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**Sounding Tradition:
Colombian *gaita* music and investment in the discourse of tradition**

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by

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Report

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at Austin

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Master of Music

The University of Texas at Austin

December 2012

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank two professors in the Department of Ethnomusicology at the University of Texas at Austin, my advisor Dr. Robin Moore and Dr. Sonia Seeman, for their patience, thoughtful feedback and ongoing mentoring in countless ways. Dr. Charles Hale at the Lozano Long Institute of Latin American Studies also helped secure funding for this project via a Tinker Foundation Summer Research Fellowship, and I am thankful to him and the Foundation. There are countless people in Colombia to whom I am indebted, but in particular Urián Sarmiento, Fredys Arrieta, Jorge Nieves Oviedo, Nicolás Hernández, Juancho Nieves and Elber Álvarez shared their expertise, music, and even their homes with me with astounding generosity.

Abstract

Sounding Tradition: Colombian *gaita* music and investment in the discourse of tradition

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2012

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Cumbia is arguably Colombia's best-known musical export. This popular dance music from the country's north coast is today ubiquitous throughout Latin America, yet surprisingly little has been written about it. This report examines cumbia in its most traditional setting, the *conjunto de gaitas*, an ensemble featuring flutes of indigenous origin and Afro-Colombian drums. Musicians and scholars alike have interpreted the ensemble and its repertoire as a site for preserving tradition and an audible symbol of how three distinct racial groups—black, white, and indigenous—combined to form the Colombian nation. This report examines the investment in a discourse of tradition and explores how this discourse has served to sound a marginalized Colombian identity while simultaneously limiting its place within the national imaginary. After an introduction that lays out theoretical literature on tradition, race, and place, I consider three instances where the discourse of tradition has prominently shaped *gaita* music. First, I turn to Los Gaiteros de San Jacinto, the most successful and archetypal *conjunto de gaitas*. The group's history, from its beginning as a part of a staged folklore troupe for national and

international tours to its recent Grammy award win, is a prime example of how the very appeal to traditionalism that garnered the group's success has also been its greatest limitation. Second, I turn to scholarly literature on gaitas, comparing work from the mid-20th century and the early 21st. Despite notable differences between these two historiographical moments, especially in representations of the coast, appeals to tradition remain the central narrative, delimiting alternative interpretations of race and region. A final chapter offers three case studies on how different musicians have taken gaita tradition as a point of departure. From the development of gaitas in Western tuning by Juancho Nieves and Elber Álvarez, to Carlos Vives's use of gaitas in his pop-vallenato musical blend, and lastly to the "progressive folklore" of experimental group Curupira, I explore how these different trajectories complicate notions of tradition.

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CHAPTER 1: Introduction

This research project began as an archaeology of *cumbia*, a music and dance genre from Colombia that became ubiquitous throughout Latin America in the second half of the twentieth century. My interest in cumbia comes from the resonance between my personal story as a Colombian immigrant in the United States and the history of cumbia as a migrating genre. It also comes from the realization that despite cumbia's large and diverse audience and the potential for cumbia research to speak to a variety of issues, there is a relative dearth of scholarship on it. The history of cumbia in Colombia is understudied, reduced to descriptions of the early genre as either lost in a distant historical past or as the antecedent to related forms such as *vallenato* or *porro*. Whether for lack of historical evidence or because of its relative absence in the contemporary Colombian soundscape, the history of cumbia remains largely the domain of myth and speculation. Similarly, cumbia's routes from the Caribbean coast of Colombia (*la costa*) to the country's interior, and from there to Mexico and much of the rest of Latin America are also understudied. The fascinating transnational circuits that brought cumbia abroad surely deserve book-length studies, yet I only know of one article and one book chapter that address this topic.¹

Today, the term 'cumbia' refers to a wide range of music including accordion music from Mexico, electric guitar music of urban migrants in Lima, and electronic dance music from New York. The adaptability of cumbia to varied geographical, class-based, and stylistic contexts fits a triumphant narrative that celebrates local difference in a context of globalization. Such narratives can, sometimes intentionally, eclipse other narratives in which nationalist and commercial interests appropriate, codify, and

¹ See Fernández L'Hoeste (2007) and Pacini Hernández (2010). Fernandez-L'Hoeste has a forthcoming

homogenize musical practices. Steven Feld uses this language of ‘celebratory’ and ‘anxious’ narratives specifically with respect to world music, although I also find the terms useful to frame other transnational music practices, such as cumbia.² Rather than emphasize one type of narrative over the other, I situate my work alongside Feld and other scholars of popular music who focus instead on the tension between these seemingly opposing yet simultaneously present counter-narratives.

In this master’s project, I draw attention primarily to the history of cumbia in Colombia through the lens of the *gaita*. The *gaita*, a long vertical flute of indigenous origin, made from a cactus stalk, beeswax, and a duck quill, has come to represent cumbia tradition nationally. The *gaita* presents a valuable point of entry into cumbia research because it highlights several contradictions. Despite the fact that musicians and scholars place *gaita* music at the very heart of cumbia traditions, its circulation has always been limited. At the very moment when cumbia became popular outside of la costa thanks to big bands and commercial recordings, *gaita* musicians (*gaiteros*) were systematically overlooked as too traditional or niche. Even today, as the sound of the *gaita* has slowly made its way onto commercial and internationally acclaimed recordings, the most accomplished *gaiteros* are not widely recognized and struggle to make a living. The contrast between the *gaita*’s central symbolic role and its current marginalization reveals how music can reproduce ideologies of race, ethnicity and region that inform the discourse of Colombian nationalism.

² Feld, 152.

TRADITION, RACE AND PLACE

In order to understand how the gaita came to inhabit this space of contradictions, I frame my analysis around the concept of ‘tradition’. One need look no further than the adjectives that musicians and scholars alike use to describe gaita music-- folk, authentic, roots, original, real, true, indigenous, autochthonous--in order to see how heavily invested they are in the idea of tradition. Tradition is not much in vogue within ethnomusicology today, since most of the important cultural and social theory on the subject dates from the 1970s and 1980s, and the field has more or less come to some consensus. Various scholars sought to understand tradition within Clifford Geertz’s framework of culture as a semiotic web of symbols. The most notable of these were perhaps Eric Hobsbawm and Terrence Ranger who coined the term ‘invented tradition’ to suggest that certain rituals and practices are symbolically linked to the distant past when in fact they might be quite recent, often as part of efforts to create a national imaginary.³ Despite their influence, Hobsbawm and Ranger did not go so far as to say that all traditions are invented. They distinguished between traditions, typified by claims to invariance, and ‘customs’, which were subject to change and accommodation over time. More significantly they allowed that some traditions were ‘genuine’, with actual historical continuities that meant they were neither “revived nor invented.”⁴

Hobsbawm and Ranger’s caveats to the idea of ‘invented tradition’ came under some criticism, and only a year later Richard Handler and Jocelyn Linnekin argued that traditions were neither ‘genuine’ nor ‘spurious’, but rather “must be understood as a wholly symbolic construction.”⁵ Although this remains the prevailing view today, I suggest that we can read productively in the difference between the two views.

³ Hobsbawm and Ranger, 8.

⁴ Ibid, 8.

⁵ Handler and Linnekin, 84.

Hobsbawm and Ranger's allowances speak to the tension between divergent understandings of tradition as a tool for cultural hegemony or tradition as a vehicle for social agency. This tension addresses a key issue implicit in the notion of invented traditions, namely who gets to do the inventing, and thus raises two important sets of questions. One set revolves around the ways traditions make manifest or reproduce power inequalities in society, a particularly salient issue in postcolonial contexts. The other set of questions puts a mirror up to the academy and implicates scholarly representations in the invention of tradition. Here I find Karl Miller's work valuable for its focus on how the "folkloric paradigm" of early 20th century U.S. anthropologists participated in the creation and normalization of traditional categories such as "black music" and "white music".⁶ For both of these reasons, I contend that tradition as an area of study remains a constructive space for exploring issues of agency, power, and representation.

David Coplan, writing specifically about the role of tradition in ethnomusicology, identifies an inherent and "central contradiction [that] revolves around the necessarily social and historical origins of tradition, in opposition to its status in both native and scholarly discourse as something immutable, a structure of historical culture fundamentally immune to history."⁷ This echoes Handler and Linnekin's conclusions but avoids the potentially inflammatory language of 'inventing' or 'constructing' social practice, highlighting instead the ways in which the discourse of tradition is embedded and contingent to history. Traditions are always both invented and genuine, culturally created yet with real meaning and power in the present. Coplan's approach is fruitful

⁶ Miller, 91.

⁷ Coplan, 36.

because it articulates the importance of considering tradition a site of interdisciplinary “exchange among anthropologists, ethnomusicologists, and historians.”⁸

The existing scholarly literature on gaitas invokes tradition so frequently as to naturalize the link between the instrument and the idea of its ancient, unbroken cultural practice. This scholarship fails to interrogate the meaning or importance of tradition as a concept. At the same time, gaita music itself is laden with references to tradition, from lyrical content to instrument making practices, to performers’ attire. So while examining tradition in gaita helps focus my analysis on discourse and history, it also helps to keep that analysis closely grounded in musical practice.

As Hobsbawm and Ranger pointed out, the discourse of tradition does not function alone, usually appearing as part of larger ideological projects. Claims to tradition are often implicitly value-laden claims aimed not just at describing the past but also at justifying the present and prescribing the future. The cultural production of tradition, symbolic and historically embedded, participates in multiple ideological projects simultaneously, but this report will preoccupy itself primarily with the way gaita tradition, most often described in terms of folklore, functions in the project of racial-ethnic order crucial to Colombian national identity. It is impossible to isolate any ideological project from related projects that structure society along lines of gender, class, region, citizenship, etc. I do not ignore these other categories, but I attend primarily to race and ethnicity because they are in the foreground of the music and existing scholarship on gaita. If there is a commitment to a discourse of tradition, it is a commitment to an explicitly racialized tradition.

⁸ Ibid, 47.

I borrow the language of ideological projects, and specifically of racial projects, from the work of sociologists Michael Omi and Howard Winant whose work in the 1980s on racial formation remains foundational for understanding race. They argue that race, or perhaps more appropriately the process of racial formation, emerges from the “linkage between structure and representation.”⁹ Race is neither exclusively embedded in social structures nor is it solely the product of symbolic cultural representations, but rather manifests itself in the tense ground where these two realms intersect. I want to draw attention to two factors that arise from this. First, race is emergent, never fixed, always the product of symbolic relationships in society. Second, those symbolic relationships between structures and representations result from what Omi and Winant call “racial projects” that both reflect current racial dynamics and aim to “reorganize and redistribute resources along particular racial lines.”¹⁰ There is a parallelism between the dual descriptive-prescriptive nature of racial projects and that of the discourse of tradition, and I suggest that they work in tandem. Appeals to tradition perpetuate a particular racial order, and vice versa.

Omi and Winant’s work on racial formation is in line with postmodern scholarship that emphasizes the socially constructed nature of categories such as race, gender, or class. Ethnicity is another category that functions in similar ways, although the differences between race and ethnicity are revealing. Ostensibly, race implies phenotypical difference while ethnicity implies cultural difference, but examining the actual use and function of these terms reveals their contingency. Omi and Winant devote a whole chapter to exploring the historical prominence of the “ethnicity paradigm” in the US, situating it in the lineage of earlier social Darwinist ideas and tracing it forward to

⁹ Omi and Winant, 56.

¹⁰ Ibid, 55.

the present day.¹¹ In this paradigm, race functions as one of several distinctions, along with class and nation, that determines ethnicity. However, in the U.S. race comes to eclipse not only class or national origin, but also ethnicity itself, as the principal category of distinction. Race is never completely divorced from ethnicity, but the earlier focus on ethnicity gives way to a fixation on the instability and political significance of race. After all, despite the fact that ethnic and racial formations presumably work in similar ways, Omi and Winant present a theory of racial, not ethnic, formation.

If racial formation theory lacks a more integrated discussion of race and ethnicity, it is partly because the polarized racial context of the post-civil rights U.S. is not conducive to exploring the messy interaction between the two concepts. The work of Peter Wade is of use here for its approach to race and ethnicity specifically in the context of Latin America and Colombia. If ethnicity in the U.S. functions for the most part as a category separate from race, in Colombia the two terms remain much more tightly interconnected. Consider a recent government report that lists four main categories of ethnic diversity: mestizo, indigenous, Afro-Colombian, and Rom.¹² If mestizo, usually defined as “of mixed race,” is an ethnicity, how do we differentiate between the two concepts? Is Afro-Colombian both a racial and ethnic category? Does the same apply for the category “white,” and if so, why is it not listed in the report? Rather than give primacy to either race or ethnicity, Wade suggests keeping the two terms distinct by considering the “*particular history* by which these identifications come to have the force they do.”¹³ His attention to history grounds discussions of race and ethnicity in local conditions, recognizing that because both race and ethnicity are constructed their

¹¹ Ibid, 22.

¹² Instituto Geográfico Agustín Codazzi, “Diversidad Étnica.”

¹³ Wade, *Race and Ethnicity in Latin America*, 20.

meanings will necessarily vary from each other and from place to place; still, they are not completely independent. Both race and ethnicity invoke discourses of origins, a spatial and cultural geography, a sense of historical transmission, and a politics of the body, but they do so in ways that shift in space and time. I contend that this framework, where both concepts are unmoored yet constantly in play, more accurately captures the Colombian context.

In order to bring tradition, race and ethnicity into that context, I draw from Wade's concept of "cultural topography" as a significant dimension of analysis. He suggests that:

"To make sense of Colombia, the visitor, or the reader, must acquire a sense of place... It is not simply a matter of knowing where you are going – up, down, backwards, forwards – on the official map but also of sensing your way across the almost tactile, palpable terrain of the coastal smell of dried fish or the Andean smell of pine trees, the feel of tropical heat or rarified mountain air, the brash sound of Caribbean salsa or the gentle guitar melodies of the interior of the country, the sight of African black or Spanish swarthy white."¹⁴

Florid language aside, Wade's work calls attention to the ways in which cultural difference is literally mapped onto Colombia's landscape. At the level of sensory experience, sounds and smells function as symbols of region and they form and inform notions of race and ethnicity. This symbolic mapping of culture, race, and place is so prevalent that it even occurs on the official map of cultural regions produced by the Instituto Geográfico Agustín Codazzi, or IGAC, the nation's central geographic authority.¹⁵ The map lists nine color-coded cultural regions and assigns each to one of three "anthropological origins" – Hispano-American, Amerindian, or Afro-American. Predominantly indigenous regions are further differentiated by thin diagonal lines. Rather

¹⁴ Wade, *Blackness and Race Mixture: The Dynamics of Racial Identity in Colombia*, 51.

¹⁵ Instituto Geográfico Agustín Codazzi, "Regiones Culturales."

than draw attention to the ways in which this mapping problematically and simplistically collapses race into place, for example through the confounding designation of the Caribbean region as “Hispano-American,” for now I simply want to highlight the ways in which geographic space becomes a way to parse racial and ethnic difference.

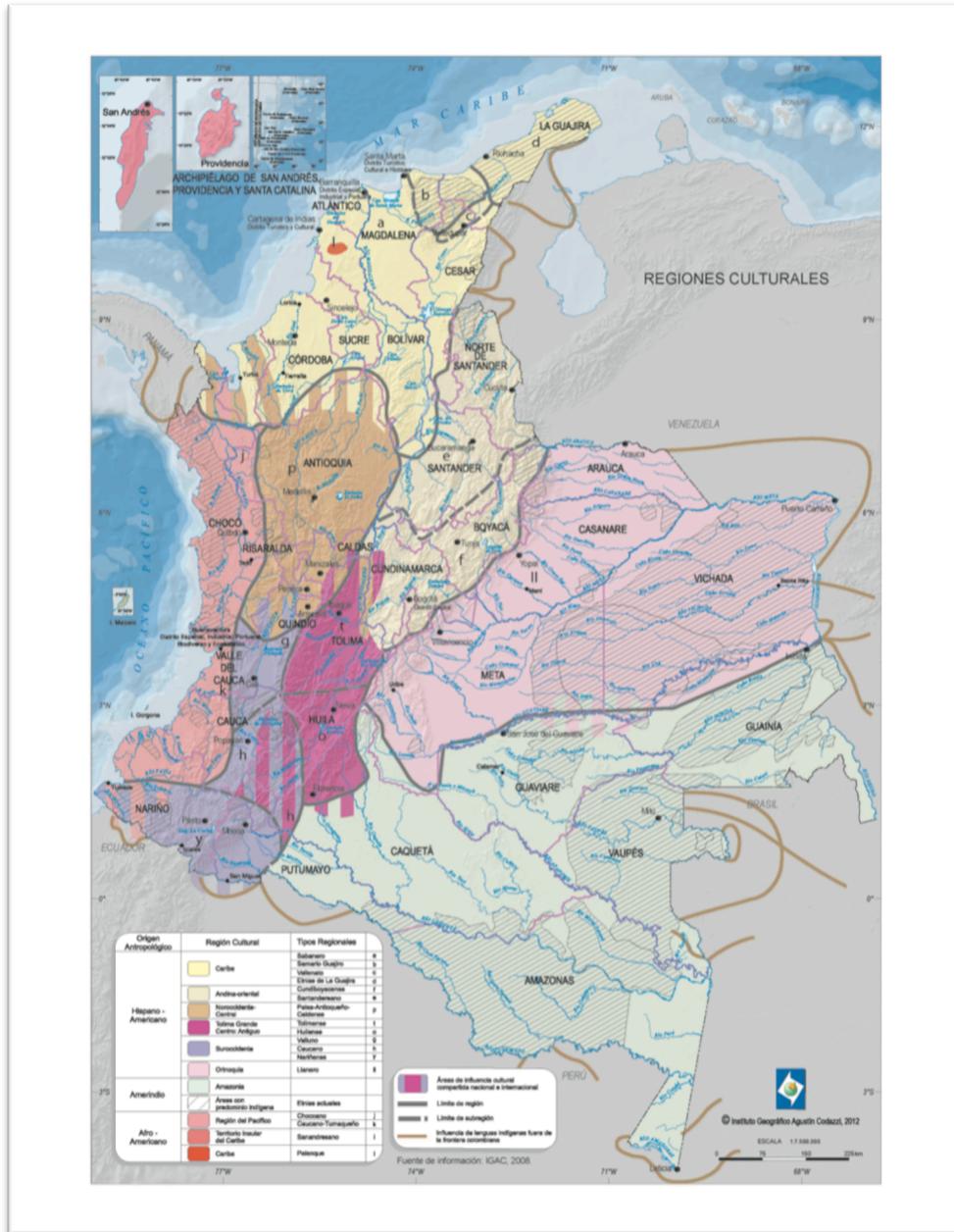


Figure 1.1: Colombia Cultural Regions map. Source: IGAC, 2012.

GAITA IN LA COSTA

To situate the gaita in this landscape, I will start at the national level and zoom in. Colombia is usually divided into six main geographic regions: central Andean highlands,

Caribbean coast to the north, vast plains to the east, Amazon jungle to the south, Pacific coast to the west, and a handful of islands in the Pacific and Caribbean. Another official IGAC map shows these geographic divisions, and when taken together with the maps cited above that plot cultural regions and ethnic diversity, they reinforce a national historical narrative of mestizaje and diversity, of sameness and difference, of center and periphery.¹⁶ The Caribbean region is crucial in this discourse because of its role as a historical crossroads: the initial site of the colonial encounter between the Spanish and various indigenous groups, a port of entry for enslaved Africans bound for the rest of the country and the continent, the first battleground in the independence wars, an important cultural gateway between the country’s political and economic center and the rest of the world, and most recently Colombia’s tourist destination par excellence. It is no exaggeration to say that la costa figures centrally in the history of Colombia, from the pre-colonial past through today.

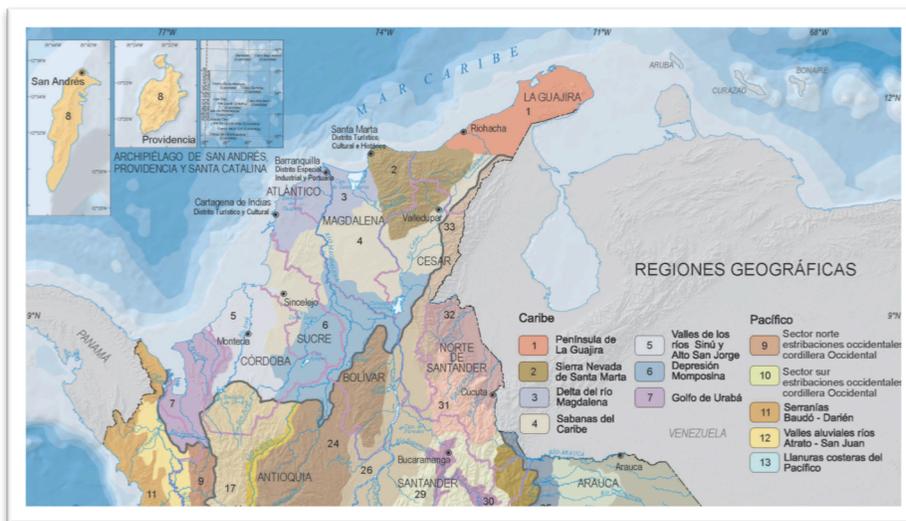


Figure 1.2: La Costa’s geographic regions. Source: IGAC, 2012.

¹⁶ Instituto Geográfico Agustín Codazzi, “Regiones Geográficas.”

The unique history of la costa as a crossroads sets the stage for the region to assume a central place within the national imaginary. As Raymond L. Williams notes, this national imaginary emerges between the 1930s and 1950s as part of a process of modernization that disrupts the firm cultural, political and economic differences that had characterized Colombia up until that point.¹⁷ Wade also notes how from that period until today la costa is a place “characterized by a certain ambiguity”¹⁸ which allows it to occupy a semiotically polyvalent space in the discourse of the nation. Its racial and ethnic diversity make it the prime example of the nation’s diversity. The contrast between its cosmopolitan cities and its “backward” rural spaces are representative of the national tension between tradition and modernity. Most importantly, when seen from the perspective of the country’s political and economic elite in Bogotá, la costa is the exotic, racialized other through which elites define themselves as such in the process of claiming la costa as part of the nation. This results in a reification of la costa as radically different from the interior yet uniquely Colombian. La costa’s cultural production throughout the 20th century reinforces this process by which discourses of regional difference become national representations. This is most evident not only in music with cumbia and vallenato being the most notable coastal styles that become symbols for the nation, but also in the literature of Gabriel García Márquez which brought international attention not to Colombian and specifically la costa. The success of these cultural forms in Colombia and abroad has cemented the place of la costa as a coherent, bounded, and central to the national narrative.

Despite the tendency to gloss it as a uniform region, la costa is a very diverse, and much of it is not even adjacent to the Caribbean coast. Some of its diversity is reflected in

¹⁷ Williams, 12.

¹⁸ Wade, *Music, Race and Nation*, 39.

Geographic Regions map: the arid Guajira peninsula, home to the indigenous Wayuu tribe; the 18,000-foot massif Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta, home to Arahaco and Kogi indigenous tribes; the Magdalena River delta which includes Barranquilla and Cartagena, Colombia's fourth and fifth largest cities, respectively; large inland plains on either side of the river; the inland Mompox basin; the Sinú River valley; and the Gulf of Urabá near Panamá. This geographic diversity has a concomitant sonic diversity. The cosmopolitanism of Barranquilla as a major port is audible in eclectic sounds from salsa and rock to the slew of carnival rhythms that are on parade every year. Cartagena's colonial history as a slave port left a predominantly Afro-descendant population that fueled the growth not only of cumbia, but of many other Afro-Caribbean and Afro-diasporic musics, including the salsa compositions of Joe Arroyo beginning in the 1970s; and *champeta*, a sound-system oriented dance music that freely borrows from soukous, highlife and reggae. The plains to the east of the Magdalena are the heart of vallenato, the ubiquitous accordion music that dominates much of la costa's musical landscape and has also incorporated particular Afro-diasporic elements. The plains to the west of the river include small hills commonly known as the Montes de María which are home to the gaita-playing towns of San Jacinto and Ovejas, *cumbia sabanera* (plains cumbia) played on accordions, and the village of San Basilio de Palenque. Palenque was founded in the early 17th century as a runaway slave community and is now recognized by UNESCO as intangible cultural patrimony because of the unique hybrid language spoken only there, *palenquero*, and for its drum music. West of the Montes de María is the department of Córdoba, known for *porro* music played by wind bands and closely associated with specific feast days. In summary, the cultural topography of la costa is one of many sounds.

The gaita represents but one of these sounds, and it is not the only or even the most obvious point of entry into a study of cumbia. However, it offers a unique perspective from which to study the genre because gaita music continues to be primarily a practice local to the Montes de María. This is changing, and all the chapters in the report explore different ways in which gaita performance has become increasingly common outside of la costa over the past two decades. Even so, gaita scenes in Bogotá, Medellín, and New York remain outposts, further evidence that this is still a musical practice very much rooted in a specific place. I contend that such geographic specificity, the tight link between sound and place, is at the heart of how the gaita and gaita music enacts a discourse of tradition.

Gaita music is also relatively stable in terms of instrumentation, repertoire, and performance practice. Again, although there have been changes that I will discuss later, we can talk generally about the *conjunto de gaita* as the most common format in which one hears gaitas, and also the one most commonly associated with traditional cumbia. The typical conjunto de gaita features two gaita flutes: the five-hole gaita *hembra* (female) with that plays a primarily melodic role, and the two-hole gaita *macho* (male) that plays primarily an accompanying role by means of repeated ostinato figures. The player of the macho, known as the *machero*, uses one hand to play the gaita and the other to play a gourd rattle called the *maraca* or *maracón*. The ensemble also features three drums: (1) a small, single-headed lap drum called a *llamador*, literally the “caller,” that plays a strict timekeeping role on the upbeats; (2) a taller, single-headed conical drum called the *alegre* or *tambor mayor* that plays more complex patterns with space for improvisation; and (3) a large, double-headed drum called the *tambora* or *bombo*, the only one of the three drums played with sticks, which helps mark time with strikes on the drum’s wooden shell as well as adding flourishes on the skins.



Figure 1.3: The instruments of the conjunto de gaitas: (L-R) llamador, gaita hembra, alegre, gaita macho, tambora, and maracón (foreground). Photo by the author.

The repertoire for the conjunto de gaitas has also been relatively stable, although the terminology for it often a source of confusion. Most musicians and commentators identify four distinct rhythms: gaita, cumbia, porro, and puya.¹⁹ The gaita rhythm, sometimes called *gaita corrida*, and not to be confused with the instruments themselves,

¹⁹ Others, such as Convers & Ochoa, use the term *género* (genre) instead of *rítmo* (rhythm). I prefer ‘rhythm’ because it correctly suggests a difference based on the use of different rhythmic patterns. I reserve use of ‘genre’ for larger conceptual organization, which is sometimes, though not always, coterminous with rhythm. Along these lines, I also use the term ‘style’ to suggest different ways of performing within the same rhythm or genre.

does not have lyrics; in this modality the gaitas tend to play lyrically, especially the gaita macho's legato phrasing that leaves very little silence. The cumbia rhythm—not to be confused with the cumbia genre discussed below—is similar to the gaita rhythm but features lyrics and often a i-V harmonic progression. The porro rhythm—not to be confused with the porro genre discussed below—is a little more up-tempo, and in this style the alegre drum plays a more syncopated pattern than in either gaita or cumbia. The puya rhythm—not to be confused with the puya rhythm in vallenato—is the most distinctive, as it is considerably faster than porro, and the tambora plays a simplified pattern much easier to maintain at fast tempos. There are other rhythms that a conjunto de gaitas could play, but those would be exceptions that reinforce the central place of these four rhythms.

GAITA

Musical notation for GAITA rhythm. It consists of four staves: Alegre, Tambora, Llamador, and Maraca. The Alegre staff shows a complex rhythmic pattern with many notes and rests. The Tambora staff shows a pattern of 'x' marks representing slaps. The Llamador staff shows a simple pattern of quarter notes. The Maraca staff shows a pattern of quarter notes with downward arrows indicating drops.

PUYA

Musical notation for PUYA rhythm. It consists of four staves: Alegre, Tambora, Llamador, and Maraca. The Alegre staff shows a pattern of quarter notes with some slurs. The Tambora staff shows a pattern of 'x' marks. The Llamador staff shows a simple pattern of quarter notes. The Maraca staff shows a pattern of quarter notes with downward arrows.

CUMBIA

Musical notation for CUMBIA rhythm. It consists of four staves: Alegre, Tambora, Llamador, and Maraca. The Alegre staff shows a pattern of quarter notes with some slurs and accents. The Tambora staff shows a pattern of 'x' marks. The Llamador staff shows a simple pattern of quarter notes. The Maraca staff shows a pattern of quarter notes with downward arrows.

PORRO

Musical notation for PORRO rhythm. It consists of four staves: Alegre, Tambora, Llamador, and Maraca. The Alegre staff shows a pattern of quarter notes with some slurs and accents. The Tambora staff shows a pattern of 'x' marks. The Llamador staff shows a simple pattern of quarter notes. The Maraca staff shows a pattern of quarter notes with downward arrows.

INSTRUMENT KEY	
ALEGRE	LLAMADOR
Open tone	Open tone
Slap	TAMBORA
Open rim tone	Shell
Closed rim tone	Open skin
Bass	Muted skin
Ghost	MARACA
Finger roll	Drop
	Sweep

Figure 1.4: Basic drum patterns for gaita, cumbia, porro and puya. From Convers & Ochoa (2007).

Keeping these rhythms distinct is relatively straightforward, but it gets more confusing when talking about genres associated with the conjunto de gaita. I use genre as a way to describe the ways in which people group musical performance conceptually. Those groupings rely on differences construed by region, instrumentation, repertoire, performers' race, or by the rhythms employed. Sometimes the distinctions perceived locally between, for example, genre and rhythm, are clear, as is the case with porro. Porro as a gaita rhythm is easy to distinguish from porro as a genre because the latter has a strong connection to the department of Córdoba west of the Montes de María, is performed by ensembles of European wind and percussion instruments, and has a different, though not entirely disconnected, history from gaita music. At other times, however, the distinctions between genre and rhythm are less clear, as in the case of 'cumbia'. As mentioned above, cumbia refers to a specific rhythm played by the conjunto de gaitas. But the term also means many other things. If you were to take a conjunto de gaitas playing the cumbia rhythm and you removed the gaitas, that would still be considered cumbia. Many people, gaiteros included, use the term cumbia loosely to refer to all the music they play. This is in part because of a tendency to understand or define cumbia primarily as the prominent use of a particular rhythmic cell of a quarter note followed by two eighth notes. Such broad definitions of cumbia as a super-genre would include not only vallenato and porro, but also all the different styles of cumbia present outside Colombia. One of the reasons genre matters is because there is inherent power in naming and categorizing sound, and cumbia presents fantastic opportunities to explore this issue. Without downplaying the importance of both narrow and broad definitions of cumbia as markers of respective local and global musical practices that resonate with each other, in this report I will use the term cumbia to refer to something in between. I take cumbia to encompass most if not all 'traditional' gaita practice and some related

practices, such as ensembles that replace the gaita with a *millo* flute (described later) or an accordion. However, I also use it as a term to differentiate gaita music from similar but distinct genres like vallenato and porro.

OUTLINE

This report is organized into three subsequent chapters that each address gaita music from a different perspective. Chapter 2 offers a history of Los Gaiteros de San Jacinto, the best known, most influential, and most archetypal conjunto de gaita ensemble. The story of Los Gaiteros is in many ways the story of how the gaita first reached listeners outside la costa. Los Gaiteros traveled the country and the world as part of folkloric troupes that presented the cultural and racial diversity of Colombia. Disputes over commercial royalties forced a split in the group in the 1970s, but by then the ensemble was firmly cemented in the national imaginary. Later iterations of the group would continue the legacy of Los Gaiteros, preserving a certain form of tradition and presenting it as staged folklore to new audiences in new contexts. Throughout the group's history, the discourse of tradition has been a way for musicians to promote themselves and their music, but it has also confined them to folkloric representations that have limited their agency and the meanings conveyed through their performances.

Chapter 3 moves from history to historiography, focusing on two moments in scholarship of gaita music. The first is in the 1960s, when foreign and domestic musicologists interpreted cumbia as a symbol of the triethnic nation. In this interpretation, gaitas come to stand in as unequivocal symbols of indigeneity, despite the fact that indigenous people are conspicuously absent from most gaita practice and scholarship. In this mid-century moment, the emphasis on studies of folklore (which

overlaps with the story of Los Gaiteros) informs the racial politics surrounding cumbia as an ambiguous symbol of national unity and racial difference. Scholars of this period wanted to present and represent the music of la costa to a larger popular and academic audience, but could only do so while reinforcing a narrative of the coherent nation. A second moment focuses on an urban resurgence of gaita music in the 2000s. I examine two similar publications that reflect a greater commitment to and interest in gaita performance. Even as these new projects challenge widely assumed facts about gaita, such as its unproblematic links to indigeneity or its central place within cumbia history, they reveal the persistence of the idea of a singular gaita tradition posited by earlier scholarship.

A final chapter presents three different ways in which musicians today are also attempting to transcend the bounded notions of gaita music heritage. First, based on research conducted in 2011, I present the story of gaita musicians and instrument makers who have developed gaitas in western tunings and in different registers. They argue that such gaitas are the most representative instruments of a nation where tradition and modernity are in constant dialogue. Second, I analyze the presence of the gaita in Carlos Vives's first two commercially successful albums. Vives was the first Colombian musician to achieve international success by fusing the sounds of la costa with rock and pop influences. The increasingly audible presence of gaitas on his second album and the prominent placement of gaitera Mayte Montero illustrates some of the ways in which Vives's music reconciles tradition and modernity in the sonic reimagining of la costa and the nation. My final example is Curupira, a group of young, university-trained musicians from Bogotá who take the conjunto de gaita outside of its context and place it alongside and in dialogue with rock instruments and other 'traditional' genres. In all three

examples, tradition is both a reference point and a point of departure for musical exploration.

CHAPTER 2: Los Gaiteros de San Jacinto

Los Gaiteros de San Jacinto are synonymous with gaita music. They are a household name nationally, cultural ambassadors of San Jacinto and la costa to the rest of Colombia, and of Colombia to the world. They have recorded several albums distributed nationally and internationally. Many other musicians point to them as cultural icons and standard bearers of a marginalized tradition. They have won countless awards, including a Grammy. Yet their story is little known outside of circles of gaita music aficionados. The history of gaita music requires telling the story of Los Gaiteros,²⁰ a story that reflects many aspects of the gaita's unique place in the Colombian musical landscape. It is the story of how music from the Montes de María became known outside la costa; how in that process both musicians from San Jacinto and listeners from outside the region reimagined their music as a folk tradition; and how these events participated in the remapping of race, class, and regional identities. As such, it is a story of how peripheries and centers both create and are created by difference: rural-urban, la costa-*el interior*, tradition-modernity. But theirs is not just a triumphant narrative of peripheries over centers. Instead, the very mappings that enable such narratives become trappings that limit the agency of musicians and the transformative potential of musical practice.

THE BIRTH OF A TRADITION

There is very little information about gaita music before Los Gaiteros. Hinestrosa suggests that there were four generations of gaiteros prior to Los Gaiteros and he lists their names, suggesting certain family lineages and continuity in performance practice.

²⁰ For the sake of brevity, and consistent with local practice, I will refer to the group simply as Los Gaiteros (capitalized). This should not be confused with other groups that use a similar naming scheme but for whom I will use their full name, or with the plural male noun for a group of gaita players for whom I will not use capitals.

What is notable is that prior to the formation of the group in the 1950s there was no precedent for establishing a gaita band with a fixed lineup and a proper name.²¹ To this day, gaiteros tend to eschew such formalities that they associate with the recording industry or more recently the music festival circuit. Outside such spaces, in the informal rural settings where gaita music is commonly played, it is not unusual to see gaiteros hop in and out of what appear to be jam sessions. This casual attitude to personnel also extends to instrument selection, as musicians are usually versatile enough to play most of the instruments in the ensemble even if they specialize in one instrument in particular. Thus, musicians commonly trade instruments from song to song. In such a context, the emergence of a group in which musicians have fixed roles and a fixed name, albeit the most generic name imaginable, is itself a notable transformation.

The story of Los Gaiteros' rise to fame begins with the outside motivation of some of Colombia's best-known folklorists, the brother and sister duo of Manuel and Delia Zapata Olivella. Manuel, a doctor turned ethnographer and writer, and Delia, a dance instructor, decided to establish a traveling folkloric music and dance troupe in the hopes of bringing the richness of Afro-Colombian coastal culture to the interior of the country. The Zapatas were black and from la costa, and the idea of the performance group was inherently about promoting black identity as a valuable part of the national panorama at a time when the colonial legacy of racial discrimination remained unchallenged. Wade describes a Colombian racial order that privileged whiteness and discriminates against blackness and indigeneity. The marginalized groups were part of the national discourse, but characterized as "primitive, dependent, uneducated, rural and inferior," which enabled discrimination along intractable class hierarchies in Colombian

²¹ Convers and Ochoa, 36.

society.²² Delia studied and taught folkloric dance, and would later go on to found a national ballet company that included Afro-Colombian dances in its repertoire. Manuel left the medical profession looking for a career that would allow him to have greater cultural impact. He traveled to New York toward the end of the Harlem Renaissance where he was inspired by the flourishing of black arts and thought. He later returned to Colombia and established himself as a contributing columnist to several newspapers. During a trip to Bogotá in the early 1950s to promote his first book, Zapata mentioned the music and dance troupe that he and his sister envisioned to a journalist friend, Clemente Manuel Zabala. Zabala, who helped get Gabriel García Márquez his first newspaper job in Cartagena, was from San Jacinto, and he knew exactly where to point Zapata in his search for performers.

Zapata Olivella arrived in San Jacinto looking for Antonio “Toño” Fernández. At the time, Fernández was 40 years old, had played the gaita for most of his life, and had never traveled outside la costa. He was a close friend of the Lara brothers, Juan and José, also San Jacinto gaita players from childhood. The three never established an official group but collaborated in collective performances that suited their talents. Juan typically played the gaita hembra, Toño the gaita macho, and José the alegre drum. At that time the larger *tambora* drum was not part of the ensemble, and the pattern played on the llamador drum was simple enough that anyone could play it, so the three other instruments together (gaita hembra, gaita macho, alegre drum) formed the core of a conjunto de gaitas. What really made the trio stand out, however, was Fernández’s singing and verbal improvisation. Up to that point, gaita repertory had been instrumental; Fernández’s addition of vocal melodies with lyrics broadened the possibilities of the ensemble. His

²² Wade, *Blackness and Race Mixture*, 20.

singing also captured a popular and piquant country wisdom. With no formal schooling, musical or otherwise, and unable to read or write until much later in life, Fernández’s brilliance lay in an ability to capture a carefree yet savvy rural worldview and put it into words in traditional poetic forms such as the quatrain and ten-line rhyming *décima*, all of it improvised.²³ Hineirosa cites a *décima* that Fernández improvised upon the request of Zapata Olivella at a concert in Cali:

Encantadora morena	Beautiful dark-skinned woman
Yo sé que te llamas Melba	I know your name is Melba
Voy a ver si me recuerdas;	Let’s see if I can make you remember me;
Me pareces que eres Buena	I think that you are good
Con tu aroma de azucena;	With your scent of lily;
Y ese ambiente donde pisas,	And the trail you leave where you walk,
Con tu mirada electrizas;	With your walk you electrify;
Tus ojos son de candor	Your eyes are made of candor
Que hacen perecer de amor	That even priests in mass
Hasta los curas en misa.	Succumb to them in love. ²⁴

Or take the lyrics from his song “Pitico de cardón,” whose title refers to the gaita, but plays on the unsubtle phallic double entendre:

Si me invitas a una fiesta	If you invite me to a party
No me toques acordeón	Don’t play me accordion
Tócame gaita completa	Play me a good gaita
Que me llene de emoción.	That fills me with emotion.
 Coro:	 Chorus:
Muchacha linda baila mi son	Beautiful girl, dance my son
Con mi pitico de cardón (bis)	With my <i>pitico de cardón</i> (repeat)
 Si al caso muero en mi casa	 If I die in my house
Me llevan al panteón	Bring me to the cemetery

²³ Hineirosa, 18.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 62. Translation is my own. Hineirosa does not specify when this episode occurred, but given where it occurs in his narrative it might have happened in Los Gaiteros’ first national tour.

Que me toquen una marcha
Con mi pito de cardón.

And play me a march
With my *pitico de cardón*.

Que busquen una maraca
Me la echen dentro ‘el cajón
Los mismo mi par de gaitas
Y media botella ‘e ron.

Look for a maraca
And put it inside the coffin
As well as my pair of gaitas
And half a bottle of rum.²⁵

The two existing Fernández biographies describe his contribution to the group as a “completion” and “elevation” of gaita music.²⁶ For these reasons, despite not being the most talented gaita player among his peers, many considered Fernández the heart and soul of what would become Los Gaiteros de San Jacinto.

NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL TOURS

The Zapata Olivellas’ folkloric troupe toured Colombia in 1953 and 1954. In addition to Los Gaiteros, it included: Andrés Landeros, a young accordion player from San Jacinto who would later become the foremost exponent of accordion-based cumbias there; three representatives of the delta cumbia tradition (cousins Roque and Erasmo Arrieta, millo players from Mahatés, and percussionist and composer Catalino Parra); and singers Madolia de Diego and Leonor González Mina, who would later become well-known vocalists of Afro-Colombian music. Photographs from the tour reveal that they performed in social clubs, theaters such as Bogotá’s Teatro Colón, and even on television. Segregation along overlapping lines of race, region, and class, as well as the relatively much smaller number of Afro-Colombians outside of the country’s coastal regions, meant that for many Colombians this would have been the first opportunity to see Afro-Colombian music and dance. Some of the venues the troupe performed at would

²⁵ Gil Olivera, 51.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 57 and Hinestrosa, 23.

have denied them access as audience, and they were only allowed as performers in part because of the Zapata Olivellas' growing reputation as scholars who presented "authentic folklore." Only seven years earlier, clarinetist and bandleader Lucho Bermúdez had brought his cumbia big band to Bogotá, with a sound "whitened" enough to be permissible yet still tropical enough that many raised eyebrows.²⁷ Despite Bermúdez's light skin and big band-style jazzy arrangements, he was still from the coast and he was still playing Afro-Colombian dance music. "The Caribbean springs forth its song, pregnant with African cacophony, on the haughty Andeans," wrote Manuel Zapata about this early presence of music from la costa in the interior. "There are many gestures that stand out for Bogotá residents as the product of mixed mulato blood, highlighting that happy brushstroke on the gray canvas of the city."²⁸ If that was the reaction to Bermúdez, then seeing actual black bodies in "African" or "traditional" costume perform dances such as the *mapalé*, slave dances reenactments, mock battles, *ruedas de cumbia*, and hearing gaitas and skin drums must have been shocking for many, to say the least.²⁹

It is worth pointing out that from the very beginning Los Gaiteros' shows were, by definition, staged folklore. Removed from the context of San Jacinto and presented together with other similarly decontextualized forms of music and dance, audiences would have lacked a framework for interpreting the performance as anything other than evidence of racial/regional difference. The commentary provided by the Zapata Olivellas, one emphasizing national folkloric diversity, only reinforced this interpretation. The use

²⁷ Wade, *Music, Race and Nation: Música Tropical in Colombia*, 141.

²⁸ Manuel Zapata Olivella, 53. Original: "El Caribe deja escuchar sus cantares impregnados de algarabía africana en los picachos andinos. No pocos son los rasgos que acentúan en el capitalino como productos del mestizaje de los glóbulos mulatos disociándose cual pincelada alegre en la acuarela gris del viejo santafereño."

²⁹ Wade (2000) makes general remarks about the reception of Afro-Colombian culture in Bogotá during this period. Specific details about the Zapata Olivellas' tour is difficult to locate because none of the information I have found published about the tour gives dates with more specificity than to say which years these took place, and even then sometimes these details conflict from source to source.

of indigenous and African-derived instruments like the gaita and drums gave an audible dimension to that difference. Placing Los Gaiteros, who did not identify themselves or their music as black or indigenous but rather as mestizo or *campesino* (peasant), alongside Afro-Colombian performers from the Magdalena Delta and the Pacific, further accentuated the sense of a homogenous, black periphery on display for the nation's geographic and political center. Again, reactions to the Lucho Bermúdez orchestra reveals how the politics of race, region and tradition intersect as different kinds of music from the coast were reaching wider audiences.

The Zapata Olivellas' first national tour was successful enough for them to consider taking a second tour abroad. At the end of the national tour, all the artists returned to their respective homes only to be contacted a few months later by the Zapata Olivellas with the opportunity to travel abroad. The lineup remained almost the same, with the exception of Landeros who opted to stay in San Jacinto. There are very few published sources that discuss the second tour. Manuel Zapata's notes and journals from the years of the trip remain in the possession of his family members, who have not made them available to scholars since his death in 2004.³⁰ The extant sources – photographs, anecdotes published in one of the books on Fernández, a handful of references made in Zapata's publications – vary in some of the details, but it seems most likely that the group first headed to Spain and slowly made their way across much of central Europe and Asia until reaching Japan, at which point they returned toward Spain, and eventually to Colombia in 1958. If the exact itinerary remains unclear, we do know that they performed in Spain, France, Italy, Germany, Czechoslovakia, the USSR, China, and Japan. In Moscow they performed at the 6th World Festival of Youth, and in China they were the

³⁰ Convers & Ochoa, 15.

subjects of a documentary film.³¹ They busked in Paris when short on cash, and in Germany apparently made quite an impression on some young ladies who wanted to return to Colombia with them.³² By all accounts, the trip was as much an adventure without a return ticket home as it was a gesture of musical and cultural ambassadorship. After four years on the road the group boarded a boat in Barcelona bound for Cartagena, ending a foundational period for Los Gaiteros.

Unfortunately the scant information about the trip raises more questions than it answers, and we are left to speculate. Almost all the participants are deceased and the conflicting details from second-hand sources make it difficult to investigate further. But what we do know is that for the better part of five years, Toño and the Lara brothers spent pretty much all their time together, performing in a way that would not have been possible had they remained in San Jacinto. Within the troupe they became the star musical attraction and took on a role of seniority. Already in their 40s, they were about twenty years older than most of the other performers and about ten years older than the Zapatas. Not only did they introduce audiences around the world to their music, they established themselves as key figures in the world of Colombian folklore.

The tour brought about changes in the conjunto de gaitas format. Prior to the tour, gaita music in the Montes de María was played on two gaitas and two drums. After the tour, a third drum joined the ensemble: the tambora. This double-headed bass drum was a staple of various Afro-Colombian percussion ensembles from la costa, including the *conjunto de millo* (which will be discussed at greater length in the following chapter) commonly found in regions nearby San Jacinto. Given their close geographical proximity and the similarities between the music of gaita and millo ensembles, it might be more

³¹ Hiestrosa, 66.

³² Gil Olivera, 64.

difficult to explain why the tambora had not previously been incorporated into gaita music. One potential answer comes from the relationship between instruments in the gaita ensemble. The two gaita flutes, hembra and macho, are paired to each other, but they are also paired to the two drums, alegre and llamador, which are themselves sometimes referred to as hembra and macho, respectively. The macho instruments provide a supporting role to the featured hembra instruments. Introducing the tambora disturbs this percussion-wind pairing. Another potential answer is more functional. Prior to the Colombian and international tours, gaiteros had never played to large audiences. The tambora offers a thundering, low-pitched sound that rounds out the ensemble's dynamic range, especially in large, indoor spaces, and thus it may have been used advantageously in large concert halls. Whatever the reason, Catalino Parra began playing tambora alongside the conjunto de gaita and everyone seemed eager to continue using it thereafter. A 1959 photo from after the tours is the first documentation I can find of it being included in the conjunto.³³

When I visited Nicolás Hernández, Toño's nephew, in San Jacinto, he pointed out another change that Los Gaiteros made during the tour. It was while traveling in Bogotá and abroad they first discovered that the wax used for the head of the gaitas behaved differently at different altitudes and temperatures. Gaitas are delicate instruments, especially the quill, which is vulnerable because it sticks out of the wax. A light knock can easily dislodge the quill and render the whole gaita useless, which is one reason why most gaiteros learn to make and repair their own instruments. Part of that process involves producing the wax mixture for the head by heating up pure beeswax until it melts and adding charred wood to give the mixture a specific consistency as it dries. In

³³ Rodríguez, "Galeria Del Recuerdo."

the cold temperatures of a European winter or at the high altitude of Bogotá, the wax on the gaitas breaks easily. Through trial and error gaiteros were able to improve the durability of the head by modifying the amount of charred wood in the wax mixture.

In a way, the touring never really ended for Los Gaiteros. They returned to San Jacinto, but over the next few years found themselves more and more in demand elsewhere. The Zapata Olivellas soon organized other international shows in Latin America. Even when Los Gaiteros returned to la costa, their growing fame resulted in requests to perform outside of San Jacinto. In 1965, George List saw them in Cartagena, interviewed them, and proceeded to write a couple of articles about the group, later including them in his book. A photo of the group in List's book shows Toño Fernández and Juan Lara on gaitas while José Lara and Enrique Gonzalez play drums. The caption, a translation of the group's name to English, reads "Conjunto de gaitas of San Jacinto."³⁴ List does not mention the fact that the group had spent a decade traveling extensively through the country and the world performing their music. In fact, other than the photo he does not mention the group in any way.

³⁴ List, *Music and Poetry in a Colombian Village*, 89.



Figure 2.1: Los Gaiteros de San Jacinto: (L-R) Toño Fernández, gaita macho and maracón; Juan Lara, gaita hembra, Enrique González, llamador; José Lara, alegre. (Source: List, 1981, 89)

In 1968, the national tourism board enlisted Los Gaiteros as one of five musical groups to represent Colombia at the Cultural Olympiad, scheduled in tandem with the Mexico City Olympic Games. Their official performance consisted of two songs that would become some of their most famous, “Candelaria” and “La maestranza,” both Fernández compositions. Judges awarded them the gold medal for their performance.³⁵ A photo shows Toño, Juan and José Lara, and Catalino Parra performing in their traditional outfits.³⁶ Upon their triumphant return to Colombia, a friend with connections in the

³⁵ Hiestrosa, 75.

³⁶ Organizing Committee of the Games of the XIX Olympiad, 472.

record industry secured them a contract with Discos CBS to record the winning songs and other titles.³⁷ The resulting LP, *Hacha, machete y garabato* (Axe, Machete and Sickle) is the first commercial recording of Los Gaiteros and ushered in a new era for them. The album cover shows the four members dressed in matching jackets and ties, emblazoned with the seal of Colombia, uniforms they acquired for the Mexican Olympics trip.

RIFTS AND SHIFTS

Ironically, the trail of reliable information about the group grows thin precisely at the point when their public profile increased. In the early 1970s Toño and the Laras had a falling out over the direction of the group and royalty payments.³⁸ Juan Lara, José Lara and Catalino Parra continued recording for CBS under the name Los Gaiteros de San Jacinto through the 1970s and 1980s. At the same time, Fernández formed a group with other musicians also claiming the name Los Gaiteros de San Jacinto, but with a more fluid lineup. Fernández's nephew, Joaquín Nicolás "Nico" Hernández, played the gaita macho in the ensemble and gradually took leadership of the group from the ailing Fernández. Manuel "Mañe" Mendoza and Antonio "Toño" García replaced Juan Lara on gaita hembra. Gabriel "Cano" Torregrosa Morales replaced José Lara on the alegre, and remained in that role until his son (also named Gabriel Torregrosa) inherited it. Juan "Chuchita" Fernández, another of Toño Fernández's nephews, began as a tambora player, but after Toño's death in 1988, Chuchita took over as the primary vocalist. Other gaiteros and tamboleros played in the Fernández-led incarnation of Los Gaiteros, not unlike the flexible personnel that was a hallmark of gaita performance prior to the 1950s. By the late 1980s, the group's lineup preserved some stability around the three elders: Nico

³⁷ Hiestrosa, 78.

³⁸ Federico Ochoa, 55.

Hernández, Toño García, and Juan Chuchita. But there was also a large group of younger gaiteros who participated in a non-exclusive way with the ensemble.³⁹ It is perhaps this flexibility that allowed the Fernández-led Gaiteros to continue after his death, whereas the Lara-led group effectively ended with Juan Lara's death in 1985.

Despite, or perhaps even because of, the fracturing of the group, the 1980s brought increased visibility not only to Los Gaiteros but also to gaita performance generally. In 1985 a festival dedicated exclusively to gaita began in the small town of Ovejas, in the Montes de María, just south of San Jacinto. Groups from several towns in the region participated, further promoting the idea of performing in fixed groups. This is also the period when new groups such as Los Auténticos Gaiteros de San Jacinto, Gaitas y Tambores de San Jacinto, and Los Bajeros de la Montaña emerge. Given the relatively small size of the gaita-playing community at the time, it is not surprising that all these groups had links, either through family, mentorship, or both, to the original Los Gaiteros. Of these groups, though, it was Los Bajeros de la Montaña, with young musicians from San Jacinto and nearby San Juan de Nepomuceno, that most closely followed in the footsteps of Los Gaiteros.⁴⁰

Part of that legacy involved promoting the gaita outside of la costa, especially in Bogotá. But if gaiteros ended up in Bogotá it was not always by choice. Escalating violence in much of rural Colombia, part of the ongoing civil war between the military, leftist guerillas, and extralegal paramilitary defense groups, created conditions of internal displacement, a harsh reality that continues to this day. Parts of la costa were particularly

³⁹ I pull together the history of Los Gaiteros during this period of fluid personnel changes from various sources, including my own interviews (with Nico Hernández and Fredys Arrieta), Bermúdez (2006) and Convers & Ochoa (2007). There is some disparity regarding dates when individuals joined or left the group, and for that reason I have not specified dates.

⁴⁰ Bermúdez, 21.

affected by armed conflict, including the Montes de María. Nico Hernández shared with me stories about being hired by known drug traffickers to perform at private parties and having to play despite his concerns and uncertainty about whether it was more prudent to accept or to pass up such gigs. As a result of finding himself in such difficult situations, he sought as many opportunities as possible to stay in larger cities like Bogotá and to secure a steady income through performances and instrument making there. Knowingly or not, the time spent in Bogotá would pave the way for other groups, like Los Bajeros de la Montaña, who eventually relocated permanently to the capital city and remain there to this day.

FIRING UP A GRAMMY

The story of the original Los Gaiteros might have logically faded at this point, after they had successfully passed the torch on to a younger generation of groups that ensured the continuation of a gaita tradition. Older members of Los Gaiteros did not stop performing, though they did “slow down,” in the words of Hernández. But an opportunity to record a CD for Smithsonian Folkways brought Los Gaiteros an unexpected resurgence in the 2000s. The CD *Un fuego de sangre pura* (A Fire of Pure Blood) was recorded mostly in New York during a 2003 tour, the first time Los Gaiteros had come to the U.S. The lineup consisted of the gaita elders, Nico, Toño, and Chuchita, backed by most of the Los Bajeros de la Montaña lineup. They recorded several songs, including original compositions from Los Bajeros’s 1999 CD titled *La acabación del mundo* (The End of the World).⁴¹ Despite the heavy contribution from Los Bajeros, the cover of the CD shows only the aging faces of the three elders and lists the group as being “Los

⁴¹ Ibid, 21.

Gaiteros de San Jacinto from Colombia.” All the individual members are credited, yet the group name Los Bajeros is not listed anywhere in the liner notes. By noting this I do not wish to criticize Los Gaiteros as a collective or as individuals, or to suggest that this is unfair to Los Bajeros or the younger generation in general. I suspect that the younger musicians, if for nothing else other than respect to their teachers and elders, are comfortable and even proud to participate under the Los Gaiteros label. However, I do want to draw attention to the investment in Los Gaiteros as authentic representatives of tradition.

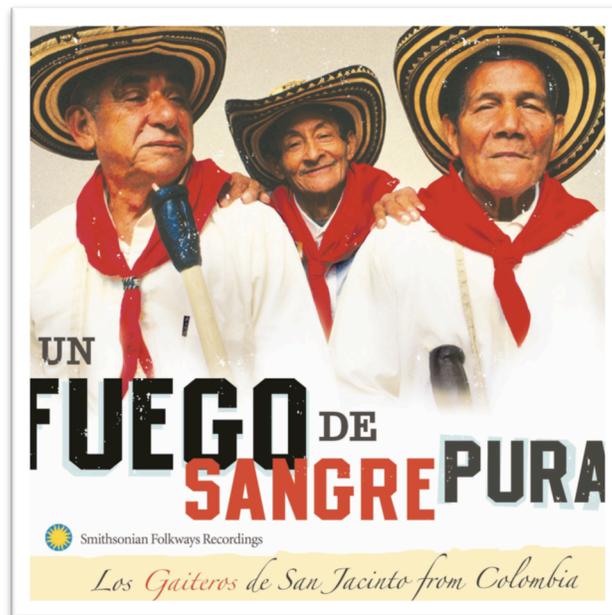


Figure 2.2: *Un Fuego de Sangre Pura* CD cover (Source: Smithsonian Folkways Recordings, 2006)

The opening track of the Smithsonian CD, “Fuego de cumbia” illustrates this strong focus on heritage. Written by Rafael Pérez, a San Jacinto composer famous for his décimas, the song is a self-reflexive description of cumbia, worth quoting in full:

Se encienden noches oscuras
Con un jolgorio que encanta
Los repiques de tambores
La raza negra levanta
Y el indio pasivamente
Con su melódica gaita
Interrumpe en el silencio
Cuando una fogata baila
Y yo siento por mis venas
Un fuego que no se apaga

Dark nights light up
With revelry that enchants
The beats on the drums
The black race rises up
And the indian, passively
With his melodic gaita
Interrupts the silence
Along a dancing flame
And I sense through my veins
A fire that does not extinguish.

Es el fuego de mi cumbia
Es el fuego de mi raza
Un fuego de sangre pura
Que con lamento se canta

It's the fire of my cumbia
It's the fire of my race
A fire of pure blood
Sung with lament

Mi tierra guaca explorada
Sin tribus y sin cacique
La raza negra ha quedado
Que con alegría nos viste
Porque con fuerza y valor
Ganaron el paso libre
Hay mezclas de su cultura
Con la del indio aborígen
Hacen vibrar el lamento
Que hoy nuestra tierra vive

My land is an exploited treasure
Without tribes or chiefs
The black race remains
And it dresses us with joy
Because with strength and valor
They won freedom
There is a mix of their culture
With the aboriginal indian
They make quiver the lament
That our land lives today.

Por aquí hay grandes señales
De tiempos precolombinos
Porque hablar de la gaita
Es retroceder caminos
Es meterse en el ayer
Y en la ciencia del indio
Es recordar muchos tiempos
Que hace siglos se han ido
Pero dejando la mezcla
De cultura y de civismo

There are great signals here
Of pre-Columbian times
Because to speak of the gaita
Is to return along paths
It is to return to yesterday
To the science of the indian
It is to remember a time
Gone by many centuries ago
But which has left the mixture
Of culture and civism.⁴²

These lyrics play on the central contradictions that I have highlighted. Pérez and Los Gaiteros place racial mixture at tension with “sangre pura,” the struggles of the past with

⁴² Los Gaiteros de San Jacinto, *Un Fuego De Sangre Pura*, Track 1.

a lamenting celebration of today. They also highlight black and indigenous roles, instruments, and histories to craft a sense of tradition that reclaims space today for black and indigenous identity as part of the “culture and civism” that make up “our land.” The discourse of tradition allows blackness and indigeneity to emerge as legitimate identities in the multicultural nation. But it also delimits those identities as traditional. During the first tours of Los Gaiteros through Colombia, their sound was threatening precisely because it was foreign and racialized, and that threat was defused both through discourses of nation and tradition and through a disassociation of the repertoire from the pressing social concerns of la costa.

Un Fuego de Sangre Pura appeared in 2006 to wide acclaim, and the following year it was nominated for a Latin Grammy in the category of Best Folk Album. Thanks in part to an invitation by members of the Puerto Rican duo Calle 13, who visited San Jacinto as part of a documentary project in 2006, Toño García and Juan Chuchita were able to attend the Grammy award ceremony in Las Vegas.⁴³ Calle 13 also invited two members of the Arahuaico tribe, an indigenous group from the Sierra Nevada, thus reinforcing the connection between gaitas and indigeneity. The CD won the Grammy, putting Los Gaiteros back on the international radar for the first time since the Mexican Olympics of 1968. This time, however, their notoriety was accompanied by a widely available recording, an appearance in Calle 13’s documentary, and extensive exposure to the Latin music market.⁴⁴ Hernández, whose participation with the group now stretched over 40 years, longer even than his uncle, was unable to attend the award ceremony

⁴³ Posada, “Los Grammy Con Los Gaiteros De San Jacinto.”

⁴⁴ Calle 13’s documentary, *Sin Mapa* (Without Map), follows the Puerto Rican duo as they visit different marginalized communities in Peru, Mexico, Venezuela, Puerto Rico, and Colombia. Their visit to San Jacinto falls between visits to Palenque de San Basilio and an Arahuaico village in the Sierra Nevada, presented respectively as sites of “pure” black and indigenous culture in la costa. In this sense Los Gaiteros appear as neither black nor indigenous, but mixed and figuratively in between.

because he had fallen ill. He decided to stop playing and retired in San Jacinto. When I visited him, his Grammy was in the cardboard box in which it was shipped, neatly tucked away beneath the sewing machine in his living room.

A week before visiting Nico in San Jacinto, I was in Bogotá with Fredys Arrieta, one of the founding members of Los Bajeros and one of the best gaiteros in the country today. Arrieta invited me to see Los Bajeros perform at a club called Salomé in an upscale part of Bogotá. The club owner, César Pagano, is also a longtime DJ specializing in Caribbean music from Colombia and Cuba. When he introduced the band, he introduced them as Los Gaiteros de San Jacinto. Why introduce the group under a different name, I wondered? As a concluding thought, I want to suggest that Los Gaiteros has always served to mediate a discourse of racial and regional difference. From its very creation, the group became the model for musicians from the coast to perform their music and identity. The celebratory narrative here is that Los Gaiteros introduced the gaita to national and international audiences, and, in the words of Toño García, ensured that “the gaita won’t die.”⁴⁵ The group’s legacy resonates with those of other staged folkloric troupes in the ethnomusicological literature, such as Katherine Hagedorn’s research on the Conjunto Folklórico Nacional de Cuba, founded only a decade after Los Gaiteros’s first tour. But, as Robin Moore notes, “the importance of Cuban folklore is precisely that it is not a static remnant from a bygone age but rather a dynamic mode of expression rooted in the everyday lives of the population, one that continues to develop.”⁴⁶ This seems a stark contrast with the story of Los Gaiteros, and here begins the anxious counternarrative found in academic literature in which musical production is fixed to an unchanging notion of tradition.

⁴⁵ Smithsonian Folkways, *A Discussion with Los Gaiteros De San Jacinto*.

⁴⁶ Moore, 196.

CHAPTER 3: Gaita historiography

Parallel to the story of Los Gaiteros as cultural ambassadors who brought a local musical tradition out of la costa, there is another story of people coming to la costa to study gaita. Throughout the 20th century and continuing today, academics from different parts of the world with different disciplinary backgrounds have researched the gaita and presented their findings to different audiences. This chapter examines gaita historiography, which is almost always framed as cumbia scholarship, and explores the ways in which musicologists have shaped popular understandings of the gaita as an indigenous instrument and the conjunto de gaitas as a metaphor for the nation.

A critical reading of gaita music historiography must begin with some context for understanding Colombian music scholarship generally. Given cumbia's iconic status as Colombia's popular dance rhythm par excellence, I was surprised to find relatively little scholarship on gaitas specifically and on cumbia generally. The quantity and quality of existing work suggests several key factors that have impeded such research. Perhaps the most important of these is the dominance of the folklore studies paradigm within Colombia. Carlos Miñana Blasco argues that the tendency to understand regional Colombian music principally as folklore is part of the ideological construction of the nation as a somehow coherent patchwork of distinct cultural identities.⁴⁷ Miñana cites the work of Egberto Bermúdez, beginning in the mid 1980s, as a critical counter-trend to the continuing prominence of folkloric frameworks that emphasize characteristics including bounded local identities, canonical figures, and fixed genre boundaries.⁴⁸ Other scholars stand alongside Bermúdez, including Carolina Santamaría and Ana María Ochoa, but their work remains the exception rather than the rule.

⁴⁷ Miñana Blasco, 3.

⁴⁸ Ibid, 26.

My criticism that most folkloristic scholarship leaves something to be desired is tempered by the fact that there are significant obstacles to doing good musicological work in Colombia. As Miñana laments, there is a lack of institutional support, likely fueled by a scarcity of resources devoted to the social sciences and humanities in general.⁴⁹ It is therefore no surprise that the leading scholars all have done their graduate work abroad: Bermúdez at Kings College in London, Ochoa at Indiana, and Santamaría at Pittsburg. For scholars outside of Colombia who may have access to more resources, there are other obstacles to research, and I will list three. First, the bloody, half-century long civil war that continues to this day has made many parts of Colombia a dangerous place to do any research, especially in the 1980s and 1990s, and more intensely so for foreign investigators. This is less of a problem than it used to be, but its impact has been substantial. Second, a lack of infrastructure (roads, clean water, electricity) makes research in some parts of the country difficult. The lack of infrastructure is, of course, not random, and reflects patterns of uneven development that reveal deep racial and class fissures in Colombian society. Third, the lack of an existing body of critical scholarship itself becomes an obstacle. Compared to the amount of research on Brazil or Cuba, for instance, which are admittedly cultural powerhouses, Colombia is a more recent subject of interest and provides little for aspiring musicologists to work with. These obstacles, however, also present opportunities.

Of course, I am using a very broad brush to paint this academic environment, and many scholars, including the ones cited above, have made valuable contributions; other examples include Lise Waxer's work on salsa in Cali or Oscar Hernandez Salgar's work on postcoloniality. Nonetheless, my intent is to give readers some framework for

⁴⁹ Ibid, 29.

understanding the authors whose work I address in the chapter. To further narrow my analysis I explicitly focus on two periods. The first examines a boom in scholarship, mostly foreign, in the 1960s, namely Donald Tayler and Brian Moser's *The Music of Some Indian Tribes of Colombia*, George List's *Music and Poetry in a Colombian Village: A Tri-Cultural Heritage*, and several articles published by Manuel and Delia Zapata Olivella, who were among List's key local guides. The second focuses on two recent works by young Colombian scholars: the multimedia *Gaiteros y tamboleros: Study guide for the gaita music of San Jacinto* by Leonor Convers and Juan Sebastián Ochoa, and the still unpublished *El libro de la gaita larga* by Federico Ochoa. By looking at these two periods of scholarship I evaluate the ways that scholars consistently employ the gaita as a symbol of indigenous identity despite very different methodologies and ideological commitments.

Before delving into the texts, I will take a moment to situate my analysis in relation to existing studies on indigenous identity through music. The work of Tom Turino among indigenous wind ensembles in Peru or of Tony Seeger among the Suyá in the Brazilian Amazon come to mind as examples of important work in ethnomusicology that addresses the central role of music in the performance of indigeneity.⁵⁰ There is also extensive anthropological scholarship on indigenous groups within Colombia on topics including language and cosmovision, political organization, interaction with the state, and ecological stewardship, just to name a few.⁵¹ Without discounting the importance of this work, I position my project outside of their purview because—and this is my central

⁵⁰ Recommended reading by these authors includes Turino's *Music in the Andes: Experiencing Music, Expressing Culture* (2008) and Anthony Seeger's *Why Suyá Sing* (1987).

⁵¹ The most notable anthropological work in English on Colombian indigenous groups is Michael Taussig's *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism* (1980), David Gow's *Countering Development* (2008) and Joanne Rappaport's *The Politics of Memory: Native Historical Interpretation in the Colombian Andes*.

point—although the gaita is a quintessential symbol of indigeneity within Colombian scholarship, gaita players do not identify themselves as indigenous. Nor is gaita music, either by itself or in its most common context of the conjunto de gaitas, described by locals as indigenous today. My aim in this chapter is to show that from early on gaita research was not primarily about indigenous people or indigenous practices, but rather about indigeneity as a symbol, one that researchers used to include native groups rhetorically within the nation. The persistence of symbolic interpretations of musical practice along racial and ethnic lines reveals an investment in the discourse of collective tradition, a legacy that even many contemporary studies have not transcended.

EARLY SCHOLARSHIP

The earliest scholarly references to the gaita establish its indigenous roots. Between the mid-1920s and 1960, three different European anthropologists carried out research among the Kogi tribe of the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta. The first of these was German ethnologist Konrad Theodor Preuss who published his study in 1926.⁵² Two decades later, Austrian-born Gerardo Reichel-Dolmatoff, considered one of the founding fathers of Colombian anthropology, published a series of articles documenting the music of the Kogi as well.⁵³ In 1960, Donald Tayler and Brian Moser, working for the British Institute of Recorded Sound, carried out a survey of the music of different indigenous tribes in Colombia. Their work documents the use of a pair of vertical flutes called *kuizi bunzi* and *kuizi sigi*, respectively gendered as female and male and played in a manner

⁵² Preuss, *Forschungsreise Zu Den Kágaba: Beobachtungen, Textaufnahmen Und Sprachliche Studien Bei Einem Indianerstamme Kolumbien, Südamerika*.

⁵³ Among these are: Reichel-Dolmatoff, *Los Kogi, Una Tribu De La Sierra Nevada De Santa Marta*; Reichel-Dolmatoff, *Datos Histórico-culturales Sobre Las Tribus De La Antigua Gobernación De Santa Marta*; and Reichel-Dolmatoff, *Diario De Viaje Entre Los Indios y Los Negros De La Provincia De Cartagena En El Nuevo Reino De Granada*.

closely resembling contemporary performance practice on the *gaita hembra* and *gaita macho*. Taylor and Moser cite research among other indigenous tribes of Central America and Mexico that identifies similar wind instruments topped with a wax head and quill, suggesting that the flutes were not exclusive to the Kogi, although the specific paired and gendered performance style does not appear elsewhere.⁵⁴

When comparing Taylor and Moser's descriptions against today's understanding of *gaita*, several differences stand out. The most notable may be that the term 'gaita' in the past apparently did not apply to the instruments used, but rather to a style of music performed on a *kuizi bunzi*, two maracas and a drum.⁵⁵ Thus it emphasized music making in a particular kind of group. In Spain, 'gaita' is the generic word for bagpipe, derived from an archaic term for 'goat', the type of skin used to make the bag. As early as the 1825, travelogues of Europeans in Colombia used the term to describe the Colombian flutes.⁵⁶ However, it is not certain at what point the musicians themselves adopted the term or when 'gaita' replaced *kuizi* as the common name of the flute. Colombia is the exception among Spanish-speaking countries today, where 'gaita' still primarily refers to bagpipes. Another exception is Venezuela, where *gaita* refers to a music style performed on a friction drum called the *furro*. Within Colombia, however, the term strictly refers to the indigenous flutes or to a style of music played on them.

Another difference in early terminology worth noting is that, in the past, Colombian *gaitas* appeared in both ceremonial and secular contexts, whereas today their ceremonial role has all but disappeared. The work of Taylor and Moser surveyed both the

⁵⁴ Taylor and Moser, 14.

⁵⁵ Ibid, 17.

⁵⁶ See, for example, Gosselman, *Viaje Por Colombia: 1825 y 1826*, cited in González, "La Música Costeña Colombiana En La Tercera Década Del Siglo XIX," 194.

highland villages of San Miguel and San Francisco with strong Kogi influence as well as the lower “mestizo” villages of Atánquez and San Sebastián de Rábago. They state,

“...although secular music and dancing probably occurs among the Kogi, as elsewhere in the Sierra, it is likely that [the paired flute] music still retains its essentially religious meaning, and we were perhaps fortunate to have been able to record any of this at all. To this extent our own recordings are inevitably taken out of their true context, and give only the barest outlines of Kogi musical traditions. It is doubtful, no matter how long we had waited, that we would have been allowed to record, let alone witness, one of these ceremonies.”⁵⁷

The situation is quite different in Atánquez, which Tayler and Moser describe as an “Indian-Creole” village created when the indigenous population of the region retreated into the highlands as Spaniards settled the village center. There, Tayler and Moser easily recorded several *kuizi* performances, one in a style called *chicote* that they described as “stiff and formal” and another in a style they found more loose and flamboyant, with audience participation and dancing.⁵⁸ They compare their findings in Atánquez with those in the Kogi villages by suggesting that,

“...all of the music of Atánquez, with the exception of the sacred chants of Indians, has either lost its former identity and significance or has diffused with Creole music. What remains is in fact rapidly disappearing because of its social undesirability. The rattle and the paired flutes still however remain the most widely used of the Indian musical idiom and their use with *chicote*, *gaita*, and *copla* singing of the new mestizo population, may in turn stand for new values in the emerging mestizo society.”⁵⁹

These writings seem to capture a moment in which *gaita* performance straddled boundaries of space, religion, and ethnicity, not to mention different styles of music. As the “emerging mestizo society” adopted the *gaitas*, it also enacted a transformation on the instruments that would drastically change the role they played. Because it captured this

⁵⁷ Tayler and Moser, 14. This implies that despite not having access to ceremonial contexts, Tayler and Moser recorded music with religious associations.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 16.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*, 18.

transition from indigenous to mestizo, the publications of Tayler and Moser also serves as a bridge to that of George List, the U.S. ethnomusicologist best known for his work in northern Colombia. Between 1964 and 1970, he conducted research in the small village of Evitar, located a few hundred miles east of Atánquez on the other side of the Magdalena River. More than a decade later, he published his findings as *Music and Poetry in a Colombian Village: A Tri-Cultural Heritage*, a hefty 600-page archetype of rigorous, mid-century scholarship. As the title suggests, List framed his analysis of the musical culture of this village through the lens of tri-cultural mixing of Spanish, African and indigenous people, and the book consists of analysis designed to disentangle the origin of different elements in the music he finds. Unlike Tayler and Moser, whose project emphasized indigenous identity and whose research was primarily in villages that self-identified as indigenous, List's focus on triethnic heritage reflects the local history of Evitar as a village of racial mixture.

It is worth noting that the bulk of List's research is not on gaita music, but rather on a related style performed on a small, single-reed flute called the *caña de millo*, also known as just *millo* or *pito*. The millo performs in an ensemble called the *conjunto de millo*, which features the same drums as a conjunto de gaitas. Both ensembles, and their repertoire, fall within what List calls the "cumbia complex," a family of related styles from la costa. He describes his focus on the conjunto de millo as largely a coincidence. He and his team set out from Cartagena looking for roots cumbia music, and on the road along the northern edge of the Montes de María region a percussionist recommended they turn north and look for the small village of Evitar, described by List as "tierra incognita to everyone in the region with whom I had any acquaintance."⁶⁰ Given his eventual

⁶⁰ List, *Music and Poetry in a Colombian Village*, xxi.

ethnographic focus on Evitar, it is surprising that List even mentions gaitas, which he only encountered in Cartagena several years later. The inclusion of gaitas in his study is a bit awkward because he talks about them in some length at the introduction and mentions them in key passages of the conclusion, but does not include them elsewhere. Although he does cite earlier scholars like Tayler and Moser in identifying the gaita's indigenous roots, List's frame of reference is clearly the mestizo gaita of the Montes de María and its triethnic tradition, which by the time of List's research was already referred to as cumbia.

List was not the first to link gaitas to the cumbia complex. Again, Tayler and Moser's work suggests a transitional moment, as they describe two distinct dance music styles performed by the gaitas, one they called gaita and the other cumbia: "the distinction being drawn between the [gaita] flute accompaniment in the first... and the accordion or stringed accompaniment of the latter, the former [is] a traditional Indian type of dancing, the latter Spanish-Creole."⁶¹ The authors maintain this distinction based on instrumentation and ethnicity, but establish a close connection between the two repertoires. But even before the work of Tayler and Moser, Manuel and Delia Zapata Olivella, the brother and sister duo that were the most prominent folklorists in Colombia at the time, had already linked gaitas to cumbia. Writing in 1954, Manuel Zapata says, "Cumbia, wherever it is danced, be it in Santa Marta or in Montería, in Barranquilla or in Cartagena, must be celebrated beneath the candlelight. There must always be a musical center around which dancers move. This melodic epicenter can take the form of the millo flute, gaitas, accordion, or wind bands, but whichever of these it is, the rhythm is the same: cumbia."⁶² A few years later, Delia Zapata Olivella echoed this: "[T]he

⁶¹ Tayler and Moser, 18.

⁶² Manuel Zapata Olivella, 118. Original: "La cumbia, donde quiera que se baile, en Santa Marta o en Montería, en Barranquilla o en Cartagena, ha de celebrarse bajo el fuego de las espermas. Ha de figurar siempre un centro musical en torno al cual danzan los bailarines. Este epicentro melódico puede recaer en

melancholic gaita or indigenous flute, in close contact with the lively and impetuous resonance of the African drum: this is how the rhythm we know as cumbia began, and that today embodies the sentiment of a large portion of the Colombian people.”⁶³ It is interesting to note the extent to which the Zapata Olivellas articulate the link between gaita and cumbia through dance; that is, they define cumbia primarily as a style of dance performed by any number of different ensembles. This conception of cumbia bears some relation to List’s “cumbia complex,” not surprising given that the Zapata Olivellas were key collaborators with List during his research.

Another aspect of the Zapata Olivellas’ work that likely inspired List was their attention to the way in which cumbia, both as dance and as music, functioned as a metaphor for Colombia’s mestizaje. “It can be deduced,” says Delia Zapata Olivella, “that cumbia – of mixed heritage, and later subjected to Hispanic influence until it became in our days a triethnic dance – must have undergone successive stages of evolution, from its distant African origin to its conjunction with indigenous American modalities, and lastly, with the predominant interference of colonial masters.”⁶⁴ This interpretation, based largely on the stability and primacy of the link between cumbia and Guinean cumbé, maintains the importance of mestizaje as a process while creating an implicit hierarchy between the different elements. Cumbia is first African, then Afro-indigenous, and only later triethnic. Read against the tendency to “whiten” music from the costa as it traveled, these comments represent a symbolic reclaiming of cumbia, and

la flauta de millo, en las gaitas, en el acordeón o en la banda de viento, pero cualquiera sea su modalidad, el ritmo de la música ha de ser el mismo: la cumbia.”

⁶³ Delia Zapata Olivella, 191. Original: “La melancólica gaita o flauta indígena, en cercano contraste con la alegre e impetuosa resonancia del tambor africano: así surgió este ritmo que llamamos cumbia y que hoy encarna el sentir de una caudalosa porción del pueblo colombiano.”

⁶⁴ Ibid, 189. Original: “Se puede deducir que la cumbia – de origen mestizo, y más tarde, sometida al influjo hispánico, hasta convertirse en nuestros días en un baile triétnico – ha debido pasar por sucesivas etapas de evolución, desde su lejana inspiración Africana hasta su conjunción con las modalidades indígenas americanas y, posteriormente, con la predominante interferencia de los amos coloniales.”

therefore of the nation, as black heritage. For Zapata Olivella, whose research focus was on folkloric dance, the prominence of African-derived influences is borne out not only through instrumentation, but also through traditional choreography. She depicts cumbia as a symbolic reenactment of the way virile African men courted passive indigenous women.⁶⁵ She suggests that the Spanish contribution to cumbia dance consist of the traditional costumes used: the woman's long, flowing *pollera* skirts reminiscent of southern Spain and the man's all-white attire punctuated by a bright red kerchief. Her conclusion, that cumbia represents "a musical synthesis of our nationality,"⁶⁶ is the epitome of a kind of folkloric nationalism that Wade, following many others, calls a "master narrative of national identity."⁶⁷

List arrives at slightly different conclusions than the Zapata Olivellas. Although he also agrees that cumbia, in any of its forms, is a product and a symbol of triethnic mestizaje, he evaluates the individual ethnic elements differently. His findings in *Evitar* suggest that Spanish music played the most influential role in the development of conjunto de gaita repertoire, African music second, and that "the Amerindian culture... has apparently played a relatively minor role in the syncretism which has produced costeño [coastal] song and instrumental music."⁶⁸ List then highlights the apparent paradox that despite the extent of European cultural dominance in the area, traditional cumbia ensembles employ primarily instruments of African and indigenous origin. His extended discussion of gaita and drum ensembles misrepresents the coastal region to an extent because he fails to consider the strong wind band and accordion traditions, both of which were popular in regions of the coast at the time of his research. His focus on

⁶⁵ Ibid, 191.

⁶⁶ Ibid, 200.

⁶⁷ Wade, *Music, Race and Nation*, 15.

⁶⁸ List, *Music and Poetry in a Colombian Village*, 567.

single-site ethnography in Evitar, itself a legacy of structuralist paradigms in anthropology, makes his findings unsuitable to support general claims about la costa. The same could be said of his views of cumbia, already a diffuse popular style when he carried out his research in the 1960s and certainly when he published in the early 1980s.

The tendency to generalize about the region based on fieldwork in Evitar reveals other problems with List's analysis. The conjunto de millo music he finds in the small village is not a good example of triethnic culture. His research demonstrates that the millo flute and the drums in the ensemble are of African origin, and that the lyrics and song forms are Spanish. Devoid of any obvious Amerindian influence, the conjunto de millo and its repertoire thus appear to contradict List's main thesis of triethnic mestizaje for one of biethnic mestizaje. To account for what he interprets as a lack of indigenous influence, List posits that African and Amerindian cultural elements were in competition not only with dominant Spanish elements, but also with each other. He asserts that in this competition certain factors favored the survival of African cultural traits over Amerindian ones, such as the use of iron in the fabrication of tools and weapons, and "complex political development."⁶⁹ He even states that "in the area which is now rural Bolívar, the negro is still considered the superior of the Indian."⁷⁰ The context of this quote, resonant of early twentieth-century evolutionist thought, suggests he is referring to both a cultural and physical superiority that ostensibly helped Afro-descendants and African culture survive in la costa to a greater degree than indigenous culture.

It is interesting to note that the Zapata Olivellas, as well as later Colombian scholars such as Guillermo Abadía Morales and José Portaccio Fontalvo, argued for the biethnic origin of cumbia, although unlike List they claimed that it contained a

⁶⁹ Ibid, 569.

⁷⁰ Ibid, 570-1.

predominantly African-indigenous mixture instead of Spanish-African. Their accounts situate the birthplace of cumbia in the circle dances called *cumbiambas* that took place in an unspecified moment of the colonial past in the poor neighborhoods of Cartagena. Specifically they mention the bottom of the Cerro de la Popa, just outside the city's famous fortress walls.⁷¹ It was in such neighborhoods, they claim, during celebrations of the feast day of the Virgen de la Candelaria, that "blacks and slaves gave birth to cumbia."⁷² The geographic specificity of these accounts speaks to a certain mythologizing of cumbia as a form of resistance against colonial hegemony, contrary to List's suggestion that African and indigenous elements were in competition and that Spanish elements predominate in traditional music generally. The notion of mythologizing is in line with more recent interpretations of how, regardless of any supporting or contradicting evidence, these "origin myths" function as part of a racial and ethnic national discourse.⁷³

The emphasis that both List and the Zapata Olivellas place on triethnic cultural mixture necessarily places the gaita as a symbolic of indigeneity within the cumbia complex, which otherwise lacks any indigenous influence. It is clear why List would want to include conjuntos de gaita in his analysis despite their peripheral presence in his ethnographic work. Gaitas signify indigeneity, and the conjunto de gaitas supports the triethnic narrative of la costa and the nation. If this analysis of gaitas appears out of place in List's book about the conjunto de millo, an article he published eight years before the book does a better job of framing the same argument of triethnic mixing by focusing on the conjunto de gaita:

⁷¹ Abadía Morales, 94 and Portaccio Fontalvo, 61.

⁷² Portaccio Fontalvo, 63.

⁷³ Wade, *Music, Race and Nation*, 53.

“The gaita ensemble of the Colombian Atlantic coast displays elements derived from three different cultures. The pair of gaitas accompanied by the maraca represent the legacy of aboriginal America. The two drums, that is the *tambor mayor* and the *llamador*, represent the African contribution. The language and poetic form of the sung texts are of Hispanic origin. Therefore, this folkloric ensemble is an excellent example of syncretism, a viable fusion of the aboriginal America, African and European musical culture.”⁷⁴

This formulation is analogous to what Delia Zapata Olivella says about dance, and perhaps derived directly from it. Costeño music and dance function as ideal symbols for the idealized nation precisely because they preserve readily distinguishable elements from each of the parent cultures in a collaborative display. The articulations between the gaita, indigeneity, triethnic mixing, and the nation, so common in later discourse, are primarily the product of the Zapata Olivella siblings and later List.

21ST CENTURY SCHOLARSHIP

One of the byproducts of the heightened visibility of the gaita in the 1990s, discussed in Chapter 2, was that young, urban musicians embraced the instrument and its music. The informal aural training that had kept gaita traditions alive for decades found a new audience in cities, particularly in Bogotá where university students organized ensembles, shared hard-to-find recordings, and even brought musicians from the coast to the capital to teach and play. The following section examines two very similar texts that emerged from the gaita’s presence in Bogotá. One is *Gaiteros y tamboleros: Material para abordar el estudio de la música de gaitas de San Jacinto* (Gaita players and drummers: Study guide for the gaita music of San Jacinto), an impressive multimedia

⁷⁴ List, “El Conjunto De Gaitas De Colombia: La Herencia De Tres Culturas,” 53. Original: “El conjunto de gaitas de litoral atlántico de Colombia exhibe elementos derivados de tres culturas diferentes. La pareja de gaitas con acompañamiento de maraca representa la herencia aborígen americana. Los dos tambores, o sea el *tambor mayor* y el *llamador*, representan la contribución africana. El lenguaje y la forma poética de los textos cantados son de origen hispano. Por lo tanto, este conjunto folklorico es un excelente ejemplo de sincretismo, una fusión viable de las culturas musicales aborígen americana, africana y europea.”

book, CD, and DVD set by Leonor Convers and Juan Sebastián Ochoa, published by the Universidad Javeriana in 2007. The second is *El libro de la gaita larga* (The book of the long gaita) by Federico Ochoa, a still-unpublished project that the author was kind enough to share with me in manuscript form. The two efforts combine pedagogy and history in an effort to preserve and diffuse gaita traditions beyond regional and national borders. Notably, both texts spring from close collaboration across regional, class, and generational boundaries, and the authors preoccupy themselves with communicating the voice of older gaiteros. Some of those voices problematize the uncritical association of gaitas and indigeneity, resisting essentialist representations that typified earlier scholarship. They also embark on the difficult task of representing gaita music on the page, codifying a musical style whose long history of oral transmission resists formalization.

Gaiteros y tamboleros stands out for its thorough focus and scope. The authors offer equal parts history of gaita music in San Jacinto and multimedia content oriented toward teaching the basics of all the instruments in the conjunto de gaitas to someone who has little or no familiarity with the music. In the introduction, Carolina Santamaría praises the project for being at the vanguard of a practice ethnomusicology that takes the tradition of Mantle Hood a step further by “focusing on the experience and pleasure of playing,” and doing so with the clear objective of “preserving the practice of a musical tradition transmitted orally without fixing it on paper.”⁷⁵

The project’s narrow focus on San Jacinto grounds both the historical and practical aspects of the work in a particular musical culture without generalizing its conclusions beyond that frame. Citing extensive interviews conducted both in Bogotá and

⁷⁵ Convers & Ochoa, 12.

in la costa with musicians from the Montes de María region, especially gaitero Fredys Arrieta and tambolero Joche Plata, the ethnographic portion of the book allows musicians' voices to come through in a way that prior work on the region did not. Although they never say so explicitly, Convers and J.S. Ochoa's discussion of the relationship between the gaita music of San Jacinto and the various musical traditions in the surrounding region suggests that the town's centrality within la costa is important. The authors focus on what they characterize as the four "most representative genres of gaita music from San Jacinto": cumbia, gaita, porro, and puya.⁷⁶ They recognize that the genres are related, that they "share a cradle."⁷⁷ But they also recognize that each has a distinct story that connects San Jacinto to its surrounding areas. Without committing to a genealogical or hierarchical relationship between different styles, they do emphasize a dialogue between the San Jacinto cumbia on gaita and the accordion cumbia from Cartagena; between the porro on gaita, porro played by wind bands in Sincelejo, and *bullerengue*; between puya on gaita, *mapalé*, and Colombian *merengue*.⁷⁸

The most interesting of all these regional comparisons, however, involves what the authors call a "black style" of gaita performance. They state:

"There is, however, a no-less-important black tradition in gaita music. This corresponds to musicians of the black race... primarily from the plains surrounding the Montes de María, like San Onofre and María la Baja... In effect, we can speak of a black style and an indigenous style to gaita traditions, that although from a broad perspective belong to the same core and present clearly identifiable differences."⁷⁹

⁷⁶ Ibid, 40.

⁷⁷ Ibid, 42.

⁷⁸ Ibid, 41 and 75-6. Bullerengue, mapalé, and Colombian merengue are three of a large family of percussion and vocal styles known collectively as *bailes cantados*, literally "sung dances." They are most common in rural areas Colombian Caribbean and Pacific coasts, and have come to represent the strong African heritage of those regions.

⁷⁹ Ibid, 33. Original: "Hay sin embargo una no menos importante tradición negra en la música de gaitas. Ésta corresponde a músicos de raza negra... principalmente de regiones circundantes a los Montes de María, regiones sabaneras, como San Onofre y María la Baja... En efecto se puede hablar de un estilo

This black style, embodied by a handful of gaiteros like Sixto “Paíto” Silgado and Jesús María Sayas, presents a challenge to the discursive link between gaitas and indigeneity established by the Zapata Olivellas, List, and later scholars. As demonstrated previously, that link resulted from scholarship that cast the conjunto de gaita and cumbia as symbols of triethnic mestizaje and the nation. The fact that in a particular context the gaita can symbolize blackness cuts against the uncritical acceptance of gaitas as indigenous. For the authors of the book, as well as for these black gaiteros, reimagining the gaita as more than just a symbol of indigenous identity is an important project that attempts to displace an outdated nationalist discourse. In 1991, Colombia ratified a new Constitution that “recognizes and protects the ethnic and cultural diversity of the Nation.”⁸⁰ This formal recognition of the country’s ethnic minorities, especially as organized around the categories of indigeneity and blackness, was not only powerfully symbolic, but also explicitly guaranteed certain rights that ethnic minorities had claimed including collective ownership of land, official recognition of indigenous languages, and seats in the House of Representatives. We can situate the refashioning of gaita identity in the context of increased attention to the role of indigenous and black ethnic minorities.

Urián Sarmiento, a musician and scholar from Bogotá, has been at the forefront of bringing to light the black gaita tradition. He has organized recordings, produced documentaries, and arranged national and international tours for Paíto and Sayas. In a recent interview, Sarmiento credited the growth of local gaita festivals in the early 1990s as the opening that allowed these musicians and their styles to gain publicity.⁸¹ These festivals, the most notable of which are the Festival Nacional de Gaitas (held every

negro y un estilo indígena en la tradición gaitera, que aunque pertenezcan a un mismo núcleo desde un punto de vista amplio, presentan diferencias claramente definibles.”

⁸⁰ Colombian Constitution, Title I, Article 7, 1991.

⁸¹ *Sonido en Vivo, Sixto “Paíto” Silgado y Los Gaiteros De Punta Brava.*

October in Ovejas) and the Festival Autóctono de Gaitas (held every August in San Jacinto) are structured much like other folklore festivals throughout the country. Professional and amateur musicians compete in a range of categories, often more for the notoriety than for the modest cash prizes. Were it not for these festivals, it seems likely that the black gaita style would have remained in obscurity.

Paíto and Sayas's black gaita style, and as Sarmiento, Convers, J.S. Ochoa and others frame it, reinforce the tight link between race, region and music in la costa. The authors make the implicit claim that the black gaita style contests previously assumed links between gaitas and indigeneity and thus also challenges broader associations between race, region and style. Can we talk about a San Jacinto style in contrast to a San Juan style? Is there a difference between the black style of Paíto, who is from the Islas del Rosario, and the black style of Saya, who is from San Onofre? What are the "clearly definable differences" between the black and indigenous styles? Answering these questions requires not only close listening, but also a nuanced understanding of the racial and cultural history of the region. I agree with Convers and J.S. Ochoa that "the black style undoubtedly deserves greater research," but Sarmiento's efforts to document and preserve this style have reached some tentative conclusions.⁸² Convers and J.S. Ochoa point to two main differences between the black and indigenous styles: repertory and note duration. They believe that certain songs may be more common in the indigenous style than in the black style, or vice versa, although Sarmiento also points out that there is generally far more overlap than there is uniqueness in the two repertories.⁸³ In terms of note duration, they believe that indigenous gaiteros tend to play more legato, leaving few silent spaces, whereas one of the characteristics of the black style is a sharp, staccato

⁸² Convers & Ochoa, 18. Original quote: "El estilo negro merece sin duda otra investigación."

⁸³ Ibid, 90. Also see *Sonido en Vivo*.

approach that makes use of silent space between notes. These differences are audible, if subtle. Some authors and interviewees then make the less tenable leap from differences in note duration to associating the legato style with an “indigenous nostalgia” and the staccato style with a “black exuberance.”⁸⁴ As this illustrates, however, the very recognition of difference is predicated on existing racial and ethnic stereotypes that persist in a new typology. Thus, the process of recognizing a black gaita style may reinforce rather than destabilize existing racial categories.

Turning now to the second recent work on gaitas, F. Ochoa frames *El libro de la gaita larga* in a very similar way to Convers and J.S. Ochoa’s *Gaiteros y tamboleros*. Again, there is a tight focus on the Montes de María region, although F. Ochoa barely mentions the black gaita tradition. Both studies illustrate a self-awareness about the difficulty of fixing gaita music to the page through transcription, while suggesting that such an effort nevertheless constitutes “an efficient method for conserving, analyzing, distributing and understanding [gaita music] better,” not just “Westernizing the gaita.”⁸⁵ Both studies developed simultaneously, and both cite each other, although F. Ochoa claims that his work will prioritize the performance of gaitas themselves over other instruments.⁸⁶ The overlap between the two projects – in content, publisher, sources, and educational tone – is in itself notable as a sign of the relatively sudden interest in this type of scholarship. Renewed interest in gaita music must be taken as part of a larger trend to attend to cultural practices that index the local and the national in a context of

⁸⁴ Convers & Ochoa, 89.

⁸⁵ Federico Ochoa, 17 (footnote 7).

⁸⁶ Personal correspondence with Federico Ochoa.

increasingly translocal and transnational.⁸⁷ As F. Ochoa notes, “the study of our folklore is coming into fashion.”⁸⁸

Like Convers and J.S. Ochoa, F. Ochoa offers yet another surprising corrective to previous scholarship. According to him, the main genres played by gaita are the gaita corrido, porro and puya. There is one glaring absence; F. Ochoa notes, “it is worth clarifying that this work does not include cumbia because it is a rhythm of millo music, and its interpretation is not common on gaita.”⁸⁹ This omission seems to drastically contradict most scholarship on gaitas, from the Zapata Olivellas to Convers and J.S. Ochoa, as well as the comments of musicians themselves. As mentioned earlier, the conceptual link between gaitas and cumbia occurred at some point in the mid-20th century thanks in part to early scholarly work, but also because gaiteros started describing their music as cumbia. Today the connection is taken for granted to the point that gaita music is synonymous with folkloric cumbia. Thus, cumbia is recognized both as a specific rhythm played by gaita ensembles and as an umbrella term for most if not all gaita music.

F. Ochoa’s separation of gaita and cumbia repertoires might be viewed as a radical move, yet there is an alternative interpretation: that he is trying to emphasize musical differences in millo and gaita repertoire. All scholars who have written about gaita and cumbia acknowledge differences between cumbia as played by millo, gaita, and accordion ensembles. There is no consensus as to what such differences are, although they seem to relate to tempo, with cumbia on millo being the fastest or most “festive” variant and cumbia on gaita the slowest and most “melancholic.”⁹⁰ Differences may also

⁸⁷ See Ana María Ochoa (2003).

⁸⁸ F. Ochoa, 17.

⁸⁹ F. Ochoa, 44. Original quote: “Vale la pena aclarar que no se incluye en este apartado el ritmo de cumbia, porque es un ritmo típico de la música de millo y no es frecuente su interpretación en la música de gaitas.”

⁹⁰ Convers & Ochoa, 79-80.

arise from the inherent characteristics of the instruments. Accordions allow chromaticism that the gaita and millo do not; the gaita hembra tends to favor certain diatonic intervals and makes use of distinctive bird-like trills in high registers; the microtonal pitch variations possible on the millo lend themselves to expressive, quavering melodies. Also, gaita ensembles' approach to the more common rhythms of gaita corrida and porro probably influences their approach to the cumbia rhythm in terms of tempo, melodic phrasing, and dialogue between the gaitas and percussion. In fact, Convers and J.S. Ochoa cite interviews with musicians who suggest that the only difference between the gaita corrida and cumbia compositions is the inclusion of lyrics in the latter.⁹¹ But comparing the cumbia of millo, gaita, and accordion ensembles also reveals similarities that make any differences between them appear as ones of degree and not of kind. As explained in the introduction, the term 'cumbia' has come to mean many different things in different places, and its generic use is increasingly ambiguous. F. Ochoa's narrow definition thus brings attention to its meaning in a very specific local context.

F. Ochoa's intervention redraws the spatial, racial and musical map of la costa. It aligns cumbia with Cartagena and its demographically black surroundings, while aligning gaitas with the Montes de María and indigeneity. The statement that cumbia "is not common on gaita," which only some would accept and then only in a very narrow sense, suggests that what musicians and audiences call cumbia when played on gaita is either mislabeled or an adaptation of a closely related genre. As gaitas become more visible (and audible) in different contexts, strict definitions like the one F. Ochoa adopts may prove to be so conservative that they limit musicians' ability and agency to craft identities precisely out of the ambiguities and loose boundaries at play. For those reasons I suspect

⁹¹ Ibid, 79.

that F. Ochoa's contributions will probably be more welcome for preserving a subsection of gaita music via transcriptions than for his distinctions between cumbia and gaita. In general, to the extent that both *El libro de la gaita larga* and *Gaiteros y tamboleros* challenge earlier scholarship, they also rearticulate the relationship between music, race and region in a way that is always subject to changing local imperatives.

CHAPTER 4: Modernizing Tradition

In the previous chapters I focused on the gaita as a vehicle for tradition, whether in the staged folklore of Los Gaiteros de San Jacinto or in the academic projects of scholars discussed in Chapter 2. In this chapter I consider musicians for whom gaita tradition is a point of departure and often also a style against which they distinguish themselves as innovators. In three case studies I will explore the music of three very different gaita players—Juancho Nieves, Mayte Montero, and Urián Sarmiento—who bring the instrument into new contexts, challenging the boundaries commonly associated with gaita tradition even while they are clearly influenced by that tradition. Nieves, Montero and Sarmiento are all students, friends, and even advocates of traditional gaita performance and gaiteros. But in their own music they have pursued alternatives to such performance. Thus, they often frame their work in terms of modernizing the gaita, bringing it up to speed so it can participate alongside other contemporary music. To listen to the music of these artists is to hear the sometimes easy and sometimes tense dialogue between the discourses of tradition and modernity. Rather than resolving that tension, I suggest that these artists are consciously exploring an in-between space that reflects a discourse of the nation as both simultaneously traditional and modern.

TUNING THE GAITA: JUANCHO NIEVES AND ELBER ÁLVAREZ

Sahagún is a quaint colonial town of eighty thousand people, approximately half way between Montería and Sincelejo, the respective capital cities of the Córdoba and Sucre departments. This means that Sahagún is in the heart of porro country. Porro is the upbeat wind band music that developed in the 19th century from military marching bands playing popular dance rhythms. Most commentators include porro in the family of

costeño rhythms which List calls the “cumbia complex” (see chapter 3), although its distinct sound and style mark it as something very different from cumbia. However, one of the most notable musical experiments taking place in Sahagún does not involve porro, and that is primarily due to the town’s most notable musician, Juan “Juancho” Nieves.

Nieves is not originally from Sahagún. He was born in nearby Planeta Rica, the youngest brother in a family of well-to-do musicians. He studied music in Bogotá, and in his early twenties he moved to the southwestern region of Colombia, playing and teaching guitar and Andean wind instruments such as the *quena* and *zampoñas*. In the mid-1990s he returned to la costa for family reasons, and after his father’s passing he inherited a house in Sahagún two blocks away from the town square. The subsequent decision to settle in Sahagún changed his life. He met and married a costeña singer, became a key figure in the local music scene, and, given his experience with the quena, he decided to turn his attention to the gaita. Even after fifteen years in Sahagún Nieves stands out, not so much for his light skin or his eccentric facial hair, but rather for his singular blend of Bogotá and costeño accents and customs.

The turn toward gaita music put him in touch with Elber Álvarez, a young clarinetist and flautist who played with a porro band but who was also interested in gaita, especially a lesser-known type of gaita called the *gaita corta* or *gaita machihembriá*. These two names capture the two key attributes of the gaita corta. First, the instrument is short, only about half the length of the standard gaita (incidentally, some people now use the term *gaita larga* to refer to the more common gaitas, just to be clear). Second, the gaita corta has six finger holes, as many as the four holes of the larger gaita hembra and the two in the gaita macho combined. Presumably, people mistakenly thought that the creation of an instrument with six holes resulted from combining the larger macho and hembra gaitas in some way; hence the name, which literally translates to roughly “male-

female'd.” This assumption makes little sense from a historical or technical perspective, especially because the pitches played on the larger gaita macho actually double with pitches played on the gaita hembra. Thus, most people prefer the ‘gaita corta’ moniker. Regardless of these debates, what is certain is that by having six holes the gaita corta has a more intuitive relationship to the Western diatonic scale: seven different finger positions, one for each scale degree.⁹² Although there is no research that I know of on the history of the gaita corta, performers state that it has existed as long as the gaita larga. Álvarez told me that he believes the gaita corta represents a link between gaita larga traditional repertoire and porro music. Gaita corta ensembles today resemble gaita larga ensembles except that they include only one gaitero; instead of having a gaita macho performer who plays both the macho and the maracas simultaneously, there is just a *maraquero* who plays two maracas.



Figure 4.1: Gaita corta made by Elber Álvarez. Photo by the author.

Inspired by the affinity between the gaita corta scale and Western music, and also armed with his formal training on Western wind instruments, Álvarez set out to develop

⁹² The gaita larga is also diatonic, but there are only five different finger positions.

an equal-tempered gaita. Largely through trial and error, experimenting with different material and tools, he developed a new method for making gaitas. In order to offer a comparison, first let me offer a brief description of the traditional method for making gaitas, broken down into three discrete steps: preparing the duct, making and mounting the head, and placing the finger holes. I rely primarily on descriptions and demonstrations given to me by Fredys Arrieta, mentioned in Chapter 2 as founder of Los Bajeros del Monte and member of the group that tours as Los Gaiteros de San Jacinto.

Preparing the duct: Arrieta begins with a cardón cactus stalk that has already dried completely. He hollows out the soft, vascular center of the cactus with a thin stick, and then using a small machete or knife he cuts away the green skin of the stalk, leaving a hollow roughly cylindrical tube about 2cm in diameter. He measures the length of the tube as the distance from the center of his chest to the fingertips of his outstretched arm.

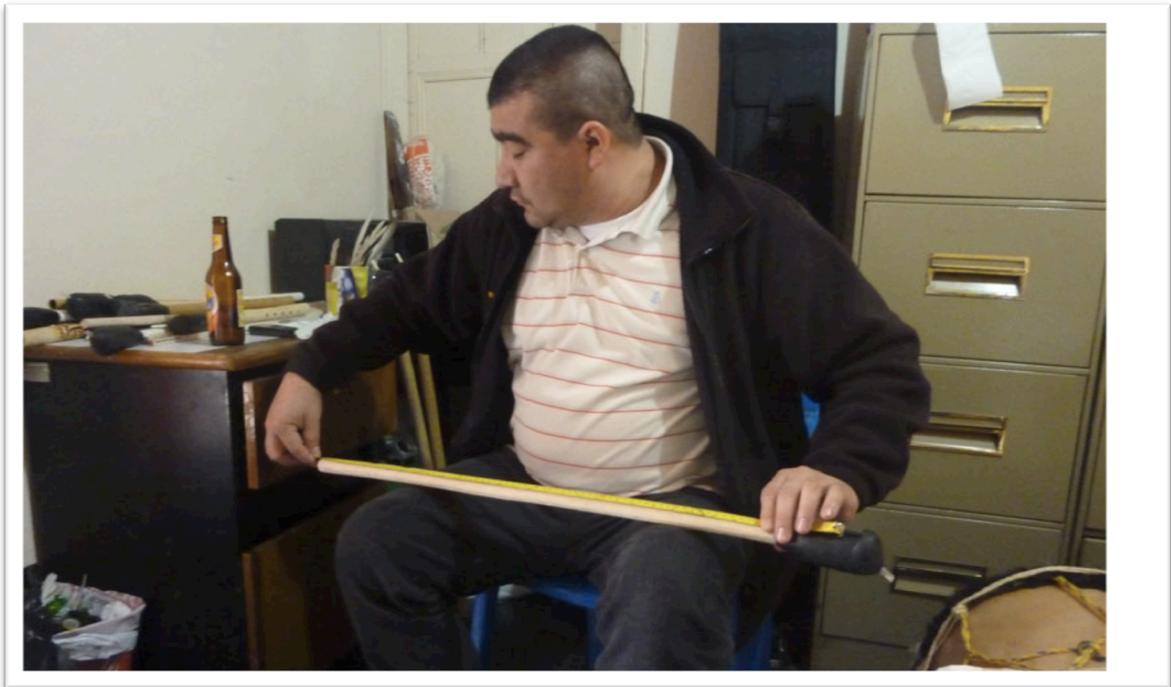


Figure 4.2: Fredys Arrieta measuring a gaita at his workshop in Bogotá. Photo by the author.

Making and mounting the head: Arrieta heats up beeswax in a pot until it reaches a liquid consistency, at which point he adds shavings of charred wood, stirring until the wax turns black. Then he takes the pot off the heat source, and as the wax resolidifies it reaches a moldable state. He takes a lump of wax and expertly molds it around one end of the tube, leaving a slight gap. To improve the grip of the wax on the tube, gaita makers wrap some thin twine on the tube before mounting the head, so that the wax adheres to it as well as to the stalk. A similar technique is used on the quill, which is then set onto the head using a straight, thin rod in order to align it so that air blow through will strike the gap in the wax along the end of the tube. Once aligned, Arrieta uses some more wax to finish securing the quill in place.

Placing the finger holes: Actually making the holes is easy. Arrieta takes a piece of rebar (usually the same one used to hollow out the duct) and heats it up (usually on the same heat source used for the wax) until it begins to glow. The hot metal burns right through the wall of the cactus. What is more difficult is knowing where to place the holes; different gaita makers have different methods for measuring the distances between them. Arrieta told me that older gaiteros place the bottom hole, which is the same note on gaitas hembra and macho, using the width of their four fingers, and that every successive hole should be spaced two fingers' widths apart. Arrieta, however, used a plastic guide made from PVC that allowed him to mark with an awl where the holes should be, then he would burn them through with the hot rebar.

This method of gaita construction preserves many traditional elements, but it also demonstrates recent material adaptations. The use of 1cm rebar by many (though not all)

gaita makers has helped standardize construction. As seen in Figure 4.2, Arrieta uses measuring tape, not his arms, to determine the length of the duct. As mentioned in chapter 2, the mix of wax and charred wood has changed to accommodate different climates. Many gaita makers, especially in Bogotá, have stopped using bird quills since they are harder to come by and instead use the plastic shaft of thin, commercially available syringes. Even Arrieta's unabashed use of a PVC guide to make the holes suggests ways in which gaitas construction has changed in recent generations.

Returning to Elber Álvarez, the changes he has introduced in the fabrication of tempered gaitas are numerous and substantial. First, there is an almost scientific commitment to standardization. Instead of using cactus for the body, he uses an industrially milled wooden shaft and lathes out its interior to guarantee a uniform air column. He uses plastic mouthpieces because quills are “fragile” and “irregular.” However he doesn't use the syringe mouthpieces either, opting instead for a tube that is both smaller in diameter (to preserve air pressure) and has thicker walls (to increase durability). The greatest evidence of his drive to standardize is of course in the tuning and placement of the finger holes. Using a digital tuner, Álvarez ensures that the length of the tube produces a tuned fundamental. For the gaita larga this is usually a G, and for the gaita corta it is usually an F. To tune this fundamental he uses a belt sander to shorten the tube, thus increasing its pitch by very small increments. With the fundamental tuned, he then uses a guide to mark where the center of the rest of the holes should be. Unlike Arrieta, Álvarez does not use rebar to puncture the stalk, but instead a small drill, fine-tuning each note. To guarantee equal tempering, the holes are not the same diameter nor are they evenly spaced. Álvarez's approach results in an instrument with consistent tuning, greater melodic range, a more durable construction, and a more standardized sound and feel.

While these may appear to be positive attributes, Arrieta told me that although he appreciated Álvarez's instruments, he thought they sounded more like recorders than gaitas. This statement implies an adherence to certain acoustic and aesthetic values that go against the Western ideals of "pure" tone and equal-tempered tuning. A very specific example of where these values clash is over one note in particular on the gaita larga. Keeping in mind that there is substantial variety in the tunings of traditionally-made gaitas, most outline roughly a natural minor (Aeolian) scale in A. But, as Convers and J.S. Ochoa note, the second scale degree is usually flatter than a B, often so flat that it sounds more like a Bb, thus outlining a Phrygian scale. The second pitch of the scale not only varies from gaita to gaita, but it varies depending on the register. In the Convers and Ochoa project they note that Arrieta's gaita produces something closer to an Aeolian scale in the first register and a Phrygian in the second. They talk at length about this discrepancy, but ultimately offer a musical analysis in A Aeolian, justifying it by saying that they "believe that it is not the intention of the musician to change mode [by playing a Bb], but rather that it is a peculiarity that results from the hand-crafted nature of the instrument, whereas the real intention is to play a B."⁹³ For Álvarez this inconsistency presents a dilemma, specifically whether to tune the gaitas to an Aeolian or Phrygian mode. By placing the hole slightly higher than in traditional gaitas he sets the second note as a B, and by making the hole a little smaller he ensures that it stays tuned in different registers. Rather than determining whether this approach is best, I use disagreements on this issue as an illustration of the distinct guiding principles that influence gaita makers.

Álvarez is one of the most skilled gaiteros in the region, both on gaita larga and gaita corta, and is best known for his work alongside Juancho Nieves. When Nieves

⁹³ Convers & Ochoa, 120.

moved back to la costa, he worked with several gaiteros on recording projects, primarily in the role of producer and arranger, but he was dissatisfied with the limitations of the gaita when it came to performing with instruments outside the gaita ensemble, precisely because of the issues discussed above related to tuning and tonal consistency. In collaboration with Álvarez, Nieves has developed several modified gaitas that address this issue. One kind of modification relies on the fact that by using non-traditional materials such as wood they can standardize certain physical elements, in this case allowing for detaching the head of the gaita from the body. Figure 4.3 shows six of their modified gaitas, tuned in chromatic intervals from D to G. The new instruments allow for easy switching between common keys to match the key of a particular piece without having to rely on the technique of half-holing to access tones not part of the harmonic series. Another modification the two have introduced is to create gaitas that play in new pitches ranges. Figure 4.4 shows one of their baritone gaitas, created by adding tubing to increase the effective length of the air column and by having keys on rods to facilitate fingering, not unlike the approach taken in many families of Western wind instruments. With the baritone instrument, Nieves is able to create four-part arrangements for gaita in SATB form: the extra-long gaita plays the baritone line, the gaita macho the tenor, the gaita hembra the alto, and the gaita corta the soprano.



Figure 4.3: Tuned gaitas cottas with removable head made by Elber Álvarez. Photo by the author.



Figure 4.4: Baritone gaita made by Elber Álvarez. Photo by the author.

In the SATB format, Nieves has arranged a variety of styles from the coast, including songs traditionally played on gaitas, repertoire from porro wind bands, and vallenato ensembles. In 2009, Nieves arranged a four-part version of the Colombian

national anthem, a stately march in Eb. In 2010, Playing for Change, a non-profit organization that produces music using mobile recording technologies, allowing artists to collaborate without ever meeting face-to-face, made a version of pop-vallenato star Carlos Vives's hit song "La tierra del olvido" (The Land of Forgetting). Playing for Change producers asked Nieves to score a gaita part referencing the gaita melody used in the original version of the song. Vives's song lyrics make romanticized references to "the land of forgetting" in a way that straddles the line between love song, nostalgia, and patriotism. Vives's reference to 'land' is ambiguous and open to listener interpretation, although the reference to 'forgetting' resonates with a common theme in literature of and from la costa, most notably in the work of García Márquez. The patchwork of voices, made visible in a video that has attracted nearly a million views on YouTube, paint a picture of national pride and harmony.⁹⁴ Both in Nieves's approach to traditional repertoire and in projects like the Playing for Change, the gaita participates in a cross-stylistic musical discourse of the nation from which it was previously largely absent. Nieves explicitly said to me he believes that tuned gaita is the most representative instrument of the nation, more so than the accordion or the *tiple*⁹⁵ both of which have European origins. The tuned gaita, he argues, is uniquely Colombian, of indigenous roots, but ultimately the product of mestizaje unique to la costa and reflective of the tension between tradition and modernity which he views a hallmark of Colombian society.

⁹⁴ Video is available at http://www.playingforchange.com/episodes/53/La_Tierra_del_Olvido.

⁹⁵ The tiple is a 12-string guitar unique to the interior of Colombia. Its strings are arranged into four sets of three courses in D-G-B-E tuning, distinguishing it from the North American tiple of the early 20th century. The Colombian tiple features prominently in several different genres of Colombian string music.

GAITA GOES POP: CARLOS VIVES AND MAYTE MONTERO

In 1993, Carlos Vives scored his first international hit with the song “La gota fría” (The Cold Sweat), the opening track on the album *Clásicos de la Provincia* (Classics of the Province⁹⁶). The song and the album’s success came as a surprise to many for various reasons. First, the album, made up entirely of “rockified” cover versions of vallenato “classics” from the early days of the genre, featured songs with provincial themes and references to specific places in la costa. This was a far cry from the crooner-oriented, romantic vallenato popular in the late 1980s and early 1990s.⁹⁷ Second, Vives was not an established artist. He was a television actor whose good looks and authentic costeño accent (Vives was born and raised in Santa Marta) earned him a starring role in a soap opera based on the life of vallenato composer Rafael Escalona. The success of the soap resulted in two albums of Escalona’s best known songs as performed by Vives, but they were more of a novelty associated with the soap opera rather than fully fledged, stand-alone projects. Third, the band Vives assembled for the project, called La Provincia, (which creates a play on words in album title), included an unorthodox combination of instruments. There were the core vallenato elements: accordion (played by virtuoso Egidio Cuadrado, a musician who had also participated in the soap opera), the *caja* drum, and *guacharaca* scraper. Other tropical/Caribbean instruments that had become common in larger vallenato production were also present: the timbales, congas, together with electric bass and keyboards. Less common was the steel-string guitar, played by Vives, and a lead electric guitar and full drum kit, more reminiscent of rock than vallenato. Perhaps the most surprising addition to the lineup was the inclusion of a gaita.

⁹⁶ The album is a play on words because Vives’s band is also called ‘La Provincia.’

⁹⁷ Wade, *Music, Race and Nation*, 217.

Of course, read another way, the success of *La Provincia* fits a common pop music narrative. Vives's handsome looks, his voice, and most importantly his fame as a pop icon in Colombia connected to vallenato made him an ideal frontman. In Vives's own words, he saw himself as an "Elvis of the Magdalena River."⁹⁸ The repertoire on his album, although dated in certain ways, highlighted the music as local to not just la costa, but specifically Valledupar as the cradle of vallenato. Even though most people who heard the album had no context for such insider references, they were unequivocally local, calling out places and people at the heart of the vallenato tradition.

If the original repertoire pointed inward to vallenato traditions, the band's extended format and the arrangements pointed outward and made the music accessible to a new audience from other parts of the nation and the world. Heavily produced in the studio, the sound associated with *Clásicos de la Provincia* made no attempt to correspond to the vallenato of an earlier generation, but instead referenced a popular fusion squarely in the mold of similar "world" music projects since the late 1980s. Music videos featuring Vives, with his signature long, curly hair and cutoff jean shorts, and the rest of the band traipsing around la costa embodied this dual signification: the images were local yet accessible to a global audience, traditional yet glossed with modern style. Carolina Santamaría has identified this moment as the precursor of a "new Colombian music" participating in the "recuperation and reinterpretation of local musics."⁹⁹

To hear Vives's project as a reinterpretation of local music for a new audience begs the question of the role of the gaita in his arrangements. The gaita is neither part of vallenato traditions nor part of the rock sound for which Vives earned much acclaim and criticism. In this section I compare Vives's first international album, *Clásicos de la*

⁹⁸ Sheehy, 23.

⁹⁹ Santamaría, 2.

Provincia (1993), with his equally successful follow up, *La tierra del olvido* (1995), and suggest that his use of the gaita is key to the symbolic negotiation of regional and national identity in his music. The gaita announces that his arrangements aspire to be more than just a vallenato-rock blend, but rather a fusion of different Colombian styles ready for presentation to the world. The success of *Clásicos de la Provincia*, especially “La gota fría,” paved the way for *La tierra del olvido*, Vives’s first album of original material, in which he embraces this pan-national fusion even more aggressively and places the gaita in a more prominent position.

One of the striking facts about Vives’s use of gaita in *Clásicos de la Provincia* is how sparingly the instrument appears. It is only on four of the CD’s fifteen tracks—“La gota fría,” “Amor sensible” (Sensitive Love), “La hamaca grande” (The Big Hammock), and “La cañaguatera” (The Woman From Cañaguate)—and even then only in a limited fashion, by my count for no longer than a total of four minutes. Whenever the instrument does appear it plays a solo where there would usually be an accordion line. In “La hamaca grande,” right before the gaita enters, Vives shouts “San Jacinto, *linda tierra!*” (beautiful land!), drawing attention to the instrument’s association with that region. This is fitting, given that the song is a paean to la costa, written by San Jacinto-born Adolfo Pacheco. Yet why bring in a gaita player to play so little? I believe that the answer lies in the fact that the musician who plays gaita on the CD is Antonio Arnedo, a renowned Colombian jazz saxophonist. Arnedo, born in la costa, trained at the country’s best conservatories and later at Berklee School of Music in Boston, and is not known primarily as a gaita player. That he picked up the instrument for this album suggests to me that Vives was searching for a folkloric sound, and the capable Arnedo did what he could on an instrument that is not his primary expressive vehicle. Listening to the gaita solos, the lines Arnedo plays are lyrical, but lack certain characteristic gaita flourishes

and trills. By contrast, Arnedo's saxophone stands out in songs like "Altos del Rosario" (Rosario Heights), the only song without accordion.

Arnedo's contribution to the project did not go beyond the recording and a few performances. Very soon after the album's release, Vives hired Mayte Montero to play gaita. Evidence of this abrupt personnel shift can be found in the music videos, all of which appeared shortly after initial sales suggested the release would be a big success. The video to "La gota fría" shows Montero, not Arnedo, playing gaita. During the saxophone solo in "Alicia adorada," the video cuts away from the band playing to center on outdoor scenery. Even more strangely, in the videos to "Amor sensible" and "La hamaca grande" we see Vives doing a very poor job of pretending to play gaita corta. Although I did not find much information on Arnedo's departure, it is clear that his contributions to La Provincia were limited, and that once Montero joined the group Vives had found the gaita player he was looking for.

At first, Montero seems an unlikely candidate to stand in for gaita tradition. Although she was born in la costa, specifically Cartagena, she did not grow up in a musical family, much less one connected to the gaita. She only started playing gaita in her late teens, at which time she was already in college studying business administration. Montero entered a world of musical performance in which women rarely if ever assumed the role of instrumentalist, more often participating as singers or dancers. But despite these obstacles, Montero became proficient at the instrument after taking classes from several gaita players who had moved from the Montes de María region to Cartagena. She quit school when she got her first big break, an offer to perform with Totó la Momposina. At that time, Totó was already one of Colombia's best-known folkloric artists from la costa, singing cumbia with a percussion ensemble billed as Totó y sus Tambores. The group had traveled nationally and internationally, notably performing at Gabriel García

Márquez's Nobel Prize ceremony in Stockholm in 1982. In 1990, Montero joined the group for a serendipitous European tour, where they came to the attention of Peter Gabriel, whose RealWorld Records was one of the pioneering labels in the "world" music scene. With Gabriel, the group recorded their first widely available commercial release, *La candela viva* (Living Fire), released in 1992.¹⁰⁰

The exposure from the tour and the CD increased demand for Montero, eventually bringing her to the attention of Carlos Vives. However, by that time Vives had completed recording *Clásicos de la Provincia*. So in order to hear Montero's gaita performance on studio releases we must turn to Vives's much anticipated follow up album, *La tierra del olvido*. This second release opens with "Pa' Mayte" (For Mayte), an upbeat dance number that does not feature gaita, but is dedicated to the new member of the band, announcing her presence. The song would go on to become one of the album's hit singles with its catchy call-and-response structure. The next four songs give a sense of how the album expands out from a focus on vallenato to incorporate other styles from the Colombian coast. Track 2, "Fidelina," is a cover of a classic vallenato by Alejandro Durán. The accordion kicks off the track, but is soon joined by a *marímbula* (African-derived thumb piano) and a tambora, two instruments that clearly reference Afro-Colombian music and that do not overlap with vallenato at all in traditional repertoire. Then the gaita joins in and remains prominent throughout the rest of the track, with almost as much gaita heard in this number as in the entire previous album. Montero's gaita plays short phrases in ostinato, similarly to the melodies common in the gaita rhythm. In the music video we not only see Montero playing gaita, but also shots of Vives carrying a gaita and playing the *marímbula*. Track 3 is the title track, "La tierra del

¹⁰⁰ The album features Montero's gaita hembra on the track "Curura," which is a remake of the tune "Ay Currura" by Los Gaiteros de San Jacinto. The version with Montero on gaita is notable because in 2003 it was sampled by rapper and producer Timbaland for the mildly successful track "Indian Flute."

olvido,” which I have already discussed briefly in the previous section with regards to *Playing for Change* and Juancho Nieves. In Vives’s version, the gaita surfaces during the bridge, in A-minor, which as I have discussed is the “home” key for gaita larga. The music video presents several indigenous Arahuaeco people and during the gaita bridge we see beautiful aerial shots of indigenous villages and sites from the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta. Track 4, “Zoila,” is one of the best-known songs by Toño Fernández, founder of Los Gaiteros, so it is not surprising that Montero’s gaita features prominently. In several moments during the song one hears a gaita macho and maraca clearly, and the accordion bass pattern imitates the gaita macho ostinato. This is a much more overt inclusion of traditional gaita repertoire, although still in the context of fusion, with a big drum kit and electric guitars with wah-wah pedals. Track 5, “Rosa,” is a cumbia by Afro-Colombian singer Irene Martínez, and the Vives arrangement places the conjunto de gaita percussion—alegre, llamador, tambora, and maraca—conspicuously forward in the mix. The gaita flute and accordion assume a secondary role, and electric bass, guitar, and an organ keep the song’s i-V7 harmonic progression pulsing throughout.

La tierra del olvido features six other songs, three originals and three vallenato covers. In listening to the album it is apparent that once Vives became established as a fusion artist, he aimed to represent the broader soundscape of la costa. The fledgling attempts at using the gaita in *Clásicos de la Provincia* suggest this was a strategy early on; once unmoored from a strict commitment to vallenato, Vives embraced this through novel use of a range of traditional and modern instruments in both studio recordings and music videos. Janet Sturman has called Vives’s approach a “techno-macondismo,” referring to a term coined by Colombia’s Nobel Prize-winning author Gabriel García Márquez in that both re-conceive of the region by reconfiguring the relationship between

old and new, traditional and modern.¹⁰¹ Key among the symbols manipulated by Vives was the gaita, in the capable hands of Mayte Montero, who pushed the instrument's sound outside its traditional boundaries while still maintaining its regional connotations. Similarly Egidio Cuadrado's accordion and the use of various instruments marked as Afro-Colombian all add to a sense of regional and national unity in and through music. Similar to the way the conjunto de gaitas functioned in the past as a metaphor for the triethnic nation, this new ensemble—often glossed as *fusión*—symbolizes a postmodern nation, rooted in its traditions but in dialogue with global music trends.

CURUPIRA: GAITA FUSION IN BOGOTÁ

Carlos Vives ushered in an era of commercially oriented fusion music in Colombia. Mayte Montero started her own side project in a similar vein by featuring gaita playing at the head of danceable tropical fusion. Singers such as Fonseca and Andrés Cabas followed neatly in Vives's footsteps as well, blending vallenato and cumbia in ways accessible to young, urban audiences. Vives himself was by the late 1990s working with producer Emilio Estefan in Miami on albums that had enough references to Colombia as to be distinct from other Latin music, but still accessible to international pan-Latino audiences.¹⁰² Simultaneously, another kind of fusion was taking place, primarily in Bogotá. At the helm of this were many of the members of Vives's band who organized side projects that intentionally avoided the mass commercialism and exposure of La Provincia. The most notable of these was the group Bloque de Búsqueda, an initiative of Vives's longtime guitarist, Ernesto "Teto" Ocampo, and producer Iván Benavides. In the words of drummer Pablo Bernal who worked in both La Provincia and Bloque, this kind of fusion was fueled by "the search to make honest music with

¹⁰¹ Sturman, 156.

¹⁰² Ana María Ochoa, 54.

musicians who were not interested in being on the radio. It was music for music's sake."¹⁰³ Although the Bloque project did not last long, fading after a brief flash in the pan on David Byrne's Luaka Bop label, the members' commitment to producing fusion music for music's sake overlaps with other stories of how musicians have incorporated the sounds of la costa into new musical contexts and textures primarily as aesthetic experiments rather than as commercial enterprises. In this brief section, which I offer partly as a conclusion to the whole report, I focus on one such project, Curupira, which calls itself "progressive Colombian folkore."¹⁰⁴

Curupira is the brainchild of Juan Sebastián Monsalve and Urián Sarmiento. Both are from Bogotá and both graduated from the music department at the Universidad Pontificia Javeriana in 1997, Monsalve studying bass and Sarmiento studying percussion. After that they spent a year in India studying sitar and tabla, respectively, and upon returning to Colombia they realized that their formal musical education had taught them very little about traditional Colombian music. Sarmiento in particular sought out traditional musicians, traveling to the coast to work with many gaiteros already mentioned, including Fredys Arrieta, Toño García, and Sixto "Paíto" Silgado, as well as famed gaita percussionist Encarnación "El Diablo" Tovar. Under Monsalve's direction, they formed an experimental group with friends to create a space in which to use rhythms and instruments from la costa in a new setting. The group has independently released three albums, *Pa'lante Pa'trá* (Forward Backward, 2000), *Puya que te coge* (Puya That Grabs You, 2001) and *El fruto* (The Fruit, 2003). After a long hiatus in which members

¹⁰³ Bacánika, "Bloque De Búsqueda: Lejos De Casa." Original: "...Se buscaba hacer música honesta a partir de personas a las que no les interesaba aparecer en radio. Era la música por la música."

¹⁰⁴ Curupira website, accessed 11/26/12.

pursued other projects, when I interviewed Sarmiento in 2011 he was preparing material for a new collective album.

What does “progressive folklore” sound like? For one, it sounds live. Curupira’s studio albums don’t lack production value, but it’s sometimes hard to tell the difference between *Puya que te coje*, which was recorded live, and the other two albums. This lack of mediation between the music and the listener suggests authenticity, literally adopting Bernal’s claim to “honest music.” The songs for the most part are also not lyric-oriented in the way that more commercial fusion is. The first album is completely instrumental. The only song with lyrics on the second album is a cover of a cumbia by Andrés Landeros. On the *El fruto* release, some songs use vocal call and response, but without a lyric-driven narrative these come off not like choruses but like chants. Again, Bernal’s words seem to ring full force: this is not radio music. Not only is there no lead vocalist, but for the most part there really are no background instruments. In an aesthetic more reminiscent of jazz than of pop, rock, or cumbia (in which there’s usually an instrument keeping time), Curupira sounds like a space of organized improvisation. The bass, gaitas, electric guitar, alegre drums, drum kit, and tambora all get their turns to solo at some point, usually with more than one solo occurring per song. Sarmiento’s gaita solos are very much in keeping with earlier gaita practice, relying on and regularly returning to short motives, liberally embellishing with piercing trills in high registers, and playing off ostinato patterns in the bass and/or gaita macho. Despite these clear references to folkloric music, the overall texture of the recordings is decidedly progressive, and it “presents an idea of the ‘local’ not linked to rigid notions of tradition, but is instead malleable and fluid due to the importance placed on innovation.”¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁵ Santamaría, 6.

One might argue that Curupira, like Carlos Vives and Juancho Nieves, approach fusion projects from a substantially different position than Los Gaiteros. Some would go so far as to criticize fusion groups for taking advantage of their privileged social status to appropriate a musical tradition for personal gain. These criticisms are evident in statements that Nieves's gaitas sound more like recorders or that Carlos Vives does not play true vallenato. These discourses police the boundaries of tradition in a way that reveals an investment in upholding certain rigid categorizations. In a way, they bring us back to one of the central themes framing analysis in this report, namely the question of who gets to make such claims and police these the boundaries of heritage. The three fusion examples I have offered all interface differently with the discourse of tradition and suggest different answers to the question of who can claim tradition as their own. Nieves and Álvarez's tuned gaitas attempt to capture the instrument's symbolic role while altering (they might say improving) the instrument's technical features, allowing it to function in a modern context. In so doing they implicitly reorient certain aesthetic and performance variables in a way that traditional gaiteros find inappropriate. Here the tuned gaitas themselves represent disjuncture between tradition and modernity, and arguably their success in bridging the gap will depend on whether the instruments are eventually adopted by other gaiteros. For Vives, bridging the gap between tradition and innovation is a secondary concern. He places his stake squarely with a form of nationalist modernity that involves an acoustic reconstruction of la costa and the nation through sound. Vives has based his career on intentionally bucking tradition while remaining in dialogue with it. Unlike Nieves, he is not interested in altering regional practice; on the contrary he reinforces it with racial and regional references that perpetuate the tension between tradition and modernity, periphery and center, the local and global.

Curupira, in my opinion, offers an alternative to either of these bounded modifications of tradition, evidenced in their projects that promote and incorporate traditional gaiteros alongside and within their own fusions in several ways. First, they feature older gaiteros on their albums, especially those from the “black gaita” tradition discussed in Chapter 3. Second, they have helped produce CDs for the same gaiteros and have organized tours for them in Colombia and abroad. Third, their most recent CD is heavily influenced by music from Colombia’s Pacific coast and the eastern plains, suggesting a commitment to a national definition of tradition, one that tackles even the centrality of the Atlantic coast within the national imaginary in favor of a more pluralistic notion of what the nation sounds like. This varied approach implicitly questions the bounded nature of gaita traditions, yet simultaneously highlights how they have and can continue to serve as tools of social agency. In this context, Hobsbawm and Ranger’s allowance of “genuine” traditions in a book that famously described its frequently “invented” nature seems to make sense. By using the gaita in new ways, Curupira recognizes the invented nature of all musical tradition including that of gaiteros, and the artificiality of those boundaries that confine gaiteros stylistically. Yet at the same time they celebrate older traditions through projects that highlight not their own musical experiments, but the music of their teachers and gaita masters.

Framed in terms of the Linnekin and Handler notion of tradition as “wholly symbolic construction,” I view Curupira as aware of tradition as symbolic play, but as play that has real-world consequences that if ignored risk perpetuating an unequal status quo. Rather than sweeping away the differences between themselves (upper-middle class, university-trained musicians from Bogotá) and their teachers (racialized and illiterate rural peasants), they draw attention to them by celebrating their sounds and promoting their artistic careers. Curupira’s fusion music is part of a larger project that recovers

traditional music and creates it anew in dialogue with traditional musicians. Curupira thus participates in both the ongoing recreation of a tradition and in the refashioning of tradition in a progressive way. Through their “progressive folklore,” which might seem a contradiction at first, I hear the sound of the gaita improvising new, socially conscious traditions across divides of time, space, and class.

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