

Articulating Blackness in Afro-Ecuadorian Marimba Performance

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For nearly four and a half centuries, Afro-Ecuadorians of the coastal Esmeraldas province have identified themselves as a distinct people, their distinctiveness arising in a cultural "space" bounded by racial, ethnic, political, artistic, musical, and at times, geographic boundaries. As a consequence, "black space" in Ecuador has always been the site of contestation, primarily by the challenge it presented to Spanish and later nationalist mestizo hegemony, but also through an uneasy distancing from its own hybrid Afro-Indigenous cultural roots. Music, in the form of the marimba dance, has played an important role in the creation and maintenance of this space, delineating a sonic sphere apart from other ethnic groups and in particular separate from the highland state. In this article, I seek to historicize the perception of black space in the Ecuadorian national consciousness, and explore how that space is being reconfigured today through musical performance.

I have titled this article "Articulating Blackness" and will begin by calling attention to that choice of words. The first term, to articulate, meaning in its common usage "to enunciate clearly and distinctly," implies a type of separation understood within a whole—a carving out of parts that reveals the sound of their differences. But I draw "articulate" also from the Latin *articulare*, meaning "to unite by or form a joint" (American Heritage Dictionary), a coming together and joining of two planes, and thus indicating a type of simultaneity. The second term, "blackness," or *negritud*, refers to a Pan-Africanist ideology which in Ecuador demands an ethnographic and contextual reading that will unfold throughout the article. At this point, with the phrase "articulating blackness," I simply want to argue that *negritud*—the entire social, cultural, and economic project of blackness as an ethnic ideology—creates its space of difference at the intersection of competing spheres of influence. Blackness retreats from the nation-state into difference and separation, even as it reaches beyond its borders to unite with a larger African diaspora. In terms of musical expression, the marimba in Ecuador carves out a distinctly black space against, and yet within, the context of a nationalist, mestizo discourse.

The roots of these competing ideologies and their intertwinement date back to the earliest days of Spanish colonization. Popular history holds that a slave boat shipwreck off the coast of Esmeraldas in 1553 introduced blacks and black culture into the country in one resounding crash (Perez Estupiñan 1996: 15; Estupiñan Tello 1996). Overpowering and intermarrying with the local indigenous population, these first Afro-Ecuadorians carved out an inaugural black space in the mangrove swamps of the Pacific littoral, successfully fending off generations of Spanish colonizers and founding what became known as the

"Zambo Republic." African influences on the region increased over time as the autonomous society that emerged in Esmeraldas became a destination point for escaped slaves from all over the region, particularly the mining towns of southwestern Colombia (Jurado Noboa, 1990; Savoia, ed., 1988). Esmeraldeñan historian Julio Estupiñan Tello (1996) argues that this state of political and cultural independence continued for more than three centuries, despite the region's official incorporation into the Audiencia of Quito in the early seventeenth century and later into the Ecuadorian state. By the time of the first prolonged efforts to incorporate the Esmeraldas province into the national fabric in the late nineteenth century, a distinct cultural synthesis had taken place largely independent of highland mestizo influence.

Musical life in the province centered on the *currulao*, the marimba dance, with strong roots in the black population's Bantu and Mande heritage in Western Africa (Whitten 1998: 80). The *currulao* was a predominantly secular festive event that took place every weekend in local *casas de la marimba*, or "marimba houses." These privately-owned dwellings were a focal point for Afro-Ecuadorian communities, used for civic meetings, recreation, and providing the performance space for the *currulao*. Norman Whitten, Jr. has written extensively on the symbolic integration of the marimba dance as a secular ritual and its importance within Afro-Ecuadorian culture in Esmeraldas (e.g. Whitten 1965; 1974; Whitten and Fuentes 1966; Whitten and Quiroga 1998). In Whitten's interpretation, the *currulao* indexed gender mores key to the maintenance of Afro-Ecuadorian society, ritually re-enacting—and acting as a catharsis for—male-female relationships in the community. In addition to the overt message of seduction and conquest in the dance choreography, the call-and-response musical tension and struggle for dominance between male soloists and the chorus of female singers represented these same relationships.

What is important for our purposes here, drawing upon Whitten's research and confirmed by my own fieldwork, is first the historic centrality of the *currulao* to Afro-Ecuadorian cultural expression, and second the marimba's ancillary function as a sonic marker of liberated black space. As the dominant musical and cultural expression of freed or escaped slaves living in a quasi-autonomous state, the *currulao*'s association with liberation was perhaps implicit more than expressly stated, but the space was nonetheless distinctly created and defined by the sound of the marimba orchestra and the boundaries of the dance floor. The importance of this space is also demonstrated by its ubiquity. As recently as the mid-1960s, Whitten estimated that every town in the Esmeraldas province had at least one marimba house, and the dances occurred every weekend, often for more than forty-eight hours straight (Whitten 1974: 108). The marimba indexed Afro-Ecuadorian culture across artistic domains as well; Esmeraldeñan literature, both oral poetry in the form of *décimas* as well as a number of novels written by two generations of *costeño* authors (discussed later), place the marimba in a central location, metaphorically and spatially, in their depictions of black life in the province.

Beginning in the late nineteenth century, the port of Esmeraldas and the region's mineral wealth took on a greater importance for the Ecuadorian nation, and a slow migration of highland mestizos to the provincial capital soon produced a new political establishment with strong ties to the national government in Quito. This incursion into black sovereignty had almost immediate repercussions on Afro-Ecuadorian performance

practices in the city. Unsympathetic to local customs, new city officials began requiring permits for black residents to hold marimba dances, restricting the number of performance opportunities and eventually lowering participation due to the cost of the necessary bribe (Whitten 1974: 110; Estupiñan Bass 1992: 87-88). The abrogation of black space as manifested in marimba performance is made clear in *Juyungo*, Adalberto Ortiz's seminal novel on black life in Esmeraldas, first published in 1942. Echoing the reality of the city at that time, the police in the story proclaim: "from this date on, it is expressly forbidden to hold marimba dances in the central parts of the city inasmuch as it constitutes an attack on order, morality, and the good customs of civilized people" (quoted in Garcia Barrios 1981: 552). According to the *marimberos* (marimba players) I interviewed in Esmeraldas in 1996 and 1997, marimba performance had in fact been banned outright in the city for a significant portion of the early twentieth century. Consequently, highland guitar-based music genres such as the *pasillo* supplanted the marimba and began altering the Esmeraldeñan soundscape (Whitten and Fuentes 1966: 169-70).

In the late 1950s, the completion of a railroad from the highland city of Ibarra to the coastal port of San Lorenzo and the laying of the trans-Ecuador oil pipeline with its coastal terminus in Esmeraldas heralded a new era of highlander immigration, tourism, and industrialization. As a consequence, the mestizo struggle to attain hegemony spread from the capital city to the rest of the province. Urbanization and the search for wage labor emptied many of the upriver towns that had once been strongholds of traditional life (Whitten 1965; 1974). Marimba use declined, and over the course of several decades, the *currulao* disappeared entirely as a functioning social event. The story could end here. Afro-Ecuadorians in Esmeraldas have never regained the political or economic autonomy they once yielded, and positions of power continue to be held almost exclusively by the mestizo upper class.

However, a counter history of resistance realized through the construction of alternative black spaces has existed for decades. The oldest manifestation of this resistance in cultural works arises in Ecuadorian literature. Constance Garcia-Barrio (1981) has traced the presence of blacks in Ecuadorian writing in the twentieth century, beginning with the derogatory stereotypes promulgated by *serrano* (highland) author Luis Martinez in his novel *A La Costa* (1904). With the rise of influential writers in the Grupo de Guayaquil in the 1920s and 30s, however, the writings of *costeño* (coastal) authors began to valorize Afro-Ecuadorian cultural themes and denounce the oppressive conditions in which that population increasingly lived (Gil Gilberto 1968; Pareja y Diezcanezo 1938). Influenced by these works, the following generation of authors, poets, and historians, many from the province of Esmeraldas itself, began promoting a self-consciously black ethnic project in the 1940s and 50s that would soon leap off the page and into other forms of cultural expression (e.g. Ortiz 1943; Estupiñan Bass 1954; 1958; Estupiñan Tello 1967).

Though there were and are political and economic dimensions to the project of blackness in Ecuador, its public profile and largest successes have largely been in the cultural realm, with the marimba as its focal point. Beginning in the early 1970s, even as the last vestiges of the marimba tradition were disappearing in its ritual form, Afro-Ecuadorian musicians began forming folklore schools and professional dance troupes to teach and perform marimba music and dance. These schools did not recreate the social and cultural world of

the currulao; the historic moment for that event had passed. Rather, classes and rehearsals created a new context and meaning for marimba performance within the black community. Age replaced gender as the important social relationship addressed in marimba performance, as elders taught youth the notes and steps to a tradition that had been off limits to them as children. Though bambucos, andareles, aguas, and other traditional dance pieces formed the core repertoire of most of the folklore groups, a new practice of combining theater with the marimba allowed the performances to include substantial references to other aspects of Afro-Ecuadorian history and culture.

A performance by the Grupo Folklórico Jolgorio in Esmeraldas on August 1st, 1997, contained many of these elements. The title of their performance was "Legends, Traditions, and Customs," and began with a short dramatization that detailed the history of the region and the founding of the Zambo Republic, emphasizing the struggle and ultimate victory of the black population. Center stage during this narration, four Afro-Ecuadorian men plodded painfully in chains under the whip of a plantation master, while the drum section of the marimba ensemble kept time with a dirge-like beat. With the onset of a heavy drumroll, the main singer began reciting a portion of the popular Nelson Estupiñán Bass poem "Canción del niño negro y del incendio," "Song of the Black Child and the Fire" (quoted in different translation in Whitten and Quiroga 1998: 79):

*Negro, negro renegrado
Negro, negro hermano del carbon
Negro de negro nacido
Negro ayer, mañana, y hoy*

*Algunos creen insultarme
Gritandome mi color
Mas yo mismo lo pregono
Como orgullo frente al sol*

*Negro he sido, negro soy
Negro vengo, negro voy
Negro ayer, mañana, y hoy*

Black, blacker still
Black, black brother of charcoal
Black of black born
Black yesterday, tomorrow, and today

Some believe they can insult me
Shouting to me about my color
But I am proud of that color
And let everyone know in the light of day

I've been black, I am black
I come black, I go black
Black yesterday, tomorrow, and today

With the shout of "Caderona!" and the first notes of the marimba, the slaves are freed, their chains vanish, and all begin dancing. The performance metaphor could not be clearer: the performance of traditional music is the practice of liberation. Through this example and dozens like it that I witnessed during my fieldwork, it appears that folklorización, often negatively portrayed as the process of musical or cultural decontextualization, in fact rescued and re-created black cultural space in Esmeraldas.

Performing Blackness

Contemporary marimba performance continues to project this new and distinctly "black" public space back onto what, in Arjun Appadurai's terms, we might call a regional, Afro-Latin "ethnoscape" or "landscape of identity" (Appadurai 1991: 191). Such ethnoscapas are always sites of plurality, where the transnational movement of goods, people, and ideas intersect with localized identities. Through the marimba, certain Esmeraldeños have attempted to communicate with and take part in a cultural African diaspora that reaches far beyond their national borders. Performances like the one just described, though grounded in a concrete local history, emphasize themes like slavery, racism, and resistance that are common to the experience of the entire hemisphere's African-American population. At the same time, however, such performances celebrate the survival of black difference in a localized manner, emphasizing a particular musical tradition as the victory over local and national forms of oppression. Thus, *negritud*, or "blackness," is expressed through performance as an ethnic ideology that not only unites Afro-Ecuadorians with a diasporic interculture, but also encourages their disengagement from the highland, mestizo-controlled state (Stutzman 1981; Aronson 1976; Hobsbawm 1995).

As we have noted, professionalization and folklorization foretold the death of the *currulao*, but they also opened many new opportunities for Afro-Ecuadorian marimberos. The most visible opportunity has come through invitations to marimba groups to represent Esmeraldas and its Afro-Ecuadorian culture in festivals of national and international music held throughout the country and region. In the 1990s, three festivals have been held in the city of Esmeraldas expressly to celebrate Afro-Ecuadorian music and its ties to the Afro-Latin diaspora. The promotional poster for the most recent of these festivals nicely represents this public image, portraying a black man singing and surrounded by Afro-Ecuadorian instruments, his legs transforming into the twisty trunks of a mangrove tree—quite literally "rooting" musical performance and cultural identity as distinctly black and Esmeraldeñan entities.

Further evidence of the marimba's function as a marker of ethnic identity and the demarcation of black space is everywhere in the Esmeraldas province. Murals in the principal towns of Esmeraldas and San Lorenzo depict marimba players accompanying dancers, proclaiming "Cultural Identity is Part of a Positive Personality" and "Folklore is the Identity of a Cultivated People." The new coat of arms adopted by the Municipality of San Lorenzo in June of 1997 prominently features a marimba at the base of a palm tree as "the symbol of our folklore." Politicians' appropriation of the instrument for campaigning is also indicative of its symbolic power for black residents of the province; the irony, of

course, is that the very symbol of ethnic disengagement is co-opted for national political ends.

The marimba's political role, in fact, illustrates an important point. Despite its symbolic status for black ethnicity and difference, no performance or representation of the marimba can entirely avoid implication in external, non-"ethnic" systems. Afro-Ecuadorian musical performance is caught between its symbolic importance as an autonomous cultural expression, and the limits placed on that autonomy by national and global mediation. Serranos continue to dominate performance contexts through the ownership of tourist sites (a frequent venue), sponsorship of festivals, and status in political structures. The black, ethnic project expressed by the marimba may advocate disengagement, but it frequently erects its opposition in an environment controlled by the very forces it resists.

A performance by the popular group Tierra Caliente, under the direction of famed singer Petita Palma, at the Quito "August Month of the Arts" celebration in 1997 offers a compelling example. This festival annually attracts crowds of up to 10,000 people for a series of performances in the Plaza de Santo Domingo in the city's historic center. Given the overwhelmingly white, mestizo, and indigenous Quichua audience, Petita's selection of repertoire for the show was surprising: the centerpiece of their performance was a song not accompanied by the marimba, but by the ensemble's drums and a guitar. The song was broken into short sections, with long explanatory breaks, and tells the story of a young black woman talking to her mother. The young woman first wants a white husband, then a rich one, then a handsome one, and then a gringo, dismissing each in turn as she realizes they are only interested in her "for curiosity" ("*por la curiosidad*"). She finally comes to the conclusion: "I only want my black man, because I can dance [the marimba] with him and eat *tapao* [an Afro-Ecuadorian dish]." Throughout the performance, Petita called up the white emcee to use as a stand-in for the white man, the rich man, and the gringo.

The explicit critique of the Ecuadorian dominant classes, represented by the white, rich, and gringo men, as well as the theme of disengagement and "sticking to one's own," likely resonated with many indigenous people in the crowd; the Quichua have with their own ethnic agenda, generally resisting many of the same forces as Ecuadorian blacks. The sharp edge on Petita's performance, however, was blunted by the festival emcee. Though he was good-natured about his role as Petita's fall guy, he ultimately had the last word, proclaiming that he would not be interested in a black woman for "curiosity," but "for love." Petita's overt call for black ethnic identification was thus transformed into a plea for interracial harmony, conveniently fitting the dominant group ideology of mestizaje.

Though the Afro-Ecuadorian ethnoscape is overtly defined in opposition to the mestizo, highland state, Esmeraldeñan blacks are constructively and critically engaged with forces that go far beyond Ecuador's borders. Prominent marimba performers such as Carmen Gonzalez, Papa Roncón and Petita Palma travel and perform internationally, creating personal ties to other black communities and sharing strategies with them for the maintenance of black ethnicity and identity. Influence, however, flows both ways. International commercial interests bring consumer goods, images, and cultural influences from other areas of the globe to Esmeraldas, where they are incorporated, rejected, or re-

interpreted into the social fabric of the province. I will conclude with a short story that illustrates a bit of this intercultural intersection.

During my second week in Esmeraldas in 1997, a number of Tierra Caliente's teenage dancers and musicians returned to Petita's house after a hotel performance to help unload the instruments and relax. I joined in their conversation which, as usual, quickly turned to the search for areas of common experience. I had already disappointed them with my lack of knowledge on American sports stars, so they turned this time to American popular music—something that, surely, the etnomusicólogo would know. As a steady stream of names came at me, some of which I vaguely recognized as American rap stars, one of the dancers began creating a beat on the bombo. Another joined in, rapping in phonetically-learned English to illustrate the best hits of Snoop Doggy Dogg, Tupac Shakur, and a host of other artists that the ignorant gringo (me) was having a hard time remembering. Other members soon sat down at the other drums, filling out the "beat" and singing the choruses, again in an improvised English. The afternoon jam session ended with a rap in Spanish that included andarele on the marimba as a live "sample."

Rap here represents a dialogue between the collective, internal identity of one small group of Afro-Ecuadorian teenagers and the external influences of commercialism and the market. American popular culture is ubiquitous in Esmeraldas: Hollywood movies play on TV and on the long-distance buses, the pantheon of American sport stars smile out from advertisements and posters; and a wide variety of American popular music chokes the airwaves. There is a definite pattern, though, to how certain groups of Afro-Ecuadorians consume this crass americana. Almost without exception, the teenage members of Tierra Caliente were most interested in black artists, black musicians, black athletes, and distinctly black musical forms. What is important here is the example of an Afro-Ecuadorian group using international market forces leveled against them to bypass local dominant power and pursue their own goals and ethnic agenda. Rap, understood symbolically as a "black" music, fulfilled that cultural need for these young men—even without understanding the lyrics.

I began by arguing that to articulate blackness in the Ecuadorian context would demand a tearing apart and a putting together, a separation and simultaneity. Current musical practices among Afro-Ecuadorians in Esmeraldas embody that kind of isolation (in the national sphere) and integration (in an intercultural African diaspora). The currulao and the folklore show, though easily recognizable through their performance as different stages in a single tradition, represent very different ideological moments in the narrative of the Ecuadorian nation and the Afro-Ecuadorian people. If the currulao historically allowed for the disclosure of an Afro-Ecuadorian cultural identity within its own community, its folkloric re-presentation today is the projection of a political Afro-Ecuadorian identity as distinct and separate from the mestizo state. Given the profound and entrenched economic stagnation in the area, and the continuing poor representation of Afro-Ecuadorians in the political structure, I think it is fair to say that music does not merely play a role in the construction of black space in Esmeraldas today, but is nearly constitutive of it.

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