned whether outsiders know more than those who do Gagá every year. At that instant, I felt very self-conscious and rather discouraged about my project. For the prior few months, I was already emotionally and logistically affected because of the conditions of the covid 19 pandemic, and listening to Altagracia made me doubt my role and positionality in the context of Gagá. Altagracia's intervention shows that she believes that bringing together the community of gagaseros is not only important because outsider scholars consider Gagá significant but because their tradition is intrinsically valuable. This is a worth that outsiders see, as Altagracia explains, and want to capitalize on. By revealing the significance that academics perceive in Gagá, Altagracia is communicating to her fellow members that the negative outlook that the elite and government authorities have about Gagá is not shared by "prestigious" outside entities.

Despite the hurdles that the covid 19 pandemic posed, the organization continued to advance their plans and make strategic connections with government officials. In November of 2020, the leadership of the group met with the then minister of Culture, Carmen Heredia. This, as many members pointed out in the WhatsApp group chat, represented one of the Gagá organization's most notable accomplishments. This official encounter, which included a speech by the minister, Ramon Britis and Miguel Angel Welch as well as a music and dance performance by Miguel's Gagá group, was the first time a minister had arranged such meeting with the intention to formalize the relationship between the Ministry of Culture and Gagá leaders. This tie is especially significant given the interaction Gagá groups have had

with other government officials. A press release from the Ministry of Culture explains that the minister has in her agenda meeting with “artistic and folkloric groups from around the country in order to listen directly to the situations they are in” (Ministerio de Cultura 2020). According to the press article, Miguel Ángel Welch Valoy says that Gagá is being affected because sectors of society say that the tradition represents Haiti. Carmen Heredia is quoted “We are definitely a diverse country, and your culture is part of a syncretism, and that syncretism is the real national brand (*marca país*).”

By organizing public events, ADOGA promotes racial consciousness and reaffirms their belonging in the national imaginary. Presenting themselves as an Afro-descendant community, ADOGA publicly celebrated the birth of one of the three founding fathers of the Dominican Republic, Francisco del Rosario Sánchez. Programming like this furthers the goal of educating the public on histories they believe are important for the community to know. The celebration of the birthday of Francisco del Rosario Sánchez is one of the ways that ADOGA believes will create an awareness of the African ancestry of the Dominicans Republic and in which Blackness is centered in the discourse of national identity. In March 9, 2021 the organization set up a podium at a public park of a small town in the outskirts of La Romana. Although attended by a relatively small crowd, the event is highly symbolical in the work that ADOGA is doing. At the event, Ramon Britis emceed a two-hours program in which community members and leaders, especially young girls, read statements and poems about Francisco del Rosario Sanchez and other Afro-Dominicans figures. One of the main objectives of the event, as told by Ramon at the

beginning, was to communicate historical events and information that is systematically left outside the school curricula and that are often not included in national discourses. The aim is to inform the community about national figures, such as Francisco del Rosario Sanchez, who are Black and Brown and whose racial identity is often whiten in official narratives. Jovanny Guetto uploaded a two-hour video that shows the beginning of the speeches and recitation and ends with a performance by the Gagá group of Miguel Angel Welch (Jovanny Guetto, March 2021). The speeches, presented along the reading of poems, show an evident intention to create a narrative about national identity in which the accomplishments of the Brown founding father are recognized. Foregrounding the key role of a mixed-race figure within a Hispanicist national narrative is anti-Blackness work that seeks to include the left-out stories and identities in the dominant national narrative.

Given the goals of ADOGA and Guetto Gaga are closely aligned, they support each other. In addition to the video on the event celebrating Sánchez, Guetto Gagá also has other recordings of ADOGA such as a meeting in 2021 (while it was called OCKIA). There are five videos from the day of that meeting in June that range from 10 to 30 minutes long. In these videos, various people, including Altagracia Jean-Joseph and Ramón Britis, are seen addressing the members present. The fifth video shows the performance of the Gagá band from Batey San Luis, which made an appearance at the end of the meeting. Jovanny Guetto YouTube channel is home to significant media content that features members of the organization addressing the concerns of the community of gagaseros.

Closing Thoughts

The two projects discussed in this chapter galvanize the community of gagaseros and amplify the voices of members of the community. I have shown that through their respective approaches and plans, ADOGA and Jovanny Guetto Gagá are effective platforms in which the anti-racist and anti-marginalizing notions of the community flower. As I illustrate, community members are not only motivated based on their experience, but also from that of their ancestors. The main issues that individuals contend with are one that the Dominican state and politicians have long implemented. Certainly, the work that other organizations have done in the last two to three decades in the Dominican Republic has laid the foundation to the steps that leaders of Gagá groups and religious leaders of Vodou are taking now.²¹ ADOGA and Jovanny Guetto Gagá are putting at the center of their labor and mission the very things that dominant sectors of society have rejected, stigmatized, demonized, and used against the Haitian Dominican community: music and religion of the African diaspora in the Dominican Republic and Haiti. Given the goals of these two organizations, the type of issues that they target, and the messages that they disseminate, their work is very much aligned with what have recently come to known as anti-racist work. In doing this work, ADOGA and Jovanny Guetto expand the traditional approaches to advocacy, activism, and the struggle for human rights in the Dominican Republic.

²¹ The Movimiento Reconoci.do and the Movimiento de Mujeres Dominico-Haitianas (MUDHA) are two organizations led and mostly conformed by Dominicans of Haitian origin who have primarily focused on supporting the population of bateyes by providing basic services, advocating for human rights, and aiding in navigating the legal system.

Chapter 5: Postlude

By examining the ideas about Gagá found in written, oral, and multimedia sources, I reveal tensions between irreconcilable conceptions about religion, culture, national identity, and citizenship in the Dominican Republic. Based on Othering and racist foundations, church leaders, politicians, and public figures maintain that Gagá is an alien tradition made by and for a community that does not belong to the Dominican Republic. In the Gagá community, gagaseros employ the state's concept of culture and folklore to assert their place within the nation-state. In doing so, I believe that they use Gagá as a crucial tool to combat anti-Haitianism in the Dominican Republic.

I understand Gagá as a subject that serves as grounds for controversial debates and conflicting narratives. In order to argue for belonging or exclusion, outsiders and insiders can craft discourses about Gagá that serve their interests. I have considered how community members of Gagá are able to compare Gagá to other music and dance traditions to argue for its Dominican character. Detractors of Gagá compare it to undesirable practices such as worshiping the devil. People in power, like church leaders, find Gagá useful to further concentrate power in Christian churches, and politicians make it to serve their desire to define a Dominican identity that excludes people with connections to the neighboring country, Haiti. Ultimately, community leaders strategically chose Gagá as an anti-racist avenue to pursue goals for the community, political representation, and reclaiming the right to belong. I have shown in this dissertation that community members leverage the visibility of their tradition

and the broad liking in large regions of the country to claim their the right to circulate in public, the official recognition of gaga as a cultural component of the D.R., and to dispel stereotyping narratives that have historically harmed their community.

I have, throughout the dissertation, raised various questions that remain unanswered and deserve closer attention, and these have the potential to be the focus of important research projects. For example, future music research can focus on the alternative rock music scene that has re-appropriated Black genres and its implications in the production of popular culture. In the last decade or so, an increasing number of alternative and fusion rock bands throughout Latin America have gained popularity and toured internationally around the Americas. While not as mainstream as dance genres like reggaeton, this music scene has significantly expanded to the extent that merits a critical view by academics. Some of these relatively recent musical projects are intentional about the music traditions, genres, and cultures they draw from with the goal to tackle issues of racial discrimination. For example, the Movement Azuei, a collective of musicians, brings together artists from the D.R. and Haiti to fuse music genres from both nations with the objective to promote Black pride, solidarity, and to the defy the mainstream narratives that highlight unreconcilable differences and antagonism between the two nations. Beyond music studies, questions of race, belonging, and stigmatization of African-derived traditions remain to be further explored.

Conducting research on any Haitian Dominican and Afro-descendant issue or tradition in the Dominican Republic is of utmost importance. And addressing issues of policing and racism is even more pressing during this current period in which the

militarization of police forces and their application of brutal force against citizens has increased throughout the Americas. Racial discrimination in the Dominican Republic, while a controversial topic in mainstream media and official discourse, recently has attained greater attention in non-traditional media, such as social media, and it continues to be an issue that many civil society organizations address. While arbitrary mass deportations of Haitian nationals have been commonplace for decades, in recent years, and notably in 2023, the media has increasingly reported these instances in which the migration authorities forcibly, and many times with inhumane treatment, apprehend Haitian immigrants to be deported. In several instances that organizations and individuals have documented in social media, Black Dominicans and non-Dominicans with and without connections to Haiti have been wrongfully taken to immigration facilities even when these individuals have presented their valid state-issued documents. As recently as September 2023, members of the group chat of OCKIA (the predecessor of ADOGA) communicated that police officers had taken into custody a Gagá band and taken their instruments even though the group had not been in violation of any regulations. Some in the chat shared videos that showed the moment in which Gagá members were in the back of police pickup trucks before being taken to the police station. Hours later, they were released.

Organizations like Reconoci.do have recently been protesting against the violations of human rights that the authorities have continued to infringe. The work that these organizations have done in the last two decades has laid the foundation for the steps that leaders of Gagá groups and Vodou religious leaders are taking now. Although the current presidential administration (2020-2024) campaigned on the

slogan of change from the previous political faction that implemented the 2013 ruling and other problematic practices regarding Haitian immigrants, it has continued the same anti-Haitian practices. My look into Gagá suggests that the work that champions and protects Black bodies and its community is certainly not coming from state officials or people in mainstream media. This is not a surprising realization, and in that regard my research joins a plethora of scholarship that shows that the liberatory labor of the African diaspora is, rather, coming from the marginalized communities.

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