

BECOMING A 'MUJERCITA': RITUALS, FIESTAS AND
RELIGIOUS DISCOURSES

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BECOMING A 'MUJERCITA': RITUALS, FIESTAS AND RELIGIOUS DISCOURSES^a

This paper analyses the celebration of girls' fifteenth birthdays in a low-income neighbourhood of Guadalajara, Mexico, and argues that this ritual is important for an understanding of multiple aspects of gender identity in contemporary Mexican society¹. Through the analysis of personal narratives and social interaction I argue that the symbolism of the celebration of girls' fifteenth birthdays is strictly connected to its performative aspects, female images, family status and respectability held by the actors involved. Moreover I argue that this ritual should be understood within a contested space of different religious discourses promoted by clerical and lay agents, and I show how through and in particular celebrations of this ritual distinct aspects of self, gender and family identity are emphasised or denied.

Introduction

There have been few published studies of the celebration of girls' fifteenth birthdays in Mexico, especially among urban, non-indigenous populations (Cardenas 1987) or among Chicano communities in the US (Horowitz 1993). Recent literature on gender in urban Mexico and Latin America has focused more on class, ethnicity (e.g. Nash & Safa 1976, 1986, Arizpe 1977, Beneria 1987) and women's participation in social movements (e.g. Logan 1988, Alvarez 1990, Westwood & Radcliffe 1993), than on the study of rites of passage (Lomnitz & Perez 1987) and life cycles. These latter themes were once developed in Latin American ethnography by scholars working within the Culture and Personality approach (e.g. Diaz 1966, Fromm and Macobby 1970, Romanucci-Ross 1973, Díaz-Guerrero 1975, Kemper 1977) which was rightly criticized for using ethnocentric psychological paradigms and being based on a non-historical, essentialist view of the self.

Studies of women's participation in social movements in Latin America have rightly questioned essentialist views of women, deconstructed aspects of motherhood, elaborated on the role of State in gender discourse and argued for a continuity between public and private spheres (Westwood & Radcliffe 1993, Craske 1993). Moreover recent theoretical work on gender identity has developed a focus on the embodiment of gender experience, the multiplicity of gendered subjectivity (Moore 1994) and has shown the negotiation of gender attributes also in specific Mexican and Latin American cases (Gutmann 1996, Wade 1994). This is of considerable importance in the study of female rituals and life-cycles as it opens up issues about the reversibility of gender acquisitions and therefore the non-linearity of life-rituals as well as an awareness that metaphors of status completion - which are often used by anthropologists to analyze initiation rituals - hinge on a particular notion of personhood (Strathern 1993). Hence different constructions of personhood infer particular constructions of gender and shape gender attributions or partition (Strathern 1995).

In this paper I will discuss the celebration of girls' fifteenth birthdays and show why it has become an important ritual in the process of creation of female identity in a Mexican low-income neighbourhood. Both the *fiesta* and *Mass*, which constitute the ritual, embody a process of female self-becoming - in which not only continuity but discontinuities take place (Crapanzano 1992:262) - as well as a public recognition of a girl's and her

^aDO NOT CITE WITHOUT AUTHOR'S PERMISSION. A similar version of this paper will be published in the *Journal of Royal Anthropological Institute* June 1997.

family's social empowerment.

The ritual represents the beginning of a phase in a girl's life which will be completed upon her wedding celebration. This period is identified as a time of 'illusion', because it is a time when representations of the nature of sexual relations and life differ sharply from the 'reality' of life after marriage. The ritual then, embodies an experience of 'suspended disbeliefs' (see below) about the 'real' woman's life after marriage, which are different from marriage grounded in reality - both positions being constitutive of a multiplicity of gender representations which coexist, rather than being mutually exclusive. It has been observed, in fact, that, in Latin American gender imagery is composed of multivocal, evocative experiences and is a symbolic reproducer of social inequalities (Melhuus and Stolen 1996).

However motivations for celebrating the *quinceñera* rituals, and indeed for not celebrating them, are important for understanding their contextual meaning. I will present several case-histories to show how decisions about whether or not to celebrate a feast for a girl's fifteenth birthday - and on what scale - depend on a family's religious beliefs, on its respectability in the neighbourhood, on family attitudes to girls' education and training and also on the negotiation of female attributes between clerical and lay agents and within and between families.

The clerical agents who are among the subjects of this study are mainly part of the 'new' Catholic Church - or, as it is called, the Church of the 'Comunidades Eclesiales de Base' (CEBs) (Christian Base Communities)². This Catholic discourse challenges existing values attached to 'traditional' rituals as far as the balance between religious celebration and popular *fiestas* is concerned. Priests have introduced a collective Mass instead that an individual one to celebrate the girls' birthdays and have criticized large scale expenditure on *fiestas* as aspects of consumerism and family 'protagonism' (in the sense of wanting to be at the centre of attention). This is because CEBs discourse, as I will illustrate below, tends to privilege meanings - the message of the ritual - over form - the performance of the ritual per se. Moreover it privileges 'objectification' of reality upon sensory, personal/'subjective' and family experiences. CEBs discourse has been considered as a progressive 'route to democratisation' in Latin America, a chance for people to see themselves as active 'voices' in the process of change (Levine 1992:29). It has enabled people to raise their consciousness as citizens (Alvarez 1990), even if in some cases it may still be used by the Church hierarchy to convey 'traditional' values of hierarchical control (Levine 1985:310). However CEBs discourse has also been questioned - both by analysts and CEBs members - concerning whether it really challenges gender hierarchies and advances the raising of female consciousness or subordinates women's issues to problems of economic injustice and oppression of people (Drogus 1990:66, Alvarez 1990, Hewitt 1991:64). In fact the recent decline of participation in CEBs in Latin America, in favour of Evangelical and Protestant movements, is also due to CEBs' difficulties in addressing issues of gender and race diversity and thus erasing internal differentiations among the 'poor' (Burdick 1992:183).

The language of the CEBs regarding this celebration points to a particular construction of gender subjectivity - based on 'de-gendering' the person in order to achieve 'humanity'. This subjectivity is based on a comparison principle, which rests on the pre-existence of a unitary subject - a human person. This principle informs an addition of gender attributes and a cross-gender comparison based on a language of degrees of differences (Strathern 1995). Within this comparison model CEBs language prioritizes, to a certain extent, a model of undivided singular/human subject, while language of lay people who celebrate the rituals often do not prioritize a

unitary model of the person, but instead gender singularity.

Hence through case studies this paper analyses the ritual of the fifteenth birthday at three different levels: in terms of the form and content it assumes in CEBs discourse; through the exegesis of the religious and sexual symbolism connected with the celebration as part of a process of gender and family identity; and finally, through a more detailed contextual analysis of this exegesis through case-studies. Such analysis reveals that the symbolism of the ritual is not fixed. Rather different aspects of its symbolic potential are stressed depending on a girl's family circumstances and the negotiation of gender identity, and the family - as a specific set of family relations - shape the production of gendered subjectivity (Goddard 1996: 18).

The setting

The study of this ritual took place in a *colonia popular*³ - called Lomas de Polanco - in the south of Guadalajara (the second largest Mexican city). This neighbourhood has an estimated population of 30.000 - the majority being employed as factory workers, building constructors, and street vendors. Since the early sixties it has been populated by migrant settlers from the regions of Jalisco, Zacatecas and Michoacán⁴ - the former two being particularly characterised by *ranchero*⁵ culture. In Lomas de Polanco migration is perceived and experienced in terms of shifting images of rural/urban belonging and changing metaphors of places and space, such as the city, the *colonia*, the village or the *rancho* of origin, rather than through ethnic boundaries. The association of geographical places and belonging to particular moral beliefs and practices shifts in relation to the contexts in which those places and belonging are perceived (Napolitano 1995:65); moreover those shifts become part of a process of memory recollection and narrative construction, often enacted in rituals (Connerton 1989:5), as well as an interpretative practice of experiencing borders (Cohen 1985:117; 1993:207).

Lomas de Polanco is a famous neighbourhood in the history of Guadalajara due to a remarkable social mobilisation - inspired by the intervention of Jesuits (Morfin Otero 1979, Sanchez 1979) - which took place from the mid 1970s until the late 1980s and led, after a long confrontation with the municipal authorities, to a free instalment of a drainage system and other basic services. The Jesuits had developed a strong network of CEBs, inspired by the Theology of Liberation; however, since the beginning of the 1990s people's participation in this movement has decreased due to a combination of factors. Socio-economic changes have taken place in the neighbourhood; basic services have been installed and economic stratification has increased. Consequently, a language of 'fighting for basic services' or for the experience of 'the communality of being poor' has had less resonance for Lomas de Polanco population than it had in the 1970s and 1980s (Napolitano 1995:56)⁶: once the basic movement's demands had been met, it tended to lose its reason for existing (Foweraker 1995:105).

There are two parishes in the neighbourhood. Padre Nemo has been in charge of the parish of the Anunciación since 1989, and he has been very keen to renew the work of the CEBs. Padre Rodolfo and Jorge instead have been in charge of the bigger parish of the Santa Magdalena. They believe in the CEBs, but in a form that is much less radical than the position of the Jesuits and Padre Nemo, since they wanted to keep on good terms with the conservative archbishop in charge at the time - Cardinal Juan Jesús Posadas Ocampo⁷.

The establishment of the fifteenth birthday celebration

The custom of celebrating a girl's fifteenth birthday is widespread in Mexican society. It consists of a Mass celebrated in the church in

order to give 'gracias a Dios' (thanks to God) followed by a *fiesta*. The size of the party varies according to the means of the family and the godparents. This celebration was originally a feast celebrated in upper and upper middle-class strata but it has now filtered down to lower sectors of the population. In certain contexts in Lomas de Polanco, the fact of deciding not to celebrate the feast while having the means to do so, or, conversely the inability to celebrate it for economic reasons, can be read as signs of distinction: indicating high or low family status.

The origins of the feast are unknown to people in Lomas de Polanco. There is no recollection of such a feast in accounts of the past by old women. Middle aged women remember that daughters of rich families in their village of origin did celebrate the feast, but it was a custom only of the 'gente de dinero' (rich people). Women younger than forty and brought up in the city may have celebrated it, but here the celebration constituted a small family gathering without a real *fiesta* afterwards, and no special dress was bought or made for the occasion⁸. In recent years, the celebration has gone out of fashion among the upper and upper-middle classes in Guadalajara. Girls prefer to celebrate their birthdays either at a disco or with a trip abroad, as is the case in Mexico City (Lomnitz and Perez 1987: 166-167).

The fifteenth birthday celebration was originally celebrated as a ball - a girl's presentation to high society. The symbology used in the feast recalled and still recalls, elements of European culture (e.g waltzes, performances of classical music, maids of honour and pages). The assimilation of fashionable European trends into Mexican society can be traced back to the dictatorship of Porfirio Diaz (1887-1911). During this period the indigenous heritage of Mexico was depreciated in relation to European and North American culture.

The first reports of the feast started to appear in the *Sociales* (social events) section of Guadalajara newspapers during the early 1940s. There are no Church records since the ritual is not a sacrament. The *fiesta* was celebrated in the house, and was an occasion for making family connections manifest. It reinforced family status and social cohesion among a specific social class. Nowadays, press reports still present an 'ideal' model of the celebration of the fifteenth birthday, a standard which is unattainable by the population of Lomas de Polanco, but which still constitutes a standard referred to by *quinceñeras* (girls who are fifteen year old) and their families.

These ideals are obviously acquired through the mass media and soap operas especially. Soap operas are a primary means through which images of upper class life style and consumption patterns become familiar to low-income populations. Some analysts have argued that soap operas can have a creative function since they allow a manipulation of hierarchical gender roles (Vellinga 1980), and can represent a resistance to 'happy' representations of traditional female roles (Ang 1986): the enfoldment of the narrative, those happy states appear never to be stably achieved and are thus continuously deferred. However, it is through soap operas that middle class values are transformed into hegemonic ones, acquired as desirable styles and patterns of consumption for many in Lomas de Polanco (reflected, for instance, in the choice of the girl's dress or the ritual paraphernalia for the feast celebration, see below).

The message that CEBs-inclined priests have attached to the catechism of this ritual in Lomas de Polanco is directed against these forms of modernisation, consumption and 'protagonism'. In the catechism class, which takes place in the parish of the Santa Magdalena a few days before the celebration, some of these issues are discussed and developed. Themes touched upon in the catechism revolve around the physical and psychological changes which are happening to the girls during this period, and the

different ways at their disposal for becoming active agents in the community Church. The *quinceñeras* are taught by Nubia, a female catechist, that a similar feast was celebrated in the time of the Toltecs and the Aztec warriors. Nubia stresses that, at that time, the girls who undertook the celebration were ready to be chosen by a male of the tribe and taken to the mountain. Soon after, they became pregnant for the sake of 'community' reproduction. However the 'ilusión de los quince' (the illusion of the fifteen-year-old) is extended beyond these Mexican origins. References are made to similar feasts celebrated at the beginning of this century in Jewish communities, and to the balls intended to introduce girls into society celebrated by the middle-European upper class in the last century.

In this allusive way the subject of sexuality is introduced to the catechism class. The element of continuity with the past, through the celebration of the feast, is related to a 'natural' female sexual status. However, that continuity is not traced via the girl's own mother or grandmother. The catechist, and some of the *quinceñeras*, are aware that senior female relatives have not celebrated this feast. Nonetheless the celebration of the fifteenth birthday becomes a connection with the 'ancestors', a link with the past that is acted out in the present.

The celebration: a wedding without husband

The ritual of the fifteenth birthday involves learning about gender identity and the construction of the female body. It does not correspond exactly to Van Gennep's concept of a rite of passage (Gennep 1909). It is not a process whose fluidity is counterposed to a static social structure (Turner 1974). While it is constituted by moments of separation, liminality and reincorporation in the stages of the Mass and the *fiesta*, the ritual is not obligatorily undertaken by all the girls in Lomas de Polanco. They acquire the status of 'being a woman' with or without celebrating it. The ritual does mark a passage into a socially recognized female status, because girls, who have undergone it, start to dress and talk in a different way, as well as change their attitudes and their bodily expressions vis-à-vis the opposite sex. The ritual indicates ways in which the girl's image is constructed by the different actors involved, as well as bearing upon the girls' own self-perception, and allowing the implementation of forms of social control over the female body.

The rite of passage starts with the Mass. The girl arrives at the entrance of the church accompanied by her parents. She wears a ball dress, preferably pink or peach coloured. White is not a fashionable colour, probably because it is the colour of 'real' weddings (as this rite resembles a wedding, see below). The ideal style of the dress is 'nineteenth century', with big round skirts, voile, embroideries and high heeled shoes. However, many families in Lomas de Polanco cannot afford this type of dress and so girls choose cheaper versions, often home-made by close relatives; dresses are seldom bought in the specialized shops in the city centre. The girl is often carefully coiffured with various trinkets such as small artificial flowers.

The girl, her parents, godparents and *chambelano/s* (male chaperon)⁹ wait for the priest to come to the entrance of the church. Then the girl, on her godfather's arm, walks in a procession towards the altar, following the priest. The *chambelano* walks and sits just behind her. 'Tradition' would demand that the girl be surrounded by seven *damas* (ladies) and seven *chambelanos*, all dressed in the same way¹⁰, but this is hardly ever the case in Lomas de Polanco celebrations, though whenever possible there is at least one *chambelano*. The girl is led by her close relatives towards the altar, and then she is left alone to receive the Mass. The celebration of the Mass can be interpreted as a liminal stage, in which she is recognized

as a newly born *mujercita* (little woman) both in the eyes of God and those close to her. When the Mass is over, the *quinceñera* leave her bouquets of fresh flowers for the Virgin behind the altar. While the girl entered the church with her godparents, she leaves the church arm-in-arm with her *chambelano*. The *quinceñera* may have a secret boyfriend before her fifteenth birthday. If this is the case, the *chambelano* is preferably not the same person; normally he is a friend of the same age, preferably a few years older, but never younger than she is.

To be 'handed over' to the *chambelano* constitutes the first stage of her reincorporation. The *chambelano* behaves very differently from the ways he behaves in everyday life. He dresses up in a suit and tie; he is very gentle to the *quinceñera* and he often arrives to the Mass with flowers for her - acts which in another public context, at that age, might be interpreted as showing lack of masculinity. The power relation between the *quinceñera* and her male counterpart, in this ritual, shows that she has a leading role, especially in the second part of the ritual constituted by the *fiesta*. Like the separation, the reincorporation takes place via a 'protecting' male side. This male protection is to defend girls from mixing with unfamiliar, male, sources of sexual attraction.

The *quinceñera's* movements towards the male side parallels the 'handing over' of the groom to his bride during the wedding celebration - which closes a cycle opened by the fifteenth birthday celebration. This 'handing over' is symbolized by the *muertito*. The *muertito* is a little drama which takes place in some wedding *fiestas* in Lomas de Polanco: the groom is taken away by his male friends, stripped of part of his clothes and then given back to the bride who will have to help him to dress again.

This shows how marriage should end the time of indulgences typical of a bachelor life-style, and makes the groom 'subject' to the exclusive care of his bride.

The celebration of the majority of fifteenth birthday *fiestas* that I witnessed in Lomas de Polanco took place at home. The phases of the ritual are always similar: food is given to the guests after the opening dances, with the godparents served first. Young guests come to the party especially to dance and drink. The *quinceñera* dances to the opening music, first with her godfather and then with her father, or her maternal uncle if her father is absent. A typical passage of the ritual is a special dance with the *chambelano/s* and, if present, the *damas*.

The *quinceñera* often choreographs a waltz routine with her *chambelano/s*. Some girls rehearse for as much as three months to learn the steps and to acquire enough confidence to perform in front of a large number of friends and relatives. In her performance the *quinceñera* often directs the movement of the *chambelano*, thus leading her male counterpart in a public occasion. When asked why they dance a waltz, *quinceñeras* reply that it is somehow elegant: a *quinceñera* without a waltz is not a real *quinceñera*. If the music was a cumbia rhythm there would be no difference between a *quinceñera* celebration and any other *fiesta*.

This dance is a powerful emotional experience. The girl stands out on her own in the eyes of people, and fear of 'failing' and appearing clumsy are recurrent concerns:

I was very nervous about the waltz coming out fine. I was afraid about forgetting the steps, of getting embarrassed in front of many people, but never in my life will I forget this moment (Nubia, catechist).

So the dance which is often interpreted by the clergy in Lomas de Polanco as a mere 'act' (see below) - a form without a content - is for the

quinceñera an experience of a new ability to perform in public, and of the emotions connected with a change in self-identity. In fact the girls' tensions fade as the dance goes on and she, with her *chambelano*, assumes more self-confidence in the dance. As the *fiesta* develops, her parents, as well as her older brothers, check that possible drunks are kept under control so as to avoid unwanted quarrels, before the *fiesta* is over - in most cases around midnight¹¹. It is clear that the excitement, the nervousness and the sense of fulfilment that the *fiesta* and the ball generate are a bodily and emotional experience for the girls involved. In the words of a *quinceñera*:

'I felt realized, and it is better than the wedding celebration because you are innocent about many things and now I see all the good and bad... At the fifteenth birthday celebration, you are more fulfilled because you do not see what awaits you'.

CEBs discourse: changing form and content of traditional rituals

Anthropological readings of rituals as means of maintaining authority, social control and social cohesion are very similar to CEBs attitudes towards celebrations of 'traditional' rituals. The absence of, or lessened emphasis upon, certain rituals are revealing evidence of different group identity within a community. In Lomas de Polanco Jehovah's Witnesses, for instance, celebrate rituals neither around the figure of the Virgin nor on the occasion of the fifteenth birthday. To a certain extent, the CEBs have also an understanding of religious rituals and popular celebrations which is distinct from more 'traditional' Catholic interpretations. And CEBs discourse can only be fully understood if it is studied in a complex, not isolated religious arena taking also into account the different and often conflicting voices between the grassroots and the leaders of the CEBs themselves (Burdick 1994:196).

CEBs goal is to 'use the symbols of popular religion and give them a new interpretation of their real meaning' (Padre Nemo). In other words the parishes' political wish is to infill 'traditional' and long-established rituals with 'new and truthful contents'. This has happened for instance in celebration of the Virgin of Guadalupe, where in sermons and social drama the Virgin becomes an 'Amazon' aiding the efforts of enslaved people in the process of liberation, rather than a passive listener and consoler of human sadness, as she is portrayed in the images of the 'traditional' Church¹². The Virgin is a polysemic symbol in Mexico, whose imagery can stand both for sufferings which give strength and legitimacy to women (Melhuus 1992:159) and for redemption of the community, since the power of giving birth and care for the well-being of children can be seen as balancing out male political self-interest and corruption (Martin 1990:486).

Thus, the metaphor of fighting for social justice, which the CEBs have introduced, imports a 'new' sense of resistance to a 'traditional' symbol. Moreover, the *fiestas* promoted by the *Comunidades* focus on the communal gathering rather than on the show (e.g. the diversions staged, the food stalls, the music): the space of the Mass is used to carry forward some evangelisation on social and political injustice while cutting down on the show expenses. But some believers are against those changes since the celebrations lose the ambience they used to have back in the village or in the ranch, and therefore those believers do not participate so actively as before. Consequently, the dismissal of 'traditional' devices typical of *fiestas* of the village, and the introduction of 'new' - socially and politically oriented - contents' in the celebration of the Mass by some clerical agents challenge the 'traditional' Catholic division between the mundane, the political and the religious, and raise questions about what a 'traditional' celebration is, and who controls it.

The celebration of the fifteenth birthday in Lomas de Polanco also raises issues about the 'new' contents of 'traditional' rituals. Since the fifteenth birthday celebration is not one of the seven Catholic sacraments, and is a relatively new ritual, the interpretation of the celebration is an open field both for clerical and pastoral agents. Catholic teaching stresses girls' 'closeness to nature', the purity of their body at the Mass is a chance for them to honour God for their having arrived 'intact' at such a point in life; moreover the Mass also stresses the duty to 'take a right path' and become part of the community by participating in different activities such as children's catechism, youth theatre, choirs and *Comunidades*¹³. Failure to participate in such community activities is interpreted as a lack of maturity and an inability to accept the responsibility which is appropriate to a mature Catholic person. The model of personhood imbued in such evangelisation is a pre-existing unity to be re-achieved - a fully conscious human person- rather than a model focussed on specific gender aspects and specificities.

Since the arrival of Padre Nemo and Padre Rodolfo, the celebration in Lomas de Polanco has taken place in groups, but tensions between personal, family empowerment and community identity have arisen in relation to this communal form of celebration. So some families in Lomas de Polanco have decided to celebrate the Mass in other parishes outside Lomas de Polanco.

In the Santa Magdalena, all the *quinceñeras* who happen to have their birthday in the same month go to Mass on the last Saturday of that month. Padre Rodolfo and Padre Jorge, in their sermons, underline that this Mass reaffirms the principle of the baptism¹⁴ as a renewed initiation into the life of the Catholic Church. A former priest in the Santa Magdalena, Padre Hermilio, points out the problem the Church faces in understanding and interpreting a 'new' ritual which acquires importance in people's lives. However he, like the other priests in Lomas de Polanco, emphasizes a 'search for meaning', stressing the 'word' above the 'act':

There is also - and we must not forget it - a mentality which is not easy to change. It looks for the celebration without catechism, *the act without words*...The majority of the people want the Mass as a step in order to celebrate the "fiesta", which is sometimes reduced to an expression of consumerism and of a materialist society... (Cardenas 1987:122). (My translation and emphasis).

The polarisation between a meaningful act and a '*fiesta* in itself' is drawn in the catechism used by the *Comunidades*. In fact, Padres Rodolfo, Nemo and Hermilio believe that the Mass for the fifteenth birthday entails a transformation of girls' consciousness and focus of action from familial and personal to communal levels. Padre Nemo and Padre Rodolfo affirm that people need to overcome the individualistic/egoistic tendencies which create protagonism. This celebration - to them - becomes an opportunity for strengthening a sense of community rather than an occasion for family status differentiation. 'Protagonism', in the words of the priests, is associated with individualism, urban atomization, and materialist culture.

The 'resistance' of a part of the population to communal celebration suggests that additional issues are at stake. Priests and their associates understate the importance of the Mass and the *fiesta* as *experiences* in the process of the creation of female self-identity. The fifteenth birthday celebration is 'the day' of the girl: in fact, the priest has to call the girl by her name, otherwise 'if the priests do not call her by name, it is not her Mass' (Padre Hermilio). This coincides with the fact that a girl's name is very rarely used in speaking about her. Girls are 'the daughter of the woman who sells chickens...the daughter of those who sells *tacos*... the daughter of my godfather' and so on, which, to a certain extent, implies that she is not recognised as a full social person. Their identity is not

referred to by names but in terms of their other attributes, their spacial location and the social function of their parents or close senior relatives. The celebration of this feast also highlights a tension between a young woman's desire for freedom and her family's respectability and control over her. On the one hand, the girl is the centre of the feast and expects subsequently to receive more freedom of action and of decision-making within the close family environment. However, this is rarely the case, and family control actually becomes greater. Hence tensions which are highlighted in this celebration in Lomas de Polanco are not only about religiously more or less meaningful acts, but also about lay characteristics of family identity and communal celebration. These *fiestas*, being a form of differentiation of family status, constitute an important moment for a girl's self-identity and that of her family. Through CEBs' evangelisation people may become 'aware' that *fiestas* imply 'unnecessary' financial commitments; nonetheless many go ahead spending considerable amounts regardless of CEBs criticism.

Becoming a mujercita: the time of illusion

I shall now analyze the symbolism of the fifteenth birthday celebration, and discuss its exegesis in the light of the heterogeneity of several case-histories. The exegesis of rituals are problematic when rituals are conceived as acting out Levi-Straussian's mental structures, or as a-priori symbolic, meaningful statements about the world - opposed to a structured everyday reality (Turner 1969) - rather than being evocative of it (Sperber 1975), or as somehow embedded with truth and 'deep' meanings (Goody 1977) - decontextualised from the anthropologist's writing act of translation. But rituals bring about experiences in the world rather than merely represent them. They are performances both at an utterance level - verbal statements are themselves action (Austin 1962, Tambiah 1968) - and at a bodily level, as performative imagination, movement and orientation in an interpersonal space (Parkin 1992:16). Symbolic and hermeneutic interpretations of rituals have then to be understood from the context of power relations between the agents involved (Foster 1990).

In common language, the fifteenth year is referred to as the most glorious for a girl. Phrases such as: '...parece de quince (you look very well),...te pusieron como una de quince (literally 'they made you up like a fifteen year-old' meaning that the person has recovered completely from a disease)' identify this age with a physically powerful stage. In the imagery of both young and older women in Lomas de Polanco, the fifteenth year represents a period of illusion, *la ilusión de los quince* :

You are like blossoming flowers.... what will shine is not your dress, but your soul, the purity of your soul..now you can start really to be somebody (Nubia).

The time of illusion in female life is when girls hope to enjoy themselves before assuming responsibility for their own family. This expression is used by women of various ages, but it can also be used by fathers to refer to their daughters. This period goes on throughout the engagement, so it revolves around a 'fantasy' of what life and especially love can be. In a Mediterranean context the time of illusion is ritualized in the First Communion, which marks a liminal stage between childhood and wifehood/motherhood (Parson 1967). In Chicano communities this condition of liminality is particularly identified with the tension embodied in the girls between being available for courtship but not yet desirable as an object of sexual passion (Horowitz 1993:267). The fifteenth birthday celebration coincides with the acknowledgment by the family (especially the father) that a daughter is ready to have a sweetheart (if she does not have one already). The father gives her the *permiso de porta* (literally the license of the door), the authorization to see her boyfriend on the

threshold of the house for a set period during the evening. Times and modalities of this licence depend on the strictness of the father and the willingness of the mother to 'cover' for daughters when they break the rules.

A girl is expected to fulfil family duties well before her fifteenth birthday. The girl already knows house duties. The ritual can mark a transformation of appearance (the use of make-up and fashionable clothes), but that transformation is part of an ongoing process that has started well before fifteen. In this sense the fifteenth birthday celebration embodies a process of transformation rather than a clear-cut step from one irreversible stage to another. In fact the *quinceñera* during her feast may receive a range of presents (perfumes, tights, make up, but also teddy-bears or other stuffed animals) which mark a co-existence of childhood and adolescent elements in this age of puberty. The language of a *mujercita* also changes: some expressions associated with the jargon of street play cannot be used any more, and becoming a 'little woman' is related to the mastery of a language that avoid the use of uncontrolled, youthful expressions. However, this control is not perceived as a move away from childhood:

Now it is necessary to know what one does and why one does it and to be able to decide. But I still feel like a child. We carry childhood within us and we never should lose it. For that reason I like to play with my little sisters (Angelica, a *quinceñera*).

The extent to which some elements of play and childhood are maintained after the age of fifteen depends on girls' personalities, their relation with the other sex, their role within the family, as well as on the degree of family control. In this sense the ritual does not point to a linear evolution but to coexisting, multiple and sometime antithetic female aspects, and it does not just imprint a social status on the girls, but 'it brings out the social relations of which she ..is composed' (Strathern 1993:48). Therefore gender attributes are not just added on to the person but they are revealed at different moments in time. This revelation is part of the process through which active agents engage in the process of formation of subjectivity.

Some mothers remarked to me that at this age daughters start to be more selfish towards their brothers and sisters. They become more helpful in the house, but at the same time they start to carve out their own 'private' space both metaphorically and physically; 'their territory' may well be just one corner of a room, which is often shared with other sisters. Moreover, the process of becoming a *mujercita* takes place through becoming acquainted with a specific female knowledge - such as changes in female bodily shape and cycles - which has to be kept separated from the other sex (e.g. not shared with brothers or fathers). The religious message of sexual purity connected to the ritual relates to this body of knowledge.

The Mass for a *quinceñera* is to thank God 'de no haber fracasado'. *Fracasar* literally means to break badly as a result of hitting or being hit. Metaphorically it signifies becoming pregnant and therefore losing virginity; this metaphor reveals that the girl's body is interpreted as an unpenetrated whole. Her purity is a 'natural' purity, which evokes the transparency of nature. *Fracasar* takes place when this whole is seen as broken. However, *fracasar* is a redeemable state as becoming a mother is valued in itself independent of the fact of being married or not (Melhuus 1992:175).

Through the symbolic values of the elements used in the feast, the ritual constructs an image of female 'gentleness', 'beauty' and 'magic'

outside everyday reality. The dress, the hair style that the *quinceñera* wears, the cushions and champagne glasses¹⁵ that she may receive from different godmothers refer to dimensions of purity in which both class differences and the evilness (as temptation aspect) of the female body are absent. Therefore the fifteenth birthday celebration, as the beginning of the time of illusion, suggests a whole female body celebrated in its integrity, unpenetrated by 'reality' - or protected from penetration so to enhance status and reputation of the family (Collier 1986:101)¹⁶. This integrity should last until the wedding, because sexual intercourse and reproduction are part of that 'reality' associated with the end of a 'dreamed' female freedom, and with the subordination of a 'broken body' to family control. This is the case of some single mothers in Polanco. Families react in various ways to pregnancies out of wedlock. If the father of the baby does not want to *reparar* the situation (literally to mend, metaphorically to marry the girl), she will turn to her family. Parents, and father especially, may react by preventing her from staying in the house while she is pregnant and sending her to some relative's house. However, after the birth of the child she is reaccepted into family life on the condition that she respects considerable limitations of her freedom.

If the time of 'illusion' for a girl is related to ideas of enjoyment and male kindness during courtship, the representation of the time of 'reality' is characterized by female suffering, male jealousy and lack of care. Girls of fifteen know that the time of 'reality' is associated with aspects of female suffering and male betrayal - even if they often say that they will marry a man who will not make their life miserable. So the experience and the imagery associated with the time of 'illusion' seem to suggest a '*suspended disbelief*' rather than belief in the existence of a different kind of gender relation, and it highlights the importance that 'delaying' and 'withholding' have in the negotiation of gender positions. It is possible that a girl may indulge in behaviour and fantasies in accordance with '*la ilusión de los quince*', and in the eyes of older people, it does not oppose beliefs in what 'reality' is but only defers them. So, paradoxically, the fifteenth birthday celebration is an experience of self-empowerment, as the time of 'illusion' is associated with the achievement of a wider freedom, more responsibility and the possibility of courtship; but it also expresses control of the female body and the deferral of the breaking of its integrity.

The dynamic of family control and status opened by the fifteenth birthday celebration often creates tensions between individual and familiar identity. The considerations weighing on the choice whether to invest resources in a feast, especially in families with limited means, exemplify some of the tensions between personal and familial will. It was possible to observe, especially in some villages of origin of Lomas de Polanco people, that the feast was often celebrated by those families which wanted to reaffirm their status and their cohesion vis-a-vis the rest of the village, even if the celebrated girl would have liked to use the money spent on the feast for different means (e.g. building her own separate room in the house).

If the Catholic symbolism of the fifteenth birthday celebration relates to a girl's virginity, the ritual experience can be valued apart from such a meaning: the reality of a girl's life can be discordant with some of the symbolic meaning of the ritual. Such was the case of Tania, a pregnant girl who celebrated her fifteenth birthday and married a few months later. Everyone in her family, as well as the priest, knew the situation but the celebration took place nonetheless. The feast was celebrated in a lower key than Tania would have expected if her condition had been different. The *chambelano* was her fiancé and she danced the waltz

as any other *quinceñera*. She had daydreamed for so long about this feast that the fact of being pregnant was not enough to prevent it from taking place. The celebration of the ritual of becoming a *mujercita* cannot be denied to a girl by the fact of being pregnant, even if unmarried pregnant women should not be celebrated in public, or take part in other public rituals (Arnold 1978). But the experience of *being celebrated* in the ritual, and the enactment of daydreams, can be stronger than the symbolic message of virginal purity that the ritual embodies in the social and religious context. In this case the 'reality' of a female 'broken' body coexists with the representation of a time of 'illusion' in which the female body is symbolically still 'unbroken'. This coexistence indicates that there is 'room for manoeuvre' around issues of female sexuality and virginity. Protect or relinquish female virginity has been described as a tactic where women are not just passive victims of male predatory out-of-wedlock sexual proposal (Goddard 1996), or mere symbols of family honour. Women through the control of their virginity can achieve the opportunity to leave the family household and establish their own, and they may broke appropriate code of behaviour at their own advantage (Goddard 1996:158).

Hence, not only 'illusionary', but also 'real' time after marriage can be read as the articulation of values which create meanings out of, and inspire particular tactics in everyday life. Much of this articulation is at the level of social and personal imagery. The latter is difficult to research using anthropological methods because it is often part of the 'unsaid'. Moore (1994a) has stressed that the representative aspect of gender - that is the imaginative and performative - needs to be re-represented and resignified through social action such as rituals. This is because the experience of the engendered body often resists social discourse, which imposes a regime of intelligibility of the body itself. The ritual of the fifteenth birthday feast, and the time of 'illusion' which the ritual initiates, are also imaginative experiences in which gender categories are re-represented and sometimes resisted; they embody 'fantasies' of identity which relate to certain forms of power and agency within and between gendered subjects (Moore 1994:66), and are articulated in a language of evocation which often reproduces gender inequalities (Melhuus and Stolen 1996: 271).

In conclusion, the *fiesta* of the fifteenth birthday celebration is not 'a gesture without words', a meaningless or consumptive pattern, but is a real experience about 'illusionary' time. CEBs emphasis on the meaning of communality, rather than the importance of individual performative acts, overlooks the relevance of the drama and performance (Turner 1982) as expression of distinct goals for specific people (Parkin 1992:17). The performative aspect becomes central when the fifteenth birthday celebration fails to correspond to its social and religious approved meanings (e.g. Tania's example) and explains also why many *quinceñeras* decide to celebrate the fifteenth birthday in parishes outside Lomas de Polanco, thus opting out of the communal celebration. The celebration, through the emotional experience and the symbolism of the ball, the waltz and the dress, formally introduces girls into a 'new sexual world', and at the same time 'defends' them from it. But the experience of the ritual cannot be read just at the level of symbolic meaning. It has to be understood through the idiosyncratic aspects of particular sets of social relations. The next and last section expand on these aspects.

Celebrating or not celebrating

The celebration of the fifteenth birthday does not take place for all girls in Lomas de Polanco, and its celebration - and absence - enhances different, sometimes conflicting aspects of female identity as well as different class positions and their representations. When the family is

keen to celebrate the daughter's fifteenth birthday, the feast can take place in various forms. The most expensive form involves the nuclear family, together with godparents and other members of the extensive family, pooling resources to rent a ballroom for the feast. Although I heard of such occasions, I never personally observed one in Lomas de Polanco; similar expenses are encountered in *fiestas* which take place in the village of origin of one or both of the *quinceñera's* parents. Opting to celebrate a life-crisis ritual in the village rather than in Lomas de Polanco not only informs the community about the status and prestige carried by the migrant family, but also reinforces a tie of belonging on the part of the offspring even if they were, as it is often the case, born in the city. In these circumstances, the parents may express the wish that one day the *quinceñera*: 'gets married to someone from the village'. In other cases, the celebration may take place in the open air - in a farm that a relative or a godfather has put at the disposal of the family. However, in the majority of cases the party is held in the house of the family and a stereo system and lighting are rented or a band is paid to play live music. However, if the family cannot afford the feast or is not keen on the celebration, the birthday may be celebrated with a generous meal at home between close relatives.

The main reason why some girls celebrate their Mass and others do not is economic: the cost¹⁷ of the whole feast varies, but if there is live music, it is at least around a million and a half pesos (around 500 U.S. dollars, before the pesos' devaluation in 1994). In the case of financial shortfall, resources are pooled within the extended family; often godparents help to cover part of the cost, by buying the dress, the food or the music. Nonetheless, financial difficulty is not the only factor which prevents the celebration from taking place. Girls who do not celebrate the feast may be divided into two groups. Those who come from households in straitened economic circumstances, and those who prefer to spend the money in a different way - such as going to the beach or saving to buy a small car.

The absence of celebration of the fifteenth birthday in well-off families marks a sign of distinction of family status both within Lomas de Polanco, and within the villages of origin. Families such as the Ortega, whose members -both female and male- have achieved a high degree of educational and professional status in comparison to the average standards of Lomas de Polanco's population, and who are highly respected within the neighbourhood, look down on such a feast. The professional status of Ortega sisters has put their relationships with men in a different perspective. For this family the celebration of the feast of the fifteenth birthday in Lomas de Polanco would not have been a sign of distinction, because the public recognition of the daughters' rights to have boyfriends was not a priority for them at the age of fifteen but only later, once they had finished their education. There was no need for their family to celebrate the fifteenth birthday feast to improve their status within the community, because, on the contrary, this would have lowered the family on a social level to one which it did not want to belong. The decision of the Ortega family could be seen as an attempt at both individual and family emancipation from communal identity. The importance of a personal career has replaced the importance and 'pressure' to celebrate the ritual.

Therefore the celebration of the *quinceñera* in Lomas de Polanco can be interpreted in two different ways. It is a demonstration of family status and prestige in the eyes of neighbours and of the branches of the extended family. However, it can also be regarded by the middle classes especially as a vulgar celebration which enhances certain aspects of female identity, emphasizing particular patterns of development of female life and sexuality.

Many girls in Lomas de Polanco fantasize about their fifteenth birthday celebration in advance, but not all of them do. Some are particularly interested in the celebration of the Mass and the fact of holding a family gathering for such an occasion; other girls privilege the importance of the feast - 'their feast' - over the experience and the content of the Mass. Girls who have dropped out of school at an early age and those who are still studying, tend to emphasize quite different meanings attached to the ritual. Girls at school are more protected by the family than girls who already work, and they often have to decide between studying or having a boyfriend (courtship on a regular basis occupies part of every evening). In the majority of cases, girls' freedom of movement after the *quince* is reduced, as she can see her boyfriend only in the presence of a third person (e.g. little brother).

Milena, the fifteen year old daughter of Cuca and Juan - two active members of the Movimiento Familiar Cristiano (MFC), a relatively traditional Catholic group - had daydreamed about her fifteenth birthday celebration since she was twelve. Her parents encouraged rather than obstructed the idea. She dropped out from school because she was bored, but had not yet found a job. Six months before her birthday Milena started to think seriously about it. She looked at dresses, saved up a part of her weekly pocket money, and found a little job to meet part of the expenses. Milena had gone out with her boyfriend, who lives two blocks away, since she turned fourteen. Her parents allowed her the opportunity to see him, but insisted she had to meet him in front of the house and that she should not go to any *fiesta* with him as yet. Since having a boyfriend, she has dropped previous male friendships. Even her female friendships have been reduced, as female gatherings are criticized by her and her boyfriend as a source of unpleasant gossip. Milena comments upon her *quince* as the moment to take 'the right path':

Up to now I have felt confused. I can be led astray by friends.

But after my fifteenth, I will be able to see what is more appropriate.

The process of becoming a *mujercita* takes place through a new awareness of male intentions so that 'you do not let them manipulate you, and you learn to choose' (Nubia). So Milena did not trust her boyfriend to take her out on her own before her *quince*.

Like many girls in Lomas de Polanco, Milena was not sure that the family could afford the celebration until a few weeks before the date. But eventually with the help of relatives and godparents her feast was celebrated with a special attendance also of some couples from the Movimiento Familiar Cristiano. The attitude of Milena's mother towards her *quince* was a mixture of pride and worry. Cuca feared that Milena would get married too soon after her fifteenth birthday, because she had already been going out with the boyfriend for a while. Her concern was that 'she would stick to the first', making the same mistake as her mother, who regretted having stepped into married life so young and inexperienced.

Milena's power within family life changed visibly a few months after her feast. She was more often in charge of the housework. She used to play and argue with her younger sister, but now she calls her *mi hija* which is a term used to mark a status difference¹⁸. Milena behaves differently with her father too. She used to hug or kiss him before he left to go to work, but now her physical relation with him has become more distant. She often complains that her brothers do not take her out to *fiestas* because girls may think she is one of their girl friends.

Sabrina, the first of four children of Alfonso - a coordinator of the CEBs as well as the MFC - did not think of celebrating her fifteenth birthday with a feast. Alfonso had to leave his job because of health problems. The economy of the household is tight, but priority is placed on

investment in the children's education. Sabrina and her parents hope she will be able to attend university in the future. Sabrina's parents' experience in the CEBs made them sensitive to the priority of the Mass over the feast:

There is no need to spend so much for a feast. What is more important is the Mass in order to give thanks to God, and to have a small family gathering. There are many people who get into debt to have a good feast, but it is better to spend on schooling. (Elsa, Sabrina's mother)

The message was assimilated by the daughter; in fact, Sabrina asked just to celebrate the Mass. She was aware that her father works only part-time, but that her parents were doing their best to support her higher education. Sabrina never had a secret sweetheart, but after her birthday asked her father for permission to go out with a schoolmate, who had asked her out. However, she clearly stated that she was not going to lose her mind over him. Her energy and effort were fixed on finishing her curricula and possibly to go to university. Her wish instead was more 'practical'. She wanted to save on the feast to buy a small car. Sabrina herself was surprised, a few weeks before her birthday, by the insistence of her parents (especially her father) that they celebrate her *quince años*. Alfonso is aware from his experience in the *Comunidades* that there was no need to spend money on this feast, and that other people in the parish would have understood his position. However, Sabrina is the first of his four children and the only daughter. For Alfonso, it was important that his daughter - towards whom, in Sabrina's words, he is extremely protective and jealous - should celebrate the feast. Her father is very strict with her and justified his insistence on the celebration by stating he wanted his daughter to have a nice memory of her *quince* - after all, Sabrina is his *consentida* (the privileged one). In the end Sabrina was pleased to celebrate her feast - even if at home and with reduced costs - because she felt at the centre of attention.

The cases of Ester and Julia suggest that a relative prominence of the Mass or the *fiesta* in the fifteenth birthday celebration revolves around greater or weaker family control over the girl's sexual body. Ester has been working since she was ten, and is now cleaning a shop. She is not able to read and write properly, but she appears to be very witty and looks older than she is because she uses make-up and tight clothes with confidence. Ester was born in a *casa chical*⁹. Since she was young she has had to find ways to earn money and help her mother, brother and sisters with the precarious economy of the household. She looks somehow 'more experienced' than her age. She has had a boyfriend since she was twelve, and goes to *fiestas* with friends until late at night. Neighbours comment upon her hanging around with different male friends and her mother admits she cannot 'control' her very easily:

She is very rebellious. Sometime I cannot bring her inside at ten, but at eleven.. She wants to enjoy herself, but needs to realize that if she finds herself with something (i.e. pregnant), then I will be not responsible: she will be..

The godfather and sponsor of her fifteenth birthday celebration was supposed to be one of her former employers, but at the last minute he withdrew and gave just part of the meat. So she borrowed a wedding dress from a friend, bought some shoes, and paid for the music. After the feast, the family was absolutely broke, probably skipping some meals, while the house looked run-down and sloppily maintained. This family spent more on the *fiesta* (they rented a live band) than other better-off families in Lomas de Polanco on similar occasions. For Ester, the Mass was not so important, rather the *fiesta* and the ball were what she really cared about. However, she seemed disappointed at the way the feast turned out because towards the end, there

where some fights and the music was not as good as she expected. She also expressed disappointment at the fact that almost none of her extended family, who were expected to come, turned up to the *fiesta*.

The glamorous component of an 'outstanding' day, in contrast to the quotidian daily life-style of her family, seemed to be Ester's strongest motivation for celebrating the *fiesta*. Ester's precocious habits, her relationship with her mother, and the family's careless conduct in housekeeping have been negatively judged by the neighbours. She is not seen as a girl of honour, nor is her family. These are probably some of the reasons why the neighbours did not attend the feast. Ester's case shows an aspect of femaleness that claims freedom and pleasure, and rejects subordination to parental authority.

Juana seems an opposite case. She lived around the corner from Ester, and her family's control over her was much stronger. She studied as an accountant and was not allowed to go out with friends to *fiestas*. She spent a lot of time at home, and was described as very responsible by the members of her family. She wears fashionable clothes and light make-up, but without being provocative. Juana had two older sisters and an older brother who pooled money together to buy her the dress and sponsor the renting of a sound system and lighting equipment for the *fiesta*. Her father, a chief building worker bought the necessities for the party. Juana's *fiesta* was considered a success by her family and friends even without a live music band. In contrast to Ester's case, the unity of Juana's family and its respectability among neighbours contributed to the positive realization of the feast.

Juana especially enjoyed the Mass and the fact of having all her family around her. After the celebration she described the emotional intensity she felt at being there near the altar and receiving her Mass. Now she wishes, after her fifteenth, to have more responsibility as 'I am not a child any more', and to commit herself fully to her study and work. Her mother is protective towards her because she feels that now she has to keep an eye on her, not for Juana herself, but for the boys who could deceive her. In her words: 'if the girl has more than one boyfriend people talk badly about her afterwards. But the boy can have more than one girlfriend at the same time!'. In respecting her family's rules, and accepting the need to be protected from the danger of male sexual intentions, Juana - unlike Ester, who seems to look for dangerous encounters - ideally embodies the symbolic meaning of the celebration of a *quinceñera*: submission, virginity and control of the female body, which requires 'appropriate' dress, language, and social relationships with the same and the opposite sex.

The cases of Ester and Juana show that this rite of passage entails tensions between different aspects of male and female sexualities. Female sexuality should be controlled, kept away from male 'wandering' (philandering). But at the same time virility is measured in relation to a man's capacity to attract the opposite sex and appear to dominate (Wade 1994:129). So female sexuality - when it is actively expressed in circumstances of male 'wandering' - becomes threatening to family order because it is deceitful and uncontrolled (Martin 1990:478). Yet some girls may actively look for sexual encounters. The fifteenth birthday celebration, then, becomes a theatre for different and often opposed female identities, as is the case in other rites of passage related to female puberty (Wilson 1980:621).

The cases of Milena, Sabrina, Juana and Ester show that the same ritual can enhance different aspects of womanhood in relation to the life-styles and religious beliefs of girls' families. A celebration held by a family involved in the CEBs (such as the family of Sabrina) tends to be less glamorous than one held by those only involved in more 'traditional'

The cases of Milena, Sabrina, Juana and Ester show that the same ritual can enhance different aspects of womanhood in relation to the life-styles and religious beliefs of girls' families. A celebration held by a family involved in the CEBs (such as the family of Sabrina) tends to be less glamorous than one held by those only involved in more 'traditional'

religious groups (for instance, the family of Milena), because savings may be invested more in a daughter's education or in the acquisition of valuable commodities, rather than in the *fiesta*.

Conclusion

A 'traditional' ritual - such as the fifteenth birthday celebration and celebrations of the Virgin - acquires new meanings in the language of the CEBs. Those new meanings suggest a priority of communal identity over family and individual 'protagonism' and represent the Virgin as a fighter for, rather than just a consoler of, the poor. Those shifts to a new language are aimed to help breaking sacred and profane distinctions and to see everyday life as part of the sacred, which manifests in a spirit of 'being' the church through communal activities (Levine 1992:146). However, priests and their assistants search for meanings, and the tendency to reject an 'act without words' (Cardenas 1987) criticize and confine 'traditional' *fiestas* to their functional role of emphasising the family as a 'competitive' unit which wishes to increase its social status. The fifteenth birthday celebration (and its absence) clearly carries a meaning of social differentiation and transformation of female social status; however, the ritual also constitutes an important moment in the process of female identity and self-perception because it opens up a time of negotiation within the family concerning control over, and definition of, the female sexual body. This cycle will be ended with married life, when the time of 'illusion' - the time of '*suspended disbeliefs*' - can be extended no longer. CEBs discourse - which often de-emphasises issues of gender hierarchy in favour of ideals of the communality of the 'poor' - fails to a certain extent to grasp the importance of the body and embodied experience in the ritual in the process of female identity and the creation of female subjectivity. However, at the same time it emphasises the roots of the ritual in a 'mythical' past which, rather than stressing the singularity of specific villages or *ranchos*, enhances the communality of memory - memory of a rural past which is central to the representations of places, and to the definition of boundaries and identities, in this part of Mexico.

At a symbolic level the 'success' of a fifteenth birthday celebration depends on how well the 'illusion' is dramatized in the experience of the ritual. The drama of the ritual constructs the female body through virginal images and metaphors of the body as a vessel which should be preserved intact. Family unity, and the respectability of the family and of the girls' reputation in the neighbourhood, are some of the factors which shape the 'success' of the *fiesta*. The time of 'illusion', which begins with the ritual, indicates the new complexity of a dimension of female identity. Girls acquire new responsibilities towards their families, while the wish to engage in courtship and sexual imagery demand a loosening of family control. Girls are symbolically handed over to the male domain, but they also experience self-empowerment in the ritual. After the ritual, however, their freedom of action is often reduced, as well as their autonomy in relation to the male domain - this tighter control being one of the causes of early marriage. So the ritual implies discontinuities as well as continuities (Crapanzano 1992:262) in the process of becoming a *mujercita*.

Forms of resistance to family authority reveal tensions between different female aspects. Those differences can also be seen when the ritual is foregone, as in the case of better-off families in Lomas de Polanco in which female choice privileges individual, professional training above marrying and forming a family at an early age. The socio-economic condition of a family influences not only whether the feast is celebrated or not, but how the feast is interpreted. This is becoming more noticeable

now that female education is starting to be seen as a gateway for the improvement of female life and household conditions in many working class families (LeVine 1993).

Lastly, the exegesis of the ritual cannot be reduced, as the CEBs discourse implies, to its functionalist elements of family status differentiation and 'consumption'. On the other hand the ritual cannot be fully understood if limited to its symbolic level, marking sexual boundaries, and helping to construct the female body as a vessel which needs to be defended from male philandering. The ritual is a performative act, an experience which may or may not be part of the process of creation of female self-identity, and which reveals - even in its absence - different forms of female subjectivity shaped within particular sets of family and social relations. In fact, the indigenous exegesis both of the ritual and of its absence needs to be understood within the context of particular sets of family relations - which are very heterogeneous - and also differing contexts of religious discourse and perceptions of 'class' and status, given that economic and other considerations affect peoples' decisions about whether or not to celebrate the ceremony and if so on what scale.

1..The material in this article is based on a eighteen month fieldwork between summer 1990 and spring 1992 which was funded by the University of London Scholarship Fund.

2..The CEBs are Catholic groups of biblical reflection organized at the street level and based on 'residential vicinity and local knowledge' (Banck 1989:13), which, based on the Theology of Liberation teaching, aim to raise consciousness to act against social injustice and to improve solidarity and living- conditions among the underprivileged. They are organized at the level of the parishes but they are also part of regional and national networks.

3..A colonia popular is a low-income neighbourhood which can be of recent or old formation. Its degree of economic homogeneity can vary but the term *popular* refers always to its class composition.

4..Many factors have influenced migration to Guadalajara such as the shift from staple to cash crop cultivation, the freezing of official prices for basic agricultural products and the concentration of services and economic activities (Orozco 1989), but we should not forget that in many cases individual reason for migration may override collective household interests (Melhuus 1992:62).

5..*Rancho* is a term which defines those people who, in general term, live off breeding animals, small agriculture and handcraft production and live in scattered, isolated settlements (*rancho*) (Gonzales 1979, Barragan 1990). Moreover they are distinguished from Indigenous people for their strong form of patriarchal family organisation, beliefs in 'traditional' Catholic values and a power stratification in political oligarchies (Peña 1984).

6..I ought to point out that my data were collected before the dramatic devaluation of the pesos in December 1994. However the effects in Polanco of the early 1980s economic crisis - connected to the fall of oil prices - had resulted in a decrease in the buying-power of factory wages, a increased informalisation of the market economy and a higher female participation in it. Nevertheless, Lomas de Polanco is a singular case as it is becoming a 'center' for the periphery since a huge and well-stocked street market takes place twice a week; this attracts customers from surrounding areas and has pushed up house prices, especially around the street market, obliging many families which are renting and living on very low income to move out into 'less expensive' neighbourhoods.

7..Cardinal Posadas had been until 25 May 1993 - the day in which he was murdered 'by accident' - archbishop of Guadalajara, and was recognized to be very hostile to the Theology of Liberation movement.

8.. LeVine has pointed out in a study carried out among women in Guernavaca that this feast has been celebrated by working class families since the 1950s (1993:60).

9..Good (1991) reports that in the Sakandu - a rite of puberty which takes place in the Tamil Nadu State in South India - girls also perform rituals similar to a wedding ceremony but their chaperon is always a female relative, a few years older than them. Avoidance of contact with a male in the ritual is to avoid the threat to the purity of female sexuality and her family's caste-identity.

10..There may be a correlation between the ideal number of *damas*, *chambelanos* and the celebrated girl. Fourteen people (seven *chambelanos* and seven *damas*) could stand for the fourteen years, while the *quinceñera* represent the fifteenth year/person. The stress is therefore on singularity: she represents the odd number, the individuality, everything which stands out unmatched.

11..Fiestas de *quinceñeras* which go on after this time are criticized by the CEBs-inclined clergy and their assistants in Polanco, because they go beyond the aim of a family gathering.

12..I refer to groups such as the Adoración Nocturna and the Vela del Santísimo which promote an image of the Virgin Mary that stresses endurance, encompassing love, and eternal forgiveness.

13..Padre Rodolfo has introduced a special moment in the Mass for the 'fifteenth' of girls celebrated in Santa Magdalena at which the girls have to hold each others' hands and recite a prayer: 'Lord, I give you thanks for these fifteen years of my life that you have granted me...for my parents, my brothers...and for the love with which they have educated me...I love and admire this world, that is the work of your hands, the sun, the flowers, the stars, the water, the wind and what is born and grows on this earth...I recognize that the society I join today, with enhanced consciousness, has many negative aspects...nevertheless there are many good people ready to give me a hand to follow the good path'.

14..The girls are made to reaffirm, as in the confirmation, the baptismal vow of the rejection of Satan.

15..Many of these items were not exchanged ten/fifteen years ago. The role of ritual paraphernalia as commodities in the process of female identity formation can only be pointed out here, but not discussed in detail.

16.. Collier, discussing the changes in female self- conception in an Andalusian village, writes: 'The status and reputation of the family thus rests on the degree to which its women are protected from penetration - by a woman's sense of sexual shame, by being locked away and/or by the courage of family men in repelling seducers' (Collier 1986:101).

17..The basic costs consist of dress and shoes for the *quinceñera*; food, normally *birria* - a meat dish - beans, *tortillas*, soft drinks and beer; the fee for the Mass, which varies from church to church, and the charge for the rental of music equipment.

18..'Mi hija' is also used between adult women who are not blood relatives and can be used by husband to their wives. Although an affectionate term, it evokes a status difference between speaker and addressee.

19..Casa chica is a single female parent household formed by a man in an extra-marital relation. The father of Ester lives in another state of Mexico, and rarely comes to see his six sons and daughters.

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