Chapter 13

Capillitas:
Religion, Communication, and
Syncretism in Small Roadside Communities in Venezuela

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ABSTRACT

This chapter focuses on the analysis of a small religious and funerary culture practiced alongside Venezuelan roads, where many car accidents cause a great number of deaths every year. After a car accident has caused the death of a person, family members build a small cenotaph known in Venezuela as capillita, where a variety of ritual practices are developed. According to family members, the capillita has to be built at the exact location where the victim “took his last breath.” This small funerary culture is a vivid expression of rich and complex processes of religious syncretism that combines and integrates elements originally coming from Catholic, Jewish, and African-Venezuelan practices, along with popular agrarian myths and legends. Communication processes, sometimes among distant communities, located in different roads and highways, are based on family visits and religious meetings, where messages are exchanged face to face. But capillitas are not only funerary monuments where family members and neighbors come to communicate with the deceased, visit and bring candles, flowers, water, liquor, and food, they are also signs of warning to passersby and, particularly, to drivers who are usually blamed for car accidents.

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INTRODUCTION

Syncretism and fundamentalism can be viewed as opposite reactions to the processes of modernization and globalization. André Droogers (2005)

We would like to begin with a short story that we learned during a field trip in our research about road *capillitas* in the state of Zulia, at the west side of Venezuela, where we have been carrying out investigations since 1996. But, first, let us tell you that *capillitas* (Spanish for little chapels) are, in fact, no more than cenotaphs built along the Venezuelan roads at the exact place where somebody has died in a car accident. Cenotaphs are funerary monuments where there is no body buried. In our research we gathered information about more than four hundred *capillitas* in the western region of Venezuela.

As we said, in 1996 during one of our field trips to the Lara – Zulia highway, we encountered a small *capilla* that had been built to commemorate a man who worked as a lottery salesman (Figure 1). He had died in a car accident a few years before, and the neighbors we interviewed told us that this lottery man used to travel in public transportation between the city of Cabimas, where he sold lottery tickets, and his small road village, where he and his family lived. Every day he travelled in the morning from his village to Cabimas and went back in the afternoon. In one of these trips back home the car that he was travelling was involved in a serious accident and he died. After the usual nine nights of funerary prayers, his family built his *capilla* at the place where the car fell and, therefore, where he, according to his family, *dio su último suspiro* (took his last breath). He was buried at a cemetery in Cabimas.

As usual, every Monday his family went not to the Cabimas city cemetery but to this little cenotaph, to pray and talk to the soul of their beloved, put candles, flowers, water and, in

*Figure 1. Beautiful semi aerial capillita located by the Perijá road in the state of Zulia, Venezuela. Notice de flowers and the vivid colors. March 2009. Photo by David Enrique Finol.*
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