

El Camino de Santiago: The Growth of Pilgrimage and the Changing Spiritual Experience on the  
Road to Santiago de Compostela

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### Abstract

The pilgrimage to the Cathedral of Santiago (El Camino de Santiago or The Way of Saint James, in English) is originally a Christian pilgrimage dating back to early medieval times. It has recently become more popular than the previous years. The pilgrimage began in order to visit the apostolic tomb of Saint James, but recent studies have shown that people now focus on the journey as opposed to the arrival in Santiago (Peelen and Jansen, 2007). The change of religiosity and spirituality along El Camino de Santiago has interesting implications for pilgrims' motivations, the impact on an individual and the community, the correlation of motivations and the emotions experienced, and expectations compared to actual experience. In addition to this, the different routes along El Camino de Santiago attract different people and thus different communities are formed around each of the routes of the pilgrimage. This paper will expand upon previous research with three weeks of fieldwork conducted on El Camino de Santiago Primitivo and in the city of Santiago. The Camino Primitivo (Primitive Way in English) is a less-traveled route of El Camino that starts in Oviedo, spans 330 km, and ends in Santiago.

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Over time and with the development of major world religions, pilgrimages have become “an important social phenomenon” which leads pilgrims “to locations where their sacred texts claimed founding events in faith had taken place” (Ashley and Deegan, 2009, p. 10). Pilgrimage can be seen as a *rite of passage* complete with a liminal phase. “Rites of passage are the transitional rituals accompanying changes of place, state, social position, and age in a culture” (Turner, 1978, p. 249). Victor Turner explains rites of passage as being “marked by three phases: separation, limen or margin, and aggregation. The first phase comprises symbolic behavior signifying the detachment of the individual or group.... During the intervening liminal phase, the state of the ritual subject becomes ambiguous... in the third phase the passage is consummated, and the subject returns to classified secular or mundane social life” (Turner, 1978, p. 2). Pilgrimage can be seen as a rite of passage because it takes the pilgrim out of their daily routines and into a liminal state in which there is time to reflect upon oneself (Ashley and Deegan, 2009, p. 10). “Bonding with others undergoing the same experience may cut across social boundaries to establish a feeling called ‘communitas’ by anthropologist Victor Turner” (Ashley and Deegan, 2009, p. 10). Pilgrim trails can be found all over Europe and the world, but according to Turner they all have one thing in common. “.... They are believed to be places where miracles once happened, still happen, and may happen again... Miracles or the revivification of faith are everywhere regarded as rewards for undertaking long, not infrequently perilous, journeys and for having temporarily given up not only the cares but also the rewards of everyday life” (Turner, 1978, p. 6).

The pilgrimage to the Cathedral of Santiago began during medieval times in order to visit the Apostolic Tomb of Saint James. Legend has it that shortly after the execution of Saint James (Santiago in Spanish) in 44 AD in Jerusalem by the order of King Herodes Agrippa the bones of the saint were transported to the west coast of Spain during the time of Moorish presence in the Iberian Peninsula (Peelen and Jansen, 2007). It was not until the ninth century that the bones were recovered again (Peelen and Jansen, 2007). The legend of the bones of the apostle along with the heroic stories of Saint James defending the Christians against the Moors inspired the pilgrimage route (Peelen and Jansen, 2007). The first record of a pilgrimage is just shortly after the discovery of the bones, also in the ninth century (Polachic, 2002). Although the pilgrimage began in accordance with the Catholic Church, “today the Camino is an eclectic space composed of many experiences, symbolisms, beliefs and practices, some of which contradict the Catholic faith and doctrine” (Chemin 2012, p. 129). In addition, El Camino de Santiago was deemed a ‘European Cultural Itinerary’ in 1987, which validates it as a symbol of unity among the European nations (Jansen, 2012, pg. 5). Routes start all over Europe and end in Santiago (see appendix 2). El Camino de Santiago can also be referred to as El Camino and The Way or The Way of Saint James in English.

Recent studies on El Camino de Santiago by the Dutch anthropologists Peelen and Jansen have shown that people now focus on the journey as opposed to the arrival in Santiago. Today, at the Cathedral of Santiago one sees a variety of people searching for a variety of meanings. According to Peelen and Jansen (2007, p. 76) “...even many of those pilgrims who confess that they no longer or never did adhere to a religion or church, do relate their emotive experiences on el camino in spiritual and semi-religious terms.” The changing religiosity and spirituality, in addition to the increase in popularity, of El Camino de Santiago may be implicated in the

construction of modern day pilgrimage. There is a need for this increasingly popular phenomenon to be studied further for a better understanding of the changes.

In addition to reviewing previous studies on El Camino, I spent fourteen days walking and staying in the *albergues* (pilgrim's hostels) along El Camino de Santiago Primitivo in August 2013. Multiple questions were considered during this study:

- What are the general reasons for doing El Camino de Santiago? Thus, why is it important?
- What is the extent of the impact on pilgrims in an individual and communal sense?
- Is there a correlation of motivations an individual has to do El Camino de Santiago to the impact of the emotions experienced on El Camino?
- Is there a relationship between the expectations of El Camino de Santiago and the actual experience while on El Camino?

In addition to the original goals of the study, it was evident after beginning El Camino Primitivo that there are differences between El Camino Primitivo and other routes in regards to cultural and who is attracted to the specific Caminos. Hence, the differences in the Caminos were also explored to fully understand this phenomenon: What are the cultural and communal differences between the different routes of the Camino? And, what propels these differences?

### **Literature Review**

In recent years, the popularity of pilgrimage around the world has increased considerably with 192,488 pilgrims arriving in Santiago in 2012 (Informe Estadístico, 2012), Compared to 1986 with only 2,491 pilgrims arriving in Santiago (Collins-Kriener, 2010, p. 154). This is an

incredible increased in just 26 years. In 2010, during the last Year of The Saint, 272,135 pilgrims arrived in Santiago, which is also a dramatic increase from the previous Year of The Saint, 2004 with only 179,944 pilgrims arriving in Santiago (Informe Estadístico 2010, 2004). The Year of the Saint is any year in which Saint James' Day, July 25<sup>th</sup>, falls on a Sunday (Hartley, 1912 pg. 51).

### **Religious Change and Increasing Pilgrimage Popularity**

In order to understand present day pilgrimage and the changes these pilgrimages are facing, we must first understand the changing religious conditions that are occurring. "New Age spirituality is exerting more and more influence in Western culture" (Collins, 1998, p. 91). New Age refers to a type of religion that contains a collection of eclectic spiritual beliefs (Aupers and Houtman, 2006). These beliefs are often taken from various religions and applied as each individual sees fit (Aupers and Houtman, 2006). There is not a strict set of beliefs that are associated with New Age or New Age Spirituality, but on the contrary, New Age has been explained as a way of picking and choosing the parts of religious you do and do not wish to adhere to (Aupers and Houtman, 2006).

Victor Turner explained years ago that the popularity of a pilgrimage depends on the sociocultural climate of the environment. "For the development of a pilgrimage may be accelerated or retarded by the intellectual and political climate... Pilgrimage systems are peculiarly vulnerable in that they do not have their own means to defend themselves by force. But they have one immense advantage: unless a pilgrimage center is systematically discredited and destroyed, the believing masses will continue to make their way to the shrine" (Turner, 1978, p. 29) The increase in pilgrimage, specifically that of Santiago de Compostela in relation to the sociocultural context.

Religion is becoming exceedingly more ambiguous with more people having no religious affiliation yet maintaining some religious or spiritual beliefs such as in God or other spiritual beings. A recent study by the Pew Forum found that one out of every six individuals around the world (16% of the world's population) has no religious affiliation (Pew Forum, 2012). The group of unaffiliated is now the third largest behind Christians and Muslims, and about equal size to the Catholic population (Pew Forum, 2012). This study by the Pew Forum classified religion by self-identification. Surveys show that many of those who are religiously unaffiliated still believe in a higher power (Pew Forum, 2012). Of French adults who are unaffiliated 30% believe in a higher power, and of American adults who are unaffiliated 68% believe in a higher power (The Global Religious Landscape, 2012). This is evidence that although one may not consider himself or herself affiliated with religion that he or she still has a belief in some sort of spirituality. Again, this can be seen as the New Age movement described as “an incoherent collection of spiritual ideas and practices...draw(n) upon multiple traditions, styles, and ideas simultaneously, combining them into idiosyncratic practices” (Aupers and Houtman, 2006, p. 201).

In the past century, the percentage of Catholics in Europe has decreased. In 1910, 44% of Europe's population was Catholic compared to 2010 in which only 35% of the population was Catholic (The Global Catholic Population, 2013). There was also a decrease in the overall Christian population in Europe. In 1910, an overwhelming 94.5% of people in Europe were Christians compared to 76.2% in 2010 (Global Christianity, 2011). The decrease in Christian and Catholic members along with the increase of religiously unaffiliated members gives a new sociocultural context in which pilgrimage is being undertaken.

The change in the current religious circumstances is creating an opportunity for the popularity of pilgrimage to increase considerably. The ambiguity of pilgrimage seems to attract

not only strict adherents to Christian doctrine but also those who may consider themselves strictly spiritual and unaffiliated with religion. Those who do see themselves as strictly spiritual can be considered as part of the New Age Spiritual category, whereas there are others who consider themselves to be atheists or not believe in a higher power of any kind. Today, along El Camino de Santiago one may see a variety of meanings, which may have an influence on the pilgrim's experience. "Some hosts incorporate orthodox religious beliefs as part of their work, yet others adopt a diverse array of beliefs and practices, ranging from belief in extraterrestrial entities to Evangelical Christianity, animism and Buddhist Atheism. So despite its Catholic roots, "today the Camino is an eclectic space composed of many experiences, symbolisms, beliefs and practices, some of which contradict Catholic faith and doctrine" (Chemin, 2012, p. 129).

### **Rites of Passage and 'Communitas'**

The force of community acting upon pilgrims also plays a role in the construction of reality on the Camino. Willy Jansen explains, "even individual hikers to Santiago seldom walk alone" (Jansen, 2012). "Moving in unison for hours and hours on small country lanes and suffering together the pains and blisters and muscle aches not only helps pilgrims to (re)fine their own selves but also to connect with others in that concrete, limited space as well as globally. Not surprisingly, pilgrims profess to have gained more insight into themselves and into humankind as they come to appreciate the kindness of other humans as expressed on the journey" (Jansen 2012, Peelen and Jansen 2007).

Victor Turner explains the community phenomenon in pilgrimage as "communitas" in a rite of passage. "Communitas" can be described as "the state of oneness and unity that neophytes living outside the norms and fixed categories of a social system share during liminal periods" (Turner, 2012, pg. 169). Pilgrimage can be seen as a rite of passage in that it contains the three



phases of a rite of passage: separation, a liminal phase, and aggregation. The first phase of separation refers to the individual's separation from a fixed point in the social structure (Turner, 1978, p. 2). The liminal phase can be classified as the phase in which the individual is betwixt and between familiar lines of classification (Turner, 1978, p. 2). He or she is in an ambiguous state; the individual is no longer a member of the original state and not yet a member of the new social position formed through the rite of passage. During pilgrimage, the liminal phase is the extended period of time during which the individual walks. It is the period after beginning the pilgrimage and before its conclusion. Aggregation is when the individual returns into society and is expected to adhere to the norms for the appropriate position in society (Turner, 1978, p. 2).

The mystery of Christian pilgrimage, compared to other rites of passage, is within the individual. "What is secret in the Christian pilgrimage, then, is the inward movement of the heart... the pilgrim seeks temporary release from the structures that normally bind him..." (Turner, 1978, p. 10). Pilgrims come together through the ritual, which often enhances his or her inward reflection. During the liminal phase of pilgrimage, pilgrims form a certain bond beyond a basic relationship due to the power of the ritual. Through the ritual there is often a change seen within the individual, "Pilgrims have often written of the 'transformative' effect on them of approaching the final altar..." (Turner, 1978, p. 11). Victor Turner discusses how the ritual induces a specific relation among members, "It is only through the power ascribed by all to ritual, particularly to the Eucharistic ritual (which in part commemorates the pilgrim saint), that likeness of lot and intention is converted into commonness of feeling, into 'communitas'" (Turner, 1978, p. 13).

### **Publicity of the Camino by popular Authors**

In addition to the present changing religiosity in Europe, the publicizing of pilgrimage by popular authors and films has increased peoples' awareness of pilgrimage. *The Camino: A Journey of the Spirit* written in 1998 by actress Shirley MacLaine has become an international bestseller. In her book, she discusses her own spiritualities in depth through the visions she has while on the Camino; some of the main themes in the book are of personal survival, overcoming hurdles (illness, loss, emotional healing, coping with pain), and a spiritual life that is self-guided in comparison to the doctrines of the church (Chemin, 2012). Here, we see a view of spirituality that is in contradiction to the Catholic Church, "I have never been religious, opting instead to seek spirituality, so what interested me about the Camino was the energy of the ley lines themselves" (MacLaine, 1998, p. 5).

Another example of a popular novel influencing pilgrims is Paulo Coelho's book, *The Pilgrimage*, in which he explains his journey of the self on the Camino through his RAM (Rigor, Adoration, Mercy) teachings (Coelho, 1987/1998). Through the novel, Coelho's own spiritual awakening is revealed by the RAM practices. Although the RAM practices are never fully explained in his book, Coelho's narrative of the Camino details his own spiritual encounters, which allows readers to understand the Camino as an openly spiritual experience.

Both of these novels go into depth of individual spirituality of the self, unconnected to an organized religion. In accordance with the religious changes, the publicity of these books may have encouraged people with various backgrounds to hike the Camino, as opposed to people with solely religious backgrounds. Chemin noted this phenomenon during his fieldwork along the Camino in 2012, "Coelho's influence on contemporary travelers surfaced repeatedly during my fieldwork, where his books were always mentioned as a source of inspiration" (Chemin, 2012, p. 132).

### Methodology

In order to get a firsthand experience and participant observation of pilgrims on their way to Santiago, I spent two weeks walking El Camino de Santiago Primitivo and staying in *albergues* (pilgrims' hostels) with other pilgrims along the way from August 11<sup>th</sup> to August 24<sup>th</sup>, 2013. Since I walked El Camino Primitivo, I began in Oviedo and walked 330 km to Santiago de Compostela. I chose El Camino Primitivo because I already had established contacts in Oviedo. In addition, the Primitivo was more practical in view of my schedule and time restrictions.

Along the way I conducted semi-structured interviews using judgment sampling (see Appendix 1). Because I walked with other pilgrims, stayed in *albergues* with other pilgrims, and ate with other pilgrims I was provided ample opportunity for participant observation. I kept detailed notes of my experiences and the interviews I conducted. Some interviews were conducted in English and others in Spanish. All translations are my own. I also took photos along the way.

Because of the nature of pilgrimage, I was also a participant. I refrain from using my own emotions to guide the discussion here, but instead focus on information I gathered from other pilgrims' emotions and experiences. Although I do maintain an academic perspective focused on others, I think it is important to mention that I too was experiencing the conditions of pilgrimage such as body soreness, blisters, and the challenges of the pilgrimage in general.

The interview sample was rather small in comparison with the overall pilgrim community. El Primitivo only accounted for 3.3% (6,349 pilgrims) of the overall Camino de Santiago community in 2012 compared to 70.1% (134,979 pilgrims) on the Camino Francés (Estadístico, 2012). A potential flaw of this study may be that the observation is solely along El Camino Primitivo, although this is addressed and ultimately may have added to the study by

acknowledging differences between the less traveled routes of the Camino. Comparing the different routes of the Camino on the basis of pilgrim's motivations, culture, and community is also an area in which further research could and should be considered.

## **Field Research**

### **A Day in the Life of a Pilgrim**

Before understanding the cultural, social, and spiritual constructions on El Camino de Santiago, it is pertinent to understand what a typical day is like on El Camino de Santiago. Understanding a day in the life of a pilgrim will give context to the additional cultural and social information. Pilgrims are awake first thing in the morning, many of them before dawn. Some leave the *albergue* by five in the morning, others a bit later. I made a plan to always leave around seven in the morning. Many mornings, groups of pilgrims who had just met would leave together. During the day's walk pilgrims often walk with a group for a while and also alone for a while to enjoy the serenity of the Spanish countryside. Some days, pilgrims stop at a café for coffee or a small grocery store for a piece of fruit or a modest snack. Anywhere from 15 to 33km (10 to 20 miles) later, the pilgrims would be arriving in the next *albergue*.

The *albergues* usually don't open until one in the afternoon, so if one arrives early he or she adds his or her backpack to the long line of backpacks, takes off his or her shoes, and rests while he or she can (appendix 5). Once the hostel opens the hostel caretaker stamps the pilgrim's credential and the pilgrim pays the small fee of five Euros (appendix 3). Sometimes the pilgrim is shown to his or her bed other times you claim any bed of your choice. Once the pilgrim has found a bed for the night, s/he heads to the shower to once again feel clean. Directly after, the pilgrim hand-washes and hangs his/her clothes on the line to dry.

After the long day hiking with little food, the next task is to find something to eat, usually from a grocery store in which you can buy food to make for lunch and dinner with others. Some towns did not have a grocery store or café in those cases it is important to know ahead of time and stop to purchase food before arriving in that village. To find out whether or not there is food available in the next town or village, a pilgrim can consult his or her own guide book. It is also common for pilgrims to discuss the day ahead in the hostel; one of the main concerns during these discussions is where to stop for food. After having a late lunch, many people take a *siesta*; others were not keen on taking a *siesta* in fear of not being able to sleep at night. I almost always took a bit of a rest to regain some energy for the evening. After getting up from the much-needed rest, it was again time to eat. Sometimes groups of pilgrims would then go to a bar for a beer or glass of wine to socialize and get to know one another even better. Everyone in the hostel was usually asleep by ten, if not earlier. Something to note about the pilgrim's hostel experience, they are always surrounded by others; there is no privacy or alone time.

It is evident that life on the Camino boils down to the bare necessities: eating, sleeping, and being surrounded by others. The fact that there are no responsibilities of individuals on the Camino, with exception to basic survival needs, there is more time to be devoted to individual or spiritual thought. For some, the time to think on the Camino is what draws them to it. One pilgrim mentions on his motivations, "I want to have more time to think to myself, to talk to myself."

### **The Changing Religion Effect on Changing Pilgrimage**

In my research and through the interviews I conducted, I found a surprisingly small amount of pilgrims whose motivations for the pilgrimage were strictly religious, if at all. Some did comment that they come from religious backgrounds but did not relate religion to their

experience on the Camino. During the interviews, I asked each pilgrim about their religious or spiritual background. Out of the twenty-one pilgrims I interviewed, ten explained their religion as atheist or said they didn't believe in God at all (48 percent), five explained their background as spiritual (24 percent), three as non-practicing Catholics (14 percent), one as a practicing Catholic, one as a Protestant (5 percent), and one as Orthodox (5 percent).

In addition to the small portion of individuals who self-identified themselves as religious, some commented on how religion should not be something to cause conflict in today's world. This shows how a religious solidarity is created along the Camino. One response exemplifies this well, "Before this (El Camino de Santiago), (I was a) very very strict atheist. I have had long debates with people who are religious, and in the past I would be very judgmental of them if they believed in God, and now I feel like most people believe in the same thing just using a different language or words. I would say I believe in nature, but someone may say but that is God. God is nature. I believe in love and nature." She explained to me how her views of others and of spirituality in general had changed along El Camino de Santiago. Again, it is seen that the ambiguity of pilgrimage allows for a relaxed atmosphere in which people are less afraid to explore religion and spirituality. One woman commented, "I think you are introduced to a lot more aspects of religion or spirituality than you might have been before." Here, it is seen that individuals along the way also recognize that the pilgrimage does support a variety of different religions and spiritualities. Another woman on the pilgrimage explained, "Religion is something that shouldn't be divided into names." She is referring to the idea that it doesn't really matter which religion one practices, expressing the ideal solidarity of different religions.

Out of the twenty-one pilgrims interviewed, only one stated his motivation was religious. When asked the question "why are you doing this pilgrimage?" One pilgrim responded, "both

because of my religion and because of holiday.” Moreover, religion was not the sole reason he stated for doing the pilgrimage. When the same individual was asked, “What is your motivation for doing this pilgrimage?” He answered with, “to experience the beautiful places and to try if it is possible for me to walk this way. It is pretty hard to walk 35km, you have to believe in yourself.” His answer here is similar to other pilgrims who are looking for a more individual experience. Again, we see the overlapping similarities of religion and spirituality on El Camino de Santiago. This helps to create a sense of solidarity and as I will discuss further, “*communitas*.”

Thirteen of the twenty-one pilgrims (62 percent), however, did relate their reasoning for doing the Camino to be “spiritual,” “a self-challenge,” “time to think,” or “for the physical and emotional experience.” Because of the ambiguity of pilgrimage, there is room for ambiguity in religion and spirituality along the Camino; it is a place where people come to find themselves or their spirituality, sometimes even unintentionally. One pilgrim explains, “I thought I would get much less out of it than I already have... (Before starting the Camino) I thought the expression ‘find yourself’ was stupid, but now I appreciate it.” A woman on the Camino, who considers herself a nonpracticing Catholic describes her experience, “The more you walk, the more tranquil your spirit feels, which affects your mind, and you are more truly yourself.” These two individuals both exemplify how their spirituality has changed over the course of the pilgrimage, which in this case, is a mere two weeks. It is evident that many people are emotionally touched along El Camino de Santiago, but different individuals describe this in different ways including spirituality, nature, and experience. An additional question that I asked pilgrims in Santiago was “How has doing El Camino de Santiago impacted you?” Of the eight pilgrims who were interviewed in Santiago, six explained in some way that the Camino had taught them something,

making a positive impact on their emotions. One consultant said “I have made some realizations about my life that I don’t need to be in as much of a rush of life things... At home it is easy to get caught up in these things.”

Along the Camino, during the liminal phase of the pilgrimage the idea of religion and spirituality are ambiguous and have some interchange, but once in Santiago, there is pressure to adhere to a specific category. After arrival in Santiago, pilgrims make a stop at the pilgrim’s office in order to receive their *Compostelana*, a document stating their completion of the Camino (at least the last 100km). When a pilgrim receives his or her *Compostelana* he or she is asked, “for what reason did you do the Camino?” The choices are “religious,” “religious and cultural” (spiritual), and “cultural” (these are in quotations because the category in which each pilgrim chooses is ambiguous and does not necessarily represent the attitude of the individuals for reasons I will explain). Those who claim religious or religious and cultural receive a *Compostelana* that is in Latin and surround by a border on a thick sheet of paper (appendix 4). On the contrary, those who claim solely cultural get a *Compostelana* that is a welcoming letter in front of an image of Saint James (appendix 4). The difference between the fancy “religious” or “religious and cultural” *Compostelana* and the plain “cultural” *Compostelana* exhibits how there are different religious pressures existing in Santiago that are not prevalent along the Camino where religiosity and spirituality are ambiguous. The comparison of these two documents shows a bias towards those who claim “religious” or “religious and cultural” motivations.

While in Padron, I was included in a conversation of pilgrims debating on which reason they were going to say for doing the pilgrimage. None of the four included in the conversation were going to say “religious;” the debate was between “religious and cultural” or solely “cultural.” A comment from one pilgrim was that he didn’t want the Catholic Church to be able



to count his pilgrimage in their statistics because he was not doing it for religious reasons. The others were leaning towards claiming religious and cultural because in their minds it signified spirituality as opposed to religious motivations. Nobody in this conversation was religious, but all were on the Camino to think or for spiritual reasons.

In August 2013, 40.7% of pilgrims arriving in Santiago claimed “religious” reasons, 52.9% claimed “religious and cultural” reasons, and 6.4% claimed “cultural” (The Pilgrimage to Santiago 2013). However, these categories do not give a good representation of the pilgrims on the Camino. First, the names given to the category are ambiguous and create confusion. For example, (from my earlier explanation) one pilgrim did not want to claim “religious and cultural” because he did not like the religious aspect, yet his motivations are spiritual. At the same time, the others were going to claim religious and cultural because they thought it represented spirituality more than the cultural option. In addition, the mere fact that the *Compostelanas* are so different not only may sway the reasoning a pilgrim claims, but also shows a bias by the pilgrim’s office. Because the *Compostelana* given for a “religious” or “religious and cultural” pilgrimage can be seen as fancier than the one for “cultural” motivations, it is evident that these “religious” reasons are favored by the pilgrim’s office and the institutions connected to it.

### **Motivations**

After two weeks on El Camino de Santiago, I had not seen one person stop at one of the many chapels along the way to pray. Some took photos, took a quick look, or stopped to get a stamp in their credential, but nothing more than that. In the interviews, only one of the twenty-one people interviewed noted that religion was a part of the reason for doing El Camino de Santiago. The movement away from organized religion to a more ambiguous state of

religiousness or spirituality (as discussed earlier) is implicated here. Even though some informants claimed to be of a religious background, they had reasons other than religious for doing the pilgrimage. Because less people are doing the pilgrimage for religious reasons, the question is ‘why are these pilgrims doing it?’

When pilgrims were asked, “What is your motivation for doing this pilgrimage?” many responded with similar answers pertaining to health, stress relief, time to think, or a break from everyday life. Not one respondent claimed that their sole motivation was related to the mainstream Christian religion. Again we see that the motivations pilgrims have support the idea of ambiguous religiosity along the pilgrimage.

Many pilgrims commented that their motivation for walking El Camino de Santiago was to challenge oneself or a time to get to know oneself better. Here, the shift from outward, mainstream religious motivations to more inward spiritual motivations is evident. One respondent answered the motivation question with “my motivation is the atmosphere created between the pilgrims and the nature.” There is a sense that the importance does not lie in reaching the destination of St. James’ remains, but instead the importance is put on the journey and experience. In fact, this same respondent’s destination was not Santiago but Finesterre, a city on the coast. One respondent even directly said during the interview, “...It’s not the destination but the journey.”

Another pilgrim responded with “...I want to have less stress. I want to have more time to think to myself, to talk to myself. I have many doubts now in Santiago. If I should move, what I should do. And that is my motivation, to figure out all of these doubts.” This pilgrim is seeking something very specific while on the Camino and is motivated to find these answers.

It is seen that pilgrims make the trek for many different reasons. A lot of these reasons have to do with self-change and introspection of oneself. Seven of the twenty-one pilgrims interviewed expressed a their motivations as some sort of self-change or introspection. Some examples of what I considered self-change or introspection were “I wanted to leave something behind me,” “to refresh my mind,” and “I want less stress.” Five pilgrims said one of their reasons was to challenge themselves physically, and four mentioned thinking as one of their reasons for doing the pilgrimage. Since this El Camino de Santiago is originally a Christian pilgrimage, it was a surprise to find that so few people explained their motivations for walking to the remains of Saint James as religious. Again, we see how the ambiguity of pilgrimage itself is allowing for individuals to explore religion and spirituality.

### **Expectation Compared to Reality on the Camino**

The relation between expectations and the reality lived on the Camino varies from person to person. Some people had come with grand expectations of revelations or self-growth while others say they came with no expectation at all. If the pilgrim came with a preconception that was not very specific, he or she may not have gotten out of the pilgrimage what they originally thought they were going to get, but they would still explain the experience in a positive way. For example, “Before I started, [I thought I would have] less pain, [and be] less tired. I thought it would be easier, and I thought the possibility of more introspection. Also, I thought I would be alone.” When this same pilgrim explained his actual experience on the Camino he said “It took a while to start getting the introspection that I was looking for. Also, I started from the beginning of the Camino sharing this experience with other pilgrims, not only walking but also feelings.” He said that along the way he learned, “The secret to live happy is to share.” Before beginning, this pilgrim was looking for introspection, to better understand himself. Along the way, however,

he learned more from his interactions with others. Hence, this pilgrim came with a different expectation than what his actual experience was, but nonetheless he found that his experiences on El Camino de Santiago impacted him in a positive way.

Those pilgrims who had very concrete expectations before beginning El Camino did not always get the answer they were looking for. One pilgrim came looking for “the answer, if it is me who has a problem or things around me.” His motivation for walking the Camino was to figure out his doubts. At the time (five days into the pilgrimage), when asked if his preconceptions had been met he said “...not an answer yet, nothing. I mean very good experiences, nice people...” Walking into the city of Santiago, he still explained to me that his doubts had not been figured out. He did not think the Camino had answered what he had expected it to, but it was still a worthwhile experience.

Some of the pilgrims who came with little or no expectation of introspection were surprised with their experience on the pilgrimage. One pilgrim whose expectations were in the beauty of the nature along the way explained his experience along El Camino as “pain in the feet, to disconnect with everything, but to understand what is important in life.” This pilgrim, although arriving with no clear expectations of his own, came out of the pilgrimage with a different idea of what is important in life, which requires a kind of introspection and change. Another pilgrim explained the difference from his expectations and his reality on the Camino as “I thought I would get much less out of it than I already have gotten. In all terms -- I expected to get to know people but not so deeply and so many people. [Before starting el Camino] I thought the expression ‘find yourself’ was stupid, but now I appreciate it.” This is a good example of someone who did not come with high expectations of self-growth but did experience it along the way. Another pilgrim explained that she did not have any expectations so she was not

disappointed, “I didn’t have great expectations, just to live something different, a different experience. I am not disappointed because I didn’t have expectations.” Another pilgrim who before starting the pilgrimage thought, “There was only one goal – Santiago.” In the end this same pilgrim said that she “met all of these nice people and I learned about myself, more than I thought.” Nine people of the twelve people (75 percent) who came expecting things other than inward revelations and reflections, ended up having the time and experiences to have some sort of self-change. The other three pilgrims who came expecting things other than inward reflections, did not explain their experience as having any self-reflections or self-revelations. For example, one consultant when asked what her expectations were said “It was my first pilgrimage, I don’t know what I expected.” Then when asked what she felt she was actually getting out of the pilgrimage said, “I don’t know. I just wanted to arrive.” In this example, the individual does not relate their prior expectations or their actual experience to any introspection. Although there are a few examples of pilgrims who did not relate their experience on El Camino to introspection, self-change, or self-growth, the majority of pilgrims did feel that the Camino impacted them in some way.

Overall, each pilgrim’s experience is different and each pilgrim articulates their experiences differently. It is evident that there is almost always introspection, self-change, or self-growth on El Camino de Santiago. Whether or not there is a preconception of self-change beforehand does not play a large role in the actual experience. When one comes to the Camino looking for something very specific, it is not necessarily found. Despite the expectation a pilgrim has for their own journey along The Way, he or she will explain their experience as meaningful.

### **The Community on the Camino**

The community that is formed along El Camino de Santiago plays a direct role in the construction of pilgrimage. It is said that one will never walk alone on El Camino de Santiago even if you come alone. Through my study I saw incredible acts of kindness, which has an effect on the community formed. Some examples of acts of kindness on El Camino include the women in Borres that invited us into her backyard for a barbeque, the physical therapist who looked at a fellow pilgrim's bum ankle, and a couple who lives on a difficult pass of the Camino gave water out to pilgrims. These are just a few examples of the many acts of kindness and generosity that is seen along El Camino. The community formed then perpetuates itself; the acts of kindness are passed on from one pilgrim to the next. Pilgrimage can be seen as a rite of passage with the three phases of separation, liminality, and aggregation. The community that is formed along EL Camino supports Victor Turner's idea of 'communitas' during the liminal phase of a rite of passage.

The simple fact that almost all pilgrims have the same goal, Santiago de Compostela, a sense of community is created between people. Some common themes in pilgrims' answers when asked about the impact on community were "helpfulness," "good atmosphere," "respect," "generosity," and "love." One pilgrim explains his perception of the community, "On the Camino, everyone shows their good side and that creates a good atmosphere. It is a little magical; it is difficult or almost impossible to find this in our everyday life." This pilgrim notices how there is something different about the bonds formed within the pilgrim community. This, Victor Turner would explain as the formation of 'communitas.'

The phrase "buen camino," which is often used between pilgrims, means "good walk," yet it signifies much more than that. Pilgrims say "buen camino" for a greeting, a farewell, and to

wish the other the best of luck on the remainder of their journey. Among pilgrims, this phrase signifies motivation, companionship, and solidarity all in one. This seemingly simple phrase is used to unite and create comradery and community between pilgrims.

When staying in large cities (similar to cities along El Camino Francés), one would expect a larger pilgrim community, yet the reality was much different. For example, in Lugo and Melide (the largest hostels on the Camino Primitivo, with around 100 beds), after arriving in the hostel very few pilgrims would be seen during the evening. After a rest, pilgrims go out to explore on their own in the larger cities because there are so many places to go. Compared to the smaller cities, pilgrims don't have nearly as many options and therefore spend more time together. For example, in San Román (a small village with only one café/grocery), almost all the pilgrims from both the public and private hostels went to the one bar in the town together for the evening. This is one example in which we see how the smaller cities, hostels, and the Camino Primitivo in general forces pilgrims to interact and spend time with one another.

Not only are the hostels smaller on el Camino Primitivo, but the towns which pilgrims pass are also smaller. A few of the towns have very limited options for food. An example is the tiny town of Borres, which had only one bar and no grocery. The women who owned the bar allowed the pilgrim group to use her backyard for a barbeque. Three pilgrim men went to the next town by taxi, solely to buy food and wine for the group's barbeque. Everyone at the hostel was invited, and almost everyone came. In order to get to the back yard, we had to walk through their garage and barn. It almost seems unnatural that someone would open up their home to people they had just met, but here is the generosity of the Camino. This night was special; everyone was together laughing, sharing, and conversing while just having a good time. Everyone knew the next day ahead would be a long and hard one, the hardest day's walk of the

Camino Primitivo. In the guidebook I used, it claims this day “involves a significant ascent and ranks among the pilgrimage’s most strenuous stages; it also has the potential to be one of the most memorable... while this is one of the most demanding walks on any camino, made more so by the lack of resources, it is strikingly beautiful with expansive mountain vistas unfolding in all directions” (Perazzoli and Whitson, 2012, pg. 234). This night on the El Camino Primitivo exhibits people coming together, sharing experiences, and sharing a meal in preparation for a long day ahead. The exclusion in Borres in combination with the difficult walk ahead created special bonds and relationships between the pilgrims.

The meal in Borres is just one example of many meals shared along El Camino. It is common to cook meals with other pilgrims even if you had just met them that day. In Bercuedo, a group of five of us pooled our money together, shopped for, and cooked *tortilla patata* for lunch. For dinner we joined with three others to cook a pasta dish. In Grandas de Salime, a large group of us had *arroz cubano*. On yet another night in San Román, everyone in the hostel of twelve beds ate a pasta meal together. The examples of shared meals along el Camino are endless (appendix 5). Even when the meals were not prepared together, people offered one another food when it was necessary. Shared meals have been proven to unite and foster community within families. “This opportunity to come together around a meal and focus on each other as individuals is essential to building relationships. During this time, members frequently share information of common interest or concern... The most valuable occurrence during the family meal is not often the meal at all but rather the opportunity to interact, strengthen bonds, and build relationships” (Watland, Hallenbeck and Kresse, 2008). From previous studies, it is evident that sharing meals has a positive effect on the fostering of community and relationship



ties, which is seen throughout the journey on El Camino de Santiago (specifically along the primitive way).

Others have alluded to pilgrimage putting everyone on the same socioeconomic level, which allows for a bond to be built within the pilgrim community. Economically, we are all one on the Camino; people can come with riches or with nothing, but on the Camino, all pilgrims stay in the same *albergues*, with the same flies, and the same stink. During the day each pilgrim climbs the same mountains and has hardships. The equal socioeconomic levels aid in the formation of ‘*communitas*’ during pilgrimage.

### **Publicity of the Camino by Popular Authors**

As noted earlier, the effect on the popularity of pilgrimage by authors is visible. When I asked how informants had heard about El Camino de Santiago, a German man responded with “I read the book from Hape Kerkeling and Paulo Coelho.” Another pilgrim from Germany explains, “A comedian from Germany wrote about his experience. That is actually how I heard about it.” One pilgrim explained how she heard about the Camino as watching the film, The Way. Along with pop culture in the form of films and books, publicity is coming from television and high school Spanish classes. While many pilgrims heard about El Camino de Santiago through some form of mass media, others said they had a friend or a family member who had previously done the pilgrimage and recommended that they do it “People who have done the Camino recommended me to do it” Another pilgrim said that “My sister did it three years ago” encouraging her to do it as well. The popularity of pilgrimage is not only being influenced by pop culture but is also perpetuating itself through family and friendship bonds.

### **The Differences of the Different Routes of the Camino**

In the current literature, there is a high focus on El Camino de Santiago Francés compared to the other routes. Considering it is the most popular (with 70% of all pilgrims completing the Francés in 2012), it is not a surprise that the Francés is studied most heavily, but with the growing pilgrim community it is important to also take the other routes in to consideration (Informe Estadístico Año Santa 2012). Studying the more obscure routes may lead to different or similar conclusions, either leading to a better understanding of pilgrimage in general.

On my first day on the Camino, somebody mentioned to me that different routes of El Camino de Santiago are each very different from one another. The group of three I walked with on the first day had actually all met on their first pilgrimage on El Camino Francés. They explained to me that El Camino Francés is a “tourist attraction;” there are too many people, it is too popular, and that the primitive and other routes of the north are better because of this. They believe that the Camino is a pilgrimage of the self and therefore all the finesse simply causes distractions. From this day on, I began to note differences between Caminos and ask those who had also done El Camino Francés what they perceived the differences to be. Although the destination is the same for all pilgrims on the way to Santiago, “the way” may be very different in regards to culture and community depending on the route traveled: Francés, Primitivo, Coastal, Portuguese. The guidebook I used even noted some differences once the pilgrims of the northern routes join that of the Francés, “Today you join the Camino Francés. Be prepared for some major changes – the number of pilgrims will increase dramatically, there are *albergues* and provisions in nearly every village, and all route-finding difficulties will become a thing of the past” (Perazzoli and Whitson, 2012, pg. 263).

One question I began asking was “why did you chose to do El Camino Primitivo and not one of the other routes?” Some answers included “More nature and less roads,” “more natural, less crowded, and more original,” and “I prefer el Camino that has more beautiful landscapes. These views motivate me to walk.” Here, it is evident that a certain type of pilgrim is drawn to the Camino Primitivo, one who is looking for a bit more natural and original experience. Because the Camino Francés has become much more popular, there is a stronger “tourist” feeling to it, as often explained by others. As my guidebook implies, on the Camino Primitivo it is often hard to find your way with limited signs, in the form of yellow arrows or seashells, marking your way (appendix 5). On the other hand, it is nearly impossible to get lost on El Camino Francés because you walk in a line of never ending pilgrims.

One pilgrim compares the Camino Primitivo and the Camino Francés, “The energy is different, and the pilgrims are different. The worst thing is that there are too many people (on Francés)... (El Camino Francés) may be a bit more spiritual but too many people” Again, I think it is important to analyze the differences between the communities on the different routes. Those who have walked multiple routes, explain their experiences on the different routes as different in regard to people and spirituality.

The community that is formed is exemplified in the interdependence of pilgrims seen in hostels on the Camino Primitivo. Compared to other Caminos, the primitivo has fewer hostels with fewer beds. An average hostel along the Camino Primitivo would have between 12 and 25 beds (with the exception of Lugo with 44 beds and Melide with 156 beds) compared to the Francés, which would have anywhere from 20 to 100 beds and sometimes even more in the larger cities (Perazzoli and Whitson, 2012). Because there are fewer people staying in each hostel on any given night along the Camino Primitivo, there is a better chance of getting to know

other pilgrims and forming stronger bonds with them than on the Francés. One pilgrim explains, “it appears that the people of the primitive are closer to each other because we cook together, talk together, stay together. It is counterintuitive because the more people that are on the Camino, the less they know each other.” People on the Camino Primitivo are forced to be in very close proximity with fewer people around, which creates a different atmosphere. The idea of different communities being formed on different routes is something that should be further studied to better understand pilgrimage.

The Camino Primitivo joins the Camino Francés and the Camino del Norte in Melide. Here there is a change seen in the attitudes of people on The Way. One pilgrim comments on the difference between their experience on the Camino Primitivo and the Camino Francés “[On the Primitivo every second person is from Spain. On Francés, every second person is international.” There is a difference in the community of people on the primitive way compared to those on the overall Camino. It is evident that different Caminos attract different kinds of pilgrims on both a cultural and religious basis. To fully explore this phenomenon cross studies should be done of the different routes.

In addition, the last 100km is all that needs to be completed in order to receive a *compostellana* (formal document stating that the pilgrimage was completed). Starting in Lugo (100 km from Santiago), there are many more pilgrims on the route to Santiago because of this stipulation. Here, there is also a change in attitude. Once we were within 100km of Santiago, many people who had just begun walking would take a taxi to cut down on some of the kilometers needed to walk. Others would have their backpacks transported to the next town for them. Although the office of pilgrims does not consider this cheating, pilgrims who walk every step of the way with their backpack on see taking a taxi or sending your bags to the next town as

cheapen the meaning of pilgrimage. The majority of the pilgrims who began many kilometers before, walked each and every step of the way, and carried their belongings with them were angered that these new pilgrims even called themselves pilgrims. Taking a taxi or sending your belongings to the next village is something that is seen as cheapening pilgrimage, turning it into tourism and not a true pilgrimage. One pilgrim who walked the Camino Primitivo commented on those pilgrims just joining the way “They don’t take the Camino seriously, like in the traditional way. Like taking a taxi if you are tired, stopping in the bars they see.” Another pilgrim from the Camino Primitivo said, “They don’t have respect for the people who may be more tired or walked more. They ignore that there are other people doing other ways or stages” referring to a group of pilgrims who cut in line at a hostel. The hostels only have limited space, which is first come first serve. At this hostel, in Melide a small argument broke out because some pilgrims cut in line, thus taking the place of others who had reached the hostel before them. Once the routes join, there is some hostility felt by those of the Primitivo towards pilgrims from the other routes. A pilgrim from the Camino Primitivo said, “They (pilgrims from the other ways) just stay with their small groups. They are not interested in exchanging cultures with others because they are in their bubble.” It is evident that the people of the Primitivo route are frustrated by those of other routes because, to them, the others are not taking pilgrimage seriously.

Even upon arrival in Santiago, it is evident that there is something that sets apart pilgrims from different routes. As three pilgrims and I arrived in front of the Cathedral of Santiago from El Camino Primitivo, we were greeted with others who also walked the Camino Primitivo but had arrived a day earlier. Chanting “primitivo, primitivo!” the group was proud of their accomplishment and celebrated the bond between those they had met along the way. Before

departing ways, the pilgrims from the Camino Primitivo arranged to meet up for dinner and drinks to celebrate together their accomplishment.

### **Conclusion and Future Study**

The community that is formed on El Camino de Santiago is related to Victor Turner's "communitas." Pilgrimage can be seen as a rite of passage with a separation, liminal, and aggregation phase. The liminal phase of pilgrimage is the whole journey, from the time the pilgrim begins their passage until arriving in Santiago, the individual is betwixt and between. The liminal phase allows for a special kind of community to be formed between pilgrims, which can be explained as "communitas," "the state of oneness and unity that neophytes living outside the norms and fixed categories of a social system share during liminal periods" (Turner, 2012, pg. 169). I argue that in the pilgrimage of El Camino de Santiago a sense of "communitas" is achieved.

El Camino de Santiago is made up of multiple pilgrimage routes that begin throughout Europe. The most popular and most studied route is El Camino Francés, but it is important to study the different routes to explore potential differences in the pilgrim's experience. Different routes attract different types of pilgrims who are searching for different things both spiritually and personally. For example, people on the Camino Primitivo often mentioned reasons for choosing El Camino Primitivo such as, being closer to nature, being further from the tourism aspects of the Camino, and/or because it is more of a challenge with the steep elevation changes and long days. These people were looking at the Camino as a chance to have some self-reflection whilst surrounded by the natural environment. On the other hand, pilgrims who chose to do the Camino Francés did so because "of the movie *The Way*," "it was kinda the most popular one," and "it is the main one." Pilgrims on the Francés seem to have chosen it because of its

popularity. It is important to note that there are differences in the reasons why pilgrims chose a certain route, which should be studied further by comparing and contrasting these pilgrimages. Along with why pilgrims chose a specific route over another, the differences and similarities of the communities formed along the Camino should also be studied.

Pilgrimage has been important throughout time and will continue to be with its continually increasing popularity. It is apparent that there is a connection between the increase in pilgrimage and the movement towards spirituality. The ambiguity along this pilgrimage allows for individuals to explore their faith in the blurred lines of religion and spirituality. The motivations pilgrims have to do El Camino de Santiago vary but are often related to a kind of self-growth or spirituality as opposed to religious motivations. Even those pilgrims who do have a religious background often do not relate their motivations to walk El Camino de Santiago to their religion. The difference between a pilgrim's expectation and actual experience on the Camino varies between individuals, but it is overall evident that people explain their experience as having a positive impact on themselves.

El Camino de Santiago, a pilgrimage dating back to the ninth century, has maintained and even expanded its popularity. It is important to understand the changes undergoing in relation to pilgrimage and how they correlate to the current sociocultural situation. The fieldwork discussed in this article is only a brief introduction on the research that can be done on El Camino de Santiago. I suggest a study that is able to compare and contrast the different routes of El Camino de Santiago to get a better understanding of this particular pilgrimage as a whole. In addition, it is important to consider the changing religiosity and spirituality along El Camino de Santiago in relation to the different routes of El Camino.

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**Appendix 1: Interview Questions**

1. Why are you doing this pilgrimage?
2. What is your motivation for making this pilgrimage?
3. How did you hear about El Camino de Santiago?
4. What is your religious/spiritual background?
5. Where did you start your pilgrimage?
6. Before starting El Camino de Santiago, what did you think you would get out of it?
7. Now, on el Camino, what do you feel you are getting out of it?
8. What impact have you seen from El Camino de Santiago on individuals?
9. What impact have you seen from El Camino de Santiago on the community?
10. Have you noticed any relationship of this pilgrimage to your own emotions, spirituality, and/or culture?
11. In what ways has your spirituality changed or been impacted while on El Camino de Santiago?
12. Have you gotten tired of doing El Camino de Santiago?
13. Have you felt like giving up? Why/Why not? If yes, why keep going?
14. (For pilgrims in Santiago) How has doing El Camino de Santiago impacted you?
15. (For pilgrims on El Camino Primitivo) Why did you choose to do El Camino Primitivo and not the others?
16. Have you done other pilgrimages? Which?
17. (For pilgrims who have walked multiple routes) What differences (if any) have you noticed between the different Camino routes?

Appendix 2: Maps of the Routes of El Camino de Santiago



Figure 1 Map of all Camino de Santiago routes throughout Europe from the pilgrim’s credential



Figure 2 Map of the main pilgrimage routes in Spain. Important to note Camino Frances and Camino Primitivo. Photo retrieved from [http://www.santiago-compostela.net/primitivo/index\\_pr\\_en.html](http://www.santiago-compostela.net/primitivo/index_pr_en.html)



### Appendix 3: Pilgrim's Credential

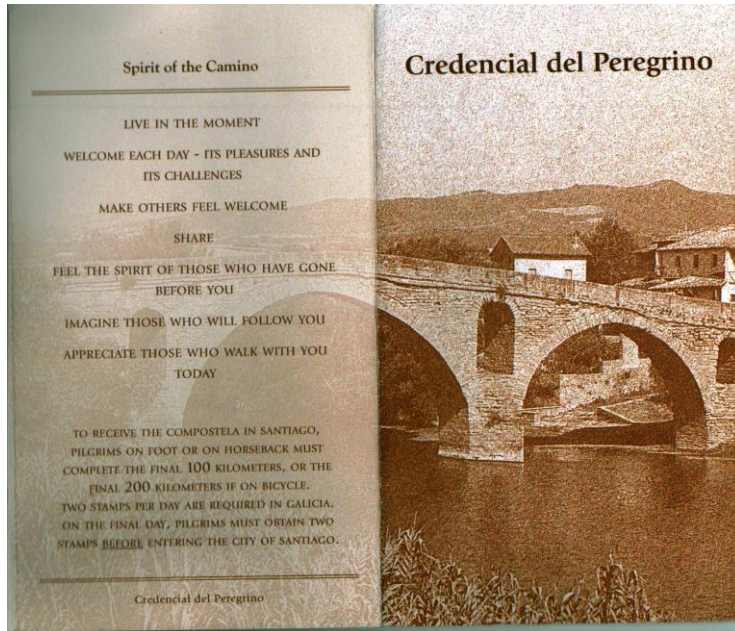


Figure 3 Pilgrim's credential. This was my credential, which allowed me to stay in *albergues*.



Figure 4 The stamps on my pilgrim's credential. In each *albergue* a pilgrim stays at he or she gets his credential stamped. In order to received a *Compostelana*, a pilgrim must get at least two stamps everyday for the last 100km. Stamps can be found in cafés, bars, and *albergues*.

## Appendix 4: Compostelanas



**Figure 5** The *Compostelana* I received upon completion of the Camino. This acts as an example of the “religious and cultural” *Compostelana*, which is written in the cursive type, in Latin, and surround by a fancy border.



**Figure 6** This is an example of the “cultural” *Compostelana*. Retrieved from <http://fernandopugaiglesias.blogspot.com/2010/10/diplomas.html>

**Appendix 5: Photos**

**Figure 7** Signs in the form of yellow arrows and or seashells point the direction of El Camino de Santiago. On El Camino Primitivo they are sometimes hard to find because there is often much time between the signs.



**Figure 8** Pilgrims line up with their bags waiting to enter in the *albergue* in Melide.



**Figure 9** Pilgrims who did not know each other the day before gather to make dinner.