

Merolicos
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1. Street cries

Walking on almost any Mexico City street one is assaulted by a constant symphony of street cries. The call of the street vendor is the come-on, the invitation, the summons which is the requisite opening to any commercial interaction.

What is true of the city is equally true of *la provincia*, so let me start there. Late one night in the Mixtec market town of Juxtlahuaca, we were awakened in our lumpy hotel bed by the arrival of a large party of people. There were about a dozen in all--men, women, and children--and they arranged themselves on the beds and floor of the next room with considerable noise. The next morning, market day, people from this room spread out across the town in small teams, equipped with snakes, salamanders, and *ajolotes*—giant live tadpoles in glass jars—to purvey various medicinal powders and other remedies.

Surrounded by various crawling reptiles, one young, fast talking street vendor hawked his potion of snake oil. What shopper would not be stopped in his or her tracks by the riveting spectacle of a *merolico* sticking a live snake head into his mouth?

(1) Snake oil vendor in Juxtlahuaca, Oax., June 1990

... animales	... (these) animals
en el estado de Jama- Jalisco lo hay	in the state of Jal- Jalisco there are lots of them
demasiado	
y es muy (...)	and it's very ---
	((puts snake in his mouth))
no hace nada	it's harmless
lo único que hace esta culebra . . .	the only thing this snake does is . . .
para el dolor del hueso	for pain in the bones
para la dolencia del frio	for the aches of the cold

The snake in the mouth is the analogue of the blare of the loudspeaker on a passing fruit truck, the shout of an itinerant tool vendor with his wares stacked on a streetcorner, the announcement on a crowded bus that one can have six pornographic Christmas cards for one thousand pesos, any stuffed animal from a gigantic pile for ten, a chicken or pork *tamale*, a tube of refreshing mints, or a delicious milk pudding.

(2) Passing vehicle selling fruit, Mexico, DF, Dec. 1992

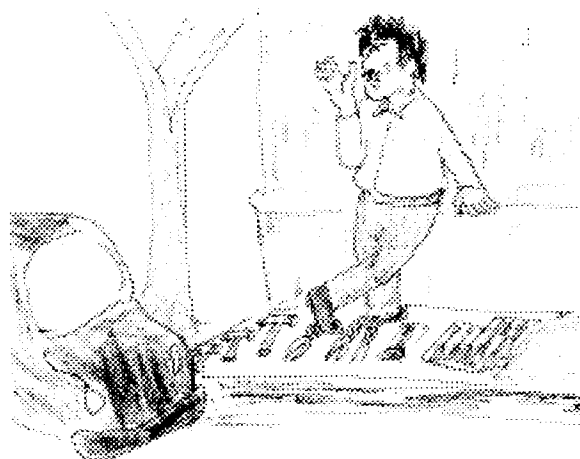
compreman manzanas, compreman
papayas, fruta, rica
papayas, son papayas, comprese,
buenas papayas, de a diez a,
sesenta

buy apples, buy papayas, fruit, delicious!

papayas, they are papayas, buy yourselves some, good
papayas, from ten to sixty [thousand pesos]

truck w. fruit

compreman manzanas compreman papayas compreman papayas fruta de a diez a sesenta



(3) Streetcorner tool salesman, Mexico, DF, Dec. 1992

a ver, a ver, aprovecha oiga oiga,
cinco la pieza:
a ver, a ver, a cinco mil, a cinco
mil, lo que le sirva

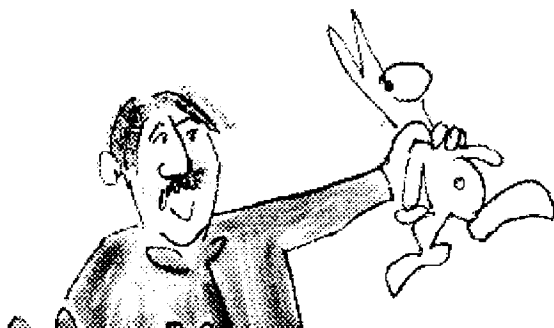
let's see, let's see, listen, listen, five per piece

let's see, let's see, at five thousand, at five thousand, whatever
is useful to you

selling tools at \$5mil each

a ver, a ver, aprovecha oiga oiga, cinco la pieza:
a ver, a ver, a cinco mil, a cinco mil, lo que le sirva

attenuate





(5) Cheap toys for sale, Zócalo, Mexico DF, Dec. 1992

todo se va de remate diez varos

everything on sale, ten bucks, young man, ten bucks

jóven a diez varo:s

selling tools at \$10 each

a ver, a ver, a ver, oiga oiga cu ro cin ro... 12 pie 72 ca.le

sin va se la lleva de a cin co... cin co:

alternate



(6) Tamales, behind the Catedral, Dec. 24, 1992

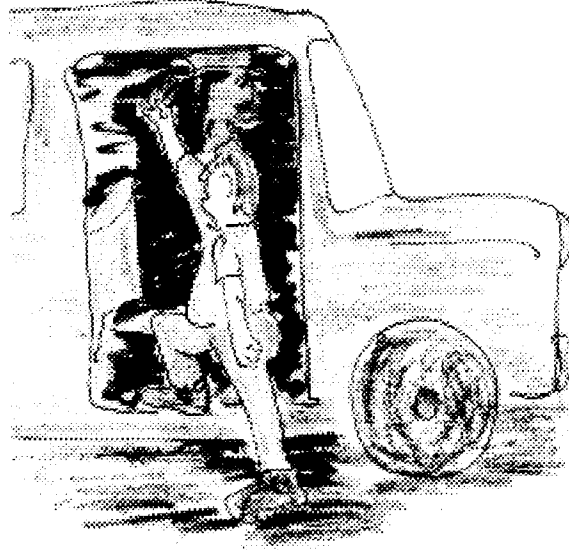
lleve tamalitos de pollo y puerco
¿cuántos?

take away pork and chicken tamales, how many?

tamales

lle ve ta ma li tos de pollo y puer
to s

pas fi lla de ven ta in gle so ma ta su que



(7) Refreshing mints, bus or Metro, Mexico DF, Dec. 1992

pastilla refrescante de menta

refreshing tablets of English mint, smooth mint

inglesa menta suave:

menta refrescante y sabor

refreshing mint, spearmint taste

yerbabuena:

llevése dos (tubos de pastilla

take along two tubes of USHER mints, one thousand pesos

USHER mil peso:s)

The seller's cry floats with a musical cadence above the more anarchic noise of the street. It is the aural equivalent of a shove on the shoulder, flashing neon, a screaming headline, or a scrumptious aroma wafting on a market breeze. It announces: Here I am! Buy me! The crowds gather around.



(8) Custard, Av. Tacuba, Mexico DF, Dec. 1992

de queso de crema de nata mire	made of cheese, of cream, of custard, look, take some along
llévelo:s	
son de queso son de crema son de	they're of cheese, of cream, of custard
nata:	
de queso de crema de nata mire	made of cheese, of cream, of custard, look, take some along
llévelo:s	
de queso de crema de nata mire	made of cheese, of cream, of custard, look, try some
pruébelo:s	
son de queso . . .	they're made of cheese . . .

sweets from cooked milk

de queso de crema de nata mire puede 10:5

son de queso son de crema son de nata

Such sounds are not confined to recent times. Bernal Díaz de Castillo (1927), on his fourth day in Tenochtitlán in November, 1519, accompanied Cortés to the great market plaza of Tlatelolco.

"The noise and bustle of the market-place below us could be heard a league off, and those who had been at Rome and at Constantinople said, that for convenience, regularity, and population, they had never seen the like" (Díaz 1927): 178).

Three centuries later, in 1839, Fanny Calderón de la Barca, a Scottish schoolteacher newly arrived in Mexico City as the wife of the first Spanish ambassador to the newly independent country, describes the "extraordinary number of street-cries in Mexico, which begin at dawn and continue till night, performed in hundreds of discordant voices" (Calderón 1982[1842]: 76-77.) A stroll through the city on any Sunday will confirm that some things have not changed, although the voices may now be broadcast with battery powered portable amplifiers.

2. Merolicos

The relation between talking, selling, and singing, the intimate, perhaps tautological conjunction of shopping and entertainment, the reliance on artfully capturing an audience in order thereby to capture its money, are exploited by all commercial advertising, past and present. But getting people's attention is only the first step.

A premise of busking (street singing), even thirty years ago on Paris streets, was that in addition to music to draw the crowd you needed a "kitty-girl" to shake them down. I could induce the curious to loiter by picking the banjo or fiddling a jig, but to extract any cash the kitty-girl had to pass the hat, look them in the eye.

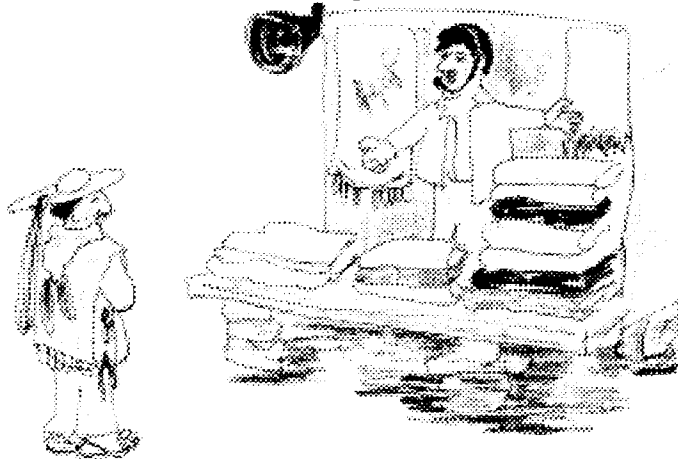
What the kitty-girl manages through sheer animal magnetism, others may achieve through talk. The talk may go beyond the ordinary come-on cries of skills. *Merolicos* are fast-talkers who hawk their wares with an extended torrent of speech designed to engage the audience in its rhetoric and, ultimately, in a social relationship which can only be escaped through purchase.

My interest here centers on several questions. (1) Once the audience's attention is secured, how is it maintained and (ideally) heightened to the point of consummation? (2) How does the verbal medium of the merolico's running performance enhance the value of what is on offer? (3) How does the interactive environment of the merolico's words further ensnare the potential customer? And (4) what generic resonances embed this interaction in a wider ethnographic domain, transforming it from a mere commercial transaction into a very different sort of exchange?

First let me emphasize that the performances are, indeed, remarkable. Merolicos really are fast-talkers, and they make their pitches at length. Although the Christmas-card seller's full routine may last only 20 seconds, for a virtuoso merolico to complete a single transaction may take half an hour of non-stop unscripted (though perhaps formulaic) talk. The volume is astonishing: the extended monologues considered here clip along at a rate of between 5.2 and 5.7 syllables per second. The fear-seller---the merolico from Catemaco, Veracruz I shall shortly introduce---thus produces nearly 9,000 extemporaneous syllables over the 25 minutes or so of his act.¹

¹ I have no reliable baseline for comparison. However, in a high speed (and high pitched) verbal argument between two Mexico city women, who overlapped each other continually in a fight

The merolico's art is first one of packaging, both physical and verbal. At the fiesta of the patron saint San Lorenzo in Zinacantán, Chiapas, an electrically amplified merolico puts together package deals of sheets, towels, and acrylic blankets, to the accompaniment of a constant stream of verbal exhortations to take advantage of his bargains, and aided by a *cobrador* who rushes into the rain-drenched crowd distributing the goods and collecting the money. He tries to interest his audience in the finer things, the best brands, regularly sold at the biggest commercial centers. He offers them rare commodities: blankets from San Marcos, blankets with "a deer imprinted in the middle," blankets which he offers "on sale in the San Marcos fair in Tuxtla" (the state capital), "regional hand-woven *serapes*," "double-bed sized blanket with designs on both sides," "blankets with the Loren trademark." He offers them commodities of style and value: "for people who like the best, of the kind that rich people use."

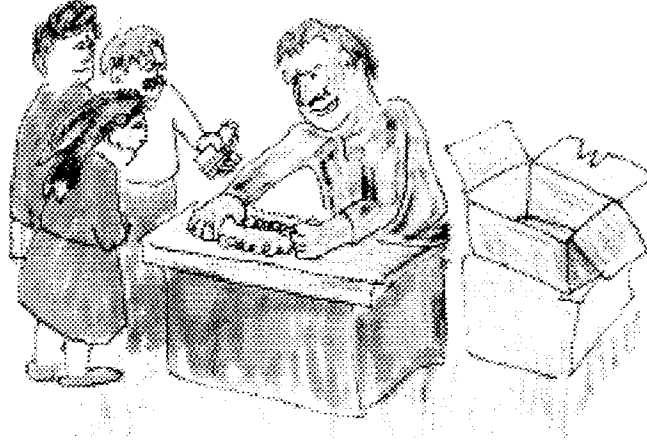


(9) Blanket vendor, fiesta of San Lorenzo, Zinacantán, Chiapas, Aug. 1989

y para que se la gane	and so that you will win it
le voy a dar otra más de regalo	I'm going to give you still another gift
quien me paga quince mil pesos	whoever pays me 15 thousand pesos
le doy otra	I'll give you another
le doy otra	I'll give you another
y regálale otra	and give him the gift of another
y no me de quince mil	and don't give me 15 thousand
quien me paga diez mil pesos que	whoever will pay me ten thousand pesos, let him win them
se las gane	
ora se lleva cuatro sábanas para el	now, he'll take away four child size sheets
niño	
quien paga diez mil que levante su	whoever will pay ten thousand pesos, let him raise his hand
mano	
ora gente	now, people
gásta(se?) diez mil aquí dáselas a la	spend ten thousand here--give them to the young lady with the
señorita . de los elotes	<i>elotes</i>

lasting about an hour, the four minutes of most intense talk yield averages of 4.1 syllables per second for the fight-starter, and 3.5 for her opponent. (See Haviland and de León 1988.) Much more than this brief essay allows on the poetics of the genre, the parallelism, the play of pronouns (between the formal *Usted* and the familiar *tú*), and the interactional strategies employed ought to be said.

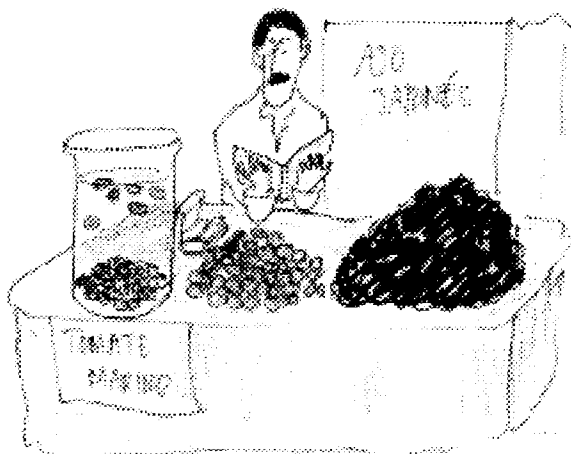
Another merolico, in the Zócalo, sells cheap jewelry of sparkling metal from several covered crates. He too offers a package deal, starting with a golden chain breccet, and including a medallion of the *Virgen de Guadalupe*, two wedding rings, and a small locket, all made from the wonder metal *tumbaga* which other less scrupulous jewelers, he says, try to pass off as gold plate. All this for only 10 thousand pesos (about \$3.50). Lest one suspect that this bargain is too good to be true--and lest his audience drift into boredom--the merolico injects a constant thread of self-mocking humor into his non-stop spiel. He frames his own talk, metapragmatically, as "ironic." (He offers to throw in the paper napkin, in which he wraps the loot, for free.)



(10) *Tumbaga* seller, near Zócalo, Mexico DF, Dec. 1992

valen dieciocho en locales	they're worth 18 thousand in shops
pido diez	I'm asking ten
le entrego esta medalla con la imagen de Guadalupe	I'll hand over this medallion with the image of Guadalupe
le regalo este juegito de arritas como quiera que sea	I'll give you this set of rings however you count it
aquí hay más de diez	what's here is worth more than ten
le regalo esta cerrajadita chapita de oro	I'll also give away this little gold plate locket
y si me da usted diez mil mire	and if you give me ten thousand look
parece irónico pero hasta la servilleta va de regalo	it seems ironic, but even the paper napkin is a gift

The verbal packaging can also have other generic resonances. The merolico who sold me a matched pair--one male or positive, the other female or negative--of marine tomatoes (see Figure 1) to guard against hemorrhoids quoted freely from several heavy books stacked on his table. He took pains to explain what many people are unaware of: the scientific principles involved, with the authority of his verbal text contributing to the allure of the purchase.



(11) Marine tomatoes, Zócalo, Dec. 1992

científicamente lo que vamos a aprovechar lo que mucha gente ignora es que al juntarse la corriente del negativo y el positivo con la corriente del cuerpo se forma una corriente que científicamente lleva por nombre corriente de convección ese es lo que mucha gente ignora ¿sí? y hasta inclusive es importante desde ese punto de vista porque como mucha gente dice, bueno

scientifically, we're going to take advantage of the fact of which many people are ignorant that when you join the negative and positive current with the current of the body there is formed a current which scientifically goes by the name of convection current many people don't know that right? what's more, it's important from this point of view because many people will say, "Well . . ."



LA BOTANICA MEXICANA CUENTA ENTRE SUS EJEMPLARES RAROS A LOS:

TOMATES MARINOS

A LOS QUE DEBEN ATRIBUIRSE VIRTUDES CURATIVAS DE

ACTIVAR LA CIRCULACION SANGUINEA. ACTUALMENTE EXHIBIENDOSE EN EL MUSEO NACIONAL DE ANTROPOLOGIA E HISTORIA. VISTO POR TELEVISION Y EN EL LIBRO DEL PROF. MAXIMINO MARTINEZ (PLANTAS MEDICINALES DE MEXICO).

**CURA VARICES. FLEBITIS. HEMORROIDES
ALTA O BAJA PRESION**

NOTA DEBEN USARSE NEGATIVO + POSITIVO CERCA DE LA PIEL, YA SEA EN LA BOLSA DEL PANTALON O EN UNA BOLSITA DE TELA EN EL CASO DE LAS MUJERES.

DE VENTA EN CALLE ARGENTINA (ZOCALO) FRENTE AL No. 6. MEXICO, D. F.

Figure 1. Leaflet to accompany marine tomatoes.

3. Merolicos and meroliquismo

The plain street vendors' calls and cries both attract and inform potential buyers--often by highlighting price and backgrounding commodity. ("Listen, listen, five, five, five bucks!") For the merolico, on the other hand, the verbal performance not only announces the commodity but further invests it with value. Part of this magic is accomplished Snark-like through pure repetition. Each new offering, in the package blanket or tumbaga deals, is tracked and trumpeted in words, emphasizing the merolico's proposition that the packet sums together at bargain price the much higher costs of the individual items, repeated and detailed in words. Part of the urge to listen to the merolico's unfolding spiel is the desire to hear what he will say next: what new virtue he will proclaim, what new bargain he will announce. The performance is not, however, baldly repetitive, but clothed in the parallelism characteristic of other powerful genres: prayer, sermon, political harangue. The very form of the merolico's talk thus resonates with authority and power, supplemented in the case of the purveyor of marine tomatoes by the weight of the scientific tomes from which he quotes. An artful juxtaposition of words and images further imports value: tumbaga is both gold and not gold; the wedding rings are diamond-"ized"; blood and bodily "currents" are channeled by the dual polarity of the pair of marine tomatoes; the image of Guadalupe shines from a medallion which "could almost be" from the Escuela de Artesanías; the blankets are those of "rich folks."

Although there is limited genuine interaction in these canonical commercial encounters, there are interactive seeds ready to sprout at any moment. As the blanket seller makes a sale, he incorporates the buyer into his running monologue, dispatching Beto to collect the money and deliver the goods to the now spotlighted client. As a member of the crowd shows interest in curing hemorrhoids or headaches (the particular virtue of Japoneses garlic, which he can also supply at a favorable price), he is invited to share the merolico's scientific revelations, thus distancing himself from the many people who are ignorant of such facts. The jocular vendor of *tumbaga* incorporates the questions of clients, and even their requests to purchase his wares, directly into his running spiel, rarely dropping a beat or missing a phrase.

Moreover, the successful merolico must know who his audience is, what their concerns are. He must know their economic limitations. Most importantly, he must know their fears.

4. Selling with fear

My last, most powerful exhibit is a remarkable merolico who is not a merolico; a merolico who has nothing to sell, but who sells it with fear.

Christmas is over, and with it the frenzy for buying gifts that filled the streets of central Mexico City with triple the usual number of *vendedores ambulantes*. Schools are running again, and Mexico has returned to the routine of work. Every Sunday, however, in the Alameda the *plaza* returns. Here come many parts of Mexico's hidden population, notably the servants, maids, and laborers whose only escape from semi-visible work in the so-called "informal economy" is a Sunday on the town. In the Alameda one can have drinks, sherbets, sweets, cassettes, photographs posed on a plaster horse, shoeshines, picnics, assignations. One can

watch jugglers, fiddlers, beggars, rockers, *punqueros*, mimes, mariaches, and--of course--merolicos.

In the Alameda, clustered around a neatly if somewhat shabbily dressed man holding a microphone is a knot of forty to fifty people. The microphone is connected to a portable speaker sitting on the pavement, surrounded by various books, fortune telling cards, knotted red bandanas, and a cloth bag containing live snakes. The people had been attracted by the snakes. The merolico has now stowed them away, and he places in the outstretched hands of a circle of onlookers a small packet holding the paper image of a saint and a printed prayer. What follows will last nearly half an hour. It is, to me, a masterpiece of *meroliquismo*, the creation of value from the thin air of words, a powerful verbal manipulation of cultural knowledge, interactive etiquette, and unalloyed fear.

In the remainder of my time, I will share this merolico's words, letting them demonstrate their own almost sinister power.

The sequence of the entire pitch is as follows. First the merolico recruits the people to whom he will give the *talismán*. This he announces is part of a secret that includes a blessing, a prayer, and a spiritual consultation. It is a gift, not for sale, offered only to those who accept it "with faith." He suggests that this talisman will help people who have problems in their lives, who want to have luck, success, and happiness, those who believe in God. He announces that it is a weapon against enemies and evildoers. He describes to them how to use it to ward off bad luck, and he recites for them its accompanying prayer. If this amulet were for sale, in his home town of Catemaco, Veracruz, it would cost 126 thousand pesos, which, he allows, is not expensive for health, happiness, and luck.

The merolico now asks which of the people who have received this secret are willing to give him "20 thousand humble pesos"--roughly minimum daily wage--to help him bring his message to others. Most are reluctant, but one person comes forward offering him the amount he asks. Questioning this person about whether or not he willingly makes the contribution, the merolico finally gives him the money back, then tries to shame the rest of the circle for their lack of faith. Again he asks them to put 20 thousand pesos into their outstretched hands, along with the amulet. He offers each person a blessing. Then, with their permission, he takes the money--20 thousand each from 20 of the original 36 people who accepted a talisman. On one final round he extracts 5 to 10 thousand pesos each--"for a *veladora*"--from another 6 to 8 people. He invites those who have given him *ayuda* 'help' to retire to another part of the Alameda to receive their promised spiritual consultation.

Thus, in about half an hour, this merolico manages to earn about half a million pesos, and this from a crowd of people who earn less than that in a fortnight. How has he transformed 25 minutes of talk into something for which a struggling laborer or maid will part with a day's pay?



(12) Selling with fear, Alameda, Jan. 1993

díganme en voz alta

¿la llevan con fe?

all: ¡sí!

merolico: no la vendo, ¿e?

yo ya te la regalé, ¿sí?

es de ustedes, ¿sí?

cuando la quieras comprar/

no me vengas a buscar aquí a la
Alameda

porque no me vas a encontrar

sí ¿me entienden?

yo soy de Catemaco

¿han oído hablar de Catemaco?

a: sí

merolico: ¿sí?

sí ¿han oído hablar de San Andrés
Tuxtla?

de ahí soy yo señor

no me da vergüenza serlo

te lo juro por Dios

así invito

a mi casa han ido gente rica

millionaria a curarse

lo que el médico no ha podido

hacer por ellos

yo por eso les digo, ¿la llevan con
fe?

tell me out loud

do you take it with faith?

YES

I'm not selling it, eh?

I already gave it to you as a gift, right?

It's yours, right?

if you want to buy it

don't come looking for me here in the Alameda

because you won't find me

yes, you follow me?

I am from Catemaco

have you heard about Catemaco?

YES

yes?

yes, have you heard about San Andres Tuxtla?

that's where I am from, sir

I am not ashamed to be from there

I swear to you before God

and so I invite (you)

in my house I have had rich millionaires for me to cure

what the doctors had not been able to do for them

that's why I say to you: will you carry it with faith?

5. Gifts and secrets

The merolico announces that the paper packet, which he variously calls *talismán*, *reliquia*, *santo*, *arma*, and *bendito secreto*, is only one part of the gift he is going to make to them today. ("I am not selling it.") Together with his secret talisman he will give them a prayer; he will also make them the gift of his address "so that you can visit me, and recommend me to other people." Last, he offers them a spiritual consultation.

(13) spiritual consultation

cualquier problema que tengas	any problem you may have
yo aquí tengo la solución pa' tu problema	I have the solution for it here
traigo los materiales	I have the ingredients
traigo los aceites/	I have the oils
los polvos los bálsamos y las veladoras espirituales	the powders, the balsams, the spiritual candles

The merolico from the start controls his audience: he places them where he wants them, asks them to extend their hands, to open and close them, to step forward and back. Centrally, the merolico prompts the public to speak in response to his questions, continually testing their spiritual receptivity and their limited knowledge against his own, simultaneously drawing them into a relationship by their own verbal participation.

(14) Three left

me quedaron tres	I have three left
dios padre	God the father
dios hijo	God the son
y dios ¿qué?	and god the--what?
y dios espíritu santo	and God the holy spirit
cerrito	little hill
pozito y basilica	little well and basilica
son tres lugares que hay que visitar en la Villa	they are the three places that one must visit in <i>la Villa</i> [of Guadalupe]

(15) Saints

hay un santito que se venera el día 28 del mes	there is a saint who is venerated on the 28th of the month
¿cómo se llama?	what is his name?
San Juditas	St. Jude
hay otro santito que si le pones una monedita	there's another saint that, if you give him a coin,
calla chismes tapa bocas	he stops gossip and closes mouths
¿cómo se llama?	what is his name?
San Ramón Donato, madre	St. Ramón Donato, mother
hay un santito	there's a saint
que es el patrón del trabajo negocio y todo aquel que se dedica a ganar honradamente el dinero	who is the patron of work, business and of all those who dedicate themselves to making an honest living
¿cómo se llama?	what is his name?
San Martín Caballero	St. Martin the Knight

es lo que te voy a regalar

that's the one I am going to give you

(16) Four corners

¿cuántas esquinas tiene una casa normalmente?

how many corners does a house have, normally?

all: cuatro

FOUR

merolico: cuatro

four

¿cuántas esquinas tiene la mesa en donde comes?

how many corners are there on the table where you eat?

all: cuatro

FOUR

merolico: y ¿la cama en donde duermes?

and on the bed where you sleep?

all: cuatro

FOUR

merolico: y el cuerpo está marcado por cuatro esquinas que son dos brazos y dos piernas

and the body is marked by four corners, which are the arms and legs

sí ¿me entiendes?

right, you follow me?

all: sí

YES

merolico: y el mundo está marcado por cuatro polos

and the world is marked with four poles

que son norte sur

which are the north, the south

oriente y poniente

the east and the west

pa' que Dios te libre de toda mala corriente

so that God may free you of all bad currents

He punctuates his speech with hand claps, shouts, pointing gestures, all seemingly designed to synchronize the reactions and attention of his audience with his ongoing presentation. He forces them into responsive interaction.

(17) Let it be with faith

si vas a cargar este amuleto no más te suplico que sea con fe ¿tán de acuerdo todos?

if you are going to carry this amulet the only thing I beg of you is that it be with faith are you all agreed?

all: sí

YES

merolico: sí ¿me la piden con fe?

Yes? You're asking me for it with faith?

all: sí

YES

merolico: ¿creen en Dios?

do you believe in God?

all: sí

YES

merolico: déjenme dársela

then let me give it to you

The merolico verbally filters his audience to meet certain spiritual and moral criteria. He also requires that the audience pay attention, singling out those who murmur, joke, or chatter.

(18) Not for vagrants

estírenme su mano así porque mi trabajo no es pa' niños ni pa' vagos mi trabajo no es pa' el huevón ni pa' el borracho

stick out your hand, because my work is not for children

not for vagrants

my work is not for the lazy nor for the drunkard

He speaks to each personally, carefully modulating his terms of address (and his pronouns) to their personae. He is also quick to point up the likely failings of those who do not meet with his

own standards.

6. Power and person

Once he has assembled his public and given each person the talismán, he counts them off: there are thirty-six "believers" who have accepted the secret "with faith." The merolico now begins to reflect on his own person, his origins, his circumstances, and his work. He distinguishes himself from mere street entertainers, in a piece of explicit, reflexive, and thus occasion-regimenting metacomment. He is neither clown, nor *merolico*, he says.

(19) Not a clown

hay gente que me ve trabajando aquí en la calle	there are people who see me working here in the street
no digo chistes	I don't tell jokes
no me pinto la cara de payaso	I don't paint my face like a clown

(20) Not a merolico, either

yo por estar haciendo este escándalo aquí en la calle como merolico	because I am making this great noise here in the streets like a <i>merolico</i>
porque no lo soy primero tengo que pagar un permiso	because I am not one first I must pay for this permit
en la ciudad de México	in the city of Mexico
sí ¿me entiendes, hermano?	do you follow me, brother?
pa' que no vengan de la camioneta/ y me levantan de aquí avergonzosamente	so that they won't come in the Paddy Wagon and pick me up from here in the most shameful way

He presents himself as a man with credentials, registered with the authorities.

But who IS he then? The public stands clustered in a tight circle, continually admonished to extend their right hands, clutching their amulets. Little by little, the performer's true nature begins to appear. The merolico is not from Mexico City. Should people want to **buy** his secret, they should not come looking for this man again in the Alameda, but rather in his real home. A man of humble origins, he admits without shame to coming from the remote *pueblo* of Catemaco, known to foreign tourists and bourgeois Mexicans as a somewhat seedy resort town with a picturesque lake. To all gathered here, however, Catemaco is the nest of Mexico's most fearsome *brujos*, sorcerors, the notorious witches of San Andrés Tuxtla.

The talisman is offered only to those who receive it "with faith." But who needs this gift? Who deserves it? The merolico provides several obvious candidates: people who work, but who have problems; those who know difficulty, who have problems in the home, who find no peace and tranquility; but *gente inteligente, gente de corazón que sepa apreciar las cosas que tiene la vida* (intelligent people, people with heart, who know how to appreciate the finer things in life). More darkly, this merolico is clearly knowledgeable of deeper problems that might lead one to seek a secret like his.

(21) Does gossip pursue you?

¡mira!	look!
¿te persiguen los chismes?	does gossip follow you around?
¿las envidias?	envy?
¿te persigue la mala suerte?	does bad luck follow you
¿todo te sale mal?	does everything turn out badly for you?
¿has hecho favores a gente que te ha pagado con ingratitudes?	have you done people favors which they have repaid with ingratitude?
¿te han ido a aventar cochinadas a tu casa?	have they gone and thrown disgusting things in your home?
¿te han ido a aventar huevos podridos?	have they gone and thrown rotten eggs at you?
¿ramos de limpia?	branches from cleansing ceremonies?
¿te han ido a aventar sal . siete . potencias?	have they gone and thrown the salt of seven powers at you?
¿te han ido a aventar agua San Ignacio?	have they gone and thrown San Ignacio water at you?

It is an appropriate gift for a daughter.

(22) Give one to your daughter

regálasela a una hija	give one to your daughter
no vaya a caer en manos de un canalla que le haga una brujería	that she not fall in the hands of some bounder who will cast a spell on her
no todos los que tenemos pantalones somos hombres	not all of us in trousers are men
hay hombres que pa' tener una mujer/	there are men who, in order to have a woman
le hacen un trabajo de maldad	will do her a work of evil
riete si quieres	laugh if you want
al fin y al cabo yo lo he visto	at the end, I have seen it
no me lo han contado	it's not something they have just told me about

It will instill repugnance in your heart if someone offers you a *porquería* (disgusting thing) to drink. When used to cleanse your house or your "place of business" it will bring you luck, health, and prosperity. It will help you discover who has robbed you, not so that you will "take revenge" but so that "you will know who to watch out for."

Finally, what is the price? Well, it has no price. It is, as the merolico has repeated, a gift. If you were to travel to Catemaco, Veracruz, it would cost you 126 thousand pesos to buy. And even that wouldn't be expensive "for your happiness, your luck."

(23) Is that expensive?

yo creo que no es caro	I don't think that's expensive
¿sabe porqué no es caro?	do you know why that isn't expensive?
porque más nos gastamos en unos zapatos que no nos duran	because we spend more for shoes that don't last
más nos gastamos en bebidas embriagantes/	we spend more for intoxicating beverages
que nada más te enferman/	which only make you sick
y te separan de tu familia	and separate you from your family

¿a poco no es cierto? mis hermanos
un hombre que toma pierde todo
trabajo, familia, hijos todo

isn't that true, my brothers?
the man who drinks loses everything
work, family, children, everything

But here and now the talisman is not for sale. Instead, the merolico asks not for payment for the secret, but for simple help for himself.

(24) Give me a drop of your sweat

regálame una gota del sudor de tu
frente, ¿sí?
regálame/
una granito de arena
regálame un pan de tu mesa
pero nó para mí
regálame un pan de tu mesa
para seguir llevándole este talismán
a todo el mundo
porque para allá voy mientras Dios
me de licencia

make me a gift of one drop sweat from your brow
make me the gift
of one grain of sand
make me the gift of one piece of bread from your table
but not for me
give me a bit of bread from your table
so that I can continue taking this talisman to the whole world
because there go I so long as God spares me

Who of all these thirty six people on whom the merolico has bestowed the gift of the amulet will in turn help him with the gift of not one hundred, not fifty, but *humildes veinte pesos* "twenty (thousand) humble pesos"--and not even that, if they think they are being robbed?

(25) I won't rob you

pero con una condición
si crees que a veinte pesos te robo
si crees que te estafo
si crees que vine de mi tierra/
a robarte veinte mil pesos
y dejarte pobre o quedarme rico/
no me regales nada
guarda tus veinte mil pesos
guardo mi talismán del éxito/
y seguimos siendo amigos

but on one condition
if you think that at 20 thousand pesos I am robbing you
if you think that I am swindling you
if you think that I came from my country
to rob you of 20 thousand pesos
and to leave you poor and get rich myself
don't give me anything
keep your twenty thousand pesos
I will keep my talisman of success
and we will go on being friends

Which of all the thirty six people who have repeatedly proclaimed their faith will now show themselves to have been truly faithful, not hypocrites "with their teeth on the outside"?

(26) A return gift

quién me dice yo le regalo esos
veinte mil pesos profesor
porque más me he gastado en
bebidas/
más me he gastado en comidas

who says, "I will give you these 20 thousand pesos, Professor."
"because I have spent more on drinks
"I have spent more on meals."

Giving the merolico a gift of 20 thousand pesos is transformed into an act of faith, an act of heartfelt generosity. One person comes forward to offer his 20 thousand peso note. Even if the merolico were now to withhold the talisman, the youth says he is willing to donate the 20 thousand. That, says the merolico, is genuine faith. One only has to start to speak of money for

people to show their true colors.

(27) The miser

naturalmente	naturally
no más que hablé de dinero/ y orita el tacaño el miserable/ me va a decir no traigo aunque traiga un millón de pesos tenga su dinero	I only had to speak about money and now the stingy, the miserly is going to tell me "I didn't bring any" even if he is carrying a million pesos take back your money

Having shamed the crowd, the merolico puts the twenty-thousand peso bill back in the youth's outstretched hand along with the talisman.

Another of the faithful comes forward with a 20 thousand peso note. Again the merolico tells the man to close his hand with the money (and the talisman) in it. Another man hands over a 50 thousand pesos note, for himself and his friend. Of these, and those that follow, the merolico asks about their good faith. Do they feel they are being cheated?

(28) May I buy a *refresco*?

¿me lo regalas de corazón? sí ¿me puedo tomar un refresco con esto? ¿a tu salud? ¿sí o nó? ¿sí? porque si te sientes robada no me regales nada, ¿e? porque bastante grande estoy para andarme escondiendo de ustedes	do you give it to me from the heart? may I drink a soft drink with it to your health? yes or no? yes? because if you are feeling robbed, don't give me anything, eh? because I am too big to go around hiding from you
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There are, says the merolico, of course many people who will not give their *ayuda*, who were hypocrites. Faith and money, he repeats, are in conflict.

(29) Faith or money?

quiero ver fe no quiero ver dinero si hablamos de dinero sé que traen me lo está diciendo mi espíritu pero hay gente muy miserable muy tacaña hay gente que cuando come/ cierra la puerta pa' no darte un pan si se lo pides qué lástima me da esa gente	I want to see faith I don't want to see money if we talk about money, I know that you have it my spirit is telling me so but there are miserly, stingy people there are people who, when they eat, shut the door so as not to give you bread if you ask them for it what sadness such people give me!
---	--

One youth gives back the talisman instead of paying his 20 thousand pesos. He receives the full weight of the merolico's public scorn.

(30) Look who gives it back!

¡mira!	look!
¡sea testigo tú mismo quién me la devuelve!	be a witness yourself who has given it back to me!
¡mira quién me la regresa!	look who has returned it to me!
¡mira quién me la devuelve!	look who has given it back to me!
no tengo para una veladora/ ¡pero para rechingado vicio sí tengo!	"I don't have enough for a candle "but for my damned vices, yes, I have enough!"
¡mira!	look!
¡fíjate quién me la da!	notice who gives it to me!
observa tú mismo	observe for yourself!
fíjate quién me dice tenga su secreto	notice who says to me, "take your secret
yo no quiero la suerte	"I don't want luck
yo así jodido déjeme	"leave me as I am, fucked up."
bendito sea mi padre Dios-	may God my father be blessed!

Another unfortunate, speaking with a provincial accent, also refuses to pay. The merolico strikes like lightning: you can't just walk away. The merolico can identify this unfortunate's home state, reciting the names of places down the Chiapas coast in great detail.

(31) I know your country

a, es chiapaneco	ah, he's from Chiapas!
no ando	"I don't walk
no ando. vos paga verga . . .	"I don't walk, you pay, prick!"
no no, así dicen en tu tierra	no, no, that's how they talk in your country
que yo conozco Tapachula	I know Tapachula
te conozco Huixtla Pijijiapan	I know Huixtla and Pijijiapan
Mapastepec	
Esquintla Caputahua	
Arriaga Tonalá	
Paredón	
Arista	

A third person refuses outright to make a contribution, again suffering the merolico's public scorn.

(32) Invite me for a popsicle

bendito sea Dios	may God be blessed
mira	look
si ahorita le dice una chamaca	if a chick were to say to him now "take me for a popsicle" this
invítame a una paleta no mas le va a dar el palo el bueno	good fellow is just going to give her the stick

Others make a contribution but do not seem eager to wait for the promised spiritual consultation. The merolico darkly cites the wisdom of his *maestro* 'teacher.'

(33) In a hurry?

no te vayas para darte mi dirección/	don't leave, so I can give you my address
--------------------------------------	---

déjame darte la oración	let me give you the prayer
tú tienes derecho a eso	you have the right to that
y más:	and more
pero si llevas prisa no te detengo	but if you're in a hurry, I won't hold you up, eh?
¿e?	
dice mi maestro que el que prisa	my teacher says "he who is in a hurry to live
lleva en vivir/	
en morir también la lleva	"is also in a hurry to die."
si llevas prisa, adelante	if you're in a hurry, go ahead
no te detengo	I won't detain you.
finalmente el que necesita de mí	in the end, you are the ones who need me
son ustedes	
no yo de ustedes, sí ¿me entiendes?	not I you, do you follow me?

When all of the faithful have money clasped in their hands, the merolico makes a final round, this time to collect it. He takes 20 thousand pesos from each of twenty people--400,000 pesos in all. From those who have not contributed the full amount he manages to extract five to ten thousand more from another half dozen. This leaves eight or nine who have taken the amulet and disappeared without giving any *ayuda* "aid." For these, without actually wishing it, he forecasts punishment.

(34) Punishment

esas personas que se la llevaron	those people who took it
sin darme cinco centavos	without giving me five <i>centavos</i>
para mi pa- para mi piso	for my steps
para seguir mi camino	in order for me to follow my road
¿sabes qué es lo que acaban de	do you know what they have just done?
hacer?	
es como si entraron a la iglesia/	it's as if they entered a church
y se robaron las limosnas	and stole the offerings
¿sí?	right?
es como si hicieras un juramento/	it's as if they swore an oath
y al otro día lo rompas	and the next day broke it
¿qué es lo que le pasa a alguien que	what happens to someone who swears an oath and breaks it?
jura y rompe?	
¿qué le pasa?	what happens to him?
una desgracia, ¿no es cierto?	a misfortune, isn't that right?
un accidente	an accident
ahorita la persona que se la llevó	now, whoever took the amulet without helping me
sin ayudarme/	
no le deseo ningún mal	I desire that person no evil
porque son mis semejantes	because they are my fellow men
pero sí me aseguro/	but I am sure
que es como haber escupido al	that it is like spitting into the sky
cielo/	
en la cara nos va a caer	it will fall back on our own faces

In half an hour, this merolico has managed to earn about half a million pesos, and this from a crowd of people who eran less than that in a fortnight. He has transformed twenty-five minutes of talk into something for which a laborer or maid will part with a day's pay. Notice how the entire verbal performance has step by step effected the most remarkable transformation of what started out, apparently, as an innocent commercial transaction.

1. The amulet, the apparent "good," is framed explicitly as a "gift." *No lo vendo, ¿eh? Dije "regalar."* (I'm not selling it, eh? I said "give away.") The apparent commodity is thus defined as not a commodity, at least not in this here and now.
2. Instead, the merolico offers his "secret," his street address, his consultation, in short, his power--that is the real commodity.
3. In return, he extracts from his public their commitment, expressed physically by their stretching out their hands with the amulet (which they can thus not easily give back), and interactively, by repeatedly declaring their "faith" *en voz alta* ("out loud").
4. Simultaneously the merolico reveals himself, through artful and indirect use of language and drawing heavily on his audience's presumed but unstated knowledge of the world, to be a powerful, indeed a fearsome, person.
5. There is, finally, the money, which turns out to be a truly breathtaking amount for casual strollers on the Alameda. Cash clutched in the hands is now not "payment" for anything at all; it is their *ayuda* in return for his *ayuda*. Unspoken is the knowledge that it is also the price of escape from this merolico turned *brujo*.

Epilogue and ethnographic apology

The merolico leads his clients away to have their consultations in another secluded corner of the Alameda, leaving his gear behind on the street. An elderly gentleman with expensive leather shoes and a very elegant hat, who has been sitting on a bench some meters away, stands up and comes over to pick up the paraphernalia, carefully turning off the battery-powered public address system. How many confederates did the merolico have in the crowd? What about the young man who first offered up his twenty thousand peso donation? There is clearly an ethnographic task hidden here--the ethnography of the merolico--which is yet to be undertaken.

But the anthropological power of the merolico is deeper still. The real ethnography of modern Mexico has yet to be written. The life of the city and the culture of the great masses remains largely unknown to social science. It is certainly true for me, a student of Indian life, that the city is ethnographically the most exotic part of the country. What do the people who live here know, do, think, want, and fear? Perhaps we should take our questions to the merolicos, who seem to know the subject--and their subjects--well.