

THE CARNAVAL DE BARRANQUILLA: *IDENTITY AND STRUGGLE*

LUDY GRANDAS TAVERA

Docente de la Escuela de Idiomas, UIS.
Correo electrónico: *lgrandas@gmu.edu*

RESUMEN

La búsqueda por la construcción de una nación y de una identidad nacional y cultural colombiana ha sido motivo de preocupación desde el siglo XIX. La dificultad para llegar a un acuerdo en dicha construcción no ha sido causada por una falta de visión al respecto, sino por el hecho de que la existencia de varias visiones de nación puestas en juego, las cuales emergieron e implícita, o explícitamente, lucharon con lo que fue considerado el dilema de la formación de un ciudadano en una sociedad impulsada por diferencias sociales, étnicas y raciales.

Un sitio interesante para el análisis de dichas diferencias es el de las fiestas del Carnaval de Barranquilla. Este carnaval ofrece claves no solo con respecto a las tradiciones culturales, sino en el campo de la formación y negociación ideológicas. En el Carnaval, existe un juego entre la reafirmación de las tradiciones hegemónicas y la parodia que las trastoca. Esta ruptura en las fiestas no elimina las jerarquías ni las inequidades, sino que su irreverencia abre una relación mas libre, menos fatalista a las convenciones heredadas que bien pueden representar un indicador de la identidad individual y colectiva y, como tal, se prueba indispensable a las luchas por reconocimiento por parte de las minorías reprimidas.

SUMMARY

The quest to construct a nation and a shared and distinctively 'Colombian' national/cultural identity has been a matter of great concern since the nineteenth century. The difficulty in agreeing on the construction of the nation was not caused by a lack of vision, but on the fact that there were various "competing national visions" which emerged, and almost all of which "implicitly or explicitly grappled with what was widely considered the dilemma of constructing citizens in a society driven by social, ethnic and racial differences.

An interesting space for the analysis of such differences can be found in Carnival celebrations. The Carnaval de Barranquilla offers insights not only into the realm of the cultural traditions, but into the domain of ideological formation and negotiation as well. In carnival, there is a play between the reaffirmation of hegemonic traditions and the parody that subverts them. This rupture of the fiesta does not eliminate hierarchies and inequalities, but its irreverence opens a freer, less fatalistic relation to inherited conventions that may well represent a marker of individual and collective identity, and as such can prove central to struggles for recognition on the part of repressed minorities.

National Identity Formation

Once the wars for independence ended, Colombian intellectuals and politicians were concerned on how to define the nation and its identity. The task was by all means difficult since not only Colombia's geography but also its cultural heterogeneity made it difficult to 'unite' the people in a 'nation'. Colombia was divided into different regions, what Bushnell calls '*patrias chicas*', regions with well-defined economic, cultural, ethnic and even linguistic differences,¹ which could hardly communicate with each other due to its broken terrain. Each region counted with an uneven number of descendents of Africans, Indians, and Europeans, as pointed out by Wade (p. 30) led to a "specific spatial pattern of racial identifications, still operating today. As Roldan, confirms, "the quest to construct a nation and a shared and distinctively 'Colombian' identity went largely unfulfilled during the nineteenth century". The difficulty in agreeing on the construction of the nation was not caused by a lack of vision, but because there were various "competing national visions" which emerged, and almost all of which "implicitly or explicitly grappled with what was widely considered the dilemma of constructing citizens in a society driven by social, ethnic and racial differences".² Unfortunately, intellectuals, politicians and elites believed that the Colombian nation

formation did not need to consider distinctive racial and ethnic groups, especially those that were a minority, or those who were geographically circumscribed and were often thought of as backward and primitive.

The consolidation of a national identity requires what Roldan calls a 'national project', plus "a set of events needs to occur that can make concrete and embody otherwise abstract principles or values such as those typically associated with a notion of shared community". The Colombian north coast, better known as *La Costa*, represents, on a small scale, what Roldan calls a 'shared community'. In this *patria chica*, identifications like those of race, class and gender are very important in understanding the construction of regional identity and by extension a national identity. The Carnaval de Barranquilla, a representation of *La Costa* identity as well as a Colombian cultural patrimony, can be studied as the space where material and symbolic struggle between classes, ethnic groups and other 'gendered' groups" take place. Considering that the Carnaval is the site for the continual expression and revival of narrations about the past and present of *La Costa*, let us relate how *Costeño* culture with its recognized racial mixture have influenced the celebrations of this carnival.

The Race Issue

La Costa, Wade says, is "ultimately ambiguous in Colombia's semantic and racial landscape" since the region "is black, but not that black"... and it has

¹ Bushnell, David. In Roldan, Mary. "Tracing Boundaries of the Nation: The Colombian Case". 2001.

² Ibid. Roldan, Mary. p. 5.

many people "who would be more likely to be classified as *mestizo* and white than as black or mulatto".³ This ambiguity is due in part to the highly mixed population which had important numbers of *negros* -black, *indios* -indigenous people; and European descendents, who were for the most part members of the elite and whose aristocratic lineage was brought from Europe and the Middle East. Wade found that in 1778, only in the provinces of Cartagena and Santa Marta, 8% of the population was black, 18% was Indian; and 11% was white.⁴ This heritage makes *La Costa*, in part, white. But most of all, *La Costa* is *mestiza*. Miscegenation was common and took place mainly for economic reasons. Labor in *haciendas* brought together Indians, blacks and poor whites. However, black population rapidly spread and soon became a predominant group. Their predominance was not only in numbers, but in the fact that *Costeño* society "engendered traditions of black resistance, which counterbalanced to some extent the usual processes of *blanquamiento* -whitening-, which affected all the country".⁵ That is why *La Costa* was and is referred to as black, however, not as black as the blacks on the Pacific littoral, where *mestizaje* took place but to a lesser extent. The black

population of *La Costa* has contributed a great deal with the social and cultural formation of the *Costeño* and Colombian national identity.

It is undeniable that *negros* and *indios* from the north coast have contributed to the formation of, Colombians national identity, in spite of the great difficulties. The central government represented in its politicians and intellectuals, since the early republic and well advanced into the twentieth century, expressed their discontent for the racial mixture of the nation.

They thought of *mestizaje* as a whitening process for the betterment of the Colombian 'race'. The perception they had of blacks, Indians, mulattos was clearly manifested, for example, by President Laureano Gómez, in his address before the American Society of Colombia in 1950. He blamed the mixed nature of the country as the determinant factor for the social, political and economic underdevelopment of the nation by saying that "Colombia was in many ways a backward country due to its geography, the low intellectual level of its inhabitants and their racial background".⁶ This perception shows how the nation was not thought of as a *mestizo* nation because that would have implied certain level of homogeneity that the white elite was not willing to accept. For the whites, blackness represented primitiveness, moral indiscipline (because of their 'potent sexuality',

³ Wade, Peter. *Blackness and Race Mixture: The Dynamic of Racial Identity in Colombia*. Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1993. p. 82.

⁴ *Ibid.* p. 82.

⁵ Wade. *Music, Race, and Nation. Música Tropical in Colombia*. Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2000. p. 92.

⁶ Summary of the address of Dr Gómez before the American Society of Colombia reported by Norbert Newbegin to the Department of State. June 30, 1950.

supposedly free from strict bonds of a sexual morality), and lack of civilized values. As for *Costeño* political and intellectual elites (who at the same time felt left out by the central government) "the fields in which racial and cultural identifications compete have presented opportunities and problems: blackness can be a drawback but can be avoided by stressing mixedness (something like *Vasconcelos' raza cosmica*), which can also be presented as a particularly Colombian quality; backwardness can be offset by claims to (foreign) modernity or revalued by claims to the solid authenticity of (local) tradition".⁷

Costeños always felt that their "self-image was at stake" mainly at a national level. They were "politically and culturally discriminated against".⁸ People of the interior linked *Costeños* with blackness and any expression of their culture was seen as morally suspect. But, where did this suspicion come from? Gabriel Garcia Marquez in various of his fabulous novels presents cultural and social traditions of *Costeño* [/Colombian] men in which it was and is quite common practice [in *La Costa* especially] for men of means to have relationships with women of more humble origins, crossing both class and racial boundaries. With this in mind, it is possible to think of *mestizaje* in *La Costa*, as "[a] highly sexualized [process] and loaded with images of desire and embodied emotion -of the supposed passion intensity and physical sensuality

of blacks in general and the sexual ardor of black women in particular." And what was the result of this type of sensual *mestizaje*? "Class and culture, both racialized", Wade argues, "were mediated through these embodied practices of sex, celebration, and dance", where "hierarchy did not, of course, disappear: on the contrary, hierarchies of gender, race, and class were reiterated. But certain possibilities were open to cultural -porosity- or hybridization".⁹

Willing to be recognized differently, *Costeño* elites thought that music would provide the opportunity to construct an image of modernity (however, as Wade suggests, "there is little evidence that the *Costeño* elite or even the middle classes used music as an explicit way to represent *Costeño* culture and identity"). But they had difficulties balancing tradition and modernity in relation to *Costeño* music because it could be considered vulgar due to its blackness and indigenous traits.

This assertion suggests that they recognized the particularity of their music, and wanted it to be more similar to that of the interior; but at the same time, they valued and shared black and Indian traditions (as the festivities of the Carnaval de Barranquilla) because they were culturally attractive and creative, and also because the *Costeño* exciting, vital and happy spirit was admired by natives and foreigners. This recognition led *Costeño* elites to sanitize their music. Nevertheless, Wade comments, music

⁷ *Op. Cit.* Wade, Peter. Music, Race, and Nation. P. 46

⁸ *Ibid.* p. 102.

⁹ *Ibid.* p. 70-1.

formed a crucial part of elite social life, in which "much time, effort and money was spent in entertainment in the clubs" and, of course, in the *Carnaval de Barranquilla* celebration, "as vernacular-local music styles were gradually expanding beyond lower classes".¹⁰ Once the elites permitted the entrance of music and dances of blacks, Indians, *mestizos*, mulattos and *zambos* into their clubs, *Costeño* music achieves a different status and starts to be known and expanded nationally and internationally. Dances like *la cumbia* and *el porro* became acknowledged not only as the typical carnival dances, but also as national dance symbols. The projection of *Costeño* music and dances led inevitably to the projection of the *Carnaval de Barranquilla* as a cultural event to the point that it became to be recognized as a national cultural patrimony.

Carnival celebrations offer insights not only into the realm of the cultural traditions, but into the domain of ideological formation and negotiation as well. In carnival, according to De Matta, there is a play between the reaffirmation of hegemonic traditions and the parody that subverts them, since the explosion of the illicit is limited to a short period after which reentry into the established social organization takes place. This rupture of the fiesta does not eliminate hierarchies and inequalities, but its irreverence opens a freer, less fatalistic relation to inherited conventions¹¹ that

may well represent "a marker of individual and collective identity, and as such can prove central to struggles for recognition on the part of repressed minorities, or the cooptation of such struggles".¹² Interestingly enough and contrary to these assertions, Ricardo Moncada, in an internet article that serves as publicity to the *Carnaval de Barranquilla* writes about one of the most famous events during the festivities, and the 'harmony' this carnival supposedly entails:

"As the official events begin on Saturday February 24th, the Via Cuarenta, a traditional street in Barranquilla, will trim itself for the Battle of Flowers, a social institution since 1903. The parade is the most eagerly awaited part of the carnival, with the queen and her court leading the procession, held upon floats decorated in changing motifs. Her majesty is accompanied by 200 comparsas (groups reciting prayers which satirize sociopolitical conditions) and masked figures representing common traditional or mythical figures. After four days of celebrations, Barranquilleros and tourists bid farewell to another carnival season, where in spite of any and all class differences, the entire town manages to come together for a celebration of life, detached from any worldly concerns".¹³

¹⁰ *Ibid.* p. 102.

¹¹ De Matta. In Garcia Canclini, Nestor. *Hybrid Cultures*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1995. p. 156-7.

¹² Lipsitz, George. In Moore, Robin. *Nationalizing Blackness. Afro-Cubanismo and Artistic Revolution in Havana, 1920-1940*. Pittsburgh, PA: The University of Pittsburgh Press, 1997, p. 227.

¹³ Moncada Esquivel, Ricardo. "The Carnival, Day After Day". Extract from www.baoom.com/magazine-Barranquilla, 2001.

According to Moncada, the *Carnaval de Barranquilla* is a celebration of a harmonious process of transculturation -a two way process of lending and borrowing between cultures- and *mestizaje* -racial and cultural mixture- among the different ethnic groups and social classes. In the *Carnaval, Barranquilleros* seem to have found a ground for collective consensus beyond the divisions among classes, ethnic groups and other groups that fracture society. I argue, however, that although the *Carnaval de Barranquilla*, as a Colombian patrimony, "serves to unify the nation",¹⁴ it is and has been a ground where inequalities and manifestations of material and symbolic struggles between classes, ethnic groups and gendered groups have been present and continue to exist today. Class, race and gender have been often denied validity as problems by the dominant (elite, white, male) ideology of society. In order to analyse these inequalities and struggles, I will briefly refer to the history of the *Carnaval de Barranquilla*, history that serves at the same time as a mirror not only of *Costeño* identity, but, also, of the complex process that Colombian national identity has undergone.

THE CARNAVAL DE BARRANQUILLA: A MELTING POT

Carnival, in general terms, has been described as "a 'counterdrama' or 'counternarrative', a reformulation of

¹⁴ *Op. Cit.* Garcia Canclini, Nestor. *Hybrid Cultures*. p. 136.

conceptions of self and society by those typically denied access to the official apparatuses of representation".¹⁵ As noted previously, the conceptions of the self in Colombian society are mediated by the conception the central government has of that self. Denial, lack of recognition, superiority complexes from the part of politicians and intellectuals were (at least until the 1960's) the parameters under which blacks, Indians and mulattos were scrutinized and marginalized. In spite of the fact that the *Carnaval de Barraquilla*, as any other carnival can be seen as a "loose amalgam of procession, feasting, competition, games and spectacle, combining diverse elements from a large repertoire and varying from place to place",¹⁶ it also carries within it a conflicting history, not different, a times, from the violent and complex history of the nation.

Since carnival as a "dialogic modality cannot be understood apart from the context in which it is performed", and which meanings and associations can "change radically from one month or year to the next or from one decade to the next in response to the agendas of diverse ethnic, class, government, and other social factions",¹⁷ it is important to refer to the place where the Carnival takes place because it is undeniable that the geographic location of the city has

¹⁵ Leal. *Op. Cit.* Moore, Robin.

¹⁶ Stallybrass, Peter and White Allon. *Bourgeois Hysteria and the Carnavalesque*. In *The Cultural Studies Reader*. Edit by Simon During. London and New York: Routledge, 1993.

¹⁷ Moore, Robin. P. 85.

influenced the development of the festivities of carnival throughout the years.

Barranquilla, a city port, was not always an important urban center on Colombia's Caribbean coast. It was founded in 1629, and it is located 10 miles (16 km) from the mouth of the Magdalena River. The city remained unimportant until the late 1800s, when the clearing of sandbars enabled it to thrive as a Caribbean seaport. During the second half of the XIX century, Barranquilla increased all the sectors of its economy and it exploited its geographic conditions that made it appear as the main city of the Colombian Atlantic coast. During the twentieth century, Barranquilla experimented an important industrial development and a population increase due to job opportunities and refugees from violence.

There is no doubt that the origins of the *Carnaval de Barranquilla* date back to medieval times. The liberation of the body and mind and the celebration of death and life were carried out by means of different types of dances, music, costumes, masks and other artifacts. Diego Samper Martínez and Marta Buelvas in a study on the *Carnaval de Barranquilla*, comment that the carnival that reached the Americas originated from medieval cultures, after having acquired its profile through centuries of evolution that has its origins in the ancient civilizations of the Mediterranean, where "pagan rituals involving Greek Dionysiaca and Roman Lupercalia (a fertility festival in ancient Rome, celebrated on February 15 in

honor of the pastoral god Lupercus, who kept off wolves) and Saturnalia (a seven-days period of unrestrained license and merriment for all classes, extending even to the slaves; occasion of general license, in which the passions or vices have riotous indulgence) retained its vigor upon arriving to the American continent, where it underwent significant transformations". Nonetheless, the original, the periodic rebirth of nature and man, even if not flagrant, remains under the masquerade of carnival. The myth of universal renewal shows us the path to follow in the search of its origins. It's the same principle of the renewal of time, of the periodic regeneration of life as a result of the eternal conflict with death".¹⁸

The *Carnaval de Barranquilla* has an uncertain origin in terms of an actual date of the first celebrations. It seems that the first festivities took place in Cartagena, a neighboring city. The celebration of San Sebastian on January 20, and Nuestra Señora de la Candelaria, on February 2, were "the first religious celebrations that led to carnival festivities". On such days, according to the chronicles of General Posada Gutierrez (in Samper and Buelvas), slaves were "exempt from work and given free rein to gather, sing and dance in their traditional fashion. This license was allowed to last until pre-Lenten carnival".¹⁹ Benjamin Villegas and Nina Friedemann, in their *Fiestas y ritos de*

¹⁸ Samper Martínez, Diego and Buelvas Marta. *Caribbean Carnival*. Bogotá: Diego Samper Editorial, 1994. p. 26.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* p. 29.

Colombia, comment that there are accounts of carnival celebrations in Cartagena as early as 1774.

According to them, in this festivity "military men and public functionaries wearing European masks and costumes danced the minuet and contradance (a dance in which the partners are arranged face to face, or in opposite lines) in a precinct closed." This 'confinement' of the festivities produced discomfort so much that a sector of the population "complained to the Crown and asked for prohibition of this type of celebrations." Considering that the influence of the Church in the colonies was important, religious authorities considered that carnival "offended God" and it made "good Christians surrender to temptation and abandoned their job and obligations". In spite of the restrictions imposed by the Church and the Crown, it is evident that the disobedience of some Crown Spanish functionaries facilitated the grounds for the slave, Indian and other populations to participate in carnival celebrations. Some sectors of the population used to hold their own *fiestas* away from other groups and *cabildos*, being the latter, according to Wade, groups of a kind of "mutual aid society where the slaves and free blacks could legitimately congregate with the authorization to have dances and celebrations after the custom of their African communities. Wade suggested that only free blacks could belong to these associations, while slaves would only be able to meet spontaneously in secret".²⁰

²⁰ *Op. Cit.* Wade, Peter. Blackness and Race Mixture. p. 88.

By opening the streets to all groups, slaves and Indians "slid their gods and beliefs under the halos of the saints in the processions".²¹ The Church under the "task" of evangelization, considered that any god that was not the God of the Catholic Church, should be vanished, and that practitioners and/or potential practitioners of other beliefs should be punished. In order to "discipline" *Indios* and *negros*, the Church prohibited any type of cult or religious celebration outside the rites of the Church. *Indios* and *negros* avoided punishment by disguising their gods under the images of the Church. And it is precisely this cultural intrigue that comes to enrich the plot of the carnival introduced by the Europeans. Blacks used *cabildos* to organize themselves not only to enjoy music and dance, but sometimes to also plan rebellions and escapes, as well as religious and magical practices, usually under the cloak of Catholicism but nevertheless persecuted by the always implacable inquisition. It appears that there was neither a restriction for the population to join and enjoy the festivities, nor there was a formal authorization. In the early days of the Carnaval, "it was common practice to see the slaves "gathered in *cabildos*, the tribal groups of *Mandingas*, *Carabalis*, *Congos*, *Minas* and *Bantus*, danced through the colonial streets of Cartagena in their respective processions bedecked in costumes of flamboyant colors. Women went ostentatiously adorned with their mistress' jewelry".²² It is often asserted

²¹ Villegas, Benjamin and Friedemann, Nina. *Fiestas y ritos de Colombia*. Bogota: Villegas Editores, 1995.

²² *Op.cit.* Samper and Buelvas, p. 172.

that during carnival celebrations, participants can finally make their dreams come true, at least momentarily. In the case of the black women who used their mistress' jewelry, it can be interpreted as a symbolic compensation for economic shortfalls or the hidden desires for social ascension.

One of the famous dances that originated in the *cabildos* was the *danza de negros* -dance of blacks. These groups are costumed and masked dancers whose professional dance dramatized traditional motifs. The dance intended to satirize the dances of the Court. Also, this dance represents what slavery was under the Spanish dominium, where the Caporal represents the foreman who controlled slaves work; the *negras* -female blacks- represent the loyal servants of the masters. It is interesting to see how music and dances were implicated in a whole process of change in sexual morality that was taking place in Colombia in part due to changes in sexual divisions of labor and gender relations.

These artistic expressions, as Wade states, had "different impacts on women and men, given prevailing gender relations and the perceived value of a control sexuality for women." He comments that the impact was strong because of "the connections between music dance, the body and sexuality" which "made of music and evocative and powerful mediator of the differences located in the sexualized cultural topography of the nation".²³

²³ *Op. Cit.* Wade, Peter. Music, Race, and Nation. p. 21.

Carnival dances, especially the ones of Indian or African origin were highly questioned by the Church and the elites. They connected the use of the body in dance with sexuality or improper behavior. In Wade's view just as problematic is the automatic link made between physicality, sexuality - "the body, hence sexuality"- and bodily pleasure: the mere fact that music and even more obviously dance, engage the body does not make them necessarily sexual or even pleasurable.²⁴ But the fact is that every dance [even, for example, *el mapalé* -dance that involves fast moves and intense drums that represent no other thing than a cry for peace] is a Caribbean form of sensual courtship, where "man delivers himself unconditionally to his female partner, and the woman, with movements unhurried and gentle, but at the same time haughty and somewhat defiant, steps forward slowly to conceal her flirtatiousness, backs away again to arouse the male, who eventually manages to grab her by the waist and make her spin, then to release her".²⁵ An interesting detail in this type of dance is that dancers never dance in each other's arms. What the Church disliked the most was that endless titillation of the women's body, what seems to be a limitless sexual provocation.

In the early days of the *Carnaval de Barranquilla*, Indians, Africans and Europeans each contributed to this feast a wide range of elements, representing their own cultures, perhaps the most

²⁴ *Ibid.* p. 21.

²⁵ *Op. Cit.* Samper and Buelvas. p. 176.

permissive at the time, and one of the scarce opportunities when the two races which had "suffered defeat" could publicly display their customs and traditions. The festive elements from the three different cultures constituted the richness of the celebration of the carnival. Africans, for example, contributed wooden masks, inspired from American fauna instead of leopards and elephants, and the haunting rhythm of its dances and drums, with an import inevitably from their land of origin. As for the Indians, they offered musical instruments, masks and costumes". And "European contributions to the Carnaval reached America, meticulously pruned of their magical, mythic and religious context by the Church. However, the Carnaval itself stopped from being a Catholic rite when it was taken to Barranquilla, where patron saints of Virgin Mary were not the reason for gatherings for dance and music interpretation. *Comparsas* and romance comedies developed in Carnaval had its origins in Spain. African and European influences in the Carnaval de Barranquilla have one aspect in common: "they relinquish their original magical significance to become a form of pure entertainment, and to ultimately manifest the way of life of the people from 'La Costa'.²⁶

I partially agree with this view since many of the dances and parades preserve original the essence of dances, masks, music of the past. It is true that new elements are incorporated with the years, but they are in harmony with the

whole carnival and they represent the culture of *La Costa*. Carnaval has become more a commercial *feria* where the publicity of products through the sponsorship of the *carrozas*, *Comparsas*, disguises, and masks has given a different connotation to the Carnaval. In spite of the efforts of preserving the traditions it is necessary to recognize that some of the traditional dances have vanished because of the scarcity of economic resources to sustain it.

Carnival, in its early stages was considered a source of mere entertainment and pleasure, but it has become a paradox of institutionalized license. As Samper and Buelvas suggest, "Carnival freedom in Barranquilla only exists as a sanctioned form of transgression outside the realm of reality, as an idiosyncratic allegory, only tolerated during the limited period as a catalyst, an escape valve for daily frustrations culminating in a catharsis of liberation. The city can thus enjoy relative emotional and social tranquility and stability for the rest of the year. Carnival spirit is the means to achieve this, an exercise in freedom rather than overall ad full-fledged freedom as such.²⁷ The paradox lies precisely in the fact that such liberties during *Carnaval* need to be 'regulated' for the well being of the participants in the festivities. Governmental authorities have created regulations to be applied before, during and after the festivities. Measures are taken precisely because detractors [or maybe too free spirited

²⁶ Ibid. p.29

²⁷ Ibid. p. 185

participants](or perhaps those who, borrowing Durkheim's idea, "Convert themselves into what they are") have misunderstood the actual reason of carnival and have taken it as an opportunity to behave improperly by using obscene vocabulary, and a wide range of attitudes contrary to good manners. During the difficult years of *La Violencia*, the essence of carnival, represented in its masks, was altered when government officials did not allow people to wear them at any other time but during the parades, and up to certain time at night. Detractors would have to pay fines or go to prison.

As early as 1870's, there was already an official announcement of carnival with the reading of the *bando* (proclamation) in late January. The first king -replaced years later by a queen (from 1918 and on)- weeks before the actual carnival, in a public *plaza*, reads aloud the *bando*, a type of manifesto in which the sovereign establishes her decrees, diminishing the authority of the major of the city and at the same time inviting people to participate and most important of all, to enjoy the carnival. As Wade reports, during the 1870s and 1880's, two of today's important *danzas* (costumed dance groups) were established -*El Congo Grande* (with the characteristic top hats, elaborately decorated with multicolor flowers) and *El Torito* (with a bull-face mask) - organized, it seems, by the people of non-elite origins. It is probable that local barrios used to elect their kings and queens to preside over the celebrations, but by the 1880's there was a president for the entire city, and by the end of the

decade, after the founding of the first Club Barranquilla,²⁸ this figure and his court were members of the elite. From this time on, Elites took more and more interest in organizing carnival celebrations. But it was only in 1881, according to Soto and Orozco, that the Carnaval de Barranquilla was institutionalized.

On January 20, 1881, Saint Sebastian's Day, a decree that organizes the parties of the carnival is ordained by means of the reading of the "Bando", naming as king of the festivity a recognized person of the city: Mr. Enrique De La Rosa, who took an absolute command of the city, and "governed" it during the festivities".²⁹ By 1888 the Rey Momo appeared. Momo, son of sleep and night, presided the feasts of the locos, which were celebrated in small towns, villages and cities. "Divinity" of mockery, master of the hurtful satire, cruel sarcasm, and ruthlessly irony, Momo became the alleged "protector" of those who devoted themselves to party, to the scandal of vice and to excesses. He was presented with the characteristics of the jester: cap with rattles, scepter and masks. In Barranquilla, El Rey Momo is the king of the celebrations. On the eve of the carnival, he parades in front of a noisy funeral cortège that goes to the closest cemetery, where "the bad mood" would be buried, burned or shot. Walking around, Momo makes people laugh with his jokes. The

²⁸ *Op. Cit.*, Wade, Peter, Music, Race and Nation. p. 68.

²⁹ Orozco, Martín y Soto Rafael. Carnaval, mito y tradición. Barranquilla: Antillas y Publicaciones Culturales del Caribe, 1993. p. 53.

following day, after yielding his throne to the queen of the carnival, he disappears in the crowd swearing and lamenting the loss of his reign.

In 1899, for the first time the positions of president and a *junta organizadora* (organizing committee) of the *Carnaval de Barranquilla* were created. In 1903, the first Batalla de Flores (Battle of Flowers) takes place, and it was established by decree by General Heriberto Vengoechea, better known as "General Carajo". For that carnival, Vengoechea put on a "*disfraz y se metio por todos los lugares por donde los conservadores se divertian*".³⁰ This parade is one of the central and most colorful of the *Carnaval de Barranquilla*. It comes from the tradition held by beauty queens from the different social clubs of the city who, together with their entourage, faced duels, which flowers and confetti were the main weapons. According to Orozco and Soto, this parade was "created once the *Guerra de los Mil Dias* was over".³¹

CARNAVAL DE BARRANQUILLA AND NATIONAL POLITICS

The Thousand Day's War, a three-year bipartisan conflict, was, in Bushnell's terms, "the most lethal of all the country's civil wars".³² The country was in complete unrest and the north coast was

³⁰ Rey, Edgar. "Joselito Carnaval". In www.terra.com.co/pro...aval2001/nota%2011batallade%20flores.htm

³¹ *Op. Cit.*, Orozco and Soto, p. 53.

no exception. In 1901 and 1902, carnival celebrations were suspended. According to Edgar Rey, the country was under a conservative-military control. The governmental authorities were so powerful that carnival could not be "*al margen del politizado ambiente*."

During the festivities, Liberals were marginalized and ordered by Military forces to stay home. The 1903 carnival is known as the "*Carnaval de tinta azul*"³³ -the blue ink carnival. The same *Carnaval de Barranquilla* that today is a symbol of unity and tolerance was once, a ground for political struggle, where freedom to participate was denied to opponents to the regime. *La Batalla de Flores* has within it, the remembrance of a difficult past, not overcome even a hundred years later. This *Carnaval* parade is the occasion for remembering and interrogating how the ones in power "play with the history of the system of domination"³⁴ that up to this days continue marking the complex, conflictive, and ambiguous day-to-day history of the nation.

La Batalla de Flores was a means for the elite, allied of the government, to show their power through their expensive and decorated cars. Their

³² Bushnell, David. *The Making of Modern Colombia: A Nation in Spite of Itself*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993. p. 148.

³³ *Op Cit.*, Rey, Edgar.

³⁴ Lancaster, Roger. "Guto's Performance. Notes on the Transvestism of Everyday Life". In Lancaster, Roger and Leonardo, Micaela di. Edit. *The Gender/Sexuality Reader. Culture, History, Political Economy*. New York, London: Routledge, 1997.

parade departed from the Club Barranquilla, the "headquarters" of the *barranquillera* elite. No doubt, as Wade suggests, the *Batalla de Flores* was an "opportunity for the elite to come out onto the streets in their carriages and participate in an ostentatious procession".³⁵

This carnival event, even though it was partly taken to the streets, ended up in the elite's ballroom dances, where the general public was denied access. The only lower class people who could enter those ballrooms were servants. The reason why elite clubs were created has to do with a moral sanitation project since clubs emerged "in opposition to the proliferating bars and taverns of the urban working class" which seemed to have no regards for "propriety and good behavior in their precincts".³⁶ Early twentieth century elites organized campaigns against the consumption of alcohol and whites attendance to brothels, places that attempted against family stability, and even stability of the vigor of the [white] 'race'.³⁷ It is clear that their concerns only favored their 'race', which they wanted to preserve 'clean' not only racially speaking but also at a moral level.

In 1918, the elite girl Alicia Lafaurie Roncallo, was the first queen of the carnival. But it was not until 1923 that the *reinado* was institutionalized and the queens were to be elected by popular

vote. Wade claims that the queen "has always been a woman from the elite". The *Carnaval*, as it can be seen, continued to be a segregated event. The queens held parties in their clubs, and announcements for these events that appeared in the local newspapers "reminded the reader that entry was only for club members and their guests with tickets". Blacks, Indians, workers and artisans held their parties on the streets, in taverns or the '*salones burreros*' - donkey taverns- where people tied up their donkeys outside). The middle class apparently held their parties in their homes.³⁸ Later, when the local elite assumes the local dances and music as an element of the *barranquillero* identity, clubs started to open their doors to other sectors of the population. One of the consequences of this opening can be seen in the election of the carnival queen, the maximum carnival authority who, since the last 40 years does not have to be from the elites. She is elected among girls each one who represents their *barrios*. The queen, regardless of social strata, has to be pretty, young, charismatic, joyful and one that spreads the desire on the people to have fun.

Besides the Thousand Day's War, Colombia suffered another complicated political situation due to political confrontations in the late 1940s and 1950s. *La Violencia* was the name given to the Colombian internal political conflict that lasted ten years. This phenomenon, as stated by Cole Blazier, was more than a partisan rivalry and provoked much more than political

³⁵ *Op. Cit.* Wade, Peter. Music, Race, and Nation. p. 69.

³⁶ *Ibid.* p. 68.

³⁷ *Ibid.* p. 68.

³⁸ *Ibid.* p. 68.

unrest. It wracked the whole nation because it was produced not only by Liberals and Conservatives and the Military Forces, but by a combination of guerrilla warfare, banditry, pillage and murder³⁹ which was concentrated primarily in the rural areas of the nation.

⁴⁰ *La Violencia* arose out of the superimposition of Colombia's crisis of modernization on the patterns of the country's hereditary hatreds; plus, the crisis of the Colombian political system, due to alterations of the parties in power.

The violence was directed by Conservatives against Liberal civilians, and on the other side, by guerrilla actions directed against both the authorities and Conservative civilians. Between 1948 and 1964, *la Violencia* took no less than 200,000 Colombian lives, and included great destruction of property. The assassination of Jorge Eliecer Gaitan, a Liberal, charismatic leader on April 9, 1948, and the upheavals that immediately followed, marked the starting point of the rage of *La Violencia* spread all over the country, but with particular ferocity in the interior. As for *La Costa*, Wade says, it "seemed fairly peaceful by comparison, and this reinforced yet another possible reading of the region as one in which positive traditional community values reigned". I partially

agree with Wade when he says that the joyful spirit of the Costeños with their music "reflected an urban escapism that reveled in the economic growth of the period, turned its back on civil strife, and looked forward to a bright new tomorrow which was nevertheless still rooted in peaceful, communitarian morality".⁴¹ However, I consider that Costeños' disregard for *La Violencia* had more to do with the fact that *La Costa*, in spite of the prosperity of the 1920s and 1930s, was still considered, by the central government and intellectuals, a peripheral space, whose inhabitants were still labeled as careless, disorganized, shiftily, and whose political engagement was not as powerful as to understand the magnitude of the conflict of the center. It seems that the most notorious impact of *La Violencia* in Barranquilla was the increase of the population, especially of people coming from the interior and the countryside, and who started to occupy the outskirts of the city, and who brought with them cultural traditions that were mixed with the existing ones, increasing the cultural repertory of the Carnival, and the cultural expression of *La Costa* in general.

A result of this regional transculturation (phenomenon that occurs not only internationally but also among culturally diverse groups in the same society),⁴² carnival organizers decided to create a

³⁹ Blazier, Cole. *Power and Social Change in Colombia. The Cauca Valley. In Latin American Panorama, an Anthology*. Edited by Paul Kramer and Robert E. McNicol. New York: G.P. Putman's Sons, 1968.

⁴⁰ For more detailed information read Dispatch to the Department of State from American Embassy in Bogotá, June 12, 1950. On Activities of Westinghouse Motion Pictures in 1949. NARA No. 511.215/6-1250.

⁴¹ *Op. Cit.* Wade, Peter. *Music, Race, and Nation*. p. 68.

⁴² Vianna, Hermano. *The Mystery of Samba: Popular Music and National Identity in Brazil*. Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1999. p. 36.

parade in which the cultural diversity of music and dances could be displayed. They called this cultural encounter *La Gran Parada*, first introduced in 1967. It is the traditional carnival Sunday parade where *danzas*, *cumbias*, *comparsas* and disguised individuals come together to constitute the most important folkloric event of the festivities. Participants parade along the streets where a jury will determine which is the best *Escuela de Baile*.

In *La Gran Parada*, different *escuelas de baile* compete in different modalities. Their instructors are known for their high quality instruction, their research on the traditions of *La Costa* and their artistic knowledge about popular traditions. Their contribution is important considering that they revitalize the most traditional forms of *Costeno* folklore. But the *Gran Parada* is not only for professional dancers; any dance group that considers itself a carnival and dance lover, can register and participate as well. *La Gran Parada* is more than a colorful parade. It is the live expression of traditions, of a history of cultural as well as social and political [mostly conflictive] encounters. The popular, as García Canclini asserts, "is not lived by popular subjects as a melancholic complacency with traditions. Many subaltern ritual practices that are apparently devoted to reproducing the traditional order, humorously transgress it". As in other countries, the dances performed in *La Gran Parada* by indigenous, blacks, and mestizo people present the best of their traditions, but at the same time, they parody the Spanish conquistadors, "making grotesque use of their costumes

and the warlike paraphernalia they brought along for the conquest.⁴³

THE CARNAVAL AND ITS ECONOMY

Participation in the carnival has its compensations. Not only the pleasure to enjoy, sing, dance, and be oneself, but talented musical groups have the opportunity to become known and gain popularity. From the 1980s and on, as Orozco and Soto comment, the organizers of the carnival promoted the contest of *acordeoneros*, *vallenatos* and *sabaneros*, musical expressions originated in Colombia's North East. The winning contestants take home the famous "*Congo de Oro*".⁴⁴ In the 1990s, the contest was extended to other musical genres besides vallenato such as merengue and salsa. This festival as well as other attractions of the Carnival has to be supported by private companies who sponsor them as an exchange for publicity.

Since *La Alcaldia* de Barranquilla stopped supporting most of the events of the Carnival, private companies sponsor them hindering the participation of all in these major events. Unfortunately, if one wants to see the best tropical groups of the Caribbean, one has to pay a high fee. In the past, admission to all events was free. In this sense, the *Carvanal* seems to have lost its essential mission, that of the

⁴³ *Op. Cit.* García Canclini, Néstor. *Hybrid Cultures*. p. 157.

⁴⁴ *Op. Cit.* Orozco and Soto. p. 55.

promotion of the most traditional expressions of the *Costeño* culture, and has been converted into a commercial fair where publicity of goods through sponsorship for the *carrosas*, *comparsas*, and masks became crucial for the preservation of carnival. This national cultural patrimony is nowadays under the control of private corporations who are interested in preserving the events that produce the most money, and leaving out insolvent, but no less important musical and dance groups.

THE GENDER ISSUE

Perhaps the most obvious form of inversion in traditional festivals is that of gender. Men dress up like women and less often women dress up like men. The world upside down model is prevalent in traditional festival. Excess in drinking, eating, licentious behavior are all given their moment. Festivals often serve as an escape valve for the tensions present in everyday life.

For Samper and Buelvas, "bedlam would not be complete without masses of men in drag, who, like the god Dionysus in ancient pagan feasts, rival mischief, bitchiness and outrage." It is as if the spirit of carnival provokes momentary and unabashed trespass of sexual roles. From ancient times, carnival has been the stage of reserved sexual behaviors as well as transgressed social roles, where full experience of carnival is to be found in the parodies that expose much of the sexual and social roles as irrelevant. And of course, "the stronger the taboo, the more effective and

enjoyable the transgression becomes. A profound profanation of values is necessary to give the sensation of desecration, as happens when men disguise as woman in such a *macho* society as on La Costa.⁴⁵

One of the most traditional cross-dressed groups performing during *Carnaval de Barranquilla* are the *farotas* in their *Danza de las Farotas*, a dance where [*macho*] men disguise as women. This dance with its costumes comes from an Indian tradition in which according to legend, "the local *Cacique* from Talaigua, near Mompox, had his tribesmen dress up as women to dupe and ambush the Spaniards". Obviously the Spanish also contributed to this the cross-dressing culture in *Carnaval*, where for many years, natives, blacks, mulattos, or *mestizos* dressed up parodying Spanish manners, rules, habits and values. Nowadays, on carnival days, "the [*macho*] hard working bus-driver, mechanic, shop-keeper, businessman or any other professional, by the grace of King Momo, suddenly metamorphoses into a society lady or a pregnant woman, dressed up and made up to "kill", much to the delight of the rival parades, and flaunts his charms in a dive or bar or at a street corner, taking advantage of carnival looseness".⁴⁶

As mentioned before, *La Costa* is characterized by a *machista* culture, where gays and lesbians are seen as 'possessors' of the 'strange illness' of not being straight. One of the latest parades

⁴⁵ Op. Cit. Samper and Buelvas. 177, 185.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* p. 177.

included in the *Carnaval*, and competing with trends of other famous carnivals of Latin America and Europe, since 1997, the *Carnaval de Barranquilla* welcomed the "*desfile de los 'otros'*" - the Gay Parade. Gays are called "*los otros*" - the others; in the *Costeno* context, these 'others' are understood not as the recognition or inclusion of the Other or the otherness, but as a way to highlight 'the difference' of these 'men' who are coming out to the street, despite rejection and criticism by their intolerant society. Carnival Saturday, right after the *Guacherna*, gays, dressed up in their best costumes, parade on the streets. Admiration or mere curiosity takes *Barranquilleros* to the street to see the Gay Parade, an impressive event full of *cumbiamberos*, colors, and paraphernalia.

This particular parade has "revolutionized" the carnival. Day-by-day it is gaining admiration and respect, and it is the event that *Barranquilleros* have learned to see. For gays and lesbians the carnival represents one of the limited spaces in which they can feel free of criticism and repudiation by their counterparts, the *Costeño* men. In a way, gaining a space in the carnival, may mean, a step toward the validation of homosexuals' rights, and *Costeño* acceptance that homosexuals constitute part of their society.

CONCLUSIONS

Carnival serves, in a magic act, to "convert one self in what we are", it helps our dreams come true and symbolically do what we want.

Barranquilleros of all strata, converted themselves into what they are "have received [not without difficulty] culture as a gift and carry it with you as something natural, incorporated into [their] being, act as what [they] are, an heir".⁴⁷ The *Carnaval*, then, serves the population not only as an escape from reality, but a means to transcend the social reality [of in equalities] of the everyday life. Dances like *el mapalé*, (dances that demand peace through their drums) are the means by which local people go about things, inevitably expressing their concerns, dreams and aspirations, with what they know, with what they have, because the Caribbean people's main need is communication.

The *Carnival de Barranquilla* besides possessing some of the qualities of Europe's medieval carnivals also mirrors the magic of the traditional and authentic folklore of a creative and original people. *Negros* and *indios*, mulattos and *zambos*, *mestizos* and whites have contributed to the enrichment of the celebrations of carnival; however, the most predominant influence comes the *Negro* population.

Traditional *Costeño* music and dance served Colombian national identity formation. In spite of the resistance elites imposed to the rest of the population in accepting *Costeño* music and dances as part of their identity, music could achieve what politicians, even intellectuals have not been able to achieve: "to break down barriers of race and class and serve as a unifying

⁴⁷ *Op. Cit.* García Canclini. p. 135.

element, a channel of communication, among diverse groups of society".⁴⁸ Once elites [reluctantly at times] opened the doors of their prestigious clubs to the music and dances brought by *negros* and *indios*, in the second and third decades of the twentieth century, the entire country came in contact with and became identified with this type of music and dance. As Wade suggests, "discourses about Colombian popular music often included and still include today, a concern with origins, attributed mainly to African, native Americans."⁴⁹

The recognition of *Costeño* music at a national level, took the *Carnaval de Barranquilla* to the status of national cultural patrimony.

The commercialization of the *Carnaval de Barranquilla* has negative and positive aspects. It is negative because groups devoted to the most autochthonous dances [that require special and expensive costumes] do not count with economic resources for their preservation. As a positive aspect, commercialization helps the incorporation of new cultural expressions.

Despite the fact that *Costeños* were and are still thought of [by people of the interior] as *parranderos* [people whose main concern in life is to party], lazy, laid back and calm, they have proved to be a progressive people, proud of their patria chica and their traditions, so much

that *La Costa* has been one of the most prosperous regions of the country, in spite of the lack of attention they have received from the central government.

To speak about Colombian national identity is a complex matter. If one wants to be called Colombian, one first has to locate oneself territorially in one of the five main regions of the country, each one of which has their cultural, social, economic particularities. As a person from the interior, I found fascinating how the Carnaval de Barranquilla is an important space to approach the study of *Costeño* and Colombian national identity.

Summary

The quest to construct a nation and a shared and distinctively 'Colombian' national/cultural identity has been a matter of great concern since the nineteenth century. The difficulty in agreeing on the construction of the nation was not caused by a lack of vision, but on the fact that there were various "competing national visions" which emerged, and almost all of which "implicitly or explicitly grappled with what was widely considered the dilemma of constructing citizens in a society driven by social, ethnic and racial differences.

An interesting space for the analysis of such differences can be found in Carnival celebrations. The Carnaval de Barranquilla offers insights not only into the realm of the cultural traditions, but into the domain of ideological formation

⁴⁸ *Op. Cit.* Vianna, Hermano. p. 14.

⁴⁹ *Op. Cit.* Wade, Peter. *Music, Race, and Nation*. p. 2.

and negotiation as well. In carnival, there is a play between the reaffirmation of hegemonic traditions and the parody that subverts them. This rupture of the fiesta does not eliminate hierarchies and inequalities, but its irreverence opens a

freer, less fatalistic relation to inherited conventions that may well represent a marker of individual and collective identity, and as such can prove central to struggles for recognition on the part of repressed minorities.

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