

## SINGING TO THE VIRGIN. SOUND NEGOTIATIONS IN THE CELEBRATION OF THE *BALSADAS* IN GUAPI (COLOMBIAN PACIFIC COAST)

**DOI**  
10.11606/issn.2525-3123.  
gis.2021.175880

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DOSSIER LOCAL MUSICKING

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### ABSTRACT

This article presents an ethnography of the celebration of the *Balsadas* to the Immaculate Virgin in Guapi (Colombian Pacific) narrated from its sounds. The analysis of the celebration seeks to deepen the knowledge of the socio-cultural context of the Afro-Colombian communities of the South Pacific, in which music, spirituality, and popular culture are articulated in complex ways as an expression of community identity. The sounds experienced during the celebration allowed me to reflect on the social and identity background staged, the actors involved, their relationships and tensions, and from a broader perspective, the articulations with the dynamics of recognition and inclusion of Afro-Colombians in the multicultural nation.

### KEYWORDS


Afro-Colombians;  
Pacific; *Balsadas*;  
Marimba; Identity.

### INTRODUCTION

The recognition of the traditional music and songs of the Afro-Colombian communities in the South Pacific as part of the Colombian cultural heritage is one of the main milestones in the social recognition of this cultural

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<sup>1</sup> This article was written during the Doctorate in Social Anthropology held at the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul (UFRGS-Brazil 2018). The research was possible thanks to the CAPES/PEC-PG grant, process n: 1256220130.



manifestation. Its inclusion in 2010 in the national list of Intangible Cultural Heritage, and later as Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2015, has allowed building a political agenda around the protection and promotion of this cultural manifestation as Afro-Colombian communities contribution to national construction. Simultaneously, music and musicians of the South Pacific have been articulating to the commercial and entertainment circuits outside of traditional contexts. The state and the private sector have seen in the exaltation of the Afro-Colombian musical heritage a strategy to commercialize various goods and services linked to industries such as tourism or urban music, lines of the growing Colombian economy. Approaching these contemporary transformations of Afro-Pacific music was the initial interest of research, a rich ethnographic universe to analyze the processes of recognition of Afro-Colombians within the framework of Colombian multicultural society: social actors, tensions and articulations, the configuration of regimes of representation on Afro-Colombians based on the new Afro-Pacific sounds, and the new ways of narrating and consuming cultural difference in multicultural settings. However, when I started the research process, I understood that to analyze South Pacific music's transformations, it was necessary to know and experience the music in the sociocultural context where this tradition is an identity manifestation of the communities.

My relationship with South Pacific music began, in a way, through the contemporary and transformed forms that are disseminated and consumed in Colombian cities. Despite having been touring the region during the last decade mainly for work reasons, traditional music was always incidental. As the culmination of meetings with the communities, there was a traditional music group; other times, having a few beers in a local bar, they played some traditional music adding to the salsa and vallenato music, popular genres in the region. Studying the literature about music and sound practices among the Afro-Colombian communities of the South Pacific, I realize that I had not known the rich musical universe described by academics (Motta 2005, Hernández 2010, Berimbaum 2010, Moreno 2011, Ochoa 2014, Convers and Hernández 2015): music, spirituality, and popular culture are articulated in complex ways, configuring senses of community, recreating memories of cultural resistance to the historical processes of enslavement and hispanization, and updating narratives on contemporary violent events such as territorial dispossession and displacement due to the armed conflict in Colombia.

It was essential to get closer to this musical universe. In the search for contacts and possibilities, some friends invited me to visit the city of Guapi to get to know the Balsadas to the Virgin of the Immaculate Conception, a religious celebration that takes place every December, and where music and traditional songs are leading actors during the two days of the celebration. The Balsadas are boats decorated with lights and floral arrangements

that become altars in honor of the Immaculate Virgin, carried by a river procession from the riverine villages to the city of Guapi, while the singers and musicians interpret traditional songs and religious music. Once the Immaculate Virgin arrives in Guapi, the celebrations continue in a procession to the church; then the religious celebration ends, but the party continues, and other musical traditions appear. The musical component is decisive in all moments and getting closer to these sounds became the new objective.


This article presents an ethnography of the Balsadas to the Virgin in Guapi, described from its sonorities. The ethnography was carried out during the celebration of 2016, supplemented with data obtained in subsequent visits in 2017 and 2018. The text is structured in three parts: i) in the first part, I get closer to the general context of traditional music from the South Pacific using the concept of *traditional sound practices* (Berimbaum 2010), understood as historically configured social arrangements, which are in a permanent process of updating; ii) From this perspective, in the second part I present the ethnography of the Balsadas to the Virgin and its sonorities; iii) in the last part, I analyze the sound negotiations identified in the framework of the celebration and propose the need to reflect on this traditional music from analytical categories that fluidly link traditional sound practices with the neoliberal multicultural context.

## AFROPACIFIC SOUND PRACTICES

IMAGE 1. Map of Colombia - Pacific Region (highlight southern area)




Source: Adapted from [https://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Región\\_del\\_Pacífico\\_\(Colombia\)](https://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Región_del_Pacífico_(Colombia)).  
Accessed 04/01/2021



The Colombian Pacific is the strip of land located between the ocean and the Andes mountain range that occupies the entire west of Colombia between Ecuador and Panama. A region of tropical forest inhabited by approximately one million people, 90% are Afro-Colombian, 5% indigenous, and 5% mestizo. The Afro-Colombian communities that today inhabit the main cities such as Buenaventura, Quibdó, Tumaco, and Guapi and settlements along the region's rivers are descendants of enslaved Africans who were forced to exploit the region's minerals since the 16th century. Today, this activity continues to be one of the most prosperous and a source of dispute among illegal armed actors. With a weak presence of the colonial and republican state, the Pacific was historically configured as a peripheral region and less developed than the rest of the country (Escobar 2007), with socioeconomic indicators lower than the national average in aspects such as quality of life, unsatisfied basic needs, coverage of essential services (drinking water, education, health). It is also a region highly affected by the Colombian armed conflict, which has led to configure it as a violent region and poor. These imaginaries are articulated with the colonial and republican discourses on black people and the African heritage, updating discriminatory narratives about the Pacific region and its inhabitants.

The pioneering anthropological studies of Afro-Colombian communities conducted by Nina de Friedemann and Jaime Arocha in the 1970s and 1980s drew attention to the cultural practices developed by black communities in the Pacific and other regions of Colombia. They analyze the survival of African cultural and social expressions or "African footprints" (Arocha and Friedemann 1984) in aspects like spirituality, social organization, instruments and music structures, ethnobotanical and agricultural knowledge. Starting in the 1990s, the field of Afro-Colombian studies was broadened, analyzing problems such as development policies (Escobar 1997; 2007), ethnicization processes (Restrepo 2013), ethnic mobilization (Agudelo 2004), Afro-Colombian music and cultural heritage (Wade 2000, Berimbaum 2010), among other topics. These works delve into the analysis of the Pacific region's socio-cultural characteristics, highlighting the Catholic religiosity/spirituality highly syncretic with popular culture as a fundamental part of the constitution of individual and community identities. The Balsadas are precisely linked to this dimension of Afro-Colombian spirituality, with traditional music being the protagonist in the celebration, transmitting and updating that popular religiosity.

According to Moreno (2011), priests' sporadic presence in colonial times allowed the sowing of essential Catholic doctrine elements among the communities. Simultaneously, they elaborated their own practices and interpretations, creating original manifestations of an Afro-Catholic religiosity characteristic of the region. In the mid-eighteenth century, the increase



of “libre” population –as the former slaves began to call themselves since then, settled in the many rivers of the Pacific region. They continued to meet periodically to commemorate their saints and dead ancestors, occasions in which, in the parish priest’s absence, the cult’s organization and orientation were assumed by prominent people in the community. This context allows developed specific musical forms found throughout the Colombian Pacific. Each genre expresses and condense in the sounds different moments of social life: death through *alabados* and *chigualos*, the celebration of the saints through *arrullos*, or the community party in the *currulao*. Articulated with a spirituality based on a highly syncretic Catholicism and blurred limits between the sacred and the profane, these music traditions that were condemned from the colonial hegemonic discourses, today are exalted as heritage of the Colombian multicultural nation. The importance of the rivers and the aquatic space is another characteristic element in Afro-pacific popular culture. Oslender (2008) proposes that they have influenced and shaped the patterns of daily life in the region, defined the spatialized social relations, and constructed memories around the territory.

This article focuses on the southern Pacific region, covering the south half of the Colombian coastline up to the border with Ecuador (see image 1). In this region, the “marimba music” originated, known as such because the *marimba*<sup>2</sup> it is the main instrument of various traditional rhythms. Specifically, the ethnography takes place in Guapi, where the Balsadas are held in honor of the Immaculate Virgin and a city of legendary musicians. Since I decided to study this celebration, I was clear that it would be an ethnography based on the sound experiences, which implied a theoretical analysis of the celebration to understand it from its sonorities. Below I highlight some conceptual elements that allowed me to understand the Balsadas as scenarios of negotiation of social relationships and identities and can be analyzed from the sound practices deployed.

In the early 1990s, Middleton (cited in Wade 2000) argued that one of the characteristics of music social studies was the idea of the homological relationship between musical form and social structure, conceiving social identity as something pre-existing that music simply expressed. This approach leaves aside the analysis of conflicts over musical meanings in the social group whose identity is supposedly reflected. This gap is addressed in later research that analyzes aspects such as the historical contexts of reproduction and practice, the various social uses, and cultural values transmitted through music (Ochoa 2006, Birembaum 2010). I understand music and musical

2 Technically, the marimba is a xylophone mounted on a frame (bed) that can be hung or suspended on a wooden support. It is made up of chonta wood slats that are struck with two studs lined with natural rubber. The tablets, each with a resonator, vary in number from 12 to 24; in them are distributed the bass sounds and the treble. Its traditional tuning does not conform to the western scale, although the need to interact with modern instruments is imposing the twelve-tone tuning (Ministerio de Cultura 2008).

practice as a dynamic social manifestation that, while condensing and expressing social identities, is reconfiguring its meanings, and updating community life narratives. The Music-identity relationship is understood as a social phenomenon in permanent construction, not from a homology relationship. From this perspective, I understand the traditional music of the South Pacific (marimba music) due to historical processes of multiple negotiations and cultural syncretism expressed -and can be analyzed- through their own sounds. These negotiations are not necessarily harmonic processes, and as Ochoa (2006) draws attention, cultural practices must be understood as spaces for interpellation and symbolic struggle, in which historically constructed hegemonies are relativized and eventually transformed. The sounds as products of negotiations are analyzed in a context of religious celebration, which, in turn, is configured as a sacred time-space of integration, renewal, and expression of social tensions; a place paid for prestige, status, or recognition within a community on an individual or collective scale, inside and outside the locality (Ferro 2001).

Framed in this understanding of traditional music, the second aspect to highlight is the notion of *traditional sound practices* as a relevant conceptual tool for the study of marimba music in the celebration of the Balsadas. Birembaum (2010) argues that understand South Pacific music cannot be limited to the simple idea of sound production or from “western” notions of music. Its production is part of a sound worldview deeply felt and maintained in the social commons, which understands and mediates the local affectivities and epistemologies of the natural and supernatural world, and the human a non-human being that inhabited. In this way, he defines sound practices as the sound manifestations of the worldview and experiences of the communities related to knowledge, norms, social control, and the role that each individual plays. They involve music, context, place, ritual and reconfigure the notion of community through the practice of collective heritage.

IMAGE 2. Instruments of the traditional south Pacific music



Source: <http://www.danzasticasdelapacifico.blogspot.com/> Accessed 04/01/2021

During the visit to Guapi, I was able to talk with several people and collect stories about the meaning of the Balsadas and the importance of music during the celebration, which allowed me to give context and content to the notion of sound practices and even expand its meaning as political action. One aspect frequently mentioned by the locals interviewed was the understanding of local religiosity and traditional music as acts of vindication of a history of rebellion expressed and recreated in popular culture.

The *Balsadas* in honor of the Immaculate Virgin is a deeply rooted cultural expression in Guapi, mainly in rural areas. It is a party where the entire population meets to celebrate life, thank, and ask the Virgin. Despite all the difficulties, we always have reasons to celebrate life and freedom. So, the *Balsadas* are a party but also an act of vindication. A political action to show the history of resistance of the black people and to recreate our ethnic and cultural identity”.<sup>3</sup>

The musical rhythms that mark the development of the *Balsadas* are the *arulllos*,<sup>4</sup> to adore the Virgin and the Saints, and the *currulao*<sup>5</sup> that accompanies community festivals – which often occur as a continuation of religious celebrations. During the fieldwork, I was also able to know the *alabado*s,<sup>6</sup> which are sung when a person dies to accompany the transition from life to death. To understand each musical manifestation and

3 Personal communication with Darío, resident of Guapi and cultural activist, 08/12/2016.  
4 *Arrullos* are special tunes that are sung at Christmas or during the festivities to honor the Virgin and the saints. The verse system of the *Arrullos* -y *Alabados*- was inherited from traditional Spanish poetry, and academics agree that they are variants of Gregorian and Ambrosian chants with traces and cuts of African influence. In the *arrullos* the female voices are the most important; The interpretation is carried out from groups of three or four singers, of which one leads the voice, and they play the *guasá* (rattles made with wood and seeds) while interpreting the songs. Men are responsible for executing the percussion instruments (*cununos* and *tamboras*) and the *marimba* when it is incorporated (Ministerio de Cultura 2008, Ochoa et al 2016). An example of *Arrullo* is the song “Sagrada Santa María” performed by the Grupo Canalón. Available at: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t5-09Ib7\\_nc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t5-09Ib7_nc) Access 01/12/2021.

5 Also known as “*marimba* dance”, the *currulao* is a party in which people sing and dance, tell jokes and stories, drink liquor, and eat in abundance. It is common to take place after the *arrullos*, taking advantage of the congregation of people, the party continues in a profane context (Ministerio de Cultura 2008, Ochoa et al 2016). The men acquire importance in the *currulao*, manifested mainly in the interpretation of the *marimba* that constitutes an indispensable instrument for the party. During the interpretation of the music, the *marimbero* is who carries the main voice and leads the group, which is also made up of *tamboras*, *cununos*, and *guasás* (Ochoa et al 2016). An example of *currulao* is the song “Adios Guapi” performed by Grupo Naidy. Available in: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S3a9lNKFdY> Accessed 01/12/2021.

6 *Alabados* are sung when a person dies. They are chants intoned a cappella and with a responsorial structure; His lyrics are in praise of God, the Virgin, and the saints, combined with passages that refer to more human themes: experiences of pain, contradiction, or confusion in the face of death. The essence of *Alabados* is the deep sadness it expresses. It is sung only when there is a deceased person because it is believed that, if it is done for fun, people could die (Comunidad Educativa de Guapi 2016). In the following link, I present an example of *Alabado* performed by the singer Elena Hinestroza. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dL2XH4GWgyI> Accessed 12/01/2021.

its context of performance, I analyzed the documentation of application to include the traditional songs and music of the Colombian South Pacific in UNESCO's list of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity<sup>7</sup>, as well as another specialized bibliography. The technical definitions from academic analyzes of these musical traditions contrast with the meaning given by some of the locals intertwined. They defined these musical traditions as "songs of freedom" and "as cries of vindication of life and territories, a concrete way of understanding the importance of traditional music for Afro-Colombian communities and the history of cultural syncretism by which it is traversed. The lyrics of the Arrullos and Alabados combine religious themes with everyday situations in the communities. "We sing to everything, to the saints and the Virgin, also to nature, to the sea, to the river, to the mine, to our neighbor, to all those daily situations that promote the community life and the defense of the territory"<sup>8</sup>.

Understanding sound practices also implied becoming familiar with the social actors involved and their social and sound roles. At the center of traditional music are the women: the *cantadoras*. Interpretation of songs are led, almost always, by female voices, and are they who carry the melody, guide the structure of the song, and transmit the messages through their texts. Academics (Motta 2005, Ministerio de Cultura 2008) argue that matrifocal family organization configured in the Afro-Colombian societies of Pacific coast, is articulated in traditional music expressing the importance of women as the axis of sociocultural reproduction. Motta (2005) proposes to understand the Arrullos and Alabados singing by the women to recreate the Afro-Colombian culture of this region, establish and maintain social relations in the communities, social values, memory, and identity. In some cases, the men participate as vocal interpreters, but almost always, they interpret the *marimba* and the percussion instruments (*cununos* and *bombos*). Many of the men, over time, assume a role that is fundamental for the maintenance of the sociocultural space of music: music teachers (Ministerio de Cultura 2008). Another essential character of the musical practices is the instrument maker. The Pacific music is interpreted with acoustic instruments, made in a traditional way with materials typical of the region's jungle context: wood from palms to build marimbas, wood from other trees with deer and pig hides for *tamboras* and *cununos*, guadua wood and seeds for the *guasás*. This involves ancestral knowledge concerning the natural cycle and the characteristics of each component to make the instruments, knowledge that is kept secret within the builder's family (Ministerio de Cultura 2008, Ochoa et al. 2016).

<sup>7</sup> For the candidacy before UNESCO, the Ministry of Culture of Colombia led the project entitled "the route of the marimba" in which important researchers and musicians analyze different aspects of songs and traditional music from the South Pacific (Ministerio de Cultura 2010).

<sup>8</sup> Personal communication with Pedro, resident of Guapi, 08/12/2016.



A final aspect of the South Pacific's sound practices is the disproportionate impact of the Colombian internal armed conflict in the region, generating thousands of displaced families due to territorial disputes between illegal armed actors, with the consequent destruction of social and cultural structures. Besides, there is a practice by illegal armed actors to ridicule cultural manifestations and often oppose communities to develop rituals such as funerals and celebrations to the saints (Ministerio de Cultura 2008). Another consequence of the armed conflict is that the aerial spraying of illicit crops that fuel the war in the region also affects legal crops, which endangers traditions such as constructing instruments or traditional medicine (Ministerio de Cultura 2008). Although this topic is not developed in this article, the South Pacific's traditional music as a means of resistance to violence and peacebuilding constitutes a relevant axis of reflection related to these musical traditions' contemporary transformations.

### **BALSADAS TO THE IMMACULATE VIRGIN IN GUAPI**

IMAGE 3. Balsadas in Guapi river



Source: <https://blog.redbus.co/cultura/balsadas-rio-guapi-evento-mistico-cauca/> Access: 15/01/2021.

“The sea was very rough; all entries were covered. There was no place to go. The only calm access was the Guapi River. Then the Spanish navigators heading to Peru reached the town. Here they were given food and lodging. We treated them well. They brought the Virgin of the Immaculate, so they lowered the boat and took it to the church. They stayed here for about fifteen days, and at the time of sailing, the Immaculate did not want to leave. When they tried

to take out of the church the image gets heavy, and when entered gest light. It was a living image! So, they made an agreement: to change their weight into gold. They weighed the image, gave the gold to the Spanish navigators, and Immaculate stays here. The Balsadas of today (December 7) honored how the Immaculate Virgin arrived in Guapi. They come from communities such as Chamón, Penitentes, Sansón, in a procession down the river, *arrullando* (singing to) the Immaculate until they reach the town and take her to the church. Each community makes its Balsadas, and the most decorated one wins” (Carlos, resident of Guapi)<sup>9</sup>.

The *Balsadas* are built from two boats with outboard motors, joined together using boards, and reinforced with nails and rope. The decking forms a platform that becomes a floating altar to honor the Virgin of the Immaculate Conception, the “Purísima” as it is commonly called by the locals. The altar with the Immaculate Conception occupies the principal place. It is adorned with colored balloons and arrangements made with palm leaf forms arches, crosses, and other figures. A fundamental part of the decoration is the illumination, made with light bulbs installed in the altar and around the structure and lit with an electric plant’s help. Below are the *cantadoras* and musicians, singing to the Virgin since they leave her community and throughout the river’s journey until Guapi. Each *Balsada* is followed by smaller boats accompanying the route, a river procession as a prelude to what happens when they arrive in Guapi, awaited by the inhabitants in a festive atmosphere full of fireworks. Once in port, the Virgin is lowered from the floating altar. The procession continues, now in a massive procession where the *arrullos* songs are confused with the fireworks’ noise -and the nearby bars’ music- until reaching the church where the image is temporarily left. Then the party continues, now in a profane context where the *currulao* becomes the protagonist. The music’s intensity increases, along with the fireworks that accompany the celebration until dawn. The following day, after a mass procession through the city streets, with *arrullos* and prayers, the celebration honored the Virgin is closed.

The ritual is repeated every year, commemorating how the Immaculate Conception arrived in Guapi, meaning the beginning of the December 7 celebration. This date is locally considered more important than Christmas. On that day, people who live in other cities of the country return to spend the Christmas holidays with his family. That same day, early, I arrived in Guapi. I was lucky to get the ticket, considering they are scarce and expensive due to the low frequency of flights and the high demand among the people from Guapi, mainly in Cali, the city where the flights leave. The other way to go to Guapi is by sea from Buenaventura, which

<sup>9</sup> Personal communication with Carlos, resident of Guapi, 07/12/2016.

takes between 4 and 5 hours through the rough Pacific Ocean; by plane, the trip takes 45 minutes. As soon as I arrived, the first thing I did was go to the port (known as the wall), hoping to see the final adjustments of one Balsadas that would eventually be there, which did not happen. But it was there that I met Wilson, a friend from Guapi who accompanied us those days. I say 'us' because in Guapi I met a group of friends – some of them researchers on issues related to Afro-Colombian policies- which trip as tourists interested in the celebration. Thus, I suddenly saw myself as an ethnographer-tourist in a context where tourism is not frequent – beyond the people who pass through the city in the direction of the island of Gorgona<sup>10</sup>. That was my initial role to experience the Balsadas, a role that would be modified throughout the celebration.

## THE IMMACULATE ARRIVED (DECEMBER 7)

The Immaculate, to Guapi arrived  
got heavy, here stayed  
She was heavy, became light  
to stay in the prefecture  
(Traditional *Arrullo*)

December 7 is known in Colombia as the “candlelight day”, a celebration where families gather and candles and lanterns are lit on the outskirts of houses and buildings; marks the beginning of the Christmas celebrations, and the following day (December 8) is a national holiday, one more reason to start the festivities. In fact, this day belongs to the Catholic religion’s official calendar, commemorating the dogma of the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary, based on a bull proclaimed by Pope Pius XI in 1854<sup>11</sup>. I did not know what candlelight day was about until I started this research –always lived it as a start date for the Christmas holidays. When I arrived in Guapi already knew the official history of the celebration. Still, while I was getting to know a little better what the celebration was about, the first aspect that caught my attention was the Virgin’s arrival’s mythical origin. According to the story presented initially, the Immaculate Virgin came through a group of Spanish sailors who, to stock up and continue their journey to Peru, had no other option but to take the Guapi River because the other rivers were unnavigable. When they arrived, the first thing they did was take the Immaculate image to the local church;

<sup>10</sup> Gorgona island is a former penal colony, and currently a natural park visited by tourists. From Guapi, it takes two hours to get to the island.

<sup>11</sup> On December 8, 1854, Pope Pius XI proclaimed the bull entitled “*Ineffabilis Deus*” in which he declared the dogma of the Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary.


but when they wanted to take her back and resume the trip, she did not want to leave. The image became so heavy that they could not remove it, so there was no choice but to trade, and the agreement was its weight in gold. Pedro, another inhabitant of Guapi, completed this story for me: when they were weighed, the image became lighter, so in the end, the Spaniards took less gold than they wanted. It was a living image!<sup>12</sup> Both stories emphasized this aspect, something that kept spinning in my head.

**Alabados.** That morning that I arrived in Guapi, we learned of an unfortunate event. The father of a friend who invited us to the Balsadas had passed away. So, we went to give condolences to the family. Shortly after arriving, witness the *alabados* that the women sing to the deceased. Suddenly one of the women intoned a verse, and then the other women began to respond to her. The atmosphere changed immediately, and the voices started to trap all the attendees in a more reflective attitude. For the first time, I felt the depth of the voices and the sadness of those songs.

Mass was scheduled at noon, followed by burial. I arrived at the church and was surprised by how many people there were. "Important people die this day" told me about a man who was by my side. A good explanation for all these people, I thought. Once the mass was over, some parents came forward to talk about the deceased. At that moment, I realized that the number of people was also due to two simultaneous funerals. We left the church in procession towards the cemetery, six blocks down the main street of Guapi. Throughout the tour *Alabados* and Catholic prayers, all quite simple but, above all, very emotional to see so many people accompanying and saying goodbye to the deceased. Once in the cemetery, the procession divided in two, accompanying the respective coffins that they took in opposite directions in the small cemetery. I was left outside with a perspective of the two events. When everything was ending, someone told me that the other deceased was an important *culimocho*<sup>13</sup> man in his community. There I understood some things that I had noticed, especially the large number of white people who accompanied the mass and the procession. I was surprised by how each group of relatives prays and cries their dead, sharing the same ritual space and language, a theme linked to those negotiations and inter-ethnic relations configured in the South Pacific studied by Arocha and Rodríguez (2003). The *Alabados* were present all the following nights that we accompanied the family.

12 Personal communication with Pedro, resident of Guapi, 07/12/2016.

13 "Name given to a very particular community of Hispanic descent. They differ from other people of the same origin since after May 1851, when slavery was abolished in Colombia, they did not leave the south of the Colombian Pacific coast, remained on the beaches of *Mulatos* and *Almarales*. They claim descent from Basque sailors, whose ships, it is assumed, were wrecked a hundred years before Columbus arrived in America, and from those who learned the trade of shipowners who still practice today. They say they prohibit marriages with black people and despise their behavior. However, they are very competent in the culture of Afro-Colombian communities and not so much in that of whites" (Arocha and Rodríguez 2003, 79).



**Arrullos.** By 8pm, we were ready for the Balsadas. The plan was to eat something and try to find an excellent place to witness the arrival of the Balsadas. With a bottle of aguardiente in hand, we were to the food stalls near the port, a meeting place with other friends. All the way, I noticed that practically all the houses were decorated with candles, and many people were outside. Also, people now looked at us a little differently, with some familiarity. I imagined that by having accompanied the mass and the procession to the cemetery. When we got to the central park, the mass that started the celebration had already finished, and people were leaving the church with lighted candles singing Arrullos just as we were passing by. But it is the nearby bars' music (vallenato, salsa, reggaeton) what predominate in the soundscape at that moment.

The park is the principal meeting place for locals, and the central space where the celebration in honor of the Immaculate takes place. On the eastern side of the park is the city's port and, in the background the Guapi River; on the opposite side is the church, which is the main building of the space. On the north and south sides, there are several bars, discos, and grocery stores. We go through the park and walk a block until we reach the stalls with typical food: fried fish, crab in coconut milk, shrimp stew, and other delicacies at meager prices compared to Bogotá. As with traditional music, the food of Guapi – and other places in the Pacific – has been studied and appropriate by the leading chefs of the country, adding gastronomy to sociocultural practices of the Afro-Colombian communities of the Pacific recognized as part of the nation's cultural diversity. In many cases, in accelerated processes of patrimonialization –and cannibalization– which I will analyze later. As I ate, I heard fireworks in the distance: that meant the Balsadas were approaching. Then, finish eating and find a place to attend the celebration. I wanted to see the arrival of the Balsadas as closely as possible and accompany the procession to the church. I got to the central park, and there was already a crowd of people. The fireworks began to emerge from the end of the park. In the distance, we could already see three rafts and the boats that accompany them, from which fireworks were also coming out, but the music groups in the Balsadas were not yet heard. The party increases and the empty aguardiente bottles are already seen in good numbers on the floor. Before arriving, each Balsada makes a round trip, a kind of dance on the river where the boat pilot shows their expertise in handling these boats. Finally, the three Balsadas arrived, and everyone received them among applause, prayers, and toasts. Once they dock safely, the altar with the Immaculate descends, and afterward, the musicians and the cantadoras. Once they dock safely, the altar with the Immaculate descends, and afterward, the musicians and the cantadoras. The Arrullos now heard louder, although still confused with the fireworks' noise and the bars' music. A complex sound space, but at that moment, are the religious songs that dominate the senses of those accompanying the procession. The path between the port and the church is

short. It is only through the park, so this part of the celebration does not last long, and the Immaculate Conception is quickly inside the church.

Now it is possible to clearly hear the lyrics of the arrullo that accompanies the procession: “It has arrived, the Virgin Mary has arrived” the cantadoras sing as the procession goes from the entrance of the church to the altar area; first, the Immaculate enters, and then in order comes the marimba, which is carried by two young men while the marimbero plays; then the men with drums, before the cantadoras, and behind the procession. It strikes me that the musicians and cantadoras wear T-shirts with the local energy company’s logo (Energuaipi). In the altar area, the Immaculate brought by the communities is left next to the Virgen of the church. The cantadoras and marimbero stand backs to the altar and those in charge of the percussion face the altar. The Arrullos continues, now with more volume and people accompany the song. When a female singer begins to sing a new song, I am struck by the movement she makes with her hands, asking to stop playing the marimba. Indeed, that song was only with the voices of the cantadoras and the percussion of the drums. Shortly after, the arrullos stop, and this part of the celebration ends.

**Currulao.** Outside, the fireworks never stopped. When people began to leave the church, fireworks’ intensity increased, and that is when the *vaca loca* (mad cow) appears. It is the moment of transition from the religious to the pagan component of the Balsadas. The *vaca loca* is a structure that resembles horns set on fire; in them, put a container full of viche<sup>14</sup> or aguardiente; people try to get some of the drink while the man who wields the horns is scaring away who dare to challenge the fire<sup>15</sup>. The space of the celebration around the central park is quickly reconfigured: some people are in front of the church, where the *vaca loca* continues, and inside the park are the other part of the crown hear two groups of traditional music that now interpret faster rhythm. The musicians and cantadoras are organized all around the marimbero as the center of attention. The Currulao is now so loud and fast that it dominates all my sound space for a long time.

For an hour, I accompanied this movement in the park, a place now desecrated and given to the party. When I step aside, the Currulao music is again confused with the fireworks and the bars’ music. The soundscape becomes more complex when, precisely in the basketball court, at the other end of the park, begins a bachata concert sponsored by the Mayor’s Office as part of the Balsadas celebrations. This concert’s electrical amplification now competes with the other sounds, including the Currulao music that continues until dawn.

<sup>14</sup> It is a Traditional distilled alcoholic drink of the area, made by hand from sugar cane. Not to confuse with industrialized *aguardiente*, also made with sugar cane.

<sup>15</sup> Personal communication with Carlos, resident of Guapi, 07/12/2016.



IMAGE 4. Arrullos at church



IMAGE 5. Vaca loca (Mad cow)



IMAGE 6. Currulao

## **SINGING TO THE IMMACULATE (DECEMBER 8)**

At noon we reached the central park. At that moment, the procession was just beginning. The Immaculate came out through the church's door, on an altar adorned with flowers carried on the shoulders of several men. Ahead go the young acolytes dressed in white and lifting the symbolic Catholics. Then the Bishop - who came from Popayán city for the celebration - leading the prayers, and then the other priests who accompanied the celebration. Behind the altar go the faithful, who slowly leave the church and join the procession that goes directly to the port, along the street that borders the central park. In the procession, a group of cantadoras with guasás stands out, and like the rest of the faithful, they also respond loudly to the Catholic prayers. The loudspeaker that allows amplifying the Bishop's voice and the faithful's responses dominate the sound space in this initial part of the procession, even preventing hearing the guasás that the women do not stop playing at any time.

**Arrullos (II).** The procession approaches the port, and we begin to hear the cooing from the Balsadas. Docked there since the night before, I can see that the Immaculate is once again on her floating altar. When the faithful arrives, the prayers begin to confuse with the fireworks noise exploding in the sky. The ritual of the previous night is repeated, but in an inverted logic: now it is the Bishop and priests who come to the Immaculate image brought by the communities. They wait for the trustees to lower from de Balsada and take it right in front of the Bishop. At that moment, the musicians and singers stop with the cooing, not the faithful with their prayers. While the Bishop blesses the Immaculate image, a priest takes the megaphone and prays to the Virgin Mary.

Then the procession continues. The Bishop and priests, followed by the Immaculate image that came down from the Balsada, join the rest of the faithful. The two Virgins (the one that came from church and one that comes from the Balsada) meet again. The musicians and cantadoras also join the procession, singing Arrullos again. At that moment I notice, that unlike the celebration of the previous day, the marimba is no longer there. I imagined that because it was a much longer procession, it was difficult to carry the instrument given its weight and size -after leaving the port, the procession would take the main street for 3 blocks, and then it would return to the church through a parallel road. Regardless of the heat of noon, people accompanied the procession that day. The aguardiente encouraged the singers and musicians who did not stop singing to the Immaculate throughout the journey, while the faithful prayers to the Virgin Mary and Jesus Christ.

"Long live to God" people were singing when they arrived at the church. The place's acoustics allowed the *arrullo* to be heard clearly as the procession entered the church. The Immaculate images are brought to the side of the



altar where the Bishop is already waiting for the arrival of the faithful. For about 5 minutes, the *Arrullos* resound in the church and dominate the entire sound space. Suddenly the music stops, and the Bishop begins the mass: in the name of the father, the son, the holy spirit (...). During the Bishop's sermon, two aspects were interesting to me. The first was the recognition he made of Guapi's Afro-Colombian popular religion, the musical component, and the importance of these manifestations as non-violent social arrangements in the context of a peace treatment in Colombia. This music and faith demonized by the church for centuries, now is praised by the Bishop of Popayan and seen as an Afro-Colombian contribution to peacebuilding. Something interesting happened at that moment. While the Bishop spoke about the importance of making this popular religiosity known in the country, he suddenly addressed us, the tourists at the church's end. He talks to us about the ethical responsibility for disseminating content about communities so that stereotypes about black people, poverty, and violence are not reproduced anymore. We realized that by Bishop's eyes, our presence in Guapi was as journalists or documentary filmmakers – in addition to our status as foreigners, the cameras we carried indeed gave that impression.

Shortly after, the religious ceremony ended. For the first time, the sound space was just the murmur of people leaving the church. Minutes later, the musical sounds returned. Two groups of musicians and *cantadoras* –the same from the night before– settled at the ends of the park, and the *Arrullos* began. I thought that the marimba would join in this part of the celebration, but this did not happen. For an hour, the musicians continued playing their drums and the *cantadoras* with their *guasas*, while they sang the last songs to the Immaculate. The closing of the celebration was already beginning.

**Currulao (II).** In the evening we arrive at the park again. The Mayor's Office had prepared the stage where the bachata concert was presented the day before, now with the marimba music groups as protagonists. Slowly the place filled with people, and with the beginning of the music, the first choreographies began as well. People come together as a group and perform the same steps from a series of movements that everyone seems to know; I had already seen this in other parts of the Pacific and in contexts such as the Petronio Álvarez Pacific Music Festival that takes place every year in Cali. Suddenly everything is silent and dark. The power went out –something common in Guapi. “It doesn't matter,” someone shouts, and the marimba and *cununo* touches begin again; the musicians and *cantadoras* come down from the stage and join the audience. The party continues without the need for electrical amplification of sound; in fact, due to the lack of light, the bars in the park are silent, and it is the *currulao* that dominates the sound space during the closing of the celebration.



IMAGE 7. Bishop's blessing



IMAGEN 8. Musicians and cantadoras join the procession



IMAGE 9. Singing to the Inmaculte

## SOUND NEGOTIATIONS

When I decided to go to Guapi to see the Balsadas to the Immaculate Virgin, the objective was to get closer to the sociocultural context in which the traditional music of the Afro-Colombian communities of the South Pacific takes place. For this, I defined music -traditional and popular- as the result of historical processes of negotiations, appropriation, and reconfiguration of musical traditions, and I articulated the concept of traditional sound practices to analyze the context in which Afro-Colombian musical traditions related to community and identity experiences. With these notions, I approached the Balsadas in Guapi ethnographically, although, to tell the truth, during the development of the fieldwork, I rather let myself be carried away by the sounds that marked each moment of the celebration.

The sounds experienced during the celebration and described in the ethnographic narrative allowed me to reflect on the social and identity background that is negotiated during the celebration, the actors involved, the relationships and tensions, and from a broader perspective, the articulations with the debate on the recognition and inclusion of Afro-Colombians in the multicultural nation. One of the key works to approach these problems was the text by Carvalho (2004) on Afro-American musical traditions, especially when he questions the possibilities that traditional communities must maintain control of their sound production -or at least part of it- facing a contemporary consumer whom he defines as impatient for the exotic. Suggests that both apocalyptic and hybridization approaches to understanding the current musical transformations in traditional African American music, lead us to think that it is no longer possible the community control of ritual and symbolic productions, but about how the loss of this is control is negotiated. This argument allowed me to specify the idea of sound negotiations to analyze the Balsadas celebration, understood as dynamic processes of appropriation and resignification of sound traditions that dialogue at different symbolic levels, within unequal power relations between the social actors involved. Sound negotiations can be analyzed at the community level regarding the internal forms of control over the celebration, its sounds, and the narratives about the collective identity that are reinforced and updated; Also in the areas where these possibilities of community agency are diminishing or are null, it is possible to identify sound negotiations, the actors that participate, interests, power relations, the geographical spaces where musical traditions now circulate, and the narratives about Afro-Colombians expressed from new sounds.


To conclude, I return to some ideas presented throughout the article from the approach of sound negotiations, highlighting aspects of the celebration related to the scope of the producing communities and the processes of identity construction, and identify some articulations with

the recognition of Afro-Colombian people in the multicultural context, a topic develops in another work (Estupiñán 2020).

**Balsadas and Afro-Pacific identity.** The first aspect to highlight is that the musical repertoire displayed in the Balsadas is the product of multiple sound negotiations that affect the construction of the Afro-Pacific identity. The *arrullos*, as well as the *alabados* -which are not part of the celebration, but which I can experience during the visit to Guapi- are the result of processes of appropriation and resignification of Catholic and African traditions, which express and update narratives of cultural resistance to slavery and the significance of the inhabited territory that feeds individual and collective identity. The traditional Spanish poetry and the Catholic rites that the church brought to the region as a form of evangelization and social control, were appropriated by the communities and intoned by the Afro-Colombian *cantadoras*, creating a religious universe around an Afro-Colombian spirituality that leaves the parameters of the Catholic rite. Arboleda (2006) argues that this universe of virgins and patron saints contains a sense of common identity that is sustained through memory and the routinization of a ritual practice seen as a patronal feast.

The myth of the origin of the Balsadas constitutes itself a negotiation between the locals and the Spaniards who arrived with the image of the Virgin, mediated by their will to stay since the image became so heavy that they had no choice to leave her. The relationship of the myth with the idea of a living image, with its own will, leads us to think about another aspect of the negotiations that are at stake in the framework of the celebration: what makes the Immaculate alive is that it is part of the daily life of the faithful, acting in community affairs based on his special powers attributed -such as stopping the tides and in general allowing the boats arrive at port.

This Afro-Pacific identity that is updated through a celebration like the Balsadas, transcends the spiritual-religious component and speaks to us of aspects that structure the Afro-Colombian societies. Ochoa et al (2015) argue that the evangelization process carried out by the Catholic Church in the region allowed the incorporation of ritual forms of the Catholic religion into the communities, but not in the fundamental ethical and moral codes. Thus, religion is manifested mainly in the worship of Catholic saints, but not in aspects such as the handling of the body, sexual relations, myths, legends, and funeral customs that continued to be based on African forms and appropriated by indigenous peoples with whom they share the territory. One aspect that attracts the most attention is that the religious celebration is mediated by dance and alcohol, something difficult to think about in regions such as the interior of the country where colonization had its main headquarters, and the Catholic religion is less syncretic with popular traditions. But something that definitely marked me during the



visit to Guapi, is the prominence and strength of women in the interpretation of *arrullos* and *alabados*, a reminder of the importance of women as the axis of physical and cultural reproduction of the Afro-Colombian communities where matrifocality and extended family was a cultural resource for the survival of the community in adverse conditions during slavery, and even today this particular social organization continues to be negotiated within the framework of the state and multicultural society.

**Balsadas and multiculturalism.** The main motivation for going to the Balsadas to the Immaculate Virgin was to have a sound experience of traditional music in its sociocultural context, and to understand how music, spirituality, and popular culture are articulated in a complex way configuring senses of community and recreating memories of resistance. This was the main topic of interest, but the ethnographic data collected, and the bibliography consulted additionally allowed me to identify aspects of the celebration related to the general debate that guides my research related to the recognition of Afro-Colombians in Colombian multiculturalism. For this, I highlight three situations and actors of the celebration that allowed me to think about how that social recognition of the Afro-Colombian cultural difference is negotiated. The first moment is in the church during the closing of the celebration, when the Bishop makes recognition of the spiritual, cultural, and musical value of the popular religiosity in Guapi. The Catholic Church becomes an actor in the Balsadas but does not seem to challenge the control that the communities have over the rite and the rhythms of the celebration. In fact, popular religiosity is recognized taking place long-term negotiations that have led to a paradigm shift: practices that were formerly condemned as diabolical acts today are considered a contribution of enslaved Africans and their descendants to the construction of the Colombian multicultural nation. Therefore, the fact that it was the Bishop of Popayan is highly symbolic, considering that city was the center of colonial power in that area of the country and a place characterized by its Catholic religiosity.

The Balsadas were born as a manifestation of the popular religiosity of the Afro-Colombian communities on the Pacific coast, which spontaneously organized and competed for which had the most decorated altar to the Virgin and the best musicians and cantadoras. Currently, the celebration is sponsored by the local Mayor's Office, and the participation depends largely on available resources. Although there was no speech from the Mayor during the celebration, the presence of the local government could be felt in the banners that adorned the streets where the procession passed, and with great force in the musicians and cantadoras who came in the Balsadas, all with T-shirts promoting the local public energy company (EnerGuapi). This leads us to reflect on the power that the local government acquires in making the celebration possible and consequently in the

progressive loss of power of the communities. Recent governments at the national and local level have promoted the incorporation of Afro-Colombian cultural heritage into ethnic markets, and in this negotiation, the producing communities have shown themselves to be at a disadvantage; However, the episode of the lack of electricity during the closing concert is a good reminder that the negotiations are permanent, and the communities always have opportunities to control their sound production.

Finally, I emphasize that during the development of the celebration, traditional music was in permanent negotiation with other sounds from the bars (vallenato, salsa, reggaeton) and the bachata concert sponsored by the Mayor's Office, unequal negotiations since the electronic systems of amplification allows these genres to dominate the sound space. On a subsequent visit to Guapi, I learned that for following religious celebrations, music in bars had been banned, a negotiation aimed to maintain community control of the celebration promoted by the Mayor's Office and local leaders. But at the same time, the musicians and musicians of the South Pacific have been articulating with urban genres and emerging markets in the multicultural and transnational context, negotiating narratives about people and culture through the new Afro-Pacific sounds.

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Submitted: 10/05/2020  
Resubmitted: 12/21/2020  
Accepted: 03/02/2021