

Spiritual pilgrimages and UFO tourism in Uruguay: the case of La Aurora's cattle ranch

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Abstract: This paper analyses the advent of a type of spiritual tourism that is taking place on livestock farms in northern Uruguay. The spread of stories about sightings of anomalous lights and unidentified flying objects by locals have historically caused these farms to become tourist attractions. This is the case of La Aurora's cattle ranch, where a series of 'events' between 1976 and 1977 changed the history of the area forever. After these supernatural events, which left several marks on the ground, happened, the cattle ranch gained local and international popularity regarding UFO issues. Nowadays tourists, ufologists, *new age* groups, and religious pilgrims from different countries visit it during the year. The beginning of a type of 'modern secular pilgrimage' at La Aurora cattle ranch is explained in terms of a multi-sited ethnography.

Keywords: tourist attraction; Uruguay; anthropology; UFO sightings; new age; modern secular pilgrimage; multi-sited ethnography; non-human agency.

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1 Introduction

The ranch called 'La Aurora' is a rural cattle farm of about 1000 hectares located near Salto-Paysandú Bridge. Due to its proximity to the Dayman River, people tend to think that La Aurora belongs to the region of Salto; however, the cattle ranch is within the borders of the province of Paysandú. Confusion arises from the shared border and the closeness of the ranch to the city of Salto. Additionally, residents describe the area where this cattle ranch is located as 'reddish land'. Between 1976 and 1977, a set of 'events' forever changed the fate of the ranch (Cuitiño, 2016). After these strange events (which

left marks on the ground) happened, the place gained popularity locally, regionally and internationally in relation to UFO phenomena. As a result, since the 1980s the ranch has spontaneously become a touristic attraction (Lugo and Pohyú, 2000). The reason for its fame is based not only on the oral narrative created by residents of the area but also on the role the local media played after two events that took place. This spreading and retelling of stories has caused La Aurora to be one of the most important tourist attractions in relation to UFOs in Latin America and worldwide (Kottmeyer, 2001).

Throughout different times of the year, tourists, *new age* groups,¹ journalists, and ufologists² come to the ranch to gaze at anomalous lights and aerial phenomena (Cuitiño, 2016; Martínez, 2015). Nonetheless, in the 1990s the entrance to the ranch was closed to the public. The owner and his family took this decision because of the entrance of different *new age* groups, which had the sheep and cattle confused at the ranch (Figure 1).

Figure 1 Gate entrance to La Aurora's ranch in Paysandú, Uruguay (see online version for colours)



Source: Photograph taken by author (2018)

However, in 1987 the Tonna-Rattin family built a religious sanctuary opposite the ranch (Figure 2). The purpose of building the sanctuary was to pay homage to a Capuchin priest. Pio of Pietrelcina (1887–1968). Pio of Pietrelcina also well-known as ‘Padre Pío. Pio of Pietrelcina’ was an Italian priest who belonged to the Capuchins order. He is known worldwide for ‘stigmata’ in both hands (similar to stigmata that Jesus of Nazareth suffered at crucifixion), and for performing miracles and healings which were unexplained at the time.

Figure 2 Entrance to ‘Padre Pío’ shrine opposite La Aurora’s ranch (see online version for colours)



Source: Photograph taken by author (2018)

Because of this series of miracles and healings, Pope John Paul II canonised him in 2002 under the name of ‘San Pío de Pietrelcina’. Due to the friendship that Tonna’s family maintained with him [for many years through the exchange of letters, they decided to build a shrine (called ‘Gruta del Padre Pío’ in Spanish). Therefore, after the sanctuary was built, Tonna’s family forbade the access to the ranch. This decision led tourists who frequently went to the ranch to observe strange aerial phenomena and sightings of anomalous lights, to go to the sanctuary instead. Although the shrine was built after the events of 1976 and 1977, this is the only part of the ranch that can be currently visited without asking for permission. Consequently, spiritual pilgrimages have taken place since the construction of this shrine. Currently, UFO tourism, religious tourism, and other forms of spiritual tourism also take place at the same site.

Due to sightings of anomalous lights and aerial phenomena from time to time (Díaz, 2016), many tourists and ufologists consider La Aurora an *axis mundi* or a “cosmic axis”. The “axis mundi” is a point that connects sky, earth, and world of beyond (Cohen, 1992, p.34). At this point, a connection is made between higher and lower realms. Since 1980, La Aurora and its area of influence constitute a tourist attraction for the practice of UFO tourism and ‘modern secular pilgrimages’ (Digance, 2006). Hence, the spiritual guide José Trigueirinho³ has chosen this area to build a ‘Planetary Healing Center’ called ‘Casa Redención’ (Lugo and Pohyú, 2000). Furthermore, Trigueirinho always considered the ‘Padre Pío’ as a model of ‘spiritual leader’. On the other hand, RAHMA groups⁴ (currently extinct) arrange periodic visits to the ranch to achieve channelings and ‘third type’ contacts. Because of the shutdown of the access to the public since 1990, RAHMA groups and other *new age* groups carry out their activities at the ‘Gruta del Padre Pío’.

2 The events: genesis of the story

In the early morning of March 4th, 1976, a strange 'event' happened at the cattle ranch which would forever change its fate. That summer night the owner of the ranch, Mr. Angel Maria Tonna (now deceased), awoke to the sounds of the chickens, dogs barking and a flutter of turkeys that were around the cottage. Then there was a silence, and after a few seconds an explosion. According to Mr. Tulio Tonna (son of the owner A.M. Tonna), when Mr. Tonna was leaving the cottage he saw a strange light which illuminated the entire field and when he looked up he noticed a light going up and down in a perpendicular way. The light did not correspond to a helicopter, a plane, an aircraft, a car, or an electric light bulb. Following Tonna's son's description, what he noticed in this first instance were three lights, which formed an isosceles triangle when one of them moved down to the ground, where it was suspended for almost a minute. Then it climbed up and merged into the middle of the two other lights. In a few seconds, "the lights were making a zigzag effect and then the three lights left quickly" (Cuitiño, 2016, p.26). Considering this, and to analyse this type of phenomenon we will use the notion of 'event' designed by the philosopher Gilles Deleuze. In that sense, to Deleuze (1993, p.77) "the event is a vibration...such as an audible wave, a luminous wave".

The next morning Mr. Tonna found strange traces on the ground near the cottage. The most striking effect after this first event was the disappearance of an 'ombú' tree (*Phytolacca dioica*). The 'ombú' tree was close to the stable of ranch. At present, only a hole in the ground can be seen in that place.⁵ The hollow remains today and in the depth, people can see a few stuffed animals. According to the protocol developed by the *Blue Book Project*, what happened to Mr. A.M. Tonna was a 'third type' experience. So, in this type of experience there are traces on the ground which are not easy to explain; scientifically it has no explanation. These traces on the ground lasted for a long time, and even today, they can be observed. One year later, on the night of February 17th, 1977, Mr. Tonna was dining with his wife when suddenly he saw strange lights through the window. Immediately he went outside the cottage and noticed that the lights were located at the back of the stable. Following Cuitiño's (2016) journalistic research (Figure 3), Mr. Tonna decided to come near the stable where he saw a strange light that extended approximately 30 m from the top to the ground.

Suddenly, the light began moving straight towards him and the barnyard animals. The aftermath of the episode was dramatic as a dog and a race bull died all of a sudden. Mr. Tonna suffered several burns on one of his arms. The next day Tonna's relatives discovered strange traces on the ground that still remain. Apart from that, a section of the line of wire fences surrounding the ranch had been molten. According to Cuitiño's research, the following week Japanese engineers (who were working on the construction of the 'Salto Grande' Dam) went to the ranch. They carried *Geiger counters* and detected a greater degree of magnetism than at any other point in the area (Cuitiño, 2016). Considering this, these two incidents at La Aurora helped this mere cattle ranch become one of the most famous tourist attractions in the world in relation to UFOs. These events started word-of-mouth comments and a folk legend based on the UFO subject that arises from time-to-time. After these two events, a series of facts happened at the ranch as well as in the area surrounding it.

As a result, several governmental and non-governmental organisations in Uruguay were created to study UFO phenomena and the sightings of anomalous lights in the sky. Two of the organisations that were created and still exist are CRIDOVNI ('Comisión

Receptora e Investigadora de Denuncias de Objetos Voladores No Identificados’) and CIOVI (‘Centro de Investigación de Objetos Voladores Inidentificados’). CRIDOVNI belongs to the Uruguayan army, whereas CIOVI is a civil non-governmental organisation. In relation to events at La Aurora ranch between 1976 and 1978, neither of them reached clear and precise conclusions. However, both organisations pointed out the ‘truthfulness’ of the events that happened in the ranch between those years. Incidentally, we must not forget that after each one of those events, traces and marks were found in the field. For instance, as it was mentioned previously, there were verified molten wire fences, hollows in the ground, and a deep hole next to a tree.

Figure 3 Front cover of Eduardo Cuitiño’s book published in 2016 (see online version for colours)



Source: Author’s archive

Since the 1980s, different local and regional media began to spread and discuss the ‘events’ which happened at the ranch. TV programs, newspapers, and radio auditions began to amplify and disseminate what had happened in La Aurora throughout Latin America and worldwide. One such example is the *Voces Anónimas* Uruguayan TV program presented by Guillermo Lockhart. This series narrates a paranormal story (‘legend’) which occurred in Uruguay in each chapter. Chapter 30 (2013) of the series describes the events of the ranch between 1976 and 1978. Through a wide range of testimonies and files of the time, the television presenter reconstructs the facts that marked the history of the ranch forever.

Another television program that addressed the events that took place in La Aurora in the late 1970s was the local series *Mil Voces Leyendas*. In Chapter 2 (season 2015), the television presenter Juan Vicente Roman interviewed different people who are dedicated to teaching and applying the healing properties of that place. Most of these ‘alternative

therapists' (*healers*) live in the city of Salto or in the Dayman Hot Springs area near the cattle ranch (Chalar and Balbi, 2008). According to these healers, the ranch has a special energy that allows people with serious diseases (who visit the place) to aid their healing. These techniques employed by healers cover a wide range of trends and traditions (Heelas, 1993). In the report created by healers, they point to a series of pseudo-medicinal techniques and practices such as Acupuncture, Reiki, Chinese medicine, Rolfing, Yoga, and Tantric Buddhism.

On top of that, some of the interviewees argued that the energy existing in La Aurora and its surroundings is due to the amount of quartz that exists in that area. As in the Roswell case, the media not only promoted La Aurora story, but also actively created it (Collie, 2002; Saler et al., 1997; Wright, 2020). TV series such as *Voces Anónimas* and *Mil Voces Leyendas*, and books like *Estancia La Aurora: el enigma* (2016), amplify and shape a folk legend that continues to perpetuate itself in time. According to William Dewan (2006), the media have played an important role in the growth of UFO phenomenon by including other domains in folk culture.⁶

2.1 *The common traits of UFO-related tourism in the Americas*

One of the characteristics of UFO-related tourism in the Americas are the common cultural traits among them. Indeed, Roswell, La Aurora's ranch, and Mount Uritorco, have some characteristics in common. First of all, all three sites, where some form of UFO-related tourism is currently taking place, arise during the context of the Cold War. This does not mean that all the places, where this type of tourism is practiced in the USA and the rest of America, have arisen during this context. On the contrary, it is a matter of showing the common features of the three sites mentioned above. As revealed by Courtney Collie (2002, p.7), "the connection between Cold War-related anxiety and the sudden, widespread appearance of flying saucers did not escape contemporary observers".

Another shared trait is the process of transformation of these three sites into a tourist attraction. In all cases, it is proven that the UFO-related tourism arose after a specific event, subsequently transformed into a 'myth'. Before these events, they were not tourist attractions. Likewise, the conversion of these places into attractions for the practice of UFO-related tourism did not imply a previous tourist planning. For example, in the case of Roswell, "this tourism was born from the cultural impact of the Roswell myth" (Collie, 2002, p.33). Undoubtedly, these three cases show how a touristy site can become a place for the development of UFO-related tourism without the need to be activated as a tourist attraction beforehand (Chalar and Balbi, 2008; Collie, 2002; Yáñez, 2018).

Finally, another common trait shared by Roswell, La Aurora's ranch, and Mount Uritorco, consists in the prohibition of the entrance to the site where the events took place. Due to the three cases are private or state (not 'public') properties, the UFO-related tourism ends up developing in the surroundings of the place. Moreover, in the case of La Aurora's ranch and Mount Uritorco, the area of visit and tour of the tourists ended up forming a 'zone of influence' for the practice of UFO-related tourism and a wide range of pseudo-medicinal techniques and rites belonging to some branch of the *new age*. For this reason, tour operators and tourists currently talk about an 'Aurora Zone' (Chalar and Balbi, 2008) and an 'Uritorco Zone' (Otamendi, 2015). As the anthropologist Alejandro

Otamendi has argued, “such sites are erected as sacralised/sacred spots and are shaped as anti-structural spaces within the ritual process through which tourism takes place” (Otamendi, 2015, p.347).

3 The anthropological approach to anomalous lights and UFO experiences

Current anthropological approaches about paranormal phenomena have surpassed the debate around the categories of fiction/reality. Hence, some anthropologists have studied UFO sightings and anomalous lights as a ‘significant cultural phenomenon’ to avoid “the question of objective reality of any extraterrestrial involvement” (Saler et al., 1997, p.11). For example, in the book *UFO Crash at Roswell: The genesis of a modern myth* (1997), anthropologists Benson Saler and Charles Ziegler transcend the believer-vs.-skeptical debate, arguing that Roswell story is best understood as a modern American folk belief. The authors show how the story (and its continual retellings), taps into modern fears about the power of the media and the production process of folk beliefs. Based on different versions of storytellers about the Roswell case, they employ the notion of ‘myth’ to explain the production process of retelling. Additionally, the anthropologists conclude that in the myth-production process of Roswell narratives the media had a fundamental role.

Nevertheless, many anthropologists avoid using the concept of ‘myth’ to describe the sightings of anomalous lights and unexplained aerial phenomena. One example is Thomas Bullard’s (2000) approach to UFOs sightings. In Bullard’s viewpoint, he points out “that the term myth has been used differently by various writers in ufology” (Dewan, 2006, p.199). For common sense, the word *myth* is used to describe a false belief. Taking this into account, Dewan (2006, p.199) states: “anthropologists add that myth is true to its believers and false to nonbelievers, whereas psychologists see myths as expressions of the unconscious mind”. Therefore, the usage of the word “myth” to explain UFOs retellings is questionable. Traditionally (in folk studies as well as in anthropology and history) the term ‘myth’ was used to designate the sacred narratives of a distant past. For that reason, if we follow the traditional definition of the term it would be difficult to denominate UFO beliefs as such.

Furthermore, Carl Von Sydow (1948) eschews the term ‘myth’ to describe narratives of an unknown source transmitted by others. He proposes the notion of *fabulate* to refer to third-person retellings of an unknown source. According to him, and following Von Sydow points of view, Dewan (2006, p.187) contends, “if a particular memory generates enough interest in a population and is consequently retold by different people, it may become a memorial legend”. In the same way, David Hufford (1982) in his essay “Traditions of Disbelief” points out that academic approaches to traditional metaphysics have generally premised their research on the assumption that such beliefs are inherently incorrect. He notes, “supernatural beliefs arise from and are supported by various kinds of obvious error. This has traditionally been the starting point for most academic work on the subject” (Hufford, 1982, p.47). ‘Traditions of disbelief’ are as much based on faith as those that state the contrary. Taking into account that much of the UFO academic debate focuses on truth/untruth and fiction/reality categories (Appelle, 2000), it is useful for an anthropological approach ‘transcend these oppositions’ (Saler et al., 1997, p.165). Apart from the discussion of the ‘right category’ to understand anomalous experience accounts,

it is more important to ask about the *cultural conditions* that have to be present so that the stories have a ‘reality effect’ (Barthes, 1989).

One instance could be Claude Lévi-Strauss’s analysis of the effectiveness of symbols in magic. According to Lévi-Strauss approach of magic effectiveness, “efficacy of magic implies a belief in magic” (1963, p.168). He explained that for effectiveness of magic to occur, three conditions must be fulfilled: “first, the sorcerer’s belief in the effectiveness of his techniques; second, the patient’s or victim’s belief in the sorcerer’s power; and, finally, the faith and expectations of the group” (Lévi-Strauss, 1963, p.168). The three components have the objective of creating a *gravitational field*, where magic acquires its effectiveness. In the case of UFO experiences, not only the individual faith is necessary but also the group beliefs are essential to create such a ‘field’.

At present, most of the anthropological approaches about UFOs phenomena stopped using the notion of ‘myth’ (Appelle, 2000; Dewan, 2006; Ellis, 1991). One such example is Bill Ellis (1991) essay about contemporary legends and contemporary folk tales. Ellis avoids the use of the term ‘myth’ to explain oral narratives about sightings of anomalous lights and UFO supernatural encounters. He proposed the notion of ‘legend’ to describe an oral narrative, which includes a wide range of stories and folk tales. He deems the term ‘legend’ as more suitable than ‘myth’ in describing sightings of anomalous lights and aerial phenomena.

Nevertheless, many years ago French semiologist Roland Barthes (1991) recovered the traditional notion of “myth”, and redefined it from a semiological point of view. He defines *myth* as “a type of speech” (Barthes, 1991, p.107). According to him, myths nowadays must be considered as ‘a system of communication’. Therefore, he stated that “myth cannot possibly be an object, a concept, or an idea; it is a mode of signification, a form” (Barthes, 1991, p.107). The advantage of this redefinition of the term myth carried out by Barthes is that “every object in the world can pass from a closed, silent existence to an oral state, open to appropriation by society, for there is no law, whether natural or not, which forbids talking about things” (1991, p.107).

3.1 *The sacred space in UFO tourism: myth and hierophany*

Beyond the debates regarding the validity of the term ‘myth’ to explain the UFO phenomenon, what has been proven is its similarity to religious beliefs or political ideology. The anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss (1963) has analysed an example of this. In the chapter entitled “The structural study of myth”, of the book *Structural Anthropology*, Lévi-Strauss draws a parallel between mythical thought and political ideology. According to him, political ideology “have largely replaced it in modern societies” (Lévi-Strauss, 1963, p.209). To show that, the French anthropologist gives as an example the episode of the French Revolution from the approach of a historian and that of a political actor. Unlike the researcher in history, the politician considers the French Revolution “as a sequence of past happenings, a non-reversible series of events the remote consequences of which may still be felt at present” (p.209).

This double structure composed of the historical and a-historical dimension implies that myth can “pertaining to the realm of *parole* and calling for an explanation as such, as well as to that of *langue* in which it is expressed, can also be an absolute entity on a third level” (p.210). According to Lévi-Strauss, the ‘myth’ remains a myth despite the worst translation. In other words, “a myth is still felt as a myth by any reader anywhere in the world” (p.210). This unique characteristic within the linguistic plane allows a myth to be

recognised as such anywhere in the world, as well as in the most diverse cosmologies, far away in time and space. In the case of UFO-related tourism, the experiences and descriptions narrated by subjects in different parts of the world coincide in the same story. Nonetheless, the structural analysis of myths developed by Lévi-Strauss did not take into account a fundamental component for their functioning within the ‘belief system’: *sacred time and space*.

In the same way, the historian of religion Mircea Eliade attempts to find broad, cross-cultural parallels and unities in religion, specifically in ‘myths’. However, Eliade asserts that the main function of myths consists of “breakthroughs of the sacred into the World” (Eliade, 1963, p.6). In fact, to this author, religion is based on a clear distinction between the *sacred* (God, gods, myths, etc.) and the *profane*. Besides, both dimensions include the categories of *time* and *space*. To demonstrate the difference between the sacred and the profane, Eliade introduces the concept of ‘hierophany’. This category allows to give structure and orientation to the world, establishing a sacred order. For this reason, ‘hierophany’ is a materialisation of the sacred. Furthermore, “the hierophany reveals an absolute fixed point, a center” (1963, p.21). One of the sacred realms where hierophany manifests itself is in the myths.

Following Eliade’s approach, the sacred can manifest in the form of ‘myths’. In contrast to Lévi-Strauss’s structural model, myths not only imply a sacred time but also a *sacred space*. This is due to the profane space which has no a ‘qualitative differentiation’ (Eliade, 1961, p.22). For instance, two researchers who have applied this conception to the UFO phenomenon have been Bertrand Méheust y Thierry Pinvidic (2003). So, in their book *OVNI. Vers une anthropologie d’un mythe contemporain*, both authors deem that each culture has a notion and an experience of the sacred, within a guiding ‘myth’ that allows it to order the chaos of reality. According to Méheust and Pinvidic (2003), the UFO phenomenon constitutes one of the modern myths in contemporary Western societies. The anthropologist Alejandro Otamendi (2015) has cited this approach in his doctoral thesis. In a chapter of his research, Otamendi shows the different contemporary conceptions and approaches to the UFO phenomenon. One of these conceptions is the approach developed by Méheust and Pinvidic.

3.2 Methodology and techniques

The methodological framework developed during the research was of qualitative nature, as were the research techniques carried out in the field and in the office work. In the case of research techniques, I applied multi-sited ethnography, *in-depth* interviewing, and analyses of secondary data (tourist brochures, TV series, books, webpages, documentaries, filmography, photographs, press archives, etc.). The ethnographic work that was implemented during the research is framed within what the anthropologist Renato Rosaldo calls ‘deep hanging out’ (Clifford, 1997, p.188). This type of fieldwork involved weekly visits to the Estancia La Aurora (especially on weekends), for a period of more than four years. Hence, the type of ethnography that was carried out does not constitute *strictu sensu* the classic modality of fieldwork in anthropology. So, this type of ethnography has as a methodological guideline what George Marcus (1995) designated as ‘follow-up’ instead of ‘residence’ or prolonged stay in the field.

In relation to the research of tourist flows that come to the ranch to develop their different spiritual practices (channellings, sightings of anomalous lights, spiritual pilgrims, attunement, etc.), the ‘multi-sited ethnography’ technique was chosen for the

fieldwork. For this reason, in the paper “Ethnography in/of the World System: The Emergence of Multi-Sited Ethnography” (1995), the anthropologist George Marcus radically departs from the premises and objectives of classical ethnography to initiate the development of a new form of ethnography in relation with the fluctuations of time and space, as well as the constant flows of people, objects, and beliefs. By proposing a change of paradigm in the analysis of cultural phenomena, multi-sited ethnography does not aim at a holistic representation of the groups studied. This kind of ethnography has different goals and objectives than the traditional paradigm. As Marcus explained, the object of study of ethnography is currently mobile, because the global constitutes a part of the local situations.

On the methodological level, multi-sited ethnography develops a series of techniques and forms of physical presence in the field: following people, following objects or quasi-objects, following the story (historical or tourist), following individual biographies, following the conflict, etc. Accordingly to the approach developed by Marcus, the local is only local circumstantially. Unlike classical ethnography, where the anthropologist would settle in one place for a long period and investigate it holistically (integrally), multi-sited ethnography offers the possibility of continuing the fieldwork outside the boundaries of the territory where sightings of anomalous lights and spiritual pilgrimages take place. At the level of research techniques (in addition to the analysis of secondary data), the in-depth interview was also conducted. That is why not only tourists and pilgrims were interviewed on site but also in their respective homes (Korstanje, 2017). Such interviews led to trips to different parts of the country as well as to certain cities and towns in Argentina, and the southern region of Brazil. Fifty-eight in-depth interviews were conducted, applying the methodological criterion of ‘non-representative random samples’. This was due to random sampling from strata within a population excludes some ‘unrepresentative combinations’ (Taylor and Bogdan, 1984).

4 Becoming a tourist attraction: UFOs and tourism

Currently, La Aurora receives tourists and visitors in all seasons of the year. Although UFO tourism and spiritual tourism are currently practiced in the area opposite the cattle ranch (Cuitiño, 2016; Lugo and Pohyú, 2000; Martínez, 2015), it is by means of the former type of tourism that international fame is achieved. This means that the first pilgrims who visited the ranch practiced some spiritual tourism modalities (e.g., UFO tourism, energetic tourism, religious tourism, etc.). Generally, the great majority of these visitors belonged to a group of *new age* movements. Regarding the visits to ‘Gruta del Padre Pío’, they have been increasing since the 1990s. Due to this, at present, La Aurora is not only a place for the development of UFO tourism but also a large number of pilgrims visit the ‘Gruta’ to perform religious pilgrimages. In addition, during the weekend some sellers pitch their tents (Figure 4) next to ‘Gruta del Padre Pío’ to sell ‘souvenirs’ and prayer cards with religious images. One of the most interesting issues of La Aurora in relation to tourist activity is that the owners of the ranch never wanted to exploit it as a tourist attraction. Furthermore, they refuse to give interviews except in exceptional cases.

Figure 4 Sellers of religious souvenirs and prayer cards opposite the ranch (see online version for colours)



Source: Photograph taken by author (2018)

Concerning the practice of UFO tourism and religious tourism *stricto sensu*, the visits carried out by tourists, ufologists, pilgrims, and journalists have as *push-factor* sightings of anomalous lights, strange aerial phenomena, and spiritual pilgrimages. Within the spiritual exercises that tourists perform, there is a wide range of rituals and meditation techniques (Figure 5). Nonetheless, they all belong to some branch of the *new age* movement. Among the most common rituals and meditation techniques that can be observed today are *attunement* (sitting in a circle holding hands to achieve an inter-spiritual connection) and *channelings* (telepathic communication with beings from other galaxies). Even today -with the entrance to La Aurora forbidden-, few cars go opposite the ranch at dusk to spend the night awake. This is because most tourists and ufologists consider the ranch to be an *axis mundi*. The concept of place as an *axis mundi* or ‘Center of the World’ is what attracts tourists to frequent pilgrimages to the ranch, searching a connection between the higher and lower realm. Taking this into account, Erik Cohen pointed out the link between pilgrimages and the conception of place as a ‘Center of the World’. As Cohen (1992) has argued:

“...conception of the ‘Center of the World’, through which passes the *axis mundi*, provided a plausible context for a theory of pilgrimage. According to this approach, a pilgrimage could be seen as a religiously motivated journey to the center of the world itself, or to one of its homologous representations.” (p.34)

One such example could be ‘Monte Uritorco’ in Cordoba City, Argentina. The ‘Monte Uritorco’ is a mountain and the highest peak located on the ‘Sierras Chica’s’ chain, in the northwest of Cordoba. Since the 1960s a legend has circulated among new age groups that “an underground city (called ‘Erks’) lies under the mount and surroundings” (Otamendi, 2008, p.34)). Furthermore, in the 1980s a group of professionals and new age

groups from ‘La Plata’ city explored the area in search of this underground city. At present ‘Monte Uritorco’ constitutes a tourist attraction for the practice of spiritual tourism and UFO tourism. Therefore, this place is considered an *axis mundi* by the wide range of new age groups that visit the mount during the year.

Figure 5 Tourists doing spiritual exercises inside La Aurora’s ranch where one of the ‘events’ happened (see online version for colours)



Source: Courtesy of Tonna’s family (1986)

4.1 A type of “modern secular pilgrimage”

With this in mind, there is a connection between new forms of pilgrimage and places regarded as an *axis mundi*. Pilgrimages made by tourists, ufologists, journalists, *new age* people, and religious pilgrims to La Aurora’s ranch are deemed by Justine Digance (2006) as a type of “modern secular pilgrimage”. As Digance (2003) pointed out, this type of pilgrimage differs from traditional religious pilgrimage (Rinschede, 1992; Smith, 1992; Turner and Turner, 1977; Vukonić, 2000). Nevertheless, “modern secular pilgrimage” not only encompasses *new age* groups and UFO tourists but also any tourist with a wide range of religious beliefs or agnostics convictions. As Digance (2003) states:

“...modern secular pilgrimage has been used so as to distinguish it from traditional religious and prehistoric/tribal pilgrimage traditions. However, it is not regarded as New Age pilgrimage because the modern secular type encompasses many other civil or secular interests apart from it.” (p.154)

Nowadays, tourists and pilgrims from nearby countries and the rest of the world visit the cattle ranch almost daily (Figure 6). Since the 1980s, it has become a tourist attraction. It should be noted that not only sightings of anomalous lights and strange aerial phenomena happened in La Aurora’s ranch, but ‘several inhabitants of the area have also had their

experiences' (Cuitiño, 2016). For instance, inhabitants of the surrounding area have found mysterious traces in their fields as if a hot object had been there. Moreover, we must add some strange facts other than the different events previously narrated, which contribute to a sense of 'mystery' around the ranch.

Figure 6 Tourists and pilgrims during a pilgrimage to 'Gruta del Padre Pío' (see online version for colours)



Source: Photograph taken by author (2018)

One such example is the alleged visit of astronaut Neil Armstrong. According to a folk legend, the famous astronaut visited the ranch on more than one occasion as a journalist of *Newsweek* magazine. There are different versions about the visit of the famous astronaut to La Aurora. Members of Tonna's family as well as local journalists claim that the famous astronaut visited the ranch twice. However, a 2008 letter sent by Neil Armstrong's secretary denies the visit of Mr. Armstrong to 'La Aurora'. Mrs. Vivian White, Armstrong's secretary, responded to a query made by the Professor of Astronomy and editor of the Uruguayan magazine "Dimensión Desconocida", Professor Angel De Vitta. In the letter sent to Neil Armstrong on 16 April 2008, Professor De Vitta asked about his visit to 'La Aurora' between 1978 and 1980. The reply of Armstrong's secretary⁷ (on his behalf) is blunt, and claims that he never visited the cattle ranch.

The oral account of the possible visit of the astronaut Neil Armstrong to La Aurora is a good example of how a micro-story can become a macro-story. Because of this, Marshall Sahlins (2005) has analysed this *continuum* between a local history (micro-level) and a historical meta-story (macro-level). Following the approach developed by Sahlins, in certain historical circumstances a micro-history can become a macro-history and vice-versa. Taking into account that one of the main objectives of microhistory is "an exaltation of minor historiography against the historiography that concentrates on the great and the powerful" (Ginzburg, 1993, p.16), Sahlins explained how in certain historical contexts a microhistory can be connected to a historical account of universal

scope. If, in general, the microhistorical approach aims at the scale reduction, the priority of singular cases, and the attention to story (Ginzburg, 1993), the analyses developed by Sahlins show how in certain historical circumstances a microhistory can become a macrohistory. In the specific case of La Aurora, the supernatural experience of Mr. Tonna referred to the story of Neil Armstrong, the first astronaut to set foot on the moon.

5 Conclusions

Nowadays the major types of tourism in Uruguay are the following: “Sun and Beach Tourism, Ecotourism and Rural Tourism, Business Tourism and, Spa and Hot Spring Tourism” (Peña, 1999, p.33). Clearly, UFO tourism and spiritual tourism are not one of the most developed types in Uruguay. This is due to various factors. One of these factors is the scarce academic research carried out on this subject in Uruguay. Another factor is the conceptual confusion that exists in the field of tourist studies in Uruguay between UFO tourism, spiritual tourism, and religious tourism. In relation to spontaneous development of spiritual tourism in La Aurora, communication networks of *new age* groups and the diffusion of the phenomenon through the mass media, have contributed to the development of a symbolic universe associated with mysticism. Both factors mixed have forever changed this place from a mere cattle ranch to a regional and international tourist attraction. In addition, the revelations of mystical experiences of spiritual leaders written in their books (such as Sixto Paz and José Trigueirinho), have generated ‘new narratives’ which contributed to the arrival of important flows of tourists at this area. Nonetheless, it was the UFO subject which gave rise to the spiritual movement in La Aurora.

Clearly, the historical evolution of La Aurora cattle ranch into a tourist attraction has significant relevance for tourism anthropology. This is because the spontaneous emergence of this tourist attraction is not linked to a historical-cultural matter produced by man but to a series of ‘non-human events’. Taking as a reference the Actor-Network Theory developed by Bruno Latour (2005), the tourist case of La Aurora ranch reveals how non-human events have the *capacity for agency*. Undoubtedly, the sightings of anomalous lights and unexplained aerial phenomena consist of *non-human* phenomena without prior figuration. Regarding the capacity of agency of these non-human *quasi-objects*⁸ without any previous figuration, Latour (2005, p.71) points out that “anything that does modify a state of affairs by making a difference is an actor -or, if it has no figuration yet, an actant”. Therefore, any object that modifies a given cultural framework by making a difference without having a previous figuration is considered an ‘actant’. The ‘unidentified flying objects’ (UFOs) are included in this anthropological category. Furthermore, phenomena such as the cattle ranch La Aurora signify a challenge for tourism anthropology, because they show *how non-human forces* have the capacity to act as agents in tourist phenomenon.

At this point, classical motivation theory of tourism could be applied through the concepts *push-factor* and *pull-factor* (Dann, 1981). Following Dann’s conceptual distinction, *push-factors* constitute the internal needs and desires of tourists (which generates the demand of travel), while *pull-factors* are the attractions of tourist destination. In the case of La Aurora, *push-factors* are linked to the oral legend and the folk tales related to UFO sightings, while *pull-factors* are associated with the energetic properties of the zone. Finally, tourists and pilgrims who visit La Aurora and its area of

influence are characterised by being a middle-class and middle-upper class, between 25 and 65 years old, and come mainly from countries of the Southern Cone⁹ (Chalar and Balbi, 2008; Cuitiño, 2016; Lugo and Pohyú, 2000; Martínez, 2015). Moreover, the majority of tourists visit the place on weekends or holidays. Most of tourists and pilgrims arrive in small groups by bus. Although almost all belongs to some country of the southern cone, most that visit the ranch are Uruguayans and Argentinians. However, the motivations of tourists and pilgrims that visit the ranch have changed over time. For the last two decades, most of visitors have had as *pull-factor* the energy and spirituality of the zone, and not UFO's sightings.

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Notes

- ¹*New age* groups can be defined as “an amorphous, diverse, and poorly group whose spiritual beliefs fall outside the bounds of mainstream religion and who are found in every corner of the globe. Their beliefs can be described as a synthesis and creative expansion of various branches of religious thought, including Christian, Buddhist, Taoist, and, characteristically, neo-Native American belief systems” (Huntsinger and Fernández-Giménez, 2000, p.537).
- ²‘Ufologist’ is the person who researches and is dabbler to UFO phenomenon or ‘ufology’. As Dewan points out: “Ufology has a growing body of literature written by folklorists, psychologist, and historians” (Dewan, 2006, p.198).
- ³José Trigueirinho is a Brazilian filmmaker and film director. In the 80s, he founded a religious movement called ‘Comunidad Espiritual Figueira’. The idea of establishing a religious movement arose from the mystical experiences lived by Trigueirinho in his travels throughout different countries. Nowadays, he is dedicated to giving lectures in several countries and is the spiritual leader of ‘Comunidad Espiritual Figueira’. This spiritual community is present in several countries of Latin America and Europe.
- ⁴‘RAHMA groups’ were dissolved by Sixto Paz in 1990 in order to avoid fanaticism. However, around the world, many people continue such encounters, though not officially belong to RAHMA despite nominating themselves as such. Sixto Paz was the founder and spiritual leader of these groups.
- ⁵About the case of the ‘ombú’ tree there are not only many witnesses who support the version of this disappearance, but also photographs which show the existence of the two trees before the ‘event’ would have happened.
- ⁶“The UFO domain has grown to include, for example, animal mutilations, crop circles, mysterious figures known commonly as ‘men in black’ (or MIB), alien abductions, and speculations concerning varying degrees of government conspiracy” (Dewan, 2006, p.185).
- ⁷“Dear Professor De Vitta: I am responding on behalf of Mr. Armstrong to your letter. Mr. Armstrong has no recollection of visiting ‘La Aurora’ ranch. Examination of his trip records shows no visit to ‘La Aurora’, and no photographs from the visit show any scenes on a ranch. I hope this information is useful. Sincerely, Vivian White” (White, 2008).
- ⁸Following Michel Serres’s (1982, p.225) definition: “a *quasi-object* is not an object, but it is one nevertheless, since it is not a subject, since it is in the world; it is also a quasi-subject, since it marks or designates a subject who, without it, would not be a subject”.
- ⁹The Southern Cone region in Latin America is composed of four countries: Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, and Uruguay.

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